THE LONG WAY HOME: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF YOUTH AND CONFLICT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

BY

URMITAPA DUTTA

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Mark S. Aber, Chair
Professor Norman K. Denzin
Professor Alejandro Lugo
Professor Peggy J. Miller
Professor Julian Rappaport
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a critical ethnographic investigation of the struggles over cultural representations and their relationship to varied expressions of ethnic violence in Northeast India (South Asia). Taking Garo Hills region of Northeast India as the site of inquiry, this dissertation interrogates the culture of normalized everyday violence and it reconfigures identities and subjectivities of local youth. Second, it explores sites of resistance and everyday peace building possibilities in an effort to address endemic ethnic violence in Garo Hills. Advancing an ethical approach to engaging marginalized populations, the dissertation traces the ways in which young people in Garo Hills are complicit in and/or endure everyday violence, and how they articulate their analysis of violence. The ethnographic findings elucidate the complex interplay of violence and marginality in normative spaces in the everyday lives of youth in Garo Hills. The findings suggest that despite the ubiquity of divisive ethnic meta-narratives, multiple counter-narrative possibilities are embedded in youth articulations of violence. Building on those possibilities, a community engagement project was facilitated with local youth using a youth participatory action research framework. By involving local youth from different ethnic groups, the project attempted to create a context of inclusive participation with the goal of examining how young people engage and potentially renegotiate their sense of identity and community in such contexts. This dissertation details how the youth-led community engagement project subverted established patterns of marginality, social exclusion and segregation in the local community; thus substantiating the need for settings and processes that engender integrative ties across ethnic groups in the local community. Arguing against State-sponsored identity categories, this dissertation establishes the need for alternative, more inclusive forms of citizenship and belonging as they pertain to people living in Northeast India.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been a reality without my parents - two of the most compassionate and ethical people I know. I can trace this dissertation and my larger project to my formative years when my parents made concerted efforts to inculcate a critical awareness of systemic oppression, inequity, and privilege. In my mother Jayanti Dutta, I found immense depths of compassion and forgiveness. Her inordinate ability to glimpse humanity and hope under the most fraught conditions never ceases to amaze me. In my father Utpal Dutta, I had a role model of a morally upright citizen and human being who refused to settle for anything other than what he viewed as just. Their values have greatly shaped who I am as a person and as a researcher. I am indebted to them for having faith in the convictions of a seventeen year old to follow a relatively unchartered territory that eventually led to this work. I am especially grateful to them for providing me with a constant home during my fieldwork as I grappled with the loss of a different home. Ma and Bapi, this dissertation is a testament and a tribute to all the sacrifices you made over the years.

This project would not have been possible without the support of my home community, especially the participants in my project who so willingly shared their experiences and emotions. I deeply appreciate and respect their willingness to engage these difficult and fraught issues.

I would like to acknowledge my wonderful committee who believed in my project and were extraordinarily generous with their time, ideas, and advice. I thank Mark Aber, my Chair for providing me with the intellectual and academic freedom to explore multiple theories and methods as I shaped this project. I especially appreciate his willingness to think along with me as he encouraged me to clarify my analytic process. I am grateful for finding an extraordinary mentor and human being in Peggy Miller. An enduring source of support, she has been a vital presence as this project took shape over the years and during the writing process. Julian Rappaport has been instrumental to the analysis, arguments, and writing. His enthusiasm and keen insights combined with his commentary on earlier drafts have been invaluable. Norman Denzin’s relentless commitment to produce and nurture engaged and activist scholarship continue to be a source of inspiration. I thank him for his deep and incisive insights as he encouraged me to write in my own voice. Alejandro Lugo has provided crucial input by acting as a critical reader and pushing the boundaries of my intellectual commitments.
Several other individuals and communities have provided guidance and support at critical junctures of this project. I am fortunate to have discovered a mentor in Antoinette Burton. She has been extremely generous with her involvement, as she read drafts of chapters, provided me feedback, and pushed me to identify and speak to the political nature of my work. As my academic advisor, Michael Kral has been unwavering in his support throughout the graduate program. A graduate fellowship from the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities (IPRH) provided a year-long opportunity to engage with a wonderful group of scholars and writers. I am thankful for the vibrant intellectual space I found among the IPRH fellows during my writing. I would also like to acknowledge Honey Oberoi Vahali, my former advisor for believing in my project all those years ago, helping me discover the meaning it held for me. An extraordinary teacher, researcher, and human being, she continues to be a source of inspiration. I found an academic and ideological home in Nation 580. Being a part of that community has one of the most rewarding experiences of graduate school.

I am grateful for my younger brother Rohan, for enriching my life with his love, thoughtfulness, brotherly banter, and his belief in me. Photographer extraordinaire, his photographs unfold new vistas for me, urging me to see the world through different lenses.

Didun and Thamma, your benevolence, humanity, and resilience of spirit are a constant source of inspiration in my life. Your incredible flair for storytelling fueled my interest in history and narratives.

I feel blessed to have a phenomenal group of friends who have been an integral part of this journey and have enriched my life in ways that are manifold. My classmates from Tura Public School (Class of 1998) have always believed in my dreams and rallied for me over the years. I am grateful for having Athem, Anuska, Sandip, Natasha, and Biru in my life. Steadfast in their love and friendship, they have always been there for me. Gayatri was the best roommate one could ask for. In her I found a wonderful colleague and a most caring and fun friend. From roommate to one of my closest friends, it is difficult to imagine this journey without Gayatri. Through her I met Vikram who became the older brother I never had. Michelle and Laura, my cohorts have been my fellow travelers as we went through the trials and tribulations of grad school. In Milu, Preeti, Vivek, Vidisha, Vikhram, Vinay, Chandu, and Aravind, I found a big family in Champaign. The path to the dissertation was a long one and I am grateful for the presence of friends who at one time or the other eased the path: Sam, Koeli, Nausheen, Rakhi, Arpan, and Nathan. Finally, a shout to the homegirls who
helped me get through the last phase of grad school - Shaheen, Shweta, Mrinal, Richelle, and Aliyah.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Lori and Linda for being so generous with their support. I have really appreciated their open doors and the ease with which I could stop anytime and clarify my doubts around paperwork and the multiple rules, regulations, and deadlines. Thank you for doing your best to make life easier for us grad students.

Several grants and fellowships made this work possible: University of Illinois Graduate College Dissertation Travel Grant; Junior Research Fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies; Graduate Fellowship from the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities.

Kaushik, these past few months seem inconceivable without you as we tried to keep each other sane. I am grateful for your love and support, but most of all for your friendship. On most days I take you for granted but I feel blessed to have someone like you in my life.

Finally, place matters. I would like to acknowledge the community spaces where my writing was achieved: Guiliani’s Cafe, Espresso Royale on Goodwin, Champaign Public Library, Aroma Café, and Café Kopi.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION: THE VICISSITUDES OF HOME

I. Home and its Loss  ................................................................. 1
I.2. The Ethnicity Puzzle: Who Belongs? ......................................... 4
    I.2.1. Discordant Labels .......................................................... 4
    I.2.2. Incongruities of Belonging: Limits of the Body ......................... 8
I.3. Research Objectives .................................................................. 9
I.4. From Home to Homeland ........................................................... 11
    I.4.2. Armed Insurgencies and the Homeland Ideal ............................. 12
    I.4.3. The Ethnic Other: A Corollary of the Homeland Ideal ............... 16
I.5. Development and its Discontent .................................................... 18
    I.5.1. Returning Home: An Encounter with Remoteness ...................... 18
    I.5.2. The Developmentalist Discourse ........................................... 19
I.6. On Being the ‘Troubled’ Margins ................................................ 22
    I.6.1. The Spectacle of War .......................................................... 24
I.7. Renegotiating Parameters of Belonging ......................................... 25
    I.7.1. From Everyday Violence to Everyday Peace ............................... 26
I.8. Overview of Chapters ................................................................ 27
I.9. A Note on Terminology  ................................................................ 28

## CHAPTER 1: METHODS

1. Research for and as Social Justice .................................................. 30
    1.1.1. Autoethnography ............................................................... 31
    1.1.2. Narrative Inquiry .............................................................. 34
    1.1.3. Participatory Research ....................................................... 37
1.2. The People in the Project ............................................................ 38
    1.2.1. Youth Participants .............................................................. 39
    1.2.2. Key Stakeholders .............................................................. 41
1.3. The Methodology of this Study .................................................... 41
    1.3.1. The Process of Engagement ................................................ 41
    1.3.2. The Research Process ....................................................... 43
1.4. Methodological Deliberations: Ethics of Care ................................. 45
    1.4.1. Writing about Violence: Being a Responsible Witness ............... 45
    1.4.2. The Politics of Gender ....................................................... 46
    1.4.3. Securing Participation/Collaboration ..................................... 48
    1.4.4. Negotiating Safety ................................................................ 50
    1.4.5. Consent Process ............................................................... 51
CHAPTER 2: EVERYDAY VIOLENCE: INTERROGATING THE QUOTIDIAN .......................................................... 55
2.1. Memories: The Riot of 1987.................................................................................. 55
2.2. The Present: The Impotence of Numbers ................................................................. 58
2.3. Everyday Violence ................................................................................................. 59
   2.3.1. On Being Out-of-Line and Out-of-Place......................................................... 60
   2.3.2. The Perennial Fear of Ragging ....................................................................... 62
   2.3.3. Coping ........................................................................................................... 64
2.4. Garo Youth on Everyday Violence ....................................................................... 66
2.5. Normalization and Naturalization of Everyday Violence ...................................... 68
   2.5.1. The Scope of Ethnic Assertions ..................................................................... 68
   2.5.2. Normalization and Naturalization ................................................................ 72
2.6. Beyond Divisive Ethnic Narratives ..................................................................... 76
2.7. Rethinking Violence ............................................................................................. 80

CHAPTER 3: THE ETHNIC OTHER ............................................................................. 82
3.1. Othering ............................................................................................................... 82
3.2. The Divisive Master Narrative: Tribal vs. Non-Tribal ............................................ 84
   3.2.1. The Fear of the Other: Competition for Scarc Resources .............................. 86
3.3. Everyday Exclusions: “In their minds we are always separate” ......................... 87
   3.3.1. Story 1: Representing Place ........................................................................ 87
   3.3.2. Story 2: Inescapable Ethnic Categories ...................................................... 89
   3.3.3. Story 3: Selective Support ........................................................................... 90
3.4. Defining the Ethnic Other ................................................................................. 92
   3.4.1. The “Illegal Immigrant” and Border Policing ............................................ 92
   3.4.2. The Non-Tribal Outsider in Garo Hills ....................................................... 95
3.5. Northeasterners: The Legacy of Alterity ............................................................. 98
3.6. Altering Contingencies ....................................................................................... 102

CHAPTER 4: INTERVENTION: ALTERING CONTINGENCIES THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ......................................................... 105
4.1. Introduction ......................................................................................................... 105
4.2. Challenges of Youth Participation in a Non-Participatory Culture ..................... 107
4.3. Voices: A Community Research Project by Youth ............................................. 110
   4.3.1. Initiating the Project .................................................................................... 110
   4.3.2. Participants: The Youth Research Team ..................................................... 112
   4.3.3. The Research Process ................................................................................ 113
4.4. The Vicissitudes of Participation ...................................................................... 116
   4.4.1. Recruitment: Defining Community and Belonging ..................................... 116
4.4.2. Negotiating Representation ......................................................... 117
4.4.3. Ethnic Persistence .............................................................. 119
4.4.4. Social Critique ........................................................................ 121
4.5. Everyday Peace: Negotiating Inclusivity through Community Engagement ....... 122
  4.5.1. Critical Shifts: From Individuals to Group .................................. 122
  4.5.2. Research as Intervention: Towards More Critical Understandings .......... 127
4.6. Heal the World: Adopting a Language of Possibility ............................... 132

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: THE LONG WAY HOME .............................. 135
  5.1. Key Formulations ....................................................................... 135
    5.1.1. Ubiquity and Normalization of Everyday Violence ...................... 135
    5.1.2. Multiple Narratives of Othering and Exclusion ....................... 137
    5.1.3. Citizenship, Territoriality and Belonging ................................ 139
    5.1.4. Everyday Peace .................................................................... 140
  5.2. Limitations and Future Directions ................................................. 141
  5.3. The Long Way Home .................................................................. 145

REFERENCES ....................................................................................... 148

APPENDIX A: Research Site ......................................................................... 159
APPENDIX B: Glossary of Common Terms .................................................. 160
APPENDIX C: Abbreviations and Acronyms ............................................... 162
APPENDIX D: Timeline of Armed Conflict in Garo Hills ............................. 163
APPENDIX E: Theorization of Violence by Garo Youth ................................ 164
APPENDIX F: Flyer for Securing Garo Youth Participation ........................... 165
APPENDIX G: Group Discussion Protocol for Youth ................................... 166
APPENDIX H: Questions and Prompts for Youth Interviews ....................... 167
APPENDIX I: Questions and Prompts for Stakeholder Interviews ................ 169
APPENDIX J: Citizens Opinion Survey Items ............................................ 171
APPENDIX K: Survey Findings: Problems and Visions ............................... 172
APPENDIX L: Lyrics of ‘Heal the World’ .................................................. 173
APPENDIX M: Youth Research Activities .................................................. 174
INTRODUCTION
THE VICISSITUDES OF HOME

I.1. Home and its Loss

I look at my birthplace, knowing that I will never see it again. I want it to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen.

- Siddhartha Deb, *The Point of Return*

In his novel *The Point of Return*¹, the author Siddhartha Deb draws from his experiences of growing up in a picturesque hilly town, gradually fissured by ethnic divisions. Deb’s articulation signals the deep seeded roots of ethnic stratification that percolate into painful inequities, in this case the loss of a *home*. The protagonist in this novel struggles with ethnic violence and aspires for a transformed home. This history of grappling with an inconstant home and the subjectivities it produces are deeply present in my research. The most striking aspect of this story is how intimately it speaks to legacies of displacement, a significant theme in my personal history. My parents grew up during the post-independence period, a time of widespread social and political unrest, genocide and mass-scale displacement. They lived through the Sino-Indian war (1962) as well as the Bangladesh war (1971). Both my parents’ families were originally from Bangladesh but my great grandparents had moved to Northeast India long before Indian independence (1947). Migrants from Bangladesh who came to India before 1971 were granted Indian citizenship by an agreement between the two countries. My parents had extended family and friends who were suddenly relegated to the status of ‘refugees’ during the Bangladesh war in 1971. During this period my parents’ families opened their homes to displaced, immigrant families and aided their resettlement. In the process, my parents intimately encountered the anguish of displacement. They were especially cognizant of how Indian historiography has silenced the genocide and displacement that occurred in the wake of the Bangladesh war, which were buried under the master narrative of the Indo-Pakistan Partition of 1947². I grew up listening to stories of ruptured lives and the significant material and emotional losses people suffered during the formation of Bangladesh. Through these experiences, I was made aware of my own privilege and my place in history. The sense of historical trauma that my parents

---

² The subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan on the eve of independence in August 1947. The partition, a historical trauma, is an integral part of a national sentiment, kept alive through nationalist historiography, political debates, films, images, and music.
imbibed also shaped how they construed their relationship to community later in their adult life. Even as they made efforts to keep their past histories alive, they cemented their relationship to the present through their concerted civic engagement and organizing in their community, that is Garo Hills of Northeast India (Appendix A). While it is not the place of their birth, my parents have lived in the Garo Hills region for most of their adult lives and it has come to represent ‘home’ for them. I too grew up with experiencing Garo Hills as my home and it was many years before I questioned the foundations of this natural claim to my hometown.

Home is characterized as a place that we have to leave in the service of a new self and new authenticity. It is also the place we feel compelled to return to, even though the return is necessarily incomplete (Madden, 1999; Seiden, 2009). I left home after high school to pursue my undergraduate studies in Delhi. Despite the excitement of embarking on a new and different phase of life, I was racked by an unfathomable grief at having to leave behind my home - the mountains, the forested walks, the motley of ferns and orchids, and the cascading water falls. More than a decade ago, an early morning in June, I undertook that journey away from home. Through the haze of my tears, I tried to commit to memory the familiar contours of home - the sharp curves, ravines, the wild flowers and ivy vines and the countless dirt roads that disappeared behind the mountains. That old excruciating pain has ebbed but it never disappeared altogether. Instead it transfigured into a yearning that engulfs me at unexpected moments; for instance when the gurgling of a fountain suddenly floods me with nostalgia; recollection of the exhilaration of a hike through the moss covered mountain paths with the gushing river making its presence known. Those moments serve as a reminder of the irrevocable loss from a decade ago.

The loss was much more than the physical separation from home. It was accompanied by a growing sense of estrangement that was rooted in the broader social terrain. Moving away from home i.e., the Garo Hills region, alerted to how normalcy in my hometown had been redefined in the context of endemic ethnic conflict. In retrospect I realized that my experiences of being cast as the outsider in Garo Hills were not fully cognized during the time I lived there, perhaps in a bid to avoid confronting the impermanence of home. I became increasingly aware of the hegemony of ethnic identity politics in Northeast India that reduced my status to that of an ‘outsider’ in relation to Garo Hills. The certainty tied to my naïve and uncritical acceptance of home began to erode as I realized the extent to which the sense of home is also socially and collectively mediated. During this period, the separatist movement
in the Garo Hills had begun to escalate\(^3\). News reports and stories from back home were inundated with accounts of violence and disruption as armed insurgent groups asserted their demand for an exclusive ethnic homeland for the Garos. The targets of their violence were usually non-Garos. Even though my immediate family remained unharmed, as the perceived outsider, I could no longer take my return to my hometown for granted.

Despite the fact that different individuals in a community may have differing interpretations of a place, there also exists communal interpretations, which factor significantly in our negotiations of home (Feld & Basso, 1996; Galliano & Loeffler, 1999). I gradually became cognizant of the more formal, structural ramifications of being the outsider. The Meghalaya Transfer of Land (regulation) Act of 1972 prohibits the transfer of land from a tribal person to a non-tribal unless specific approval is obtained from the State government. This effectively bars non-tribal communities from acquiring land in the areas delineated as ‘tribal areas’ (e.g., Garo Hills). As a consequence, migrants (i.e., non-Garos) can never hope to belong to that land. A case in point is my parents who have been compelled to rent for 35 years now. It dawned on me then that I could never completely belong to my place of birth. One’s right to a home is not viewed as fundamental and non-derogable, either by the Constitution of India or by any international law. But people’s active relationships with home, both personal connections and community identifications are not instantly severed (Hart & Ben-Yoseph, 2005). And the severance, when it happens is hardly ever final. For instance the protagonist in Deb’s novel\(^4\) points out that “having lived there once, that piece of earth is never released by our clutching hands, unless it be when we die.” He continues:

> I return everyday, sometimes under the cover of sleep, at other times stepping in full daylight across the chicken’s neck strip\(^5\) that divides where I am from where I was…and almost always when it rains, lulling me into a reverie where I think I am back to the sound of horses’ hooves drumming on the slanted, corrugated tin roof, gathering myself in the cold until the moment of awakening drenched in sweat, and the realization of having been torn elsewhere from home long ago…and I return in words traced on a page, playing resident and guide as well as curious tourist…until between these modes of being and seeing, I truly become the place. I am my own hometown.

In addition to diverse forms of returning, there can also be different ways of mitigating the loss inherent in leaving. For me, the breach in the certainty surrounding home

---

\(^3\) Refer to Appendix D for a timeline of armed conflict in Garo Hills.


\(^5\) The Northeastern region of India is connected to the rest of India by a narrow trip of, approximately 12 miles (Map 1). The ‘chicken neck strip’ is a popular term used by people in Northeast India to refer to that tenuous connection.
and the loss of the safe haven became the starting point of my formal ethnographic engagement with the issues confronting Garo Hills and its people. This work began as an effort to make sense of the loss and to recover in parts the utopian landscape of the childhood hometown. Deb’s protagonist attempts to reconcile the loss by visiting his hometown one last time to make his peace. His own loss urges him to emphatically state that he desires for his hometown to be “a home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen. But how you achieve that future is no longer my concern, I tell my hometown. I have truly let go…” This statement converges with my own trajectory and also represents the point of departure. Unlike Deb’s protagonist, my utopian desire for a more inclusive home takes me back, time and again. I am invested in “that future” and it animates my efforts to understand the ethnic divide in Garo Hills, and more importantly to explore alternative forms of sociality that transcend the ethnic divide. This is perhaps an effort to secure a home by forging a relationship that is not overdetermined by my ethnicity.

The theme of ‘home’ and the conflicts and ambiguities associated with it are central to my ethnography. Using instances from my fieldwork, this chapter introduces the site of my project and the questions I will pursue in subsequent chapters. Informed by an autoethnographic sensibility, I strategically employ my own affective and structural positionality to elucidate the predicament of people living in national and regional borders like Northeast India (South Asia). I use my narrative to raise larger questions about the relations between home, community, identity and difference, and how these are navigated in the context of Northeast India. I delineate the complexities of home that make it an eternally attractive yet problematic domain. Delving into the theme of the loss of home, I locate it at the intersections of larger structural forces that engender the loss. Through these issues, this chapter elucidates the complex geopolitical context of Northeast India from the standpoint of ordinary citizens.

I.2. The Ethnicity Puzzle: Who Belongs?

I.2.1. Discordant Labels

As the theme of home became increasingly cardinal to my project, I experienced a deluge of memories that spoke to the notion of home. The most striking one was the recollection of an incident from fifth grade. Chinchin, a Garo boy in my class had called me Bangal. You are a refugee from Bangladesh, you don’t belong in the Garo Hills, he had said.

---

6 ‘Bangal’ is a term that typically refers to Bengalis with origins in erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and/or those who migrated to India in 1971 during the formation of Bangladesh.
Bangal - the single word effectively establishes one’s ‘outsider’ status and negates one’s right to belong. It is one of the worst possible forms of disparagement. Indignant at the attack I retorted, ‘and who do you think you are?’ A refugee from Tibet or Mongolia, he replied without a moment’s hesitation. Growing up in the Garo Hills, this was neither the first nor the last time that I was called Bangal to emphasize my outsider, non-Garo status. Yet this incident stands out in my memory with resounding clarity. I still remember being taken aback by my friend’s response, especially the nonchalance with which he affirmed his own ‘refugee’ status. The bewilderment probably kept the incident alive in my mind and compelled me to return to it. So that years later, I can see that this incident was about ethnicity, place, identity and labeling; two nine year olds from different ethnic communities, with different histories, sharing the same physical space and struggling to assert their legitimacy vis-à-vis that space. I can discern the uncertainty belying the apparently immutable conviction of our nine-year-old selves to stake a claim in Garo Hills and to call it home. There was something profound in that brief interaction. It alludes to anxiety about one’s relation to home, and the uneven, elliptic and fragmented texture of that experience. Home can thus be an exceedingly vulnerable experience. The term refugee necessarily implies displacement and distance from home. Chinchin was Garo and lived in a place called Garo Hills and yet he characterized himself as a refugee, essentially articulating his experience of not belonging. This apparent contradiction underscores how associations between people and places that are often presented as solid and commonsensical, are in fact contested, questioned, and in constant flux. The vicissitudes of this relationship and the inherent struggles constitute a salient theme that weaves through my work.

Close to two decades after that incident, I found myself deliberating once again on what it meant to be labeled as ‘Bangal.’ This happened during my ethnographic fieldwork in the Garo Hills in the course of a conversation with three young non-tribal men. It was a warm Sunday afternoon, with the fan whirring above, the afternoon sun streaming in through the open window, the occasional chatter of children, and the aroma of Sunday cooking wafting in from nearby homes. In those innocuous, almost idyllic surroundings, I sat listening to the three young men as they related their experiences of being ‘othered’ in a place they considered home. Sanjay reflected eloquently on his experience:

Bengalis who were natives of the state of West Bengal used the term somewhat pejoratively to distinguish themselves and assert their perceived cultural superiority over the displaced Bengalis. In Garo Hills, the use of the term, while pejorative, has a different connotation. It refers to undocumented Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh, who cross the border to Garo Hills in search of employment. ‘Bangal’ is employed as an ethnic slur.
Growing up, sometimes, when we would get into arguments, I couldn’t say much because I am a non-tribal. Sometimes I would say something. But then they (i.e., his Garo friends) would call me a ‘Bangal.’ When this word reaches your ears, it shuts your mouth. There is no opportunity to say anything. Automatically. No one can say anything after that.

Sanjay could not disguise his pain. He swallowed and took a moment to compose himself before he could continue. And in that moment of silence, I sensed the deep empathy and agreement in the comportment of the other two men. There is an embodied, visceral quality to the way in which Sanjay explains what it feels like to be called Bangal, the ultimate form of othering that assails the minds and bodies of young non-Garos growing up in Garo Hills.

Amit, another participant alludes to the routineness of this form of othering. He says:

As I grew up, I continued to see these things. Hearing non-tribal people being called Bangal by Garo boys. It is always at the tip of their tongue. Garo youth typically assume the right to label non-Garos, usually non-tribals, as ‘Bangal.’ For instance, in a separate conversation, Patrick, a young Garo male referred to this hostility towards non-tribals in Garo Hills. He said:

Honestly if I tell the truth then, yes, most of the Garo youth do not like non-tribals. They don’t like non-Garos. So, many times, even if a friendship starts between a non-Garos and Garos, then some of them are very faithful. But if some problem or difficulty crops up then the thought, ‘he is a non-tribal and I am a tribal’ comes in between.

Patrick captures the social logic of everyday ethnic violence - ‘he is a non-tribal and I am a tribal.’ His account draws attention to the ubiquity of polarizing ethnic discourses. While Garo youth employ the label ‘Bangal’ as a form of othering to question the legitimacy of other ethnic groups living in the Garo Hills, they fail to assert their own legitimacy with the same unerrering certitude. This is evident in the excerpt below where Patrick reflected on the relationship between Garos and ‘mainland India’7 on a separate occasion:

We can say we are much different from the other parts of India. The thing is that we are not original inhabitants of this place. That differentiates us from mainland India because we originated in Tibet or somewhere.

Patrick’s viewpoint is reminiscent of my friend Chinchin’s remark that he (referring to his Garo identity) is “a refugee from Tibet or Mongolia.” Chinchin reserved the authority to call me ‘Bangal,’ effectively positioning me as the ‘other.’ But this authority did not buttress his legitimacy in the Indian subcontinent. Both Chinchin and Patrick’s remarks

7 The geography of the Indian subcontinent, with the northeastern region joined to the rest of the country with a 12-mile strip of land also tends to engender binary frames like Northeast India versus mainland India.
reveal a further layer in the understanding of home in Garo Hills, one that is not usually articulated formally. Their remarks suggest that they privilege their history of origin and migration rather than that of settlement. This phenomenon is intimately connected to the dominant historical discourses. Garo historians8 (as do Garo legends) note that the Garos belong to the great Bodo race tracing their origins to a province of Tibet named Torua. The exact time frame of this migration is not known for certain. They are said to have migrated southwards along the Himalayan range to reach Eastern India. They then traveled along the Brahmaputra River thorough Bangladesh and the present states of West Bengal and Assam. The Garos eventually reached the present region of Garo Hills where they settled down permanently. Patrick’s statement is premised on the notion that people living in ‘mainland India’ are original inhabitants of India, when in fact most groups in India have mixed ancestries owing to widespread migration throughout history. What does it mean to be original inhabitants of a place? More importantly, we have to consider the potential connections and forms of attachment precluded by some primeval, irrefutable, but elusive connection between people and place epitomized by the notion of original inhabitants. When Patrick says that Garos are not original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, he also appropriates the mainstream Indian discourse about tribes in Northeast India, who are represented as distinct from other tribes in other parts of the country (Bora, 2010). Skewed media attention towards ethnic conflict and insurgent movements in Northeast India coupled with the lack of knowledge about the historical exigencies of the region often lead people in other parts of India to question the allegiance of Northeastern tribes to the Indian state. These perceptions filter into young people’s consciousness. In this case, it was reflected in the manner in which Patrick concluded his narration. After discussing how Garos are different from people in ‘mainland India,’ Patrick went on to qualify that Garos are Indians in “all other respects.” “Yes, we can say we are Indians,” he stated. It is significant that he felt

8 I primarily draw from the works of Dr. Milton S. Sangma and Late Prof. Lindrid D. Shira, two most widely known scholars in Garo studies. I have also reviewed works of other noted scholars who have written extensively on the region including N.N. Acharya, J.B. Bhattacharya, B.K. Roy Burman, Mihir N. Sangma, and P.C. Kar. Most of the historical work on Garo Hills and the Garos are written along the lines of colonial ethnographies. I included a wide range of authors in my review to discern the differences, if any, between colonial ethnographies (e.g., accounts by Maj. Playfair and David Scott) and accounts of Garo history by Indian authors including Garo historians. I did not come across any significant discrepancies between these histories. On further attention, I discovered that this set of scholarly work relies on historical documents dating back to the colonial period as their primary source. My review failed to uncover much in the way of attempts to contextualize or revise these accounts. Even though most Garo scholars acknowledge the rich oral traditions of the Garos and the concern that they are gradually dying, the documented form continues to privilege the colonial version of history, without contesting either its tone or its veracity.
compelled to clarify his ‘Indianness,’ even though the issue was never raised. The way this conversation unfolded highlights the tensions between different identities and allegiances illustrating how ethnic/regional and national identities can be experienced as discordant.

I.2.2. Incongruities of Belonging: Limits of the Body

Intractable perceptions of the relationship between phenotype, identity, and land continue to abound. These perceptions privilege contained people, identities and boundaries, and exclude those that are diffuse and uncertain. An episode at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi exemplifies this. In the fall of 2009, I was traveling back to India for my dissertation fieldwork. At the immigration counter I handed over my passport to be stamped. The elderly official at the immigration counter peered at me over his glasses. He frowned as he glanced at my passport, and regarded me carefully. He then queried in Hindi - You don’t look like you are from Meghalaya. Meghalaya is a state in Northeast India and for most uninformed Indians it is associated with ‘tribal’ communities of Mongoloid rather than Indic origin (Bora, 2010). My curt response that I was born and grew up there only served to whet his curiosity rather than gratifying it. Now he was baffled as to how I spoke fluent Hindi unlike most people in Northeast India. To avoid any further delay, I informed him that I had attended undergraduate and graduate school in Delhi. The frown smoothened and he smiled. Suddenly everything made sense, slotted into the neat categories in his mind! He stamped my passport and moved on to the next person in the line. These popular perceptions have their origins in colonial discourses that represented India and the Northeast as binary opposites, with the Northeastern tribes positioned as the ‘Mongolian other’ of Aryan India (Kikon, 2009; Bora, 2010).

My identification as someone from the Northeast India inevitably arouses curiosity. Given the fact that I do not appear ‘tribal,’ people are often surprised when I tell them I am from the Garo Hills. The implicit assumption is that only Garos (and other tribals) live in that part of the country. The incident at the airport was not the first time that my belonging was interrogated. However, at the threshold of my journey home for fieldwork, this incident emphasized the hyphenated spaces I would find myself in. It was a prelude to the questions that my fieldwork experiences would accentuate. My experience at the airport reminded me of the harassment that Chon, one of my Naga (tribal) friends from the Northeast typically faces while taking international flights out of India. Unlike the mostly benign curiosity that I encounter, she has to endure the suspicion of Indian airport officials who find it difficult to reconcile her Indian passport with her appearance, which is not ‘Indian’ enough for them.
Taken together, these vignettes speak to the relationship between people and place - the contestations, claims and counterclaims associated with it. They also demonstrate the ubiquity of the identity struggles mediating the lives of people from Northeast India.

We also form ideas about the relationship between people and place based on existing policies. This is problematic because most of the present policies in Northeast India have their origins in the British colonial order, which were driven by ease of administration rather than any meaningful insight into the relationships between people and place (Baruah, 1999; Barbora, 2008). Premised on the notion of coincidental territorial boundaries and demographic patterns, these policies endorse ethnic exclusivity, i.e., physically grouping together members of the same ethnic and linguistic group, whilst holding members of different groups apart. Northeast India is a site of extraordinary diversity with about 475 different ethnic groups and sub-groups, speaking more than 400 languages and dialects (Bhaumik, 2009). This geopolitical context gives rise to social identities that resist commonly held, uncomplicated notions about the connections between people and place. Thus, these archaic policies do not map onto the complex geopolitical reality of Northeast India where multiple ethnic and linguistic groups live in social proximity, in contiguous and at times overlapping regions (Lacina, 2009; McDuie-Ra, 2006). Yet, reinforced by the categorical policy discourses, we continue to default to stringent interpretations of the connections between people and place.

Animated by the trials and tribulations of identity, belonging, and home in Northeast India, this dissertation interrogates how commonly held notions of people, place and history construe political identities and manage social relations. How do people navigate questions of belonging in their everyday lives in the Garo Hills? How are claims of authenticity in terms of linkage to a particular community and land are judged, and by whom. How do we rework the inflexible boundaries and rules that confer legitimacy? While addressing these questions, my project simultaneously explores possibilities of new forms of attachment to home, land and community that are not premised solely on one’s ethnic identity.

I.3. Research Objectives

This dissertation is a critical ethnographic investigation of the struggles over cultural representations, their relationship to varied expressions of identity and subjectivity among youth living in spaces of endemic ethnic violence. Through these interrogations, the dissertation also explores and engages possibilities for more peaceful coexistence and community building. There is a growing body of literature examining structural determinants
of the conflict and displacement in North East India. Most scholars invested in issues relevant to North-east India concur in the potentially significant role of academia in lending voice to and empowering people living in the region (Das, 2008; Singh & Dutta, 2008). Little however is known about the manner in which people on the ground navigate the complex political and cultural issues in their everyday life. My project tries to address these gaps by privileging what is negotiated locally in the course of everyday interactions. While I am broadly interested in exploring how issues of ethnic conflict, violence, identity, and marginality are intertwined in the everyday lives of young people residing in Garo Hills, this dissertation engages two major objectives.

First, this dissertation aims to interrogate the culture of normalized everyday violence in the Garo Hills and to examine how it reconfigures identities and subjectivities of local youth. My goal is to document the everyday acts of violence and oppression, to discern the processes by which these everyday acts of violence and the silence around them are maintained and, to reconceptualize the conflict from the point of view of local youth as they get caught up in, are complicit in and/or resist the tribal/non-tribal conflict. These goals engage a number of questions. How are the different social actors (e.g. Garo and non-Garo youth, State administrative and local university officials) implicated or complicit in the processes that facilitate the normalization of everyday violence and the maintenance of a culture of silence around this violence? What are the pragmatic understandings that youth develop of their everyday situations of conflict, shifting locations of marginality and their position in the local community, which enable them to conduct their everyday lives? How do they negotiate their community affiliations in the face of multiple, often contradictory local, national and global demands? How do youth engage with narratives of collective identity and group history? How are collective narratives, often containing divergent interpretations and information incorporated into their stories? These goals/questions thus set out to identify the myriad manifestations of conflict and marginality experienced by young people in Garo Hills, and the larger sociocultural and political discourses that are implicated in these experiences.

Second, I aim to draw upon my growing understanding of youth and ethnic conflict in Garo Hills to explore sites of resistance and innovative ‘everyday peace’ building possibilities in an effort to address the ethnic violence that mediates everyday life in the region. There is a pragmatic intent to this goal, as much as that of social transformation. The focus in on how something might be achieved. As I listened to how young people in Garo Hills experience, interpret, coexist, and give meaning to protracted conflict, I attended to sites of resistance and possibility. The goal was to engage local youth in processes that shift
attention away from the blinding and divisive glare of conflict to effect changes at multiple levels; to engage them in collective processes by which they could potentially re-script their identities in more inclusive terms. The ways in which these youth engagement processes play out in turn have implications for new ways of understanding the relationship between conflict/violence, agency and community.

I.4. From Home to Homeland

When a marriage does not work out, eventually the only way out is divorce; when the joint family fails, the partition. Similarly, when the situation comes to such a point that living together of the Garos and the Khasis in the State failed, the ultimate solution is separation... The internal situation in Meghalaya is no longer conducive for living together (emphasis in original) (Memorandum submitted by the Achik National Volunteers’ Council to the Government of India demanding a separate state for the Garos)

Home is a multi-faceted concept with emotional, social, cultural and geopolitical components but homeland through the addition of ‘land’ has a definite physical connotation. The geopolitical implications of homeland are far more concrete and corporeal than the emotional positionality of home. The term homeland, by recalling the connection to land also accentuates borders and boundaries. This is evident in the above paragraph excerpted from the memorandum submitted by Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC) to the Government of India in favor of their demand for a separate homeland for the Garo tribe. The ANVC was the most vocal proponent of ethnic separatism at the time of my fieldwork. The excerpt indicates that the proposed homeland is premised on a detachment from ‘the ethnic other,’ in this case the Khasi tribe. The ANVC’s claim for a separate homeland is one of the many separatist movements in Northeast India that are mobilized along ethnic lines. Northeast India has been the site of ethnic conflict during almost the entire postcolonial period since 1947. The homeland ideal constitutes a central feature of these conflicts (Baruah, 1999). These conflicts mirror international border disputes in that they stem from multiple ethnic groups laying claim to the same territory as their ‘homeland.’ While political movements in favor of ethnic interests or autonomy have been common during the postcolonial period, they have increasingly taken the form of armed insurgency driven by an exclusive ethnic imperative (Dasgupta, 1997).


The hegemony of ethnic identity politics in Northeast India is reinforced by the
Indian state through the formulation of ethno-centric policies/solutions in response to socioeconomic and political problems facing different regions of Northeast India (Barbora, 2008). A case in point is the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. It contains special provisions for the administration of the tribal areas of the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in Northeast India. The Garo Hills region of Meghalaya also falls within its purview. The term ‘tribe’ has persisted from the colonial era to describe the indigenous or pre-colonial communities of the hills and plains in Northeast India. The usage of the term ‘tribe’ is critiqued as a colonial construction that attempts to bring over 400 heterogeneous communities into one broad classification that distinguished them from ‘castes.’ However the term continues to be part of the language of the Indian government. It is also part of the identity of the communities themselves.

The Sixth Schedule categorizes the people of Northeast India into two main groups. First, there are ‘tribes,’ who are classified into ‘hill tribes’ protected by the Sixth Schedule and into ‘plain tribes’ who receive very little constitutional protection. Second there is the monolithic category of ‘non-tribals,’ which includes communities established in the region for centuries as well as recent migrants from other parts of India and neighboring countries. This is an extremely inadequate set of categorizations, which fails to take into account the geopolitical reality of the region. Yet it remains central to the ways in which Northeast India is administered. The Sixth Schedule is implicated in protracted conflict in Northeast India. For instance, several communities excluded from the Sixth Schedule (e.g., the Rabha tribe of Assam) are fighting for inclusion in order to protect their interests in relation to other dominant, tribal communities (like the Garos). Other Sixth Schedule communities, like the Garos are fighting for their own federal state to gain further political autonomy. The Sixth Schedule thus reinforces and cultivates a notion of autonomy premised on ethnic distinctions, which has often been used to justify ethnically exclusive ‘homelands’ as an ideal to be fought for and preserved through political and even violent means (Baruah, 2003b; McDuie Ra, 2006).

I.4.2. Armed Insurgencies and the Homeland Ideal

Discontent with existing territorial boundaries culminating in competing demands for ethnic homelands is commonplace in Northeast India, but the phenomenon has not been

---

9 www.education.nic.in/articles/sixthschedule.doc
10 Caste is a pervasive but controversial form of social organization that is common in India. The caste system organizes communities hierarchically on the basis of occupation, culture, social class, etc. It is a form of graded inequality.
uniform in its influence. For example, the states of Assam and Nagaland have a longer history of separatist movements and armed insurgency than does Meghalaya, where ideas about homelands contingent on exclusive ethnic grouping became a part of the dominant public discourse only in the early 1990s. The Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) was the first organized armed protest demanding a separate homeland for the Garos. A number of Garos living in the Garo-dominated parts of the state of Assam got together to form ALMA in 1990. The leaders spearheading ALMA asserted that the Garos in Assam were deprived of an ethnic homeland they could call their own. Located as they were along the border between Assam and Meghalaya, they contended that their interests were liminal to both states. The Indian government labeled the organization as a militant group and banned it. Within a few years, in 1994, most of the ALMA members had surrendered. However, some of them retreated ‘underground’ after the rehabilitation scheme set up by the government failed. Police sources assert that these surrendered members of ALMA escaped to Bangladesh, and with the aid of other armed insurgent groups in Northeast India (viz., National Socialist Council of Nagaland, United Liberation Front of Assam and National Democratic Front of Bodoland) organized themselves into a new group called Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC). Over the past two decades or so, there has been a proliferation of smaller separatist groups but the ANVC continued to be the strongest and most organized proponent of the separatist agenda.

The Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC) was officially formed in December 1995. As an armed insurgent group, their main demand was “the creation of Separate State of Garoland comprising the present three districts of Garo Hills of Meghalaya and the areas predominantly inhabited by the Garos in the contiguous areas of West Khasi Hills and Ri-Bhoi districts of Meghalya and Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam.” After almost a decade of armed conflict, in 2004, the ANVC entered into a tripartite agreement of ceasefire with the Government of India and the State government (of Meghalaya). Since then, there

---

11 The description of ALMA is based on a range of newspaper archives and interviews with news correspondents, law enforcement officials and community members who have followed the trajectory of separatist movements in the Garo Hills. ANVC members remain silent about their relationship to ALMA.

12 It has been observed that the ANVC have severed their ties with the NSCN and NDFB, but that they still continue to have ties with the ULFA. The ANVC is silent and reticent about their connection to other separatist groups in Northeast India.


14 The excerpt is taken from the ANVC’s Memorandum on the Demand for the Creation of Separate Garoland submitted to the Prime Minister of India in 2006.
have been numerous talks and negotiations between these actors. During the periodic review of the agreement in 2010, the ANVC provisionally altered their demands from that of a separate State to the establishment of Garoland Territorial Council, an autonomous body modeled after similar institutions in other parts of Northeast India. In an interview, Torik Jangning Marak, the current spokesperson for ANVC explained to me the concept of Garoland Territorial Council:

"Though our demand was for statehood, in the series of talks and rounds of meetings we have had with the government and with other intellectuals, we have come to realize that statehood is not feasible at this point. So we have reconsidered our demand into an autonomous council status. It will be more or less in the format of the Bodoland Territorial Council. We are still concentrating on statehood but it will continue in the long run. As for now, we are concentrating on the Garoland Autonomous Council, which will have more power, more autonomy with direct funding from the central government.

This concession on the part of ANVC happened only in 2010 during the most recent round of talks. The Indian government however is yet to accede to these demands, which has resulted in growing threats by ANVC to pull out of the tripartite agreement and “go underground.” They were also renegotiating the terms of the agreement, trying to get the Government of India to agree to an indefinite ceasefire, rather than the present process of provisional truce contingent on periodic reviews. In the years following the ceasefire, there has been a distinct shift in the operation of ANVC, viz., their increased visibility in Tura, the largest urban center of Garo Hills. The ANVC has come to establish itself as a parallel administrative body, positioning themselves at the helm of local affairs. For example, they impose special taxes on non-tribal business owners, penalizing them for their ‘outsider’ status. These taxes are illegal but the district administration denies any knowledge of their imposition. One of the district administrators pointed out their inability to take any action in the absence of formal complaints lodged by those affected. But the affected business owners, especially those who own small establishments, do not trust the local administration and prefer to accede to the ANVC. They are afraid of resisting the dictates of ANVC and want to continue doing business in the Garo Hills. In this way, the status quo is maintained and normalcy redefined in the face of growing ethnic divide.

15 The Bodoland Territorial Council is an autonomous self-governing body that was set up to provide constitutional protection under the Sixth Schedule to the Bodo tribe of Assam. This autonomous body was expected to address economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos, and also speed up the infrastructure development in the area.
16 This is not his real name. This was the name with which he was christened when he joined the ANVC.
Till as recently as 2010, the ANVC were proselytizing and fighting for the creation of a separate Garoland. So despite their provisionally altered demands, the notion of a separate homeland continues to dominate the public discourse. Their ethnic assertion is clear from the manner in which they describe the sought after state of Greater Garoland:

Though the Garos of the West Khasi Hills and Ri-Bhoi Districts of Meghalaya and Goalpara and Kamrup Districts of Assam were alienated from the main Garo Hills Districts after the creation of Meghalaya State by an Act of Parliament, we are committed to unite the areas predominantly inhabited by the Garos into a single administrative unit. This form of re-demarcation under the name of separate State of Garoland is our greatest demand to which we have spiritually, culturally, politically and sanguinely committed."

In the same document, ANVC leaders argue that the Garos living in these contiguous regions “belong to the same stock of race so they may conveniently be grouped together for better administration.” It then goes on to challenge the bases on which the State of Meghalaya was formed, which served to marginalize the Garos within the state:

The present Meghalaya State\textsuperscript{17} was created comprising the United Khasi & Jaintia districts and the Garo Hills districts by the North Eastern Reorganization Act, 1971…The Garos have no affinity with the Khasis and Jaintias. Just because all the three tribes follow the matrilineal family should not be the criterion for the creation of the State of Meghalaya. Presently, Garos have no identity of its own and the present state of Meghalaya is nothing but a state identified only with the Khasis because of their selfish motive, self-centered nature and domineering spirit. Composite state for the Garos and Khasis is a mismatch. It may be described as a case of misregeneration. Unless a separate Garoland State is created for the Garos, the national identity of the Garos is at stake.

This agenda is premised on a perspective that privileges the grouping together of members of the same ethnic and linguistic group. It should be noted that while the dominant narrative is one of securing the interests of one’s ethnic group, the subtext is one of excluding and othering. The founding assumption of the discourse of a separate homeland is that the right to a home is impossible without creating a homeland. Such a project of organizing ethnic homelands then privileges \textit{homeland} over \textit{home}. It also mimics state territoriality whereby

\textsuperscript{17} It should be noted that Meghalaya was carved out of the hilly regions of erstwhile Assam to accommodate tribal self-rule aspirations within the purview of the Indian Constitution. The Hills State People’s Democratic Party composed of all three tribes, Garos, Khasis and Jaintias forwarded the agenda that states based on ethnic tribal compositions would be better placed to manage their own affairs through their elected leaders. Neither the pioneers of the movement for statehood nor the Indian government had anticipated problems that would push towards further fragmentation of the state using violent means. The functional head of the state is the Chief Minister who is elected for a term of 5 years. The fact that Meghalaya has had 21 Chief Ministers over the past 40 years is indicative of the lack of political stability in the region, not to mention the draining of state coffers with continual elections.
the organization of the homeland takes precedence over individual claims to a home. The current trend towards separatism and the increasingly violent and disruptive forms it is taking raises several compelling questions. *Is the guarantee of a homeland the only means of securing a home, identity and development? If the ultimate solution is to carve out a separate, exclusive homeland for the Garos, then what does it mean for other ethnic groups living in Garo Hills? What are the social and political consequences of different versions of home and homeland? Which actors are allowed to define boundaries? How do different conceptions of place and home exert influence on people and groups?*

I.4.3. The Ethnic Other: A Corollary of the Homeland Ideal

While a faintly expressed narrative of losing one’s home and interests to the ethnic other, is embedded within the poetic promises of the imagined homeland, it is more pronounced in the accounts of ‘foot soldiers’\(^{18}\) of the ANVC. During 2004-2005\(^{19}\), I had conducted several interviews with young men who were incarcerated for breaches committed as part of their affiliation to the ANVC. All of the five young men that I interviewed over the course the year alluded to ‘the ethnic other’ while narrating their reasons for joining the ANVC. The interviews were in Garo and they made constant reference to ‘dinthang jaat,’ which means other ethnic communities. The common perception was that people from other ethnic communities are “infiltrating” the Garo community; consequently they (i.e., the Garos) were not getting what they “should get.” Resentment against ‘the other’ was conspicuous in Hevelson’s\(^{20}\) narrative. “They are where they are not supposed to be,” he says of other ethnic communities living in the Garo Hills. It also came across clearly in Bruce Lee’s narrative. He characterizes other communities as people who “lie, swindle and cheat.” These young men

---

\(^{18}\) The ANVC is a hierarchical organization with the foot soldiers at one of the lowest rungs in the hierarchy. These are usually young men recruited from impoverished border villages. Their primary job is to act as couriers. They are expected to follow orders and do not possess any voice within the organization. Several stretches of boundaries between the states of Assam and Meghalaya are disputed. While state and non-state actors on both sides claim those disputed zones for themselves, neither does anything to address the problems faced by residents of those areas. These conditions of deprivation and instability make the young people more susceptible to totalitarian ideologies. The ideological superficiality of these youth was inconsistent with psychological theorizations of young people turning to totalitarian ideologies. These contradictions encouraged me to attend to the complex contexts within which insurgency has become a way of life. It made me question the contingencies that make it imperative to these young people to take up arms? Over time I have also become aware of how the ANVC is not a homogenous entity. Among other things there are huge economic disparities across the different layers of leadership.


\(^{20}\) The names of the incarcerated youth are not their real names. These are the name with which he was christened when they joined the ANVC.
claimed that they joined the ANVC to “do something” for the Garo community, to protect their interests from the excesses of other ethnic groups. It was clear from their accounts that this kind of ethnic polarization is part of the discourse that the ANVC employs to recruit its members. There is a deeply embedded ethos of victim. But there is a hierarchy of victims based on ethnic identification so that community identifications take precedence over victimhood.

Ethnic othering mentioned above is not limited to the narratives of those who pursue the homeland ideal. It is intricately woven into the social fabric. Ethnic assertions mediate everyday life in manifold ways. For example, one is accustomed to the sight of posters denouncing non-tribals plastered across walls all over Tura town. Members of the Garo Students’ Union picketing outside government offices with placards, protesting or forbidding non-tribal appointments are also fairly typical. A small jewelry business owner reveals the reason behind the empty display cases in his store.

I avoid keeping anything on display because it attracts Garo boys. They come in and insist on being shown stuff. Sometimes they just pick up an item and tell me they’ll pay later which hardly ever happens. And you know we cannot say anything if we want to continue living and doing business here.

Another incident took place while I was waiting to see a doctor. A woman walked past me and entered the doctor’s chamber when the attendant held the door open for me. The attendant looked at me sheepishly but refrained from saying anything to the woman who entered out of turn, merely shutting the door behind her. I pointed this out to the people managing the clinic. The receptionist responded in hushed tones, “I know. But she’s a Garo. Let her go. You can see the doctor after her.” Both the receptionist and the attendant were non-tribals. When I continued to argue that they were wrong to discriminate, he tried to pacify me, “Let it be,” he said. “They are local people. No point in defying them or confronting them.” Everyone around me -the woman who entered out of turn, the doctor, the clinic staff and other patients waiting to be attended to, went about things as usual, as if this little encounter never took place. The ethnic divide has become such an integral part of social and political life that it is no longer questioned. The vignette above exemplifies how the status quo is maintained. The Garo woman may or may not have disregarded a rule of civic life on the basis of her ethnic identity. She may or not have assumed that it was fair for her brush me aside because as a non-tribal (the perceived ‘outsider’), I should not have been there in the first place. But the clinic’s reaction or the lack of it was based on the assumption of the worst, of Garos in general as well as the particular Garo woman. Along with fear, there
is also condescension. Such encounters, usually left uninspected, only serve to widen the rift between tribal and non-tribal communities. Thus the meta-narrative around ethnic othering weighs in heavily as people navigate their everyday lives in Garo Hills. By untangling such everyday social practices in subsequent chapters, this ethnography underscores and interrogates some of the complex ways in which the politics of exclusion is ingrained in everyday life - the constraints it imposes on individual lives and it implications for communal harmony in Garo Hills.

I.5. Development and its Discontent

I.5.1. Returning Home: An Encounter with Remoteness

As my flight from Delhi progressed, the imposing Himalayan ranges came into sight. It was a clear day and the snow-capped Mount Everest was visible. The pilot’s voice alerted everyone to the magnificent sights outside. I could not help overhearing the excited chatter of a small group of tourists a couple of rows ahead of me. Unlike them, I was content to sit back and savor the sights without a compelling need to capture the moment on film; for this was my home. As the aircraft began its descent, I felt exhilarated at the initial aerial view of the green and fecund valley below. After traveling thousands of miles, the last column of my journey, a five-hour drive from the airport seemed to stretch ahead of me. Little did I know how ominous that feeling was! As I exited the airport, I was devastated to learn that one of the numerous armed insurgent groups operating along the stretch between Guwahati Airport and Tura (my hometown) had called for a thousand-hour long road blockade, refusing to allow any vehicles to pass through the highway. Several instances of violence had already been reported and everything had come to a standstill in the region. I had to take an alternative route back home, a detour that ended up being a seventeen-hour drive instead of the usual five.

Seven hours into the drive, we lost cell phone signal indicating our entry into more ‘remote’ territory. As dusk approached, we noted progressively fewer signs of habitation till it disappeared altogether. Driving through winding road amidst thick forests, we realized that those roads were rarely used, except perhaps on occasions as this. As the night wore on, the drive became increasingly treacherous, which was compounded by an approaching storm. We were all aware of the imminent danger as our car negotiated the precarious road, while being pelted by rain and hail. It was pitch dark, with no streetlights, signposts or milestones to guide us. We came across a few decrepit milestones but the writing on them had faded beyond comprehension. In the absence of any shoulders in the narrow road with the
mountains on one side and deep ravines on the other, we were compelled to drive on. All
eyes were trained on the road ahead, no one voicing the fear and apprehension that held us
rigid in our seats. In those moments, I found myself pondering over the colonial labels of
‘exclusion’ and ‘remoteness’ applied to the regions we were driving through. During the
colonial regime, the British authorities had found these harsh terrains extremely difficult to
administer and they were designated as ‘excluded areas’ and ‘backward tracts.’ In the years
following Indian independence, the popular imagery of Northeast India came to be associated
with remoteness, insurgencies and underdevelopment. The embodied sense of geographic
isolation roused me to the perpetual gap that exists between context and text. This
characterization of ‘backwardness,’ which animates much intellectual debate, is immediate
and tangible to the lives of those who call these ‘backward’ areas home. People who live in
these regions have intimate knowledge and different scale of reference in the face of the
insecurities and disturbances that have come to define their homes. Yet their voices remain
marginal in these debates. The arduous journey back home was instructive in that it
underscored the need to render audible the voices and perspectives of ordinary citizens,
voices that are largely absent from both scholarly and public discourses. I was also jarred by
the realization that home was not just the mist covered, majestic mountains. The conflict that
forced me to take the ‘remote’ detour, the unpaved roads made risky by torrential rains,
rickety bridges, absent (broken or malfunctioning) street lights, decrepit milestones, were all
integral parts of the home that I was returning to. The journey back home thus became
emblematic of the ambivalence that defines home - home as an eternally attractive, yet
problematic domain (Madden, 1999).

1.5.2. The Developmentalist Discourse

The Northeastern region of India is referred to as ‘backward’ both within the region
itself and by other parts of India (McDuie-Ra, 2009). Modernity in the form of infrastructure
is commonly viewed as the antidote for ‘backwardness.’ This dichotomy of backward versus
modernity has become the lens through which the region is understood. The discourse of
underdevelopment and uneven development dominated my conversation with Torik
Jangning, the spokesperson for the separatist group Achik National Volunteers’ Council
(ANVC). Torik cited the lack of adequate development in Garo Hills to justify the ANVC’s
struggle towards an ethnically exclusive homeland for the Garos. Unaware of my personal
experience, he drew my attention to terrains that constituted my route back home to illustrate
his point. He described:
Those roads have not been developed, even today. They are in very bad conditions. You cannot travel on those roads. Even if you do, there are lots of repercussions. For example, the roads are very bad, there are no habitations, no service centers, you have to take so many risks.

A strong narrative of uneven development also appears in the memorandum that the ANVC submitted to the government in support of their demand for a separate homeland called “Greater Garoland.” They argue:

The Garo Hills part of Meghalaya has been receiving step-motherly treatment since its inception as no proper investment for permanent development of infrastructure has ever been made in Garo Hills…There is discrimination and regional imbalance in allocating funds for implementation of schemes in the Garo Hills. Even plan allocations made to the Garo Hills districts are meager and insufficient. The policies adopted and implemented by the Government of Meghalaya so far had reduced Garo Hills - a land of plenty - to a land of poverty and woe.

Their allegation of uneven development has an unquestionable basis in reality. However the issue of development is far more complex and cannot be reduced to a problem of ethnic discrimination alone. Doing so can justify the demand for ethnic separatism and exclusiveness including the use of violence as a means to achieve those ends. This kind of ethnic reasoning also posits an overly simplistic relation between development and peace (both conceived as monolithic categories). Such rationales have become part of political discourses in Northeast India, as is evident in the reflections of Purno A. Sangma, a former Chief Minister of the state of Meghalaya. He proposed a straightforward relationship between development and peace:

Now the government of India’s slogan is ‘peace for development,’ right? So in order to have development, we need peace. This is what government of India says. I say, no, you will never achieve it. It is the other way round. Development for peace! You develop the area, you give employment to the young people, automatically there will be peace. Development, development, development! That is the key to peace. If you wait for peace, to develop, peace will never come and neither will development. Therefore my slogan is development for peace.

Some of the arguments forwarded by the ANVC, e.g., insufficient allocation of funds for development in Garo Hills are invalidated by national policies. In 1998, a separate ministry of Development of Northeastern Region (DONER) was set up by the Indian government under which all central government ministries have been earmarking 10 per cent of their annual budgets for the northeastern states. In an interview, one of the district administrators in charge of Garo Hills pointed out that the allocation of funds from the Government of India is fixed for each region and hence the diversion of funds to other regions, like the Khasi Hills
(as the ANVC contends) does not arise. He also brought to my attention other substantial funds that the Garo Hills receives under the Backward Regions Grant Fund, a special intervention from the Government of India. The funds under this intervention scheme are meant to fill critical gaps in transport and communication, health, education, agriculture or any other sector where such need arises. Additionally, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) aims to enhance the livelihood security of rural households has been in effect since 2006. Despite the existence of multiple development schemes and sizeable funds, the distinct lack of infrastructure as evidenced by my journey and subsequent fieldwork is a reality for the community. In 2008, a decade after the establishment of DONER, the per capita income in the state of Meghalaya was 17 per cent below the national average\textsuperscript{21}. State officials claim that implementation of such schemes in Garo Hills have been hindered by militancy, but the existence of corruption and nepotism within the bureaucratic system is common knowledge and part of the public rhetoric of underdevelopment. What is problematic though is the extent to which it is normalized, so that the abuse of power and politics by the state for individual interests is no longer prioritized as an issue that has to be dealt with in order to facilitate development. Consequently, the damage to the social fabric wrought by low levels of education and erosion of faith in public institutions remain largely unnoticed. Instead, the ethnic other becomes the repository of all blame and responsibility, so that separating from those ethnic others is viewed as the ultimate solution. There exist only a handful of voices that attempt to parse out the complex, multilayered discourse of underdevelopment. For instance, journalist and social activist, Patricia Mukhim\textsuperscript{22} draws our attention to the existence of social stratifications within tribal societies, which are erroneously assumed to be egalitarian. Mukhim argues that tribal societies are stratified in terms of class, power and status. She observes that these contours have sharpened in contemporary times with the emergence of an affluent, exploitative, tribal elite. This elite class constitutes the chief beneficiary of the development funds flowing into the Northeast; thus resulting in concentration of wealth and widening of the socioeconomic gap within certain tribal communities. In a sociopolitical milieu defined by the hegemony of ethnic identity politics, this phenomenon however escapes public scrutiny.

\textsuperscript{21} These figures are based on the net domestic product data released by the National Accounts Division of the Central Statistical Office under the Minister of Statistics and Program Implementation, Government of India.

The ordeals of my journey back home foreshadowed the labyrinthine issues, which my fieldwork would lead me to. I found the discourse of (under)development to be intertwined with ethnic conflict, separatism and violence in such a way that it is impossible to talk about one without the either. The armed rebel groups and other organizations with an ethnic separatist agenda cite lack of development of their region as one of the primary factors motivating them. The Indian state argues that pervasive insurgency in the region poses an impediment to development. This kind of circular reasoning forecloses alternative ways of theorizing the problems affecting Garo Hills. It also highlights the primacy of these two set of actors - armed rebel groups and the State, which not only precludes ordinary citizens as stakeholders, but also more non-confrontational possibilities of resolving the issues. These observations reiterated the crucial need to understand the protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India, including Garo Hills, by engaging closely with local civil society actors and taking in their perspectives.

I.6. On Being the Troubled Margins

The Northeastern region constitutes the easternmost region of India. It shares approximately 98 per cent of its boundaries with neighboring countries (Map 1 in Appendix A). Owing to its strategic location, the region is viewed as border or a buffer zone, and represents a national security concern. The last few decades have witnessed the progressive multiplication of armed insurgent groups in Northeast India; the South Asia Terrorism Portal documented 115 such groups in 2007. These statistics, combined with the distrust engendered by the Sino-Indian border war in 1962 amplified the Indian government’s security concerns. They became more apprehensive of the possibility of insurgent armies uniting with hostile neighbors to attack the Indian State (Hazarika, 1994). This troubled postcolonial history of Northeast India represents a significant departure from pan Indian narratives of democracy and nationalism (Baruah, 1999). Consequently, these dissenting voices have remained peripheral to the political concerns of successive governments at the center. In addition to labels of ‘remote,’ ‘backward,’ and ‘underdeveloped,’ the Northeastern borderlands have also acquired labels like ‘disturbed,’ and ‘troubled’ zones that require regulation and state intervention.

While the phenomenon of ethnic separatism is not unique to Northeast India, the

secessionist nature of the demands and strategic location of the region renders it critical from
the point of view of national security. The Indian government has typically employed
security-driven approaches to respond to the protracted conflict in Northeast India. In an
effort to contain the multiplying armed rebellions in Northeast India, the Indian Army was
given extraordinary powers to wage war on insurgent armies, most notably through draconian
laws like the 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)\(^24\). This act can be put into
operation in any area declared “disturbed” by the Indian Government. It also authorizes the
armed forces to use force “even to the causing of death” in disturbed areas in the following
circumstances: against any person acting against a law or order, to prevent the assembly of
more than five persons, and/or against anyone carrying weapons or anything that is capable
of being used as a weapon. AFSPA also allows the armed forces to arrest anyone without a
warrant who is suspected to have committed, or being about to commit, any “cognizable
offence.” Furthermore, the act states that no legal proceeding can be brought against any
member of the armed forces under the AFSPA, without permission of the Central
Government. Its continued use urges the separatist insurgent groups to demand for more
autonomy, giving them more reason to want to secede from a state that enacts such powers;
and the agitation, which ensues, continues to justify the use of the AFSPA from the point of
view of the Indian Government. By instituting such a vicious cycle, AFSPA poses a serious
threat to civil society. Thus in Northeast India we see democratic institutions and protective
discrimination to safeguard the interests of certain ethnic communities existing side by side
with extra-constitutional, emergency laws that severely impinge on civil liberties of those
very communities.

The blatant disregard that the Government of India has for the constituencies of
Northeast India has become more evident in recent years through their stance on other
contemporary conflicts. The proliferation of Maoist movements in the states of West Bengal
and Jharkhand and the inability of the respective state governments to contain the violence
gave rise to a debate around the deployment of the Indian Air Force in the region. The Union
Home Minister of India settled the debate through his categorical response that the Indian
government cannot deploy its military “against its own people”\(^25\). Yet their continued refusal
to repeal the draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act in Northeast India combined with

\(^{24}\) Armed Forces Special Powers Act: A study in National Security tyranny (From the SAHRDC
armed_forces.htm

Edition.
their failure to engage these ethical and human rights considerations vis-à-vis Northeast India, only serves to alienate the people of the region from ‘mainland India.’

I.6.1. The Spectacle of War

The attention of most scholars as well as regional and national media is consumed by the spectacular confrontations between radical insurgency by tribal groups and counterinsurgency exercised by the Indian State. What is excluded from these characterizations is the predicament of ordinary citizens who tend to be collateral damage for insurgent groups as well as the Indian military, and whose everyday lives are reconfigured in the face of conflict. In the summer of 2008, I was in Garo Hills doing some field research. One evening I was on the phone with my friend, Athem, who at the time was a student at the Institute of Health and Medical Sciences at Imphal, Manipur. As we were talking, I heard an explosion on her end. My friend let out a scream as she realized that a bomb had exploded within the university campus. She later told me that the blast happened near the library. One of the armed insurgent groups had eventually claimed responsibility for the act with threats of far worse consequences if the government did not meet their demand. Athem tells me of another incident which occurred as she had just stepped out of a restaurant after a leisurely Sunday brunch with her family. They were startled by the deafening sounds of an explosion followed by a round of gunshots. Chaos ensued as people screamed and ran for cover. In a few minutes, everyone realized what had happened. An open jeep carrying security personnel was driving past the restaurant when one of the tires burst. The armed personnel instinctively started firing their rifles suspecting a bomb blast, before they realized it was simply a tire burst. Fortunately there were no human casualties in that incident but that is not always the case. There are infinite such stories, of ordinary citizens caught between the fear exercised by the armed insurgent groups and the excesses of the armed forces. Yet both public and scholarly attention is focused on the spectacular confrontations between the armed insurgent groups and the Indian military. The mesmerizing pull of the spectacle obscures the more prosaic ethnic conflict as it is enacted in the everyday lives of people who live in zones of endemic conflict. My ethnography is geared towards addressing this gap by detailing how the protracted ethnic conflict translates into people’s everyday lives as they navigate heterogeneous spaces of belonging.

26 Manipur is one of the seven states that make up Northeast India and Imphal is its capital.
I.7. Renegotiating Parameters of Belonging

Returning ‘home’ for a prolonged period posed challenges that extended far beyond the trials of the circuitous journey back. The first month was especially trying as I grappled with feelings of estrangement, anguish and alienation. As I re-acclimated to the local context, I came face to face with a version of my hometown that was distinctly different from my nostalgic idealizations. I was struck by the general apathy and the absence of spaces to register social critique. As I contended with these realities, I realized that the physical distance helped me engage with this work while holding on to the memory of the ‘home’ unmarred by ruptures, contradictions, and ambivalence. I recognized the feat of forgetting that is involved in the very act of remembering. While I did not expect the memory to be congruent with the actual hometown, I had hoped to find possibilities for their coexistence. Returning home for fieldwork invoked a sense of belonging but the dilemmas and challenges I faced were antithetical to the homely feeling. Paradoxically, the loss of home was most profound while I was actually at home.

Understanding and making sense of one’s history is generally considered critical for being meaningfully grounded in the present. But the ‘History’ itself is partial and partisan and failure to recognize it as such tends to limit the parameters of dialogue. Enmeshed and intertwined in the complexities of history there is often conflicting evidence that permits different people in Northeast India to claim a right on the same land. When the master narrative is so contentious, simply attending to the historical roots of the conflict and associated violence is not sufficient to lead us away from the increasingly fissured political landscape of Northeast India. Efforts to trace historical roots of the conflict often tend to emphasize the historical victim in a way that establishes a dichotomy between victim and perpetrator. These categories however are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they static. Yet entire cultures can sometimes take on the identity of tragic victims and unwittingly use the energy of fear to become the perpetrator. When two groups are in conflict, each bearing a deeply embedded ethos of victim, there is the greatest danger of blind, brutal treatment towards a dehumanized and demonized other. Absolute wrongness allows for absolute rightness and unjust treatment allows for unjust treatment in the guise of retribution towards wrongdoers.

I do not contest the crucial role of historiography in comprehending the complex problems of Northeast India. I would however argue for the need for a certain break from the tangled web of the past, albeit not an amnesic one. To this end, my ethnographic project
foregrounds the embodied everyday lived experiences and concerns of young people living in the Garo Hills, that illuminate this particular political moment and offer new vantage points for reframing our understanding of the conflict and associated violence. This reframing represents ontological and epistemological shifts, new ways of knowing and being in the world, informed by the stories of young people’s negotiations of the contradictions of everyday life. Critically, these shifts are galvanized by an emotional geopolitics that situate subjects’ own constructed meanings at the heart of something previously characterized within national security frames. There is an emphasis on working from the ‘inside out,’ which can potentially point to sites of resistance and open up possibilities for reworking rigid ethnic boundaries that have come to be taken for granted.

I.7.1. From Everyday Violence to Everyday Peace

Like many others working on protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India, I too cannot distance myself from a crucial question - so what do we do? In his analysis of the hegemony of divisive politics in Northeast India, Baruah (2003) urges us to explore alternative approaches to citizenship. Others have argued for alternative policy frames anchored on a discourse of human rights (e.g., Barbora, 2008). McDuie-Ra (2006) advocates for a “third sphere” of civil society organizations that resist co-optation by armed ethno-national movements as well as the Indian government. He shifts the focus from nationalist and ethno-nationalist agendas to local human security issues of ordinary citizens who live between these two poles. My activist ethnographic (Angel-Ajani, 2006) work begins to explore what these shifts might look like in practice and how they might be achieved. Over the course of my extended ethnographic engagement with the Garo Hills, I have discovered that any attempt to address the endemic conflict and violence must privilege the composite and inter-lived nature of the space. To that end, this dissertation interrogates and excavates the ubiquitous divisive discourses that frame people’s everyday lives. In doing so, it articulates the need for a shift in the terms of the discourse. The alternative discourse has to necessarily shift attention away from the blinding and divisive glare of the normalized conflict. I explore these possibilities by repositioning disenfranchised local youth as critical inquirers into the problems faced by the local community. The decision to use youth engagement as a vehicle to understand and possibly intervene in protracted ethnic conflict was informed by a performative praxis that inspires and empowers persons to act on their utopian impulses (Denzin, 2009). Despite manifold challenges from within and from external entities, the youth engagement project opened up dialogic spaces for interrogating contexts,
negotiating notions of community, and framing action. It indexed possibilities of negotiating
parameters of belonging, which can be very powerful in the face of apparently intractable
conflict that mediate everyday life.

Efforts to create an inclusive space are also deeply rooted in my own history and my
utopian impulse for my hometown to “be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to
have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen” (Deb, 2004). As I continue to reckon with the
ethnic divide and othering, both in my fieldwork and my writing, I confront dilemmas
surrounding my own positionality, the advantages as well as the blind spots generated by
intimacy and by my own cultural links to the community and larger history. Some of these
dilemmas will emerge through my writing while I will take up others more explicitly because
of their potential for illuminating important issues.

I.8. Overview of Chapters

To sum up, two foci anticipate this dissertation’s goals: first, to interrogate the culture
of normalized everyday violence in the Garo Hills and to examine how it reconfigures
identities and subjectivities of local youth; second, to explore innovative ‘everyday peace’
building possibilities in an effort to address the ethnic violence that mediates everyday life in
the region. The chapters are organized in response to these foci (described earlier).

Youth and Everyday Violence

Chapters 2 and 3 are ethnographic accounts and analysis of everyday violence along
ethnic lines, its meaning and implications for youth, and the discursive practices that serve to
sustain ethnic conflict and attendant violence.

Chapter 2 - Everyday Violence: Interrogating the Quotidian

My ethnographic research indicates that armed conflict constitutes just one of the
complex layers of violence and othering in Garo Hills. Yet the sole focus on armed conflict
masks everyday violence that has become normalized and naturalized. This chapter details
some key aspects of normalized everyday violence in Garo Hills. It describes the everyday
expression of othering, antagonism, and violence perpetrated by Garos by focusing on the
experiences of non-tribal youth who are the most common targets. This chapter illustrates
how educational institutions serve as sites of violence and othering, detailing how faculty,
staff, and the local administration maintain the status quo. The chapter wraps up with
accounts of how Garo tribal youth understand and narrate the everyday violence that Garo
youth perpetrate against non-tribals. These narrations suggest that while ethnic separatism is
a powerful discourse, young people have a complicated relationship with it as they concur with but also diverge from and resist divisive discourses and associated ethnic violence.

Chapter 3 - The Ethnic Other

Everyday violence in Garo Hills is inextricably connected to the ‘ethnic other.’ My analysis reveals three different categories of ‘the ethnic other’ from the perspective of Garo youth. First, there is, what I refer to as the generalized ‘other communities,’ that is ethnic communities that live in other parts of India. Second, there is the “illegal immigrant” from Bangladesh, who is viewed as the most malevolent form of the other. Finally, there is the more specific category of the non-tribal ethnic others who live in Garo Hills. This chapter takes up a discursive analysis of these categories to elucidate the mechanisms that sustain and perpetuate the ethnic divide. Finally, it explicates the multiple layers of othering, highlighting not only the experiences of non-tribal minorities in Garo Hills, but also that of Garos as tribal minorities in the context of the Indian State.

Youth and Peacebuilding

Chapter 4 - Interventions: Altering Contingencies through Civic Engagement

Taken together chapters 2 and 3 provide a more nuanced and discursively complex understanding of protracted ethnic conflict in Garo Hills. However, as much as this project is about interrogating and understanding everyday violence from the perspective of youth in the Garo Hills, it is also about engaging them in resistance, possibility and change. By involving local youth from different ethnic groups in the project, I attempted to create a context of inclusive participation to explore how young people engage and potentially renegotiate their sense of identity and community in such contexts. It was an effort to create a ‘third sphere’ that would resist the continual reproduction of divisive ethnic identity politics. Chapter 5 details how the youth-led community engagement project subverted established patterns of marginality, social exclusion and segregation in the local community. It also explicates the tensions that got played out as the young people grappled with notions of community and belonging. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of such processes for building everyday peace.

1.9. A Note on Terminology

I have struggled throughout this dissertation about the terminology to use while referring to my participants. I had to address my research objective - that of elucidating ethnic conflict as it gets played out in normative spaces in Garo Hills, while ensuring my
research and writing do not reinscribe the violence inherent in the categories underlying the conflict. Most of my youth participants chose to identify themselves as primarily Garo/tribal or non-tribal depending on their ethnic affiliations. I am compelled to take recourse in these categories owing to an impoverished discourse around social identities. My use of the terms ‘tribal’ and ‘non-tribal’ must be viewed in this light rather than as an endorsement of these broad ethnic labels. The predominance of these ethnic categories is also reflective of the hegemony of ethnic identity politics in Garo Hills where social and political life is organized along categories and hierarchies of ethnicity. In other words, this categorical preponderance in the dissertation in also based on the relevance of these identifications for the youth I interviewed. The ethnic labels take the form of politicized identities, which are embraced by youth in particular contexts or circumstances.
CHAPTER 1
METHODS

1.1 Research for and as Social Justice

While the introduction sketches the lay of the land, this chapter provides a review of the methodological background and methods used in this dissertation research. The reader is introduced to the sociocultural and political landscape of Northeast India where multiple ethnic constituencies struggle to ascertain a legitimate home. Given this scenario, I became mindful of the need to refrain from attempting to depict any final truth. Instead, this research had to elucidate the complexity of the issues surrounding ethnic identity politics in Northeast India; accommodating the diverse voices that are erased by security driven discourses of insurgency and counterinsurgency. My ethnographic endeavors therefore were informed by a view of research “that seeks not to prove or disprove, but rather to create movement, to displace, to pull apart and allow for resettlement; it is research that seeks what is possible and made manifest when our taken-for-taxonomic certainties are intentionally shaken” (James Haywood Rolling, Jr., 2011). This view of research is also endorsed by postmodern psychology that emphasizes constant and critical dialogues among multiple constituencies as a legitimate way of doing science (Gergen, 2001). It became clear to me that issues of identity, conflict, and home necessitated a multidisciplinary approach that transcended typically rigid boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. In The Sociological Imagination, C. Wright Mills deconstructed academic disciplinarity, tracing its roots to specific historical-political contexts rather than some grand plan (Mills, 1959). He argued that departmentalization of social sciences is not a good criterion for the division of intellectual labor; rather, it perpetuates the false dichotomies between the political, social, and psychological. This critique of the increasing bureaucratization of social sciences, made half a century ago, is more relevant than ever as we contend with neoliberal governmentality across the globe. Resisting rigid disciplinary and methodological boundaries, I purposefully employ multiple methods to explore issues of marginality, conflict, and othering that are based on lived experience.

This dissertation project is conceptualized as a critical ethnographic project in the tradition of D. Soyini Madison (Madison, 2005). Central to Madison’s stance is activism and ethics; critical ethnography “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison, 2005; p. 5, emphasis in original). This kind of work thus begins with the recognition that conditions of existence
within a particular context and for specific subjects are not what they should or could be. Research then involves disrupting the status quo and underscoring how power, control and oppression operate in that context. My work is also informed by public anthropology (Hale, 2008; Hemment, 2007) and activist ethnographic approaches (Sanford & Angel-Ajani, 2006), with their explicit focus on addressing social, political, and categorical inequities. Resisting the hegemony of security-driven perspective in Northeast India, my dissertation offers an alternative reading of conflict and violence in the region.

The objective of critical methodological approaches is to explore possibilities that challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge, social categories and practices that limit and marginalize. While we cannot presume to speak on behalf of voices that are systematically marginalized, we can strive to create spaces where such voices can meaningfully speak and be heard. This is especially true for sociopolitical contexts like Northeast India, where critical public discourse is impoverished. Those contexts call for methods that alter parameters of (un)speakability and create spaces for marginal or alternative narratives. Thus, within a critical ethnographic framework, I relied on a number of specific approaches that enabled me to conceptualize and implement research as social justice. These include autoethnography, narrative inquiry, and participatory action research, each described below.

1.1.1. Autoethnography

My tryst with the struggles around an inconstant homeland predates this dissertation. My research identity is profoundly shaped by my experiences of growing up in the Northeastern borderlands of India. Those formative experiences spent in a small town gradually fissured by ethnic fault lines sensitized me to diverse forms of othering. Over the years I also became aware of the marginality of Northeast India in relation to the rest of India or ‘mainland India.’ With the persistence of colonial imageries of ‘backwardness,’ Northeast India continues to be associated with remoteness and lack of development, even after sixty years of Indian independence. This characterization of backwardness that animates much intellectual debate is immediate and tangible to the lives of those who call these backward regions home. We have intimate knowledge and different scales of reference in the face of the insecurities that have come to characterize our homes and define our everyday lives. Yet the voices of ordinary citizens remain marginal in both scholarly and public discourses. These gaps have shaped both the content and methods of my scholarly endeavors. My move to the United States of America in 2006 to attend graduate school exposed me to a whole new range of identity politics that had a profound impact on my subsequent work. I was suddenly
compelled to define myself in categorical terms that were not my own. For instance I found myself resisting the overarching identity of an Asian woman and the stereotypes associated with that label. I struggled to assert a more dynamic and complex identity located at the intersections of specific configurations of race, class, gender, and nationality. As someone who continually traverses such diverse identity categories (and demands), it is perhaps not surprising that my dissertation is crucially shaped by the notion of human agency as the freedom to “constitute oneself in an unexpected manner to decode and recode one’s identity” (Stinson, 2004, p.57).

I approach this research with an autoethnographic sensibility, where my self-narrative remains entwined in the research narrative as a method as well as a text (Butz & Besio, 2004). Autoethnographies have been defined as “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Reflexive use of autobiography serves as a critical tool for establishing intersubjectivity in research (Roth, 2005). An autoethnographic sensibility entails the acknowledgement that we craft our scholarship in distinctive and personally meaningful ways. As ethnographers, especially those who pursue social change, this meaningfulness has a range of consequences, both deliberate and inadvertent. As social scientists, we do not simply describe the social world, but also enact the social through a complex set of assumptions made at every stage of the research process. Therefore, instead of assuming an objective outsider convention of writing that is common to traditional social science research, my ethnographic endeavor progresses through the incorporation of my own life experiences as I investigate my research questions. I expand out of the context of own experiences, utilizing life events, experiences, memories, and my structural positioning to underscore the fraught experiences of identity and belonging in Northeast India.

I have integrated autoethnographic material into the dissertation in a number of ways. This integration is influenced by the tradition of interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 2001), which takes a narrative approach to understand lived experience as it is enacted and performed. Interpretive interactionism utilizes epiphanic moments, i.e., moments of heightened self-awareness of the situated self that emerge from crises of identity/representation (Denzin, 2001, pp 34-38). I employ such moments, locating them in larger discursive spaces in an attempt to provide a more holistic reading of the complex geopolitics of Northeast India and the identity struggles of the people who live there. The autoethnographic material also includes discursive self-reflexive insights, musings, anecdotal information, alternative discourses, and my own emotional responses connected to the
project. They are offered as “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) and at times as insights into my reflexivity in relation to this project (Davies, 1999). Therefore my own narratives function as an integral part of the data in this dissertation. This is crucial not only because of the local, cultural understandings that I bring into the work; but also because the lens through which I view this research is inextricably intertwined with my life history. By dissolving the strict boundaries between ethnography, oral history, testimonials, and storytelling, I try to open up the discursive space to explore alternative frames and meanings for people located in the Northeastern borderlands.

Positionality

Who I am in the context of my community of interest (Garo Hills) has been critical to the conception and execution of this dissertation project. Critically reflecting on my own struggles around the experience of home and belonging have aided my understanding of the emotional nuances of ethnic conflict in Northeast India. In this section, I discuss my structural positionality in relation to my ethnographic context. I grew up in a context rife with ethnic divisions where I constituted the \textit{ethnic other} since I was not Garo (tribal). However my experiences were in some ways atypical of most non-tribal youth growing up in Garo Hills; my relationship with Garo Hills was strongly mediated by my parents who are both educators in the local community. I grew up being a part of adult education programs, health camps, social and environmental awareness campaigns that my parents helped organize. Owing to my parents’ visible involvement in the local community, I had a more privileged position in comparison to other non-tribals. As a result of the relationships they have built over 30 years in Garo Hills, my parents are accepted to and invited to participate in settings that are typically limited to Garos. Over the years, my participation in the local community expanded out of the context of my parents as I developed my own interests. My position can thus be characterized as that of a partial insider and a boundary crosser. This unique position that allows me to move seamlessly across otherwise disjointed contexts and has been integral to this project. Through these movements I am able to gather multiple perspectives, which disrupt the “taken-for-taxanomic certainties” (James Haywood Rolling, Jr., 2011) that lie at the heart of ethnic identity politics in Northeast India.

My explicit standpoint as someone who belongs to Northeast India and Garo Hills does not presume to erase the differences between my participants and my self. My educational background (attending graduate school in the United States) sets me apart from most people in the community. This is especially true of my youth participants, many of
whom are somewhat in awe of what it means to pursue an international degree.’ They also tend to view my academic experiences as a useful resource that they could draw upon. Consequently I often found myself in mentoring and advising roles in relation to the future careers of the young people I worked with. My affiliation to a university in the United States relegates me to a position of privilege in the local community. In the eyes of most people, it confers me with credibility. This privilege compounds my responsibility as a researcher even as I drew upon this affiliation as a means of securing social and material resources for the local community. Over the years, I have actively engaged such perceptions with participants/community members. Thus, while I connected with the experiences of many of my youth participants, I was cognizant of the differences in our circumstances. This was never more evident than when youth talked about the limitations imposed on their mobility due to lack of social or financial capital. During those times I keenly felt my privilege to move across multiple contexts. I could leave and choose whether or not to return, while these youth were impelled by their circumstances to reconcile with contexts of endemic ethnic conflict.

1.1.2. Narrative Inquiry

Central to the narrative turn in the social sciences was the emphasis on storytelling as an essential part of being human (Mishler, 1995, 1996). For example, MacIntyre describes the human being as “essentially a storytelling animal” (1984, p.216); similarly McAdams (1993) argues that stories constitute the way in which human beings make sense of their own lives and the lives of others; for Bruner (1986), narrative structure organizes and gives meaning to experience. While some approaches have attempted to distinguish analytically between narratives and narrative inquiry, this distinction is blurred and ambiguous in much of the literature. Narrative inquiry is defined as a scientific endeavor in which narrative is simultaneously story, a way of knowing, and a mode, a method of inquiry (Lyon, 2000; p. 601). Medawar (1969) privileged a narrative mode of knowing in his characterization of scientific inquiry as a process that begins with a story about a possible world that we invent, criticize and modify as we live, so it ends by being a story of real life.

A pithy characterization of narrative inquiry that encapsulates my rationale for using narrative inquiry as an overarching framework derives from Huber and Pinnegar’s description of narrative inquiry as: “a multi-layered recognition of what it means to conduct research as a human with humans collecting stories or living alongside and trying to understand being and acting in a particular place, at a particular time” (2007, p. 457). This
characterization underscores three key issues within narrative inquiry – relationality, experience, and ethics of engagement. Narratives are also multimodal in that they integrate two or more communicative modes such as visual representation, gesture, writing, talk, and physical activity (Ochs & Capps, 1996). This characteristic of narratives allows us to represent the experiences of our participants in more nuanced and holistic ways because most people are multimodal in their communication. In this project I draw from narrative approaches that are part of the postmodern, critical turn in social sciences and use narrative as both method and phenomenon (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Narrative approaches are especially suited for studying identity and identity politics. Several approaches within narrative inquiry acknowledge that identities are no longer given or natural; rather individuals (as do organizations, communities and nations) construct who they are and how they want to be known (Giddens, 1991). Thus narrative inquiry allows us to examine how identities can be assembled and disassembled, accepted and contested (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McAdams, 1993) and performed (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). We can also envision shared identities in terms of shared and co-constructed narratives (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). The narrative mode can be used not only to understand, but also to produce new knowledge, to transform and to effect social change (Bernstein, 1997; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Morgan-Fleming, Riegle & Fryer, 2007; Loseke, 2007).

Finally, the process of research itself can be understood in terms of disciplined narrative inquiry (McNiff, 2007). A research narrative involves telling a story or multiple stories. It allows us to think critically about how we live in the midst of and alongside our inquiry.

Narrative and Identity

The relationship between narrative and identity is complex and multidimensional (Loseke, 2007). Narratives create identity at all levels of human social life. At the macro-level stories produce cultural identities and construct symbolic boundaries around/between categories of social actors (Lamont & Virag, 2002). At the meso-level, policy-making processes and organizations produce narratives of institutional identities that serve to legitimize institutional arrangements (Alexander, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Finally at the micro-level, stories produce personal identities, i.e., the self-identities of unique, embodied selves. These different forms/levels are reflexively and inextricably interrelated. Contemporary work on narrative identity is premised on the idea that individuals are no longer exposed to a single local discourse; rather multiple local, regional, national and global discourses compete for primacy in the identity formation process (Giddens, 1991). Identity is
fundamentally political because it is based on social recognition and the projection of possibilities for the self, all of which are severely influenced by pervasive systems of social oppression and domination (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Different forms of narratives can function politically as ways of ordering society (Du Toit, 1997). The pool of possible selves derive from the categories that are made salient by individuals’ sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images and symbols provided by the media and individuals’ immediate social experiences (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Within community psychology, narratives have been understood as a resource: the power to create, select and tell positively valued stories about one’s self and community (Rappaport, 2000). Like other resources, empowering narratives or positively valued stories are not available to all members of the community. Thus, the kind of narrative possibilities available to an individual can serve as a good estimate of the degree to which the group’s identity functions in emancipatory or oppressive ways. This implies that while identity is negotiated, the terms of negotiations are often unequal and power is a central force in how people, groups and organizations mobilize meanings.

Political conflict is a powerful social and ideological determinant of life experience. Since human development always occurs within a particular, social, cultural and historical context (Elder, 1998), political conflict can create a polarized ideological context (e.g., tribal versus non-tribal) for development. Thus the presence of conflict can fundamentally affect the trajectory of the life course of youth as they navigate the polarizing ideological ecologies of their development typical of conflict zones (Hammack, 2006). Protracted and intransigent conflict, as in the case of the Garo Hills, usually points towards the existence of local structures generated to sustain the potential for violence (Das & Kleinman, 2000). There is social reproduction of conflict and violence, which involves indoctrination of particular identity narratives that exclude the ideological legitimacy of ‘other’ groups. I deploy these frames to examine divisive identity discourses that mediate the everyday of youth in Garo Hills.

Narrative and the Politics of Possibility

Narrative practices reflect and establish power relations at different ecological levels (e.g., Ochs & Capps, 1996). However power asymmetries do not preclude narrative acts of resistance (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Poststructuralist approaches to narratives recognize the productive power of stories and the possibility of transformative interventions that are not totalizing in nature. What makes space for resistance is the idea that stories are always partial.
Thus it follows that new narratives can open up discursive spaces and can potentially facilitate structural change through radical shifts in social context (Bruner, 1986). While particular narrations of identity can be and often are abused by the cultural elite for the promotion of their own power struggles, they can also serve as a powerful political tool. Through altering old stories and creating new ones, we can challenge and transform dominant understandings and the underlying logic that people perceive as naturally belonging to socially constructed categories (Rappaport, 2000; McNiff, 2007). This is reflected in contemporary trends characterizing many social movements as identity movements, the goals of which are to construct new narratives or to change moral evaluations of existing narratives at multiple levels of social life (Bernstein, 1997). These conceptions broadly inform my work in the Garo Hills and my attempts to create and open up imaginative spaces that recognize alternative identities that are not overdetermined by ethnicity.

1.1.3. Participatory Research

My work with Garo youth is situated in traditions that challenge the neoliberal constructions of youth and view youth as sites of resistance, possibility and social transformation. I draw primarily from two approaches: ‘the right to research’ approach (Appadurai, 2006) and youth participatory action research (PAR) (Cahill, 2007; Fine and Weis, 2004). These frameworks emphasize the powerful ways in which youth can be drawn in to envision and initiate change in their local communities1 2. In The Right to Research, Arjun Appadurai draws our attention to youth in South Asia and Africa who have an unstable and insecure existence within the framework of global knowledge societies (Appadurai, 2006). He argues that one right that such disenfranchised youth need to claim is the right to research. Central to this idea is the democratization of research and its promotion as a right for everyone, and its use as a tool for pedagogy, advocacy, transformation and intervention. Research then is reconceptualized as an opportunity for youth to create and gain strategic knowledge about themselves, their neighborhoods and their social, cultural, and political heritage. Along similar lines, youth PAR challenges neoliberal constructions of youth as dangerous and disengaged consumers. PAR tries to reposition youth as researchers rather than researched; thus affording them the opportunity to conduct critical and systematic inquiry around the conditions of their everyday life. Research then is viewed as a process that provides disenfranchised youth ways in which they become active policy critics and agents

---

1 http://www.pukar.org.in/aboutus.htm
2 http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/start.htm
engaged in conversation, confrontation and reform in their communities. Youth PAR legitimates democratic inquiry and signifies youths’ fundamental right to ask, investigate, contest policies that enforce injustice and to speak critical truths to those in power.

Engaging young people in research can challenge social exclusion, redistribute power, and build youth capacities as well as create new theoretical possibilities (Cahill, 2007; Cahill and Hart, 2006; Torre and Fine, 2006). Enabling youth to interrogate the conditions of their everyday lives and oppression can inspire a process of community and knowledge building. The benefits of engaging young people in research are manifold, but these benefits are critically connected to *participation*. The term *participation* is used widely and often indiscriminately (Hart, 1992). In order to accrue the aforementioned benefits, participation has to be understood, embodied, and enacted as a *political commitment* and not just a method. In the absence of such a commitment only an illusion of participation is created, which serves to reproduce the status quo (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Both the right to research and youth PAR frameworks build on critical pedagogic traditions that encourage the learner to play an active role in the learning process by becoming the producer of knowledge. Critical pedagogic traditions recognize that many learning traditions are based on systems that are intimately linked to the existing economic and cultural traditions and systems that tend to privilege dominant social locations (Giroux, 1994; hooks, 1994). These perspectives frame my general approach to the dissertation research as well as the specific youth project, positioning youth as potential agents of change in their communities.

### 1.2. The People in this Project

As a critical ethnography of conflict in my hometown, this dissertation builds on many years of engagement with the local community. I draw from my participation in the wider community, autoethnographic material, as well as more traditional sources of data (e.g., interviews, discussion groups, conversations). As a result, there are many people who are part of this project. Some of them would not constitute ‘participants’ in the more traditional sense of the term viz., ‘subjects’ of research efforts like interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc. This group includes my family, friends, acquaintances, and other individuals with whom I did not have any prior familiarity. Their voices remain woven throughout the text as their accounts and experiences are crucial to the re-narration of protracted conflict in Northeast India. In this section, however I offer a brief description of the people that I explicitly sought out to secure their perspectives on issues of marginality, conflict, and belonging.
My interest in the everyday experiences of youth in Garo Hills - their experiences, relationship to, and narrations of protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India is reflected in the youth centered optic of my dissertation. At the same time, I wanted to examine the larger community and institutional narratives that mediate young people’s everyday experiences and their articulations. In other words, I wanted to interrogate what the dominant discourses around ethnic conflict were and how they were implicated in the normalization and naturalization of violence. To that end, I interviewed key stakeholders from the local community.

1.2.1. Youth Participants

The definition of youth as a social category is culturally and historically contingent (Durham, 2000). The United Nations defines *youth* as persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusive. However some governments, such as those of Guatemala and El Salvador brings the age limit down to 12 years, while Mexico and India pushes the category up to 29 and 35 years respectively. In my study, I adopt the definition of youth as demarcated in the Indian context, but most of my participants were in the age range of 20-25.

The 2001 census data\(^3\) reports that youth in the range of 13 to 34 years constitute 41.05% of the total population in India. This statistic at the state level in Meghalaya is 40.90%, which is close to the national average. The World’s Youth 2006 Data Sheet reports that only 47% of females and 58% of males in India were enrolled in secondary schools during 2000-2004. The same study reported that 35% of females and 50% of males in India in the age range of 15-19 years are already economically active. Given these dismal statistics involving a significant proportion of human capital, it is not surprising that there is a strong rhetoric prioritizing youth development initiatives\(^4\). The Ministry of Youth Affairs in India describes its objectives as follows -

The Youth, i.e. those falling within the age group of 15-35 years constitutes nearly 40% of the total population of India. This group which is the most vibrant and dynamic segment of the country’s population constitutes potentially its most valuable human resource. To optimally tap their constructive and creative energies, the Department pursues the twin objectives of personality building and nation building, i.e. developing the personality of youth and involving them in various nation-building activities.\(^5\)

---

\(^3\) [http://youthportal.gov.in/statistics/](http://youthportal.gov.in/statistics/)

\(^4\) For a list of youth development programs see [http://youthportal.gov.in/databases/youthdevelopmentprograms.htm](http://youthportal.gov.in/databases/youthdevelopmentprograms.htm)

\(^5\) [http://yas.nic.in/index1.asp?langid=1&linkid=73](http://yas.nic.in/index1.asp?langid=1&linkid=73)
The relative recency of this department however belies the rhetoric of youth as a significant constituency. Originally set up as the Department of Sports in 1982, its name was changed to the Department of Youth Affairs and Sports during celebration of the International Youth Year, 1985. It became a Ministry only in May 2000. It is perhaps not surprising then that these initiatives do not adequately respond to issues of participation, voice, (under)representation and identity struggles of contemporary youth. Thus, youth continue to be featured in a supporting role and their characterization as society’s antenna to the future exists only at a rhetorical level.

This underrepresentation is especially pronounced in case of (tribal) youth from Northeast. Thus my work with youth in Garo Hills was carried out in a context where meaningful youth participation is uncommon. The youth participants who were part of my project can be classified into three groups described below:

Table 1.1: Youth Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotes and Analysis (pseudonyms)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Garo tribal youth</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male Garo college students who participated in interviews and discussions sharing their perspectives on issues that concern that as youth from Northeast India and Garo Hills.</td>
<td>Saleng Robin Patrick Sengnang Pritam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Non-Garo, non-tribal youth</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male non-tribal youth. One of them is a teacher, three of them were enrolled in the local university, and two of them were college students.</td>
<td>Sanjay Kavi Dilip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Youth Research Group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>This group of 10 people participated in Voices, the community engagement project. All of them were master’s students at the local university. There were 5 males and 5 females; 6 Garos, 3 non-Garos and one of 1 of mixed ethnicity.</td>
<td>Details in Chapter 4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 This column includes the names of participants whose narratives I excerpt to illustrate themes, perspectives, and analysis.
1.2.2. Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders were individuals in the community who play (or have played) crucial roles in shaping cultural, political, and social discourse at the level of local community. They are described below:

Table 1.2: Key Stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Role/Designation</th>
<th>Rationale for inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Milton Sangma</td>
<td>Garo historian (retd.)</td>
<td>Well-known and respected members of the community involved in Garo cultural and literary organizations. They have been involved in some role in the research, construction, and dissemination of Garo historical and cultural narratives. Their role as educators brought (brings) them in contact with youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Caroline Marak</td>
<td>Retd. Professor in Garo studies</td>
<td>These individuals are invested in and have access to dominant cultural narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Brucellish Sangma</td>
<td>Chairperson of State Education Board (retd.)</td>
<td>To secure a perspective of Garo youth from the standpoint of a youth activist interested in addressing issues confronting Garo youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I.K. Sangma</td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>To secure the perspectives/position of ANVC, the most vocal proponent of a separatist agenda at the time of my fieldwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Pangsang Rudy</td>
<td>Youth Activist</td>
<td>They are members of the State Executive and Legislative bodies. They offer “official” perspectives on the issues in Garo Hills. These narratives are important because they enable me to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Document and interrogate dominant narratives around ethnic conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Examine to what extent the these narratives are appropriated by young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Examine contradictions between these narratives and those of local youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Purno A. Sangma</td>
<td>Deputy Commissioner, West Garo Hills</td>
<td>Purno A. Sangma has a long standing history of political involvement, both as the ruling party as well as the opposition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† The only non-tribal individual in the group. The district administrator is recruited as part of a centralized Indian Administrative Services

1.3. The Methodology of this Study

1.3.1. The Process of Engagement

Process of engaging participants for interviews, discussions, etc. took place within the
relational and social context of my embeddedness in the local community. My personal history, long standing relationships with diverse stakeholders and the community, which predate my research, were crucial to engaging people in dialogical processes around community, conflict, and youth. In contexts like the Garo Hills where much social suffering is normalized, naturalized, and/or silenced, it is imperative to speak up and to create/open up a public discourse around those issues; and I wanted my research to be a vehicle for achieving that. Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I attended public meetings, volunteered in youth-related events, gave talks, and presented papers at the local university campus although I should note that this active community involvement was not motivated by its instrumentality to my research. It was a natural extension of what has been my typical relationship with my home community.

My prior research as well as my experiences in the local community provided me with some crucial insights that informed the manner in which I tried to engage the perspectives of youth during my dissertation fieldwork. In the course of my ethnographic engagement, I noted that the local Garo community holds a rather disempowering view of their youth, viewing them as incapable of any meaningful engagement with community issues. These views were at times appropriated by Garo youth themselves. I also noted the absence of spaces where young people could critically reflect on local community issues without being drawn into polarized ethnic discourses. Thus, I recognized that in order to secure meaningful participation of Garo youth, I would have to create conditions for these young people to participate on more equal terms. Instead of trying to force youth into traditional adult spaces, there was a need to innovate, to inculcate a sense of belonging and ownership. I tried to achieve this in a number of ways throughout our engagement. During the early stages this involved:

- Approaching youth organizations and speaking to their leaders and members instead of trying to secure participation directly through colleges.
- Talking to individuals that I met in the course of my participation in the wider community about my project and assessing their interest in sharing their experiences.
- Being explicit about my personal history and sharing some of the underlying motivation for the project.
- Talking about traditional distinctions between researchers and research, offering a critique of that model followed by how the interactions I proposed would be different.
- Positioning potential participants as experts of their lives and life circumstances, arguing that they have access to knowledge and experiences that contribute to unique perspectives.

The process through which I engaged non-tribal youth differed significantly from that of Garo youth. Many non-tribal youth have come to accept the routineness of the everyday violence tied
to the conflict. These issues emerged in informal conversations with non-tribal youth. However, when I tried to engage those very youth in sharing their perspectives more extensively as part of my project, they expressed their discomfort. I discovered that it was not only the conflict that was normalized, but also the fear of violence. Despite the clause of anonymity, speaking up and speaking out were viewed as too risky. Eventually I interviewed a non-tribal male youth who was known to my family. He trusted my parents enough to agree to talk to me. In the course of our conversations, he became increasingly engaged and talked about it to some of his peers, who also became interested in an opportunity to talk about experiences that they could not do elsewhere.

As far as key stakeholders were concerned, I identified them based on considerations of the local context (my knowledge of it) and leads from the interviews/discussions with youth. I already knew some of them by virtue of having lived in Garo Hills. I contacted some of them through my parents’ social/work networks, and through my other community-based experiences. In the identification of stakeholders, I used a purposeful or “information rich” sampling approach (Patton, 2002, p.230).

1.3.2. The Research Process

Fieldwork Activities

I carried out my 11-month long dissertation fieldwork in Garo Hills region of Northeast India between September 2009 and August 2010. This project however grew out of five years’ ethnographic engagement with the region and a longer personal history that I have discussed in the previous chapter. It evolved out of master’s thesis during 2004-05 when I became interested in the phenomenon of insurgencies in Northeast India and the narratives of young men who fought them. It was my first foray into what transformed into really burning questions that continued to animate my research engagement. Given the nature of my positionality and methodological orientation, while in the field, the lines between research, action/intervention, and community involvement were often blurred. Nevertheless, I organize my activities (in addition to my participation in the wider community) in terms of the following categories in order to give the reader a sense of how the data were collected:

i) **Organizing group sessions for youth:** The goal for those sessions was to allow small groups to develop organically across several sessions (Appendices F and G). The format for the sessions was flexible and varied in structure, ranging from more of a group interview to extensive conversations and dialogue around community issues. This involved selecting places that were easily accessible, likely to ensure privacy and comfort for the participants involved. I often involved potential participants to
brainstorm appropriate places.

ii) **In-depth interviews with youth:** I conducted multiple in-depth interviews over the course of the project with both Garo and non-tribal youth (Appendix H). The goal was to secure their perspectives and illuminate their pragmatic with regard to ethnic identity and conflict.

iii) **Interviews with key stakeholders:** I interviewed other key social actors who are implicated in local community issues (Appendix I). These were completed in single sessions.

iv) **Facilitation of youth-led community engagement project:** I worked on a participatory action research project with a group of ten young people. As part of the project, I attempted to create a context of inclusive participation to explore how young people engage and potentially renegotiate their sense of identity and community in such contexts. I facilitated and scaffolded their learning process as they reflected critically on local community concerns, developed research questions, acquired basic research skills, gathered data and analyzed it, and dissemination of their findings. Chapter 4 details these processes.

v) **Collection of materials:** I gathered a range of textual and visual materials, e.g. historical archives, annual reports, published and unpublished scholarly texts about Garo history and culture from my participants, from educational institutions, libraries, government offices, personal communication. I used these materials to supplement the primary data illuminating discursive practices.

**Data Sources, Analysis, and Writing**

My analysis and writing (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) reflect the multimodal approach that I employed in my fieldwork activities. I worked with interview transcripts, conversation/discussion transcripts, my observations and field notes, newspaper articles that were published during my fieldwork, written notes and schematic diagrams from participants, and other texts/maps that I collected. I began primarily with audio-recordings, interview/discussion transcripts, and field notes. As I reviewed the transcripts and wrote analytic memos on the interview transcripts and field notes, I became aware of certain clusters that corresponded to an interesting array of interpretations that the youth had about their sociopolitical environments (e.g., theorization of ethnic conflict by non-tribal youth, theorization of youth violence by Garo tribal youth, youth perspectives on local community development). I worked with these clusters trying to elucidate the themes around which they were organized. I then began to work across clusters and materials so as to elaborate and contextualize the themes. An example of this process is the juxtaposition of
the experiences of non-tribal youth as 'ethnic others' with reflections on the issue by Garo youth and other stakeholders.

I was also interested discourses and discursive practices related to protracted ethnic conflict and violence in Garo Hills. While, I examined the data to discover regularities in how my participants narrated their everyday experiences of conflict (Hymes, 1986), I was more keen on critical (Foucauldian) discourse analysis that would elucidate the societal level narratives that young people’s stories draw from and also how those narratives are implicated in perpetuating, reinforcing, and/or resisting marginalization and conflict. I examined discursive resources (in the form of narratives, metaphors, rhetoric, social categories) that are available to youth, how they deploy them, to what end and the broader institutional contexts that shape such deployment (Potter, 2003; Wetherell, 1998). I used both narrative and contextual analyses to unpack the richness of the material and to explore the array of possible meanings.

1.4. Methodological Deliberations: Ethics of Care

The methodology of this dissertation is informed by participatory ethics that view engaged research as a means of challenging hegemonic practices and discourses (Fine, 2006). Intertwined with participatory ethics is an ‘ethics of care’ rooted in feminist and indigenous epistemologies; ‘ethics of care’ is based on an abiding respect for relationships and humanity (Gilligan, 1982; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007). This is a much broader conception of ethics that is not limited to institutionalized ethics. Moral and ethical considerations are tied to pragmatic considerations throughout the research, writing, and dissemination process. In this section, I discuss some of the salient issues/challenges I face(d) in the course of this work. The deliberations and negotiations associated with these issues were informed by ethics of care.

1.4.1. Writing about Violence: Being a Responsible Witness

Exposure to conflict, repression, and violence shapes the contours of our field and how we interpret social phenomena within it, more so when the field is also home. There is no neutral observation when conflict and violence are routine, when one is intimately connected to the context in which they occur. Posing a question is ethically tied to considerations of what we plan to do with the response. In spaces of conflict, a researcher is also required to be an engaged and committed witness (Angel-Ajani, 2006; Theidon, 2001). Making concerted efforts to attend to divergent voices so as to avoid the reproducing hegemonic understandings is an important implication of this commitment. A vital shift occurred in my dissertation in the course of my fieldwork, which illustrates such considerations and commitment. Originally, I had
conceptualized the dissertation as privileging the perspectives of Garo youth, trying to understand experiences of marginality, conflict, and belonging from their standpoint. Non-tribal youth would be included in the project, but positioned as key stakeholders whose narratives would contribute to a more complex understanding of conflict. As I began to try to secure the non-tribal youth perspectives, I found that they were very apprehensive about speaking up on issues concerning the everyday violence and the underlying tribal/non-tribal conflict. There was an amorphous fear of consequences, often disguised as a general, “you know what I mean,” an appeal to my experience of being a non-tribal in Garo Hills. I was expected to understand what it was that they feared. I felt I knew where they were coming from, but it was not until the first formal interview that I began to gauge the ramifications of the conflict for non-tribal youth. I became more fully cognizant of the centrality of the conflict in the everyday lives of non-tribal youth and it was ethically imperative to elucidate their experiences as equally important and not just to complicate the accounts of Garo youth.

Being a responsible witness in the context of my ethnographic project in the Garo Hills thus meant attempting to explicate multiple facets of violence as well as interrogating and debunking the discourses that sustain the conflict in Garo Hills. It is imperative that I write about the present violence against non-tribals while also elucidating the symbolic violence against the Garos perpetuated by the Indian State. In contexts of endemic violence, there is a potential risk for the very study of violence to reinscribe the violence or engender a different form to become complicit in perpetuating the violence. One way to circumvent this is to attend to the multiplicity of accounts and examine possibilities of renarrating the conflict in more nuanced ways. This does not involve a neutral stance. Rather it involves a recognition of the complex and sometimes competing roles that we perform in the research context, continually examining how these roles are mediated by various allegiances, commitments and beliefs.

1.4.2. The Politics of Gender

Gender is implicated in ethnic conflict in Garo Hills in extremely complex ways. Both the conflict and the attendant violence are organized and enacted along a binary framework of gender. Yet attempts to unpack the gendered subtexts of conflict and everyday violence are complicated by the ubiquitous ethnic divide that permeates the local community and mediates everyday life. Young people tend to forge and foreclose their identities around their ethnicities, their everyday experiences and interactions, their ways of being in the world configured by oppositional categories like tribal versus non-tribal. The hegemony of ethnic identity politics renders inscrutable other critical social and community fissures like gender and class. In this
section I discuss how gender is enacted with regard to two key issues - participation and violence.

**Participation:** Engaging youth in a culture that is largely non-participatory is a difficult endeavor in itself. Among those that participated, young men in general were more likely to be interested in participating and sustaining that participation in comparison to their female counterparts. This held true for both tribal as well as non-tribal youth. This preponderance of male participation appeared to stem from an implicit divide between public and domestic spheres implicit in the local community. This is not to say that women do not participate in public life. Nevertheless there are social hierarchies that govern the nature and extent of participation; hierarchies based on complex configurations of gender, age, class and ethnicity. This was particularly pronounced in the academic realm where female scholars are often relegated to stereotypical gendered roles, despite their numerical majority. For example, at a public seminar, I observed how a small group of female faculty members walked in and automatically took their place at the back of the room, as opposed to their male (and older) counterparts who took their place at the conference table. Younger female faculty members are also typically entrusted with the responsibility of decorations, refreshments, etc., duties that sometimes prevent them from participating fully at conferences. This was problematic because women’s roles as caregivers are systematically prioritized over their intellectual engagement even in professional settings as these. Although women are highly visible in the public sphere, the terms of their participation often differ from that of their male counterparts; thus challenging traditional notions of using numbers as a gauge for assessing representation and participation. In the context of Garo Hills, the number of women present in the public sphere is not an accurate or adequate reflection of the actual meaningful participation of women. These gendered micropolitics of everyday life were reflected in the differential patterns of participation. Interestingly though, this pattern did not play out during the youth-led community engagement project. This could be a factor of self-selection as well as the demand characteristics of the setting. For instance, when asked about how the experience (community engagement project) was different from their typical educational experiences, one of my female participants pointed towards the absence of labeling activities as appropriate for male or female. She also went on explain that they were struck by my confidence and unapologetic stance in my interactions with older male government officials and academic professionals. This capacity is a product of my understanding of the local context, my long-standing relationships in the community and certainly my education and training. The reflections of the young women in the group point towards the need as well as potential for contesting and working through some of the stereotypical binary frameworks of gender.

**Violence:** Gender is also implicated in conflict and everyday violence. While there is
general antagonism towards the ethnic other, young non-tribal men are at a greater risk of violence than their female or older counterparts. This is another of the social truths that everyone living there knows but does not voice. This is illustrated by the following vignette, where Sanjay (non-tribal youth participant) alludes to it in connection to safety issues:

While returning from college…while returning, all these goondas would hang out outside the college campus. They were usually intoxicated so one is scared when they will suddenly hit us - you can never tell. I used to be scared while walking down that road but there was one thing that saved anything untoward from happening to me - because I used to walk with girls. I found that if you are walking with other girls, they don’t call you but if you walk alone you are at risk.

When I asked him as to why he thought this was the case, he replied that Garo men tend to respect women and refrain from violence in front of them. When I asked other Garo men and women about this observation, their opinions converged on the idea that this was a reflection of the local community’s respect and regard for women. This idea was so normalized as a redeeming quality that it was very difficult to engage young people in related critical questions. For example, why were non-tribal men not afforded the same regard and respect? Alternately, why is a paternalizing stance adopted towards women, assuming they are not as biologically and/or socially equipped as men to deal with violence? People were more concerned about perceived (in)appropriateness of contexts in which violence occurred, rather than condoning the violence per se.

1.4.3. Securing Participation/Collaboration

The challenges around securing participation varied across the different participants groups. In case of non-tribal youth, a serious challenge was posed by their perceptions of the risks involved in talking about the conflict. While I knew that I would do everything I could to ensure that they are not exposed to any threat, my participants did not and I respected their hesitation. In the case of Garo youth too, I refrained from employing any means of securing participation where they felt coerced or cornered. While consent forms are meant to document informed consent, they do not by themselves guarantee the exercise of choice. For example, during my initial meetings with youth groups, I engaged them in discussions about the project. However, I did not conduct formal interviews with consent forms although the interactions/observations became part of my fieldnotes. I decided to forego that convenience to ensure that the youth participated on their accord and not simply because they happened to be around. Additionally, the venues of the proposed interviews/discussions were always places that were neutral in addition to being easily accessible to participants. In practical terms this refers to spaces of low emotional valence with
respect to ethnic affiliations and/or conflict. The selection of locations was also mediated by considerations of safety, especially for non-tribal youth (discussed in the section on safety).

Participation was further complicated by the format, i.e., discussions groups. Instead of starting with individual interviews, I wanted to engage a group of interested Garo youth in critical conversations about local community issues including ethnic conflict. My premise in engaging these youth in a collective process was that it would afford them critical agency and provide them with an opportunity to redefine the parameters of their everyday life outside of the ethnically polarized context. This process took time but once the groups came together, they demonstrated a very deep engagement with local community issues. This was reflected in the steadily increased meeting time. Over time the meetings began to exceed the 60-90 minutes specified in the consent form because the participating youth wanted to continue talking. During the later sessions, the young participants began to articulate the absence of spaces where their perspectives are sought and valued and where they can engage in such critical discussions. The participating youth testified to the value of this engagement for them but the shift in how they related to this space became most evident during one of my last meetings with a youth group. As I wrapped up yet another two hour meeting, I asked the youth participants if they had any questions. They started off with one, which led to many others. The questions are listed in Table 1.3 below:

Table 1.3: Questions from Youth Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Can you give a solution for communal violence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What do you think about youth violence in Northeastern states compared to youth in Western and metropolitan cities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have heard that in other states...in which states, I don’t know. But my non-friends, non-tribal, they used to tell that it is so nice to stay here in Garo Hills compared to Hindus and Muslims fighting in other states. Can you tell us about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What do you think about violence against women?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is there a solution, how should boys be raised to avoid these problems?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What do you think is going on from a psychological point of view? Of Garo youth compared to other youth? What about family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What do you think about religion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Are you going to interview government people like the Deputy Commissioner and all?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Can we ask you one question? About your future? What is your plan after Ph.D?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How do you think the scene of Garo Hills will change in the next 10-15 years? Will it be better than what it is? Or will it be worse?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. What about the development of Garo Hills? Where do you see us going compared to Shillong and other states?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. From your point of view, what is wrong with the conception of development in Khasi and Garo society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Lastly, I would like to ask you, what is your advice for Garo youth?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These questions demonstrate the researcher or inquirer role that they adopted. They were genuinely interested in knowing my perspectives on different sociopolitical issues. The nature of our interactions transformed seamlessly as the youth assumed interviewer roles. Responding to their questions earnestly and engaging them was a critical aspect of collaborative and participatory work. It was an integral part of fostering mutuality and reciprocity, the relational ideals that we strive for in participatory action research.

The experience of trying to engage the perspectives of key stakeholders differed markedly from that of youth. While some of them (e.g., educators) welcomed these conversations, others (e.g., government officials) were cautious. What was interesting though was how many of the interviews did not pan out. Based on the legwork I had done, I identified members of cultural/literary organizations, artists, local officials working in the areas of youth engagement as potential allies in bridging culture and youth engagement. Many of them expressed interest during initial conversations but after several unreturned calls and indefinite delays in setting up meetings, I recognized their lack of interest and their inability to say no to something that purports to benefit the local community. The reasons for the disinterest, I discovered, were also varied. More importantly though, this experience highlighted the stratifications within the local community both within and across ethnic groups and a diminishing value of civic engagement. As I met stakeholders, I registered a common response to my work in Garo Hills, one that was disdainful and dismissive. Why would I want to return to this place? Why would I want to have anything to do with this ‘backward’ place when I had the opportunity to leave? What would I get out of it? That I had returned from the United States was particularly salient in this response. Some people would attach a fraternal concern to their disparagement. They would dispensing advice on how I ought to look out for my own interests instead of holding out for antiquated ideals. Notions of civic engagement and citizen participation have become such extraneous concepts that the sentiments animating my work were incomprehensible to most people. I recognized that these reactions sometimes reflected a desire to maintain narratives that benefited these stakeholders, accompanied by an awareness my work threatened to undercut those narratives. Thus issues of participation and collaboration had to be navigated not only within an ethically polarized context, but also one of growing public disengagement.

1.4.4. Negotiating Safety

Navigating issues of safety was paramount while working in a context of normalized violence. It was essential to ensure my own safety as well as the safety of my participants. While participant safety is at the forefront of human subjects protection guidelines, researcher safety is
often overlooked. Opening up notions of safety to include researchers helps reframe paternalistic conceptions of research participants as vulnerable and as needing protection. A limited notion of safety also fails to take into account the effective safety mechanisms or strategies that people develop to cope with routinized conflict. Over the course of my fieldwork, it became increasingly clear that an in-depth understanding of the local context was far more critical to safety than Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols.

During my interactions with young people, it was necessary to anticipate sources of ethnic conflict and to circumvent them. These efforts were especially directed towards non-tribal youth since they are typically at the receiving end of ethnic violence. In the group interviews/discussions, I organized separate sessions for tribal and non-tribal youth. I was aware that the presence of non-tribal youth would make the Garo youth self-conscious and prevent them from expressing their opinions with candor. As for non-tribal youth, I anticipated that their fear would serve as a deterrent to any critique they might have regarding community life and conflict in Garo Hills. Besides, I did not want to expose them to any further risk. I also paid particular attention to the spaces where we met. For example, while interviewing non-tribal youth, I arranged to meet with them in a predominantly non-tribal neighborhood. I would often end up giving one of the participants a ride home so that could avoid walking alone through neighborhoods where he risked being accosted by Garo youth.

Finally, growing up as a non-tribal (the ethnic other) in the midst of endemic conflict, a sense of what is safe and what isn’t has become a part of the cultural knowledge that is integral to navigating everyday life in Garo Hills. I drew upon this knowledge to ensure my own safety as well as that of my participants. Most of these negotiations were aided by an intuitive knowing based on lived experiences. My circumstance however differed significantly from that of my non-tribal participants. My personal history and ongoing involvement with the local community allowed me access to settings that were typically unsafe for non-tribal youth. Additionally, I forged relationships with different groups of Garo youth over the past several years, which provided me with a certain immunity. Protection also came from my parents’ extensive network. In situations that could be potentially dangerous, I was always accompanied by local Garo community members.

1.4.5. Consent Process

Compliance with institutional ethical requirements calls for establishment of informed consent. The expectation is that participants will be walked through the consent forms, which they would then sign to indicate their consent to participate in the research activities described in
the document. Such bureaucratization of the consent process formalizes research and reifies the divide between researchers and researched, which is inimical to participatory action research. If informed consent is not addressed and evaluated as a process, it can reduce into a procedural matter, posing a threat to collaboration. Michelle Fine argues that while engaging in participatory action research, we need to continually evaluate what is consent and for whom (Fine et al., 2002). In accordance with these ideals, I tried to use the consent process as an exercise in confronting and contending with power differentials, continually examining my accountability and positionality in the intimate research context. Consent was thus reframed as a process and stretched across time and space. Approaching issues of informed consent, risk-benefit analyses, etc. from a purely instrumental perspective fails to capture all the reasons why people participate. For example, the active engagements of young people in my project were motivated by a desire to participate as citizens, that is as active contributing members of society who think critically about their world despite their marginalization. At times, they chose to take emotional, personal, and political risks in order to be offer critical perspectives that are too often silenced.

I attempted to bridge the gap between research ethics protocol and action in the field in several ways. I recognized that reading and signing legal documents, especially those in connection to research were not commonplace for participating youth. In fact the presence of such documents and some of the unfamiliar terms could potentially pose a barrier to participation. Also, their assessment of risks and benefits departs significantly from the instrumental terms of institutionalized ethics. More importantly though, for the young people, the IRB and the university are distant, abstract notions, so it is not typical to perceive these bodies as sources of support or protection. On the contrary, the idea of calling the IRB can be an intimidating prospect for the young people. Therefore, I had to take steps to ensure that this process did not further alienate or marginalize these youth. To that end, I contextualized the consent process for youth participants. I provided them with a very brief history of and rationale for the existence of institutionalized ethics. As I walked them through the consent forms, I explained each clause and the underlying ethical principles, with caveats where necessary. I elaborated upon different concepts like confidentiality and anonymity, and explained what they meant in practical terms. Another key issue was to explain how they could get in touch with the IRB. While the consent form states that they can “call collect,” I was cognizant of how unlikely it was that they would resort to that. So I explained the nuts and bolts of the process of what that meant. In addition, I pointed out that they could take up any issues they had about the process with me or with some community elders. Considerable work thus went into the consent process so as to reframe it as an
exercise in autonomy and agency, and to circumvent the disempowering potential of institutionalized research protocols.

1.4.6. Validity

Validation processes are concerned with making *truth* claims in research and the authority with which such claims are made. Yet, with post-structural and postmodern turns in the social sciences, we know that power is crucially implicated in what is constructed as *truth*. Such turns have resulted in methodological approaches that focus on *justice* rather than *truth* (Smith, 2005). The question then stands: *are we doing justice to the narratives of our participants?* This gets even more complicated when there are multiple perspectives and we have to critically reflect on the story that gets told through our research. The elements of intersubjectivity and representation and how we identify, understand, and utilize them are integral aspects of my research. This position departs significantly from traditional notions of validity as “the degree to which inferences reflect the actual state of affairs” (Cook and Campbell, 1979). Instead notions of validity and truth are humanized and contextualized. Validity cannot lie outside of the research context. In other words, we cannot simply appeal to a pre-determined set of authoritative norms that transcend any particular research project. Validation processes are not simply individual cognitive acts; rather they are social and political practices that can have real life implications for different subject populations.

Validation is also tied to ethics and should be considered on an ongoing basis throughout processes of research and writing. Considerations of validity issues in my project are informed by Isaac Prilleltensky’s work on psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003). He offers a set of questions to guide and critically evaluate research in the service of understanding, resisting, and addressing forms of oppression. Prilleltensky proposed two types of psychopolitical validity: epistemic validity i.e., accounting for power dynamics operating at psychological and political levels in efforts to understand the phenomenon of interest and transformative validity i.e., the extent to which change towards liberation is effected in personal, interpersonal and structural domains. Consistent with these principles, I regularly attended to and tried to address the following issues in my research. These issues are also woven throughout my analysis and writing.

- The role/impact of macrosocial forces on conflict and marginalization, as well as their influence on the perceptions and experiences of people.
- Interactions between political and psychological power at personal, relational, and collective levels.
- Promotion of psychopolitical literacy.
- Education and empowerment of participants to address social injustice at individual, community, and institutional levels.
- Promotion of solidarity.
- Positionality and contingencies.

Another principle guiding my work is that of *ontological authenticity* (Lincoln and Guba, 1986), that is achieving a more sophisticated and enriched conception of reality that was not previously appreciated. This is a research objective and an ethical imperative while working in contexts like the Garo Hills that are characterized by an impoverished public discourse. Thus I attend to ontological authenticity by working to develop a nuanced and more discursively complex understanding of ethnic conflict and marginality in Garo Hills.
CHAPTER 2
EVERYDAY VIOLENCE: INTERROGATING THE QUOTIDIAN

2.1. Memories: The Riot of 1987

The year 1987 stands out in my memory. I was in kindergarten when a communal riot broke out my hometown of Tura in August that year. As children we were not sure what was happening but we picked up on the tension. I remember school getting over early and a friend’s parents giving me a ride back home. By evening, several of our neighbors had gathered at our house and were speaking in hushed tones in the living room. All the kids were excited because we got to play way past our bedtimes. Every once in a while, a parent would come in to tell us to keep the noise down. I have a vague recollection of boarding a bus the following day with several of our neighbors and being driven to the house of a police officer, which served as a makeshift safe house. We were there for a couple of days being escorted out of the town in a police bus. As five year olds, it seemed like one big adventure. The bus took us to Guwahati from where we took a train to where my grandmother lived. A trip to my grandmother’s house in the middle of the year was a treat indeed!

But there was more to this story. While I slept peacefully that night exhausted after extended playtime, my parents stayed up witnessing the riot from our living room window. That neighborhood, like many others in my hometown, was built on the slope of a hill separated by a road that wound around the hill. The road was peppered with trees and unpaved paths on both sides leading to houses. Our house was positioned in such a way that we had a good view of the street before it curved. I later learned that there was a blackout that night and my parents witnessed angry rioters break into the garages situated at street level. They dragged out the bikes and scooters belonging to our neighbors and set them ablaze. Angry rioters also pelted houses with stones. They ran amuck that night as the local police failed to contain the riot. Border Security Forces were eventually deployed to control the riot and a curfew was declared in the wee hours of the next morning. This was before the age of cell phones. Unnerved by the riots they witnessed the night before, my mother and another neighbor ventured out into the street the following morning. They pleaded with the security officials patrolling the streets to allow them to go to a neighbor’s house to make a phone call. The officials escorted them to a neighbor’s house, one of the few with a telephone connection in the neighborhood. They called the local police station and managed to speak with the officer in charge. They informed him of the events of the previous night and insisted they felt
too unsafe to remain in that neighborhood. In a few hours, the official sent a bus that escorted the few non-tribal families from our neighborhood to his own house. The official and his wife opened their house to several families seeking protection. These were typically families who lived in predominantly tribal neighborhoods. After a couple of days he arranged for a bus to escort us out of the town. We went to live with my grandmother for a month till normalcy returned.

I pieced together the different parts of the story over time. Initially, it used to be talked about in hushed tones but it was not very difficult, even as a five year old to sense that it had something to do with ‘us’ and ‘them,’ that is, tribals and non-tribals. That was the first instance of organized violence by Garos against non-tribals living in Tura. Based on conversations with non-tribals who witnessed the riot, it appears that tensions between Garos and non-tribals were simmering for a while before an incident tipped the balance. The details of that incident are however contested. But the story goes that a non-tribal student in the local college had written a derogatory letter about the Garos. It came to the Principal’s notice, who instead of dealing with the incident directly made copies of the letter and distributed it to different parts of Garo Hills including local NGOs. Several people and groups with vested interests took advantage of the opportunity to incite local Garos against non-tribal ‘outsiders.’ They staged protests demanding the arrest of the student who had allegedly written the letter. The administration did not take these threats seriously till the angry protests erupted into violence. Non-tribals, Muslims in particular were targetted because the student who wrote the letter happened to be Muslim. Many non-tribal people suffered losses, especially those who owned small businesses. Stores and people’s houses were set ablaze. My father recalls the agony of one family in our neighborhood, whose teenage son did not return home from school that day. He attended a Bengali school near the main market area of town. Angry rioters started pelting stones on the school and stood outside the school gates waiting for students to leave. Police officials had to escort the students out of school. By then there was pandemonium and it was not safe for anyone to be out on the streets. This school was only a quarter mile from the police station so the students were forced to spend the night at the local police station. With very few people owning telephones, our neighbors were one of the many families who spent the night agonizing over what happened to their children. Families such as theirs left the town for good.

For a long time after we returned, conversations at social gatherings were dominated by stories of the riot. It was not until much later that my parents talked to me about it and responded to my questions. While communal tensions have festered, a riot such as the one in
1987 has not recurred. During my fieldwork I found that most people I talked to, both Garos and non-Garos were not too interested in talking about that riot. The riot is experienced as distant as opposed to the immediacy of insurgency. When they did talk about it, there was a tendency to blame a few key people for the eruption of violence; people who played on the communal tensions and incited rioters rather than trying to pacify them. It was also characterized as a “law and order failure,” where the local administration failed to contain protests before they got out of hand. And yet there was a sense of that event having altered something. The riot of 1987 is crucial to the political landscape of Garo Hills in that it was the public expression of antagonism towards the ‘outsider.’ It created a schism between Garos and non-Garos, especially non-tribals and established a precedent. As one non-tribal elderly community member put it, ‘After 1987, we knew that we cannot live here with our heads held high. I think the Garos were not aware of their power till then. Now they know that we are scared of them and have no option but to live here. So we have to pay our dues continuously.’

This incident was disruptive but ‘normalcy’ eventually returned albeit a different one. It was probably the most disruptive incident in my young life. What started off as an adventure had consequences for our lives. We never went back to the old house. My father tells me:

“As our bus entered the town, we heard a lot of sirens and noticed fire engines. By the time we reached the bus terminal in the main town, we got to know that our Parimal Da’s [our neighbor] house had been gutted down that very afternoon. It never got resolved as to who did it, but we just felt we couldn’t go back to the old neighborhood. We hadn’t planned on moving out initially but all our (non-tribal) neighbors had also moved out. Most of their houses were pelted with stones during the riot. It was no longer safe. After I dropped off your mother and you at our family doctor’s house, I went to our house and discovered that it had been broken into. That day itself I hired a van and removed all our things from the house.”

All our previous neighbors had moved out and it was no longer considered safe for non-tribals. We lived with several friends of our family till we found another place, in a predominantly non-tribal neighborhood. I remember the sense of loss and confusion I experienced as a young child. I failed to see why we could not return to the neighborhood where I had romped freely with the other kids without our parents being concerned about our safety. I was separated from the friends I had known since I was a toddler. I still remember the beautiful, perfectly oval, white pebble that I had found in one of our forays in the neighborhood, just days before the riot. Owning such a coveted thing enhanced my status in
the playgroup. Everyone wanted it and eventually we buried it in a patch we used to play in
till we made up our minds regarding who deserved it. For a long time, the perfect pebble
became symbolic of the life that was suddenly abandoned that August in 1987. Within a year
and half, once the immediacy of the riot faded, we moved again, to a predominantly tribal
one. My parents still live there. As children we are resilient, and our lives were reorganized
without any lasting trauma. But that first home still holds fond memories. Even today when I
walk through that old neighborhood, I feel a wave of longing and a sense of home.

2.2. The Present: The Impotence of Numbers

With the escalation of violence across the globe, the threshold for what constitutes
violence has been raised. The onslaught of violent images viewed on our television screens
makes us all spectators and vicarious participants in this phenomenon as we respond with our
biases. The memory of that riot from 25 years ago is almost erased from people’s minds,
replaced as it is by flagrant images of insurgent and counterinsurgent violence. Shifting
thresholds of violence combined with the passage of time makes the riot seem
inconsequential and almost innocuous. I begin this chapter by going back in time so as to
reconstruct the riot because I was interested in the ‘normalcy’ that gradually returned
following the riot. What was normal had been subtly redefined in the face of explicit, overt
conflict between tribals and non-tribals that defined the riot. In this chapter I interrogate what
‘normalcy’ means in the context of Garo Hills, its contours shaped by the tribal non-tribal
conflict. I also examine some of the processes by which the conflict and associated everyday
violence are normalized.

Numbers have become the primary mode of communicating the experience of social
violence (Rotker, 2002). Numbers alone fail to capture the experience and impact of insidious
everyday violence. However official statistics like number of deaths resulting from armed
insurgency and counter-insurgency have become the accepted metric for evaluating violence
by the government and also by the public. This is reflected in people’s talk. For example,
following a bomb blast in the main supermarket area of Tura in 2007⁴, one young Garo man
minimized its impact even as he condemned it: “There was not much casualty in the bomb
blast incident. One person died, but I heard that he actually suffered a heart attack because
of the loud sound.” Like many other regions across the world, Garo Hills is a region where
notions of violence have come to be defined by the media so that only dramatic gestures,
symbolisms and statistically significant casualties are violent enough to capture or captivate

public attention and warrant concern. Clearly, such numbers are impotent in contexts where violence is filtered into public consciousness and legitimated as a mode of action. This means that we need to expand the ambit of what constitutes violence to include the violence embedded in social geographies. In the next section I discuss the routineness of violence and the ways in which it mediates the everyday life of people in Garo Hills. I arrive at these understandings through the theories and critical conceptions that ordinary citizens, especially youth develop about their conditions.

2.3. Everyday Violence

There is a continuous fear that some problem will occur. And it is not as if they (i.e., young Garo males) let people off after giving them one slap. I don’t know how their mental set-up has come to be this way, how their upbringing has been. *They can do anything. Whatever comes to their mind, they do it. There is no limit.*

- Kavi, 2010

In this vignette, Kavi, one of my non-tribal youth participants points out how their social ecologies are rife with the threat of violence - the “continuous fear.” His emphatic response highlights the generalized, pervasive fear of violence experienced by local non-tribal communities. In the course of my fieldwork and interactions with both Garo and non-tribal young people, I found references to the antagonism that Garos feel towards non-tribals living in Garo Hills. These antagonisms along ethnic lines crucially shape everyday interactions in Garo Hills. Over the course of my several meetings, my non-tribal youth participants detailed the everyday violence along ethnic lines that mediates their lives. These ranged from experiences of being silenced, excluded, and discriminated against to humiliation and bodily harm. The accounts of non-tribal youth were corroborated by my Garo tribal participants as they discussed the ethnic conflict, victimization of non-tribals, and their own complicity in the process. Yet there is an unspeakability surrounding the violence signaling both its normalization and a culture of fear that obviates any social critique. In such contexts violence is not only an aberration of the social context but a regular part of it (Bourgois, 2004; Pinderhughes, 1997; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Individuals may deploy violence but social contexts crucially constitute and code the violence. By juxtaposing the narratives of Garo and non-tribal young men, a picture of the everyday violence emerges. My analysis helps enunciate the everyday violence that is usually a subtext as well as the entrenched social geographies that allow the same. In the course of my inquiry, educational institutions emerged as sites where violence along ethnic lines is enacted on a regular basis.
2.3.1. On Being Out-of-Line and Out-of-Place

My non-tribal participants narrated multiple incidents to convey the theme of ethnic antagonisms that characterizes the interactions with their Garo peers in educational contexts. I analyzed those stories to cull common themes and scripts that illuminate how ethnic antagonisms unfold in these contexts. The story presented here was narrated by Kavi, a mild-mannered young man who at the time of the interview was enrolled in a master’s program at the local university in Tura, in Garo Hills. Kavi was born and brought up in the Garo Hills, as were his parents. He narrates an incident that happened to him while he was a senior in college:

I was sitting in the common room and writing some notes. I had just finished when the lunch break started. The common room gets really crowded during break and I sort of bumped into a Garo boy on my way out. Obviously it wasn’t intentional. You can easily bump into someone when so many people are trying to come in and leave through the same small door. I didn’t pay much attention. I didn’t even notice whom I had bumped into because it was so crowded. Suddenly a boy came from behind and shoved me, ‘Why did you push me?’ he asked. I said, ‘Sorry, I didn’t do it intentionally.’ Out of the blue he said, ‘I am going to rag you. Which class are you in?’ I replied, ‘3rd year’ and he retorted, ‘so what?’ I reiterated that I didn’t even see him properly when I sort of brushed against him in the crowd. But one of his friends just came up to me and slapped me. I reacted to that and said ‘what is this? I told you that it wasn’t intentional’ to which he replied, ‘Come outside. I’ll see you there.’ I got really scared about what he would do. Luckily I had a couple of Garo friends there who are really nice. They calmed those boys. Later they said we should go and complain to the Principal. I turned down the idea. This was a small incident. You can never tell what the consequences of taking this to the principal would be…once those boys know that I complained. A bigger incident can happen. And what if I don’t have my Garo friends around me that day to protect me? I often walk to college and back alone. And these are common incidents that happen to most non-tribal students.

This narration takes us through a typical encounter between Garo tribal youth and non-tribal youth in colleges. More importantly, it highlights the reasoning employed by the youth involved and the consequences of such reasoning. A salient feature of these incidents is how commonplace they are. As my interviews with non-tribal youth progressed, I discovered Kavi’s story was a prototype. For instance, Sanjay, another non-tribal youth related an incident that bore a striking similarity to Kavi’s experience. Sanjay narrated an incident he witnessed in college while standing in line to sign up for computer terminals. People were chatting as they waited in line. A non-tribal student was gesturing animatedly as he spoke to his friend and his arm happened to hit the boy behind him in the line, who incidentally was a

---

2 Ragging is a common initiation practice in undergraduate institutions in India.
Garo. Sanjay narrates:

The Garo boy immediately accused him of doing it on purpose. The Bengali boy said he didn’t see him and even said sorry. As their voices grew louder, a bunch of boys who were standing nearby joined in ready to beat up the Bengali boy. They got agitated and pushed him against the wall and rolled up their sleeves to punch him. Thankfully a couple of his Garo friends were around and they managed to settle things. Even then the Garo boy threatened before leaving, “I will see you outside.”

As I analyzed these different incidents, a discernible pattern emerged. These incidents follow a particular script where any innocuous, accidental physical contact spirals into a contentious encounter, where attempts on the part of the non-tribal to mollify their tribal counterpart only serves to exacerbate things until another Garo person intervenes and arrests the process. Owing to the stringent tribal vs. non-tribal divide, in-group identity and solidarity is accentuated. Thus, Garo youth are more likely to respond to reason when it comes from another Garo person. Still, the non-tribal person is left with a threat. These are not isolated events and taken together, they give a sense of the collective antagonisms. The interpersonal nature of the specific incidents themselves should not blind us to the collective identities, rhetoric, and activities that give rise to them. It is also clear that the materiality of the body is a crucial medium through which the divide between tribals and non-tribals is enacted. Who occupies space and how is determined by one’s ethnicity. In the interactions described above, the non-tribal youth in question are perceived as being “out-of-line” in terms of their spatial orientation. Being “in place” or having a place involves the intimacy of cohabiting spaces with others (Ahmed, 2006). But the antagonism that Garos feel towards the ‘outsider’ renders unequal the terms of inhabiting space. As both Garo and non-tribal youth testify, their faces carry the imprint of their genealogies. For example, Kavi says that his face identifies him as a non-tribal while Garo youth pointed out how their facial features set them apart as tribals), a fact that is hard to escape. What is at stake here in this sort of ethnicization is the way in which these young men’s bodies come to inhabit space. This has ramifications for non-tribal youth who are positioned as ‘the other,’ especially in terms of constraining their mobility.

Non-tribal youth face a general risk of being caught up in ethnic flares that result from accidental encounters with their Garo peers in colleges. In addition, there are particular places that are considered unsafe in that they expose non-tribal students to potentially threatening encounters or interactions. The youth I interviewed explained that their mobility was limited even within the contained space of the small college campus. There were a number of such spaces that were considered unsafe for non-tribal youth to venture into. Thus in practical terms they did not have access to such spaces. Kavi explained:
There’s the college canteen (café). We used to be scared to go there. There were some (Garo) boys who used to hang out there, who were really terrible. I wouldn’t go so far as to say they are capable of murder, but short of that they are probably capable of doing anything. It was worse for boys who were small when they joined junior college. They were harassed more. They would be taken behind the college campus, in the wilderness, and they would be severely harassed, tortured. There have been cases where students have left college because of the harassment. *So the thing is it’s not a temporary thing. The entire time that we are in college, we live with that fear.*

The knowledge of safe versus unsafe spaces is integral to the ways in which non-tribal men navigate their college life. Considerations of how to ensure their physical safety while minimizing the likelihood of being targetted by Garo youth are a crucial part of their everyday lives. The threat of violence is not limited to locations within the campus. Secluded areas around the college are also rendered unsafe. Sanjay explicates:

> The college is sort of located in the interior. There aren’t too many shops or houses nearby. It is a very desolate area, especially in the afternoons when we would get done with classes. Sometimes we used to have guest lectures or extra classes on special topics. Even though I really wanted to attend those classes, I couldn’t. Not just me, my other non-tribal friends as well. The bus would leave at the usual time and staying back to attend extra lectures meant walking home through the desolate area near the college. It doesn’t always have to be severe. I’d be walking and someone would come up to me and say, ‘take out some money.’ If I say I don’t have any money, then they won’t believe me. It happened to a friend of mine. He was returning from somewhere. They asked him for money. He had 200 rupees with him and he gave that. But the boys did not agree and wanted more. He said he didn’t have any more money, but they wouldn’t take no for an answer, and punched him in the face and gave him a black eye.

Finally, the mobility of non-tribal youth is also restricted in the evenings. In Dilip’s words:

> We cannot go out at night after 8/8:30pm. We have to come home no matter how much work we have.

### 2.3.2. The Perennial Fear of Ragging

Ragging\(^3\) is an initiation practice that is common in undergraduate institutions in India. By definition it is an initiation rite and one’s seniority in college should grant immunity against the harassment that is part of ragging. But in Garo Hills, ragging serves as a

---

\(^3\) Ragging, especially in engineering and medical schools, can take the form of violence and abuse. At times, it has abetted suicide or led to the death of students. The practice has come under much critique and legislations have been passed banning the practice of ragging. There are anti-ragging cells set up in many undergraduate institutions for students to seek protection or redressal. Students implicated in ragging face suspension and depending on the transgression could face criminal charges. But like most legislations, it is not equally implemented everywhere.
code as well as justification for harassment and violence perpetrated against non-tribal students. In the earlier story, Kavi’s antagonist had threatened to rag him despite the fact that Kavi was a senior at the time. He later went on to explain:

As nontribals in college, we always used to stay in fear. From the very first day. And it wasn’t as if the fear would go away after the first year. We remained with that fear for the entire duration our college years - the two years of junior college and 3 years of undergrad.

While the practice of ragging is not limited to the Garo Hills, its practice there is contingent on the tribal/non-tribal divide. It is manifested along the whole gamut of everyday violence - extortion, demands for items like food, CDs, DVDs, etc., public humiliation and bodily harm. Even though the immediate violence may occur within educational institutes, its impact percolates into different realms of the youths’ lives. This is illustrated below where Dilip, another non-tribal young man discusses the implications of the harassment and violence that one is subjected to under the guise of ragging.

We used to have this Bengali friend – very sad story. He had to undergo such severe ragging that he could not wear decent clothes to college. He couldn’t even finish his studies. His family condition was also not good and he ended up having to support his family financially by giving tuitions. Another friend I know also lost 2 years and is now in my younger brother’s class. He could not take his exams. They used to stop him at the gate. So you see, people’s studies are interrupted. That is not a normal issue. It is a very very serious issue. People who have large families and are expected to support their families, in such a case when their education is impeded and they have to end up doing small, odd jobs, then how will they support their family?

The sort of everyday violence described here has come to define the college experience of non-tribal students. It regulates their movement and behavior within the college campus, but also outside it. They cannot venture into many neighborhoods in the evening, sometimes even during the day. Kavi’s assertion that “there is always a continuous fear that some problem will occur” captures the predicament of most non-tribal youth. Kavi questions emphatically, “How can one study properly if there is a constant concern about safety?” The everyday lives of young non-tribal men in Garo Hills is thus shaped by the pervasive ethnic conflict between tribals and non-tribals. The ways in which young non-tribal males walk, dress, act, talk, move - their very being in the world is reconfigured by the imperative to avoid harm and ensure physical safety. Thus, violence is no longer just a manifestation or product of, but also constructive of a particular social context. Ethnic conflict is a subtext that fundamentally affects the trajectories of youth as they navigate their polarized ecologies (Hammack, 2006).
2.3.3. Coping

Typically, non-tribal youth try to minimize their chances of being targeted in college by being as inconspicuous as possible. For example, Sanjay explained that they could not “move freely” in the college campus or “dress smart.” The idea was to be as inconspicuous as possible. “If a non-tribal boy dressed like that (e.g., well fitting jeans, t-shirts, scarves, sneakers) and hung out freely, he would be called. The Garo boys would then ask for money, to say the least,” Sanjay reflects. The materiality of the body and the freedom with which one occupies space thus figures significantly in these interactions. Even as young non-tribal men try to deflect attention from themselves, and their bodies, they acknowledge the inherent limitation of such attempts. Kavi states simply - “Other Garos would see my face and obviously know that I am a non-tribal.” Thus ethnicity becomes a social and well as a bodily given (Ahmed, 2006). The perennial threat of violence, overriding concerns of personal safety, and experiencing/witnessing everyday violence produces something akin to a shared, chronic psychosocial trauma (Lykes, 1994; Martin-Baro, 1994).

In the course of these conversations, there emerged a rough profile of the non-tribal youth who is most likely to be harassed in college by Garo youth. Males are clearly more likely to be targets of physical violence than are women. A small statured youth is also more likely to be harassed, probably because of the reduced likelihood of any retaliation. Also, young men who move to Tura from smaller towns or rural areas to attend college stand a higher risk of being picked on for a number of reasons. Given the fact that they just moved to the town to attend college, these students from outside of Tura typically lack a support network comprising local Garo students. As Amit, another of my non-tribal participants explained,

Ragging…you know…what can we do? There is nothing to say. They (Garo youth) will see us on the road sometime and just bash us up. They have no fear of suspension as well. They will wait on the road for us to show up. For some non-tribals, who have Garo friends, they may not dare to do such things to them. If they try to do something, maybe their Garo friends will come and tell them to leave them alone. But if they don’t know anyone - for example someone who has come from outside. They have to rent a room to stay here. Their family background may not be that good. Such people end up being victimized more.

Minimization

A close reading of the narratives indicates that the young non-tribal men are engaging in a continual process that minimizes their experiences of being targeted by Garo men. Earlier in the chapter, I presented Kavi’s narration of the incident where he got into an
altercation with a Garo boy. Kavi concludes his narrative with a sense of resignation. He reasons:

This was a small incident. You can never tell what the consequences of taking this to the principal would be...once those boys know that I complained. A bigger incident can happen. And what if I don’t have my Garo friends around me that day to protect me? I often walk to college and back alone. And these are common incidents that happen to most non-tribal students.

In the continuum of possible acts of violence perpetrated against non-tribal youth, the incident Kavi describes is considered less severe. The excerpt above exemplifies the way in which non-tribal youth resign themselves to the routineness of such incidents. Kavi is apprehensive of the consequences of registering a complaint against the Garo youth. In his words, it is a “small incident.” This demonstrates how the baseline for what is normal and acceptable is altered. Besides, how these young men make sense of everyday violence is also shaped by what they perceive is at stake. The narrative embodies a plethora of affect and sentiments. Seeing how the narrative unfolded, its content and the shifting inflections seems to suggest that one of the ways in which young non-tribal men deal with routine experiences of ethnic assertions is through minimization. There is outrage, righteous indignation and fear, but there is also resignation. Resigned to a life where such interactions are common, non-tribal youth learn to pick their battles and incidents like the one described by Kavi are minimized as “small” and “common.”

The pattern of minimization is not limited to non-tribals. Garo youth themselves have also come to accept the conflict as inevitable. While Garo youth acknowledged that ragging occurs and is usually directed at non-tribals, others tried to deflect attention from the ethnic factor. They did so by locating the “problem” or propensity for ragging within the Garo tribe itself, implying that it had nothing to with the ethnicity of those who are targetted. This is exemplified in the excerpt below:

Garos pick up on anybody, even Garos themselves if they find him over-smart or something. They just pick on anybody, be it a girl or be it a boy. I believe it’s uh...a necessity sometimes to control some of them because they like to show off and they like to act smart. Some of them don’t know even how to behave with the teachers. So if there is ragging, then some of them are afraid of ragging so they are controlled. (Sengnang)

Instead of engaging how ethnic differences along tribal lines are implicated in the practice of ragging in Garo Hills (as Robin tried to do) Sengnang introduces other possible arguments. He draws attention to the tendency of Garos to “pick on anybody.” According to him, Garos, as a tribe do not tolerate irreverence or insubordination, like perceived acts of being “over-
smart” or “showing off.” Ragging, or the fear of being ragged for him, then is a means of controlling undesirable behavior in “some” students. In this manner Sengnang tries to normalize the everyday violence along ethnic lines, even as they recognize the antagonism that many Garos feel towards non-tribals. Sengnang elaborated:

The main thing that non-tribals are afraid of the Garos is because the Garos are very short-tempered. And if suppose some Garo asks some question to a non-Garo and if that non-Garo speaks in such a manner that...even if he speaks in a polite manner, if the Garo feels that he is not speaking in a polite manner, because he is very short-tempered, then his temper goes up and he gets angry and he asks some more questions and if the answer is unsatisfactory then the non-Garo usually ends up getting a good beating (laughs).

Sengang’s argument is crucial here because it points to the mechanisms that Garo youth probably use to rationalize routine instances of harassment and violence targeted against non-tribals under the guise of ragging.

2.4. Garo Youth on Everyday Violence

While there is an absence of a public discourse around everyday violence against non-tribals, Garo youth acknowledge and own up to it. This conversation took place as part of extended interviews with a group of Garo undergraduate students from the local government college. Our conversations took place across several weeks, in a small room in an almost abandoned building of the local college. An articulate young man, Robin became progressively more engaged and invested in our conversation on issues affecting the local community. Patrick also became more candid in his accounts, his quiet demeanor often offsetting Robin’s animated speech. During one of those meetings, I raised the issue of non-tribal students with them.

UD: What do you think about the experience of non-tribal youth in colleges?

Robin: I have compassion for non-tribals; I have many non-tribal friends. When they are freshers here in college, we Garo people rag them. So because of that they fear the Garos, especially members of the Garo Students’ Union (GSU). They beat them and ask for money. This is the reason why the GSU is feared.

We can see how Robin starts off by acknowledging the complicity of Garo students in the ragging of non-tribal students and perpetuating a culture of fear. However he immediately shifts the blame on to the Garo Students’ Union (GSU). The GSU, which purports to protect and further the interests of Garo students and Garo people, has emerged as a powerful stakeholder over the past couple of decades. Their anti-outsider or anti-non-tribal stance is
also public knowledge. Robin also points out that the exploits of GSU are not confined to non-tribal students alone. He elaborates:

Most of the followers of GSU usually harass the non-tribals. I can say that most of the time students demand money or something in the name of GSU. So most of the times they harass the non-tribal civilians. Sometimes as I have said earlier, the Garos do not like the non-tribals; they usually try to take advantage of the non-Garos; they try to beat up the non-Garos. That’s why most of the non-tribals are afraid of the GSU.

While Robin’s unequivocal stance on the negative role of GSU was not shared by all members of the group, they did concur that non-tribals in Garo Hills are persecuted.

Saleng: Only one or two members do this. In the past I have seen many of my friends…not many, two or three…those who are in GSU, beating up non-tribal students.

Patrick: It is about misusing their power.

Robin: Yes, as I said they try to misuse their power even over the Garos, but it is over the non-Garos that they actually have the advantage.

This excerpt illustrates and validates the fear of violence that shapes the undergraduate experience of young non-tribal men in Garo Hills. The accounts of Kavi and Sanjay earlier and Patrick, Robin and Saleng above converge on a crucial detail - the absence of any kind of accountability where members of the Garo Students Union are concerned. Kavi had emphatically stated that ‘They (Garo youth) can do anything. Whatever comes to their mind, they do it. There is no limit.’ Sanjay, another participant attributes this to the lack of any “punishment” or at least those of any consequence for the Garo youth that engage in ragging.

Most important is punishment. But no one is being punished. At the most they are suspended temporarily from college for a few days. But they are indifferent to suspension. Such students usually don’t attend classes any way.

In addition to the college authorities, the local community also does not hold these Garo youth accountable. Kavi pointed out:

And the problem is, whom do we question? If I have a problem, I have to complain to someone in their (Garo) community, because they are the people who have authority…There is nothing to do. There’s always the fear of what will happen if I try to do something.

This lack of accountability combined with the fear of consequences renders it extremely difficult, if not impossible for non-tribals to report everyday acts of violence to college authorities, let alone to the police; thus making it as unlikely for them to seek any kind of redressal when they are victimized.

The other crucial point on which the narratives of non-tribal and Garo tribal students converge is the buffer role played by some Garo youth. Kavi and Sanjay both describe
incidents that were eventually cut short by the intervention of “Garo friend(s).” Kavi had explained:

There are good people among them (Garos). They understand the situation - that sometimes I have a problem because I am a non-tribal. Then they try to save me. So I have friends who know that there are goons among them. So they come and help. But such people are fewer.

Robin also attested to such roles of Garo youth. He related an incident where he played such a role.

Once I was also beaten up by a Garo student just because I tried to stop them from ragging another boy. I just told him not to do it. He had punched another non-tribal. [laughs] He hit me also because of that. But afterwards he told me that he was sorry for what he has done. That’s because he knew that if I report to other GSU members, then he would be in trouble, maybe beaten up by them [laughs]. I have forgiven him but I can say something because I have the authority to protect them. If many such Garos do that, many non-tribals will be saved from that harassment. If they are my Garo friends, I can stop them.

Robin points out that it is up to the Garo students to prevent their peers from harassing and/or perpetrating violence against non-tribal students in the form of ragging. There is an implicit recognition by the Garos (and non-Garos) that it is the Garos who are in a position to address the conflict in Garo Hills. Yet the larger divisive ethnic discourse is so powerful that it prevents any collective or organized response on the part of Garo youth or members of the Garo community who are critical of ragging. This is another of the many ‘social truths’ that local people ‘know’ but rarely articulate. The knowledge of who can and cannot intervene in a conflict involving different ethnicities is a part of people’s commonsensical knowledge that guides their everyday life. Through the multiple conversations with Garo and non-tribal youth, these implicit social truths were being acknowledged and articulated.

2.5. Normalization and Naturalization of Everyday Violence

2.5.1. The Scope of Ethnic Assertions

A recurrent theme in the participants’ narratives was the anticipation of violence. While educational institutes like colleges serve as a common site for ethnic assertion and violence, it is in no way limited to those sites. If we return to incidents such as the one where a Garo boy accosted Kavi, a pattern can be discerned with respect to how they end or are interrupted. Garo youth typically have the last word as they leave with an open threat - “I will see you outside.” Outside could be anywhere. Given that this is happening in the context of a small town, it is not an empty threat. Besides, what is happening within the college is not an
isolated incident. It is part of a larger process of constant ethnic othering and ethnic assertion. “There is no limit to this,” says Kavi as he describes the scope of ethnic assertions:

It happens everywhere, in offices, in banks, at the post office. But no one says anything. Everybody feels scorched but there is nothing to be done. No one to complain to. Once, I was standing in line at the bank. A Garo boy walks in with a swagger, plays with his cap and simply walks to the front of the line, instead of joining it. Someone mumbled about this not being right. In a typical Bollywood fashion, the boy said, ‘the line starts from wherever I stand.’ Even the bank teller did not do anything about it. She simply carried out his transaction for him. No one says anything. Even if a non-tribal protests, other non-tribals get angry. They are scared of the consequences and want to avoid any confrontation.

The picture that emerges here is that, more than acts of actual physical violence, it is the constant threat of violence, the constant fear of consequences that creates a repressive environment, which obviates any social critique from being registered. There are implicit social rules that govern the behavior of Garos and non-tribals in Tura. For example, when Garo youth enter a store and pick up stuff without paying for them or stating that they will “pay later,” most storeowners, if they are non-tribals offer little or no resistance. There have been sporadic incidents over the years, of flare-ups, when a non-tribal resisted or retaliated against a Garo. The consequences have included physical assault, being forced to shut down their business, and threats of being exiled from Garo Hills. A number of these threats have been carried out as well.

One such incident occurred in the summer of 2007, when I had returned briefly to Garo Hills to do some fieldwork. As with such incidents, there are many versions of how it unfolded. I will highlight the aspects of the event that are relevant to understanding the normalized conflict and violence. There is a family-owned business in the local market area that sells sweets and savories. It is run by three brothers, who inherited it after their father’s death. One of the brothers got into an altercation with a member of the Garo Students’ Union. Instead of giving in to what the member demanded, as is common and expected, this man (in his late 20s) resisted and argued with them. He tried to fend off their blows when it came to that. An immediate consequence of that altercation was that the brothers had to close their shop under the threats from the GSU. The altercation and the ensuing threats occurred in the middle of the day, amidst people, less than half a mile from the Police Headquarters. But it did not end there. Once the brothers realized the gravity of the situation, they tried to make amends by retracting and apologizing. Two of the older brothers were asked to ‘talk’ with the GSU members at their office. At this ‘meeting,’ they were severely tortured and brutalized
with clubs, hockey sticks and chains. The older of the two brothers had to be sent to the nearest city to receive medical treatment for his injuries. The younger brother also required medical attention but was allowed to recuperate at home. I learned these details from the youngest brother (who was not involved in this incident). He had transferred into my high school during our last year so I decided to call on him to see what had happened and how they were coping. Eventually they worked out a compromise with the GSU and were allowed to reopen their store and resume business. Even then, their elderly mother managed the shop for a while before the brothers finally felt safe enough to return to the store. But the oldest brother was scarred deeply and relocated to a neighboring city. This incident and the events that unfolded were well-known despite the hushed tones in which it was talked about. One of my non-tribal participants referenced the incident to illustrate the excesses of the Garo Students’ Union.

Reconstructive processes are involved when people talk about past incidents like the one described above. This renders it difficult to ascertain perceptual distortion or the lack of it. However, the goal here is not to assess the veracity of discrete details of the actual incident, but to examine how people think, talk and make sense of it. The status of the truth does not exist as an objective reality separate from its constituent interpretations (Ricoeur, 1981). This idea is also contained in the sense of narrative as an intermediary between past events and their meaning in the present (Bruner, 1986; Krumner-Nevo, 1998), rather than as a mirror of reality that precisely reflects the past. My participants narrated several such incidents and I analyzed the telling of those to elucidate the ubiquitous character of violence and the normalized fear that non-tribals experience. Below are several illustrations, the first of which is a reference to what happened to the three brothers:

*Incident 1:*
Maybe three years back, there was a strike called by GSU. Some elderly person...ummm I am not sure of the neighborhood, probably from Fancy Valley. He was going to the hospital to see his daughter or someone. He told the volunteers he was going to the hospital. You know - the GSU members who patrol the neighborhoods during bandhs. But these boys caught him and bashed him up.

*Incident 2:*
I was sitting at a friend’s store at the Supermarket. A Garo lady was passing by. She came and picked up a few things and then said she would pay later. My friend did not agree and said he didn’t know her. The woman replied, ‘Do you know who my son is? My son is Henry.’ My friend said he didn’t know Henry. And the woman was surprised. She said, ‘How come you don’t know

---

4 A predominantly non-tribal neighborhood
the *goonda* of Don Bosco College?’ I was appalled that a mother was expressing pride at her son being a *goonda*.

Describing these incidents served a number of purposes. First, through these incidents, my participants wanted to drive home their point about the excesses of organizations like the Garo Students Union towards non-tribals - the threat of violence and the accompanying fear that have become an integral part of their lives. Second, taken together, these incidents illustrate the consequences of resisting the actions of the Garo Students’ Union. These deter any public critique or resistance. These is a concrete illustration of yet another (usually implicit) rule of social life in Garo Hills: non-tribals have to be subservient to Garos, especially the Garo Students’ Union; and this regardless of the specificities of the situation. Finally, they are also meant to highlight the relative powerlessness and sense of helplessness experienced by non-tribals in the face of the conflict. Social life for most non-tribals in Garo Hills is thus marred by a persistent, typically unarticulated fear of violence.

Most people, tribal and non-tribal alike are complicit in the maintenance and reproduction of this fear through their silence. At this juncture, I would like to revisit the incident at the doctor’s office, which I described in the introduction. A woman had walked past me and entered the doctor’s chamber when the attendant held the door open for me. On pointing this out, I was asked by the predominantly non-tribal staff to let it pass because “they” are “local people” and we should not “confront” or “defy” them. Thus we can see how the subservience of the ethnic other or “outsider” has become to be accepted and expected by Garos and non-Garos alike, even though it has different implications for them. As a result, everyday issues are ethnicized and most social situations are interpreted using the us-versus-them or outsider discourse. Given this state of affairs, civil society in Garo Hills and similar regions in North-east India are in grave danger of being dominated by the conflict. The conflict and violence not only impact individuals from particular ethnic groups, but also the community as a whole. While acts of overt violence are localized and somewhat visible, the erosion of civil society and its insidious impact on ordinary citizens and their everyday lives goes largely unnoticed and undetected. Thus we need to systematically interrogate that which is considered ‘normal.’

I felt angry and hurt that day when I left the doctor’s office; anger over the violation of civic rules and its justification based on ethnicity. I felt hurt because I was immediately cast as the “outsider,” an act that privileged an accident of birth while negating a longer

---

5 A colloquial term for a hooligan or ruffian
history of belonging. As I began to write my fieldnotes following the incident, my attention was drawn to another facet of the incident, which escaped me during the incident itself. The staff (non-tribal) at the doctor’s office did not argue with me nor did they attempt to point out that I was wrong. They were awkward and apologetic, but most of all helpless. I can still visualize the helplessness and apology writ large on the staff member’s face as he bore the brunt of my protest. They did not want to upset me, since I was also their client. But they felt impotent under the weight of the powerful insider-outsider discourse governing social interactions in the local community. It is a reminder of the extent to which divisive discourses have become entrenched in the local community.

2.5.2. Normalization and Naturalization

A striking feature of the narratives of non-tribal youth as they describe their experiences of harassment and violence is the absence of any mechanism for redressal. Even within the context of their educational institutions, there is no mention of or any appeal to institutional authorities. Non-tribal youth have instead come to accept ethnic assertions and attendant violence as routine. This is what Martin Baro (1994) called “normal abnormality” (p. 125), that is a state of being or living where people are accustomed to, and expect to live with forms of marginalization and violence. Kavi does cite the reasons for not reporting the incident (where he was accosted by a Garo youth) to college authorities. His actions were geared towards the avoidance of any further confrontation. Taking the issue up with college authorities would also bring him into focus, which is in contrast to the tendency of non-tribal students to evade attention as means of protecting themselves. Kavi was apprehensive of more violent reprisal if the Garo youth learned of his complaint. “What if my Garo friends are not around to protect me?” he pointed out. Thus, it should be noted that having Garo friends is seen as more effective than appealing to institutional authority where protection from harassment and abuse is concerned. This led me to interrogate the possible reasons for the lack of faith in any institutional response to the everyday violence experienced by non-tribal youth.

Silence at the Societal Level

The ubiquity and pervasiveness of harassments and violence along ethnic lines points towards high levels of tolerance and even endorsement of ethnic violence at the level of local community (Das, 1998). Like their Garo peers, non-tribal students recognize the active role of entities like the Garo Students’ Union in perpetuating ethnic conflict and violence. However, when it comes to ascribing blame and responsibility they emphasize the role of
“socially responsible” members of the Garo community (e.g., educators, people in positions of authority, elderly community members). The bulk of their criticism and grievances are directed towards individuals who command authority and respect in the local community. Non-tribal youth express their disappointment in such community members who implicitly endorse ethnic divisions by failing to leverage their positions to address the conflict. Sanjay laments:

If the socially responsible members of the society reinforce the problems, then we will never have any solutions. The problems will always remain as problems.

Kavi joined in the conversation adding:

Even socially responsible citizens may feel that they will destroy their image if they get involved in the tribal/non-tribal issue directly.

These statements point to a certain level of tolerance of violence against non-tribals within the local community, so that speaking against it may not be socially desirable. Violence is always mediated by an expressed or implicit dichotomy between legitimate/illegitimate or permissible/sanctioned acts (Arendt, 1970). Both Kavi and Sanjay are essentially drawing attention to the absence of public discourse around the conflict between Garos (tribals) and non-tribals. They are critical of the fact that no one takes a categorical position on these issues to publicly condemn the violence and oppression that non-tribals experience in the hands of Garos.

**Impunity**

Another major reason that emerged for the failure to seek institutional help in response to violence was the high level of impunity enjoyed by young men who engage in violence, not only within the educational institution, but also in the society at large. The following story related by Sanjay exemplifies how the status quo around ethnic assertion and violence is maintained.

There is a bus station near my house for buses to and from nearby blocks and rural areas. There is this *goonda*\(^6\), everyone calls him Mogambo\(^7\) out of fear. They are scared of him. What this person does is he goes around asking for money from the small shops there, at the bus station. There is a small eatery there run by a Nepali. Mogambo often goes there, takes money from them, or eats without paying. Not only Mogambo, some other Garo auto drivers, the *goonda* types also go, eat there and then don’t pay. So the owner was forced to

---

\(^6\) Colloquial term for hooligan or ruffian

\(^7\) Mugambo is the name of the villain in *Mr. India*, a very popular Bollywood movie from the 1980s. Following the popularity of the movie, Mogambo became a synonym for the most villainous and evil.
hire a Garo person who could stand up to other Garos and prevent them from eating for free. Mogambo and some others are often there at the bus station but they don’t allow buses from the non-tribal belts in Garo Hills to enter the perimeter of the bus station. Even if they do, they charge money. You know the passengers on these buses - they are usually daily laborers, generally Muslims. What Mogambo does is, he goes and asks for Rs. 5 or Rs. 10 from those extremely poor people. He doesn’t even spare these people who live from hand to mouth! There is no limit to what they do. If the laborers don’t have the money or don’t part with the money, they drag them away and make them sit behind the bus stand and make them miss their bus back to their village. This is not uncommon because obviously, not everyone gives in to his demands immediately. Those who oppose suffer that fate. He gives them a slap or two and then makes them sit on the pavement as their buses drive away. Mogambo’s father works in the police force and his mother is a member of a local NGO. And this is what he does! What can we do? No one says anything.

This story highlights several crucial features of violent ethnic assertions in Garo Hills. Most of these routine instances of ethnic assertions typically occur with little or no provocation. There is an implicit rule that denies non-tribals the right to resist or protest. For example, the Nepali (non-tribal) shop owner has to employ a Garo person who can then stand up to Mogambo. Mogambo’s story is also significant because of his social standing. His parents are well known in the local community, which probably contributes to his impunity. For Sanjay and other non-tribal young men, the fact that Mogambo’s exploits continue unabated reflect in part the complicity of the local community including apparently illustrious and upstanding citizens. This narrative also signifies how entrenched the tribal vs. non-tribal divide is in the local community. These distinctions and the conflict emanating from such distinctions have become endemic to social and community life and are no longer questioned. There is no space to register protest or critique.

Naturalization

Also conspicuously absent from the narratives of non-tribal youth is the role of the local administration in mitigating and managing ethnic conflict and everyday violence. Even though non-tribal do not make explicit references to the local administration, their statements of utter helplessness suggest that they do not perceive the local administration as being a supportive presence. A feature common to all the narratives of non-tribal youth is their perceived inability to do anything about the situation. What can you do? No one can do anything. An interview with the Deputy Commissioner of West Garo Hills helped explain the
lack of faith in public institutions. In the vignette below, the Deputy Commissioner\(^8\) reflects on the ongoing antagonism that Garos feel towards non-tribals from his standpoint as the district administrator.

This sense of ‘we are left out’ is very natural. You must be reading in the newspapers that every time some union or the other always protesting, that is there. But I see no harm in that. It is a natural process till the time that saturation will come and they don’t feel this sense of insecurity. That is an integral part of any tribal society. The more the society will progress, the more these demarcations will be diluted. So I think it is a continuous evolution process.

For a local administrator to take this position is highly problematic. He naturalizes the conflict between tribals and non-tribals characterizing it as inevitable. This is an inaccurate assumption, a mirroring of colonial representations of people in Northeast India. The apparently unyielding divide between tribal and non-tribal communities is neither natural nor organic. The divisions are in fact a function of the administrative categories created by the British and which persisted through the postcolonial era. His argument also reflects an archaic notion of tribe. He places tribals on an evolutionary continuum whereby they “evolve” from their insecurity akin to xenophobia to a more secure identity. What he labels as “insecurity” is in fact a complex response to historical and historiographical marginalization, and the internalization of disempowering narratives of tribe that is prevalent in India. His perspective is indicative of his indifference to the claims of the protesting Garo organizations, as well as their impact on different communities living in the Garo Hills. In characterizing the situation in Garo Hills as an evolutionary process, he naturalizes the conflict and violence, thus dismissing any need to address the issues. In doing so he effectively disengages himself from the ethnic divide that is entrenched in the local community. His position offers us an insight into the despair that many non-tribals feel - that there is nothing to be done about everyday violence and no one to take up these issues with.

The local government thus plays a compelling, yet invisible role in maintaining both the ethnic divide and the violence stemming from it. At multiple levels of social and political life in the context of Garo Hills, normalcy has come to be redefined in the face of endemic ethnic violence.

\(^8\) The Office of the Deputy Commissioner is the highest administrative position at the district level. They are bureaucrats appointed through the Indian Administrative Services and are usually posted in the districts for a period of 4 years. In this instance the Deputy Commissioner hails from New Delhi and was assigned to the state of Meghalaya. He is non-tribal.
2.6. Beyond Divisive Ethnic Narratives

In *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner (1990) had pointed out that: “To be in a viable culture is to be bound in a set of connecting stories, connecting even though the stories may not represent a consensus” (p. 96). Even as they talk about their specific experiences, young people draw abundantly from societal narratives. Juxtaposing the narratives of Garo and non-tribal youth helps elucidate multiple aspects of their fraught and complex social realities.

While youth draw upon larger ethnic discourses to interpret events and to understand their immediate social worlds, they are not passive victims of those discourses. Over the course of the interviews and conversations, the Garo youth participants began to move away from a sole preoccupation with the tribal vs. non-tribal divide. Their gaze shifted inwards where they began to critically examine the role of powerful stakeholders amongst Garos and their potential complicity in the problems facing Garo Hills. The youth were critical of the State government and expressed a lack of faith in their elected representatives. The government is perceived as having failed in its duty to ensure a life of dignity for young people, whose frustration lead them to take recourse in insurgency. As one participant explains:

> Because of the government only...because of inequality, youth are getting frustrated. There is dissatisfaction and unrest. They think the only thing to do is to take up arms and go out. This is the main reason terrorism and insurgency is on the rise. Because of unemployment only many terrorist groups are coming out.

In addition to the government, their critique was directed towards three major stakeholders - the Garo Students Union (GSU), the Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC) and the Garo tribal elite. This fairly nuanced critique demonstrates that Garo youth possess the capacity to reflect on local community issues outside of the divisive ethnic discourse. Critically, they are able to do so in a space that is not ethnically polarized (as is the case with most of the spaces they encounter in their everyday life). It is especially striking that their critique engages with very powerful social actors.

*Garo Students Union (GSU)*

The GSU is a powerful actor in the social and political life of Garo Hills. Earlier in the chapter, I discuss how the GSU is a much-feared entity and one of the major proponents of the ethnic divide. My Garo youth participants were highly critical of the GSU’s role in local politics including their complicity in perpetrating violence. They view the GSU as an organization that has been corrupted by power. Robin elucidates:
When the students’ union first came out, it was for a good purpose - meant to safeguard the interests of the Garos. But actually, as years passed and they began to discover the power that they have, they began to take advantage of that…they are power crazy. They just want to exercise their power. They feel that they have more power than anybody else and they use violence as their instrument. They like violence.

Thus the GSU is perceived as an organization that failed to live up to its purported ideals - that of safeguarding the interests of the Garo people. They cited several examples to support their claim. For instance, the Garo youth viewed the failure of GSU to critique and fight corruption as an indication of their misplaced goals. This is illustrated in the excerpt below:

The greatest problem of Garo Hills is corruption. Corruption from top to bottom, from grass-root level to topmost. I also blame the GSU. Because if the GSU had taken initiative to control corruption then they could have controlled the corruption that has been going on in government offices, but they don’t do this; they just target innocent people, mostly non-tribals who are working out here and then they unleash their anger and terror upon them. And they even try to use their power over Garos which sometimes results in gang fights between the GSU and other local groups.

Another reason why the Garo youth participants were highly critical of the GSU had to do with their view of the organization as pawns in the hands of political parties. They argued that the actions of the GSU, rather than being guided by the interests of Garo people, are in fact politically motivated. A third set of criticism levied against the GSU by Garo youth participants was related to the organization structure of GSU, which was perceived as undemocratic. Saleng pointed out that a “big problem” of the organization is that “they are taking all the decisions by themselves” and that “they should consult the students also and try to know their views, opinions.” Patrick chimed in, reiterating that the GSU needs to engage other people in conversations to get a sense of what it is that people desire.

Ordinary Garo youth perceptions of and their relationship to the GSU are significant. The preceding analysis establishes that Garo youth do not completely identify or align themselves with the GSU. This means that although GSU is one of the powerful social actors in Garo Hills, they do not in fact embody the voices of the ordinary Garo youth they claim to advocate for. This finding has important implications for working in these fraught contexts. It is an imperative that we cognize those voices and perspectives that are silenced and oppressed in liberatory attempts that begin to assume a totalitarian character (Vahali, 2009).
Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC)

The Garo youth talked the ANVC as an important player because of the power they wield through their insurgent activities. The youth were unequivocal in their assertion that the ANVC’s claim for an ethnically separate Garoland is simply a smokescreen for their antisocial activities, best exemplified in Robin’s agitated and angry articulation below:

It’s just a pretension! What they really want is money! They are not working in the interests of the Garos. They even extort money from the Garos. If some respected Garo businessman is becoming bigger and bigger, then they extort money from him also. Nobody is safe, not even the Garos themselves. Even the Garos have to face problems. I myself have seen many such cases. They generally eat up the money, not use it for good purposes...If they really wanted Garoland, then they should have tried to educate the people of Garo Hills. They should use the money to educate the students. Why waste their money in a luxurious life? They are just eating and drinking and doing nothing! [Others nod their agreement]

Thus, not only are these young people cynical about the ideology and actions of the ANVC, they also have reservations about the homeland ideal itself. In their assessment, simply the creation of a separate homeland of Garoland will be futile without addressing the core problems facing Garo Hills. They also compared and contrasted the GSU and ANVC. For most part, these organizations are assumed to function independently, although there is a clear hierarchy with the ANVC viewed as significantly more powerful than the GSU. One point of similarity, according to my participants, is that both the organizations run on money extorted from traders and business owners, usually non-tribals. Earlier in this chapter, I drew attention to the predicament of business owners in Garo Hills (non-tribals in particular) who are at the mercy of insurgent groups. This is especially true of small business owners who do not have the financial or social power that people with larger holdings possess. Since the ceasefire was established in 2004, the ANVC has become a more visible presence in town, levying their own taxes. The local administration remains distinctly silent on how the role and actions of the ANVC has evolved since 2004. Their silence pointed to the gap in discourse - the absence of a public discourse on the issue. Yet anyone living in the community “knows” how these things work. Such gaps and silences help maintain the “normal abnormality” in Garo Hills.

The Garo Tribal Elite

The third stakeholder group that emerged as a significant part of the participants’ discourse on the Garo community was the Garo elite. The Garo youths’ attention to socio-
economics is particularly noteworthy in a context where critical analyses along axes of class, gender, and other social locations are subsumed by the ethnic divide. My participants defined the Garo tribal elite as the segment of the Garo population that was the chief beneficiary of protective discrimination measures. These are typically well-educated Garos living in urban areas and fall within a high-income bracket. My Garo youth participants were of the opinion that the Garo elite do not have the community’s interest in mind.

I don’t think the rich people are carrying out their responsibility. They should have the most responsibility towards their own countrymen. If they had thought about the people then they could have started some small-scale industry to help improve the economic conditions of the people. But they don’t think much about them...So I believe if they had used the money spent constructing hotels into constructing some small-scale industries, then it could have benefited the Garo tribe as a whole.

It should be noted that they are talking about the Garo ethnic community, with “countrymen” referring to other Garos. This is yet another instance of the ubiquity of the homeland narrative premised on ethnic identity. Even when young people critique the homeland ideal and the use of arms to achieve it, those very narratives remain entrenched in their talk. Patrick, another participant pointed out that a few of the elite “are doing any compassionate things.” He cited that some people bring children from their extended families or clans in the villages and help them secure an education in the city. He asserted that increasing such practices would also lessen the economic gap. But Sengnang had a cautionary tale to relate:

Yes, I think that some of the rich people are compassionate and they help others. They bring people from the rural areas and help them to study here and provide them with financial help. But then, many of them don’t. They usually think about their own interests. They bring the children from the rural areas under the pretext of making them study. They get them admitted in some kind of school, not the good ones though. But they hardly get time to study because they have to work. Sometimes they work late at night and wake up early in the morning and usually there is no time to study.

Sengnang’s narrative suggests that an awareness of the exploitative of apparently altruistic arrangements. It underscores the exploitation that happens within tribal societies as well; societies that are often characterized as egalitarian. Their discussion echoes the voice of a small segment of people have raised the issue of inequities within tribal societies along lines of gender and class. Yet the hegemony of (exclusionary) ethnic identity politics continues to divert attention away from these issues. This discussion suggests that marginalizing processes

---

are not confined along inter-ethnic lines, but are just as prevalent within the same ethnic community. But these processes of locally embedded marginalization are overlooked in the face of ubiquitous ethnic divisive discourses. This discussion highlights the significance of democratic and moderate spaces that allow young people to reflect critically on community concerns without being drawn into the ubiquitous ethnic divide between tribals and non-tribals. In the absence of an alternative discourse, it is difficult to entirely escape the divisive narratives and the limits imposed by them. Therefore the shift demonstrated by my young participants from the pervasive tribal vs. non-tribal framing to an examination of other obscured patterns of inequities in the local community, is a critical one from an intervention perspective. It will be explored further in Chapter 4.

2.7. Rethinking Violence

In this chapter I argue that an exclusive focus on insurgent violent acts can contribute little to our understanding of the endemic conflict in Northeast India. Instead, I elucidate the routine processes and actions that render violence acceptable and even banal. Grasping these mundane day-to-day processes is essential for an understanding of protracted ethnic violence. Rather than viewing acts of violence as isolated events, this analysis accords due weight to social context within which violence occurs and the implications it has. While the evidential basis for these arguments comes from my ethnographic engagement with ethnic conflict in Garo Hills, the literature suggests that it has wider resonance, particularly in the field of psychological anthropology (e.g., Appadurai, 1998; Das, 1998, 2001, 2005; Gorringe, 2006). The twentieth century has witnessed a transformation in the traditional idea of war. War is no longer confined to high technologies of destruction as is evident from the proliferations of ‘low technologies’ of warfare encouraged and abetted by geopolitical interests in Africa, Middle East and in Asia (Das, 2001). Insurgency (and counterinsurgency) as a form of warfare became increasingly prominent and normatively accepted, and has over time given rise to crisis-based politics (Gumz, 2009). Crisis-based politics focus on situations that are viewed as chaotic, unstable, exceptional, and as a break from normal or routine processes. Crisis-based politics fail to take into account the enmeshed systems of domination and oppression that function as givens in people’s everyday lives. The growing interest in everyday violence stems in part from the recognition that not all acts of violence occur within the bounds of declared war (Cuomo, 1996; Das, 2005; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Thus it has become imperative to study “peacetime” violence in order to understand the scope of violence in people’s lives and to address it. Of particular relevance to my project is the work
on contemporary ethnic violence that looks the role of ethnic labels and categories (e.g., Appadurai, 1998). Typically products of state policies such as partitions and constitutions, the lived experience of such large labels (like Scheduled Tribe in the case of Garo Hills) can be unstable, indeterminate and socially volatile (Appadurai, 1998). It is necessary to understand the epistemic violence inherent in State sponsored identities (like tribal and non-tribal) and the lived experience of these categories. Taking a multidimensional perspective of violence allows us to attend to the fluid, shifting and intersecting locations of marginality so that we do not end up demonizing particular social actors. We move away from notion of ethnic conflict as inevitable or primordial, while also resisting the tendency to represent and romanticize these conflicts as “subaltern resistance” or “justifiable premeditation” (Tambiah, 1996); thus denaturalizing everyday violence.
CHAPTER 3
THE ETHNIC OTHER

What does *exile* symbolize? A dissociated part of the Self? A metaphorical image carrying the truth of our existential splits, human vulnerabilities and helpless beginnings? A symbol that stands for the divide within? A condensed historical metaphor, containing since times immemorial, the overwhelming burden of bearing testimony to the pseudo and artificial division of the world on the basis of the ‘established Self’ and ‘expelled Other’?


The spectacle of insurgent and counterinsurgent violence in Northeast India has become so integral to the region’s characterization as to divert attention away from the varied forms of everyday violence in the region. This includes the violence and the threat of violence that has become a given in the lives of non-tribal youth in Garo Hills. The previous chapter elucidates that the specifics of the context may vary, but what remains constant across situations is the ethnically divisive undertone. In addition to these routine acts of physical harassment and violence, the preoccupation with insurgent violence also obscures multiple forms of violent othering that constitute the subtext of people’s everyday experiences in Garo Hills. The master narrative of ‘the ethnic other’ and the routine acts of othering stemming from it are left largely unexamined. However, as Fredrick Jameson has argued, this master-narrative continues to persist and exert its influence in the form of a “political unconscious” (in Lyotard, 1984, p. xii). This chapter will take up an in-depth analysis of the divisive ethnic discourse that mediates everyday life in Garo Hills. I will examine the socially volatile character and lived experiences underlying State sponsored ethnic categories like ‘tribal’ and ‘non-tribal.’ This interrogation uncovers the social logic governing everyday violence, how this logic filters into public consciousness and is legitimated as a mode of action. Through these elucidations, I argue for the critical need to attend to complex configurations of othering that mediate everyday life in Northeast India.

3.1. Othering

Othering is a mechanism of creating splits between groups into ‘us’ and ‘them’ that leads to a devaluation of ‘them.’ The concept of othering has constituted a key line of inquiry in feminist theory as processes that create distinctions between subjects and objects, (e.g., De Beauvoir, 1984). These processes are rooted in social hierarchies and also play a key role in perpetuating hierarchies. Othering processes are embedded in conditions of social asymmetry
and inequity, typically employed to maintain the subjugation of people or groups in marginal social locations. There are certain established frames of reference that are privileged and used to signify and define the ‘other’ in terms of departures from those frames. As a result, othering can have different material and psychological consequences for different groups. Given how power in implicated in othering processes, it is not surprising that much of the literature treats it as a unidirectional process (e.g., De Beauvoir, 1984; Fine, 1994; Said, 1978). However, Krumer-Nevo (2002) uses the term ‘the arena of othering relations’ to denote othering as a reciprocal process where different groups are engaged in struggles for and about self-definition. Krumer-Nevo’s conceptualization of the ‘arena of othering’ provides a useful analytic to understand ethnic persistence in Northeast India. There are multiple layers to the othering experienced by people in Northeast India. When ‘mainland’ or ‘mainstream’ India is taken as the frame of reference, inhabitants of Northeast India, especially tribes from the region are cast as ‘the other.’ Thus Garos experience othering in relation to ‘mainstream’ or ‘mainland’ India where they are considered the ‘Mongolian other’ (Bora, 2010; Kikon, 2009). Within the Northeastern region itself, ethnic identity assumes a central marker and in any given context the minority ethnic group is othered. In the context of Garo Hills, non-tribal youth feel marginalized and excluded as ethnic minorities. Thus, employing a relational approach to othering allows me to attend to the multiple and complex processes of othering in Garo Hills.

In the context of Garo Hills, physical markers of ethnic identity serve as the primary cleavage. For example, Kavi pointed out - “Other Garos see my face and know that I am a non-tribal.” In a similar vein, Robin had drawn attention to the physical appearance of Garos - “small eyes, flat nose” to illustrate how they can be distinguished from the people of Indic origin. In both of these instances, the young people are cognizant of their distinctive physical appearance that sets them apart as ‘the other.’ Yet physical markers are not always reliable indicators of identity, especially in Northeast India where multiple ethnic communities strive to secure the same physical place as their homeland. Both sets of young people - Garos and non-tribals have a heightened awareness of being ‘the other.’ They are caught up in a context that does not allow for any correspondence across these experiences. These experiences in fact are pitted against each other in a vicious cycle that perpetuates a victim identity to justify continued othering and violence. This is demonstrated by the following juxtaposition of two narratives, one by a Garo youth and the other by a non-Garo, non-tribal youth:

We are not treated as Indians. We are made to feel like outsiders. So we also think in terms of Northeast India versus rest of India or mainland India. It
feels like they don’t understand what is going on here. They only want Northeast to be a part of India on the map and not about anything else. They don’t care about development here. They only want to keep the land under their control...the government of India is not a benevolent government for the people of Northeast.

- Pangsang, Garo youth

It’s basically a mind game. They [the Garos?] are trying to figure out how to oust us from here - how to take everything under their own control. They think this place is called Garo Hills, so it is for the Garos. Nowadays, most of them go out to study. Then they learn how to treat other people. It also works the other way round. They go outside and feel suppressed so they come back and try to figure out how to suppress us. This is never going to end. The antagonism will always remain in their hearts.

- Kavi, Non-tribal youth

These narratives attest to different contexts of marginality. They also allude to master narratives that position each ethnic group as the victim by implicating particular economic and political inequities. Conflict derives from economic and political inequities as well as “subjective, phenomenological, and social fractures” (Crocker et al., 1999). This chapter examines how inequities and social fractures are implicated in endemic ethnic conflict in Garo Hills.

3.2. The Divisive Master Narrative: Tribal vs. Non-Tribal

Both tribal and non-tribal youth (separately) deliberated on the pervasive antagonism between different ethnic groups in Garo Hills. For Garo youth, these deliberations took place during ethnographic (group) interviews. Patrick, Robin, Sengnang, and Saleng - a group of four Garo youth had been very active participants meeting across 7 sessions. This conversation took place during our third meeting and was initiated without any prompts on my part. This is noteworthy because it could not have been easy for the Garo youth to talk to me (a non-tribal with a long history of community involvement in Garo Hills) about the antagonistic attitude of Garos towards ethnic others or “outsiders.” The conversation, which took place at the beginning of our meeting unfolded as follows:

UD: Do you have any thoughts from Tuesday’s discussion? You know, like after going home, did you think about what was discussed? Do you feel there was something that you haven’t said? We can start there today if you want.

[long pause]

Patrick: I would like to share what my friends say. Some friends told that they hate...other people, those who are living in these regions...some, some…but very few. I would like to share their opinion but there are many of my friends
who love other people also, those who are living here - to know about other people, their language, their culture…they love to learn their languages also. Many friends are learning different cultures…of other people who are living here. But some, very few, they hate…

It was evident to me that Patrick was struggling to articulate what one of his friends later referred to as the “problem between non-Garos and Garos” in a manner that acknowledges the problem without portraying a negative image of the Garos as a whole. Recognizing the difficult and volatile nature of what he was trying to say, I refrained from responding immediately. I also noted that he had paused, as if groping for the right words. The long pause was followed by a rapid discussion among the youth carried out in Garo. They were speaking in muted tones and I could not discern what they said. But they must have arrived at a decision because Robin began to speak candidly, in the animated manner that was so typical of him.

Honestly if I tell the truth then, yes, most of the Garo youth do not like non-tribals. They don’t like non-Garos. So, sometimes even if friendship starts between the non-Garos and the Garos, then some of them are very faithful. But if some problem or difficulty crops up then the thought that ‘he is a non-tribal and I am a tribal’ comes in between.

Here Robin is articulating the essential logic underlying much of the conflict and antagonism enacted in everyday life - *I am a tribal and the other’s a non-tribal*. My non-tribal participants also echoed this sentiment when they argued that the daily acts of harassment and repression experienced by them are simply a manifestation of a deeper ethnic divide. For example, Kavi, one of my non-tribal participants argued:

> This isn’t about money. It is actually about finding an opportunity to harass us. They usually ask for an amount that they know you won’t have with you. Then they can beat you up. When they engage in ragging, the main thing on their minds is, ‘He is a non-tribal, I will rag him. He has no right to come and study here’… This is their basic intention. That non-tribals should not get anything, and to achieve that they can do anything.

Sanjay, another non-tribal youth argued that demanding money is just a pretext for creating a confrontational situation. He imbues the behavior of Garo students with a particular intentionality - to marginalize and dominate non-tribals, and to that end they engage in violence. Thus both Garo tribal and non-tribal youth are independently drawing attention to the ubiquity of the ethnic divide that permeates society and mediates social life. This is an illustration of what is most at stake here - ethnic identity. Their everyday experiences and interactions, their ways of being in the world are framed and mediated by these oppositional categories.
3.2.1. The Fear of the Other: Competition for Scarce Resources

I followed up Robin’s candid statement about most Garo youth “not liking” non-Garos living in Garo Hills, inquiring about the rationale underlying this antagonism. He explained:

Most of the Garo people think that the non-Garos are taking away what the Garos should have, like for most jobs, they have to fight with non-Garos. In most of the government offices, the positions which should be occupied by Garos are occupied by the non-Garos. That’s the thing that makes young people think -because of them only we are not getting jobs. Unemployment is on the rise in Garo Hills so it makes the people think. Plus another problem is that they think that the non-tribals are coming in Garo Hills and they are occupying most of the territory. Maybe they feel threatened about it. They feel that one day they will be overrun and ruled over by them and it is this thing that makes them afraid.

This mirrors the understanding that non-tribal youth have of the conflict. Non-tribal youth hypothesized that the Garo community’s antagonism towards them (“outsiders”) is rooted in Garo people’s perceived insecurity about their own futures. The perceived progress of one ethnic community is interpreted as leaving “less” for the other. Kavi reflects on the gradual deterioration of the relationships between Garos and non-tribals, postulating that the shift may have to do with the “development” of non-tribals.

So non-tribals here are developing and their (i.e., the Garos’) problem is when that happens. Their thought is - jobs, admissions, school, college, and university - if they make a name everywhere, what will happen to us? We will become a suppressed class! So how can we dominate them? And political leaders take advantage of this. As my mother says, she doesn’t know how these things started. ‘We used to be friends only,’ she says. And the Garos used to respect the non-tribals. There may have been some problems but overall things were good, very good. So they were incited by politicians by saying - non-tribals are getting better and you need to do something about it and we’ll support you. And now they have totally come to dominate non-tribals. They try to make sure that non-tribals don’t get any opportunity of any kind.

The notion of the “outsider” and their role in depriving “local” Garos of their resources were also important themes in the narratives of incarcerated members of the Achik National Volunteers’ Council. Garo Hills is rich in mineral and forest resources and it is often argued that non-tribals come to Garo Hills to extract and exploit those resources. For example, Patrick, a Garo youth pointed out:

Those non-tribals who are living in Garo Hills, in the tribal regions, they are staying here just to take away the mineral resources.

The outsider is this seen as encroaching upon the land of the Garos and usurping their limited resources. The category of “outsiders” is not a singular one. The most pernicious form of the outsider is the “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh,” who are allegedly involved in felling trees from reserved forests in the border areas, for smuggling cattle during breeding season, and for establishing themselves in Garo Hills using fake documents and by marrying into the Garo community. However, it is not always easy to distinguish among the different categories of outsiders resulting in a generalized resentment directed towards anyone perceived as the ethnic other, even if they are Indian citizens. This resentment translates into discrimination and exclusions embedded in everyday practices.

3.3. Everyday Exclusions: “In their minds we are always separate”

Over the course of the extended conversations with non-tribal youth, the educational context emerged as significant as a site of everyday othering and exclusions rooted in ethnic differences (Garo tribal versus non-tribal.) As non-tribal youth narrated their experiences of navigating college and university life, it became clear that the phenomenon of othering along ethnic lines is a part of their everyday experience. Unlike those involving physical violence, these experiences are not limited to encounters with their Garo peers. Garo faculty and staff and the larger educational system are also implicated in exclusionary practices. Structures of participation and engagement are also constructed in ways that tend to exclude non-tribal students. Through routine experiences in colleges and universities, non-tribal youth are reminded of the fact that they are not Garos and compelled to face the consequences of that fact. In this section I examine three powerful stories narrated by my non-tribal participants. These stories elucidate the symbolic violence inherent in these routine acts of othering while pointing out the pervasiveness of othering discourses.

3.3.1. Story 1: Representing Place

At the university, students are divided into teams or houses and each house has a captain and vice-captain. This year the president of the Post Graduate Students’ Association made it clear that the leaders must be Garo. The reason they gave was very flimsy. The groups are named after the four mountain ranges of Garo Hills - Nokrek, Arabella, Durama and Ranggira. During the inauguration of our cultural week, the captains of each group have to say something about the mountain range after which their group is named. Is it necessary to be a Garo to give that background? That is my question. We have grown up in Garo Hills - we should all know and have a right to know
about the history of this place. And who doesn’t know about Nokrek? It isn’t as if only the Garos know about it. So this way they are only creating divisions amongst us. Till recently we did not feel this divide as much in the university. I don’t know what’s going to happen now. That day I felt really bad. That we can never be at par with them. No matter what they say, in their minds we are always separate.

- Kavi

Kavi’s narrative draws our attention to the larger discourse of ethnic exclusivity that operates in Garo Hills. His narrative also suggests a gradual increase in the extent to which this discourse has come to dominate social life in Garo Hills. His story is about a recent change in the constitution of the student body at the local university that excludes non-tribals from assuming leadership roles. The argument offered was that non-tribals would not be able to talk about local geography and culture in the same way as Garos, both creating and endorsing hierarchies of belonging premised on ethnic origins. This story speaks to larger issues of ethnic identity, belonging, and legitimacy that constitute the core of the ethnic conflict in Garo Hills. Implicit in the rationale offered by Garo students is the idea that one has to be born as a Garo to appreciate and forge a relationship with the natural terrain, history and culture of Garo Hills; in other words, to belong. The parameters of belonging thus established are intransigent, uncompromising and overdetermined by ethnicity. Yet there are young people like Kavi who were born in and live in the Garo Hills, whose sense of belonging and identity are repudiated by these rigid parameters of belonging. It should be noted that there are components of both right and duty in Kavi’s argument. He posits a reciprocal process where people living in Garo Hills should familiarize themselves and own the local ecology.

Kavi’s story speaks to one of the central concerns of my project - the relationship between people and place. His emphatic question resonates with my own struggles to reconcile my profound attachment to Garo Hills with discourses that negate that relationship. Are there alternative pathways to belonging? Does one’s relationship to and memories attached to one’s hometown count for something? Or are we simply fated to be held hostage by the shackles of our birth? Places hold meanings not just for individuals, but also at the level of community (Galliano & Loeffler, 1990). Thus meanings are not inherent in settings but reflections of “what people in cultural group define to be proper and improper relationships among themselves and between themselves and the physical environment” (Galliano & Loeffler, 1990, p.2). Through the regulation Kavi talks about, Garo students are in essence postulating a specific relationship among people and between people and place.
They clearly position themselves as belonging to the Garo Hills as a place, which sets them apart from people who are not born as Garos (the other/outsider). Through these communicative practices, they include or deny participation to other ethnic groups. Simultaneously they assert a natural connection to and ownership of the place, something that is denied to the ethnic other. This is a painful experience for ‘the other’ even if it fails to annul the personal sense of place that othered individuals hold. Yet place is socially constructed so how a person feels about place and belonging is in part socially mediated (Soja, 1989). This story demonstrates the predicament of non-tribal youth caught in the gap between personal and social aspects of belonging.

3.3.2. Story 2: Inescapable Ethnic Categories

Once we were on a class trip and travelling by train. There were a couple of people there who asked us where we are from. They obviously saw us travelling in a group. They were from North India and they started asking us questions about Northeast India, about Garo Hills - about the climate, agricultural products etc. Suddenly our professor said something and the few Garo students burst out laughing. I don’t understand Garo very well so I didn’t know what happened. Later my friend, who speaks Garo told me that when we were talking to those people, our professor had commented, ‘Now they [non-tribals students] will talk because they they’ve met their maharis’. They’ll tell them everything.’ And others laughed. I felt so bad. You can see the kind of thinking. How they view even a harmless conversation in terms of tribals and non-tribals. We are from Garo Hills. Why will we feel closer to those people from North India just because we are not Garos?

- Amit

This story illustrates how an apparently innocuous exchange is interpreted using a divisive frame. The term ‘mahari’ is a Garo word to refer to the clans along which the Garo tribe is organized. In its more colloquial usage, ‘mahari’ is employed as a derogatory term to refer to people who stick together. The incident described above occurred during a class trip. The professor accompanying them mocked Amit’s conversation with some fellow travelers, labeling it as a natural tendency on Amit’s part to align with his “kind,” i.e., other non-tribals. Thus, the professor clubbed the non-tribal students with other non-tribal strangers, distinguishing them from Garos (including herself). Amit and the person on the train he was chatting with belonged to different communities. The only thing they had in common was that they were not tribal. As Amit points out, he has more shared concerns with Garo tribal people from Garo Hills, rather than non-tribals from other parts of India. The professor’s

---

2 The Garo term mahari refers to clans.
comment is also an affront to the sense of home that Amit feels in relation to Garo Hills. His concern reiterates Kavi’s concern in the previous story - *is it a perquisite to be Garo to belong in the Garo Hills?* For Amit, and his non-tribal friends, the fact that a teacher engaged in this practice was especially distressing and disappointing. He later discussed the deleterious consequences of such behavior on the part of “socially responsible members of the society.”

They didn’t even realize that we went there as a group. They didn’t even feel it or realize how much their behavior hurt us. We discussed this but what can we do! It’s a teacher. We can’t tell our teacher anything. If they behave this way on their part, highlight such behavior, younger people learn from them. As kids we did not know the distinction between tribals and non-tribals. It was only while growing up that we began to understand these distinctions - *I am from this community - he is from that community and our thinkings don’t match.* We have become so obsessed with this community and that community that we have forgotten the fact that we are all Indians. There are some people who understand these things, but most people, 90% I would say don’t.

Amit’s account underscores the violence inherent in these entrenched forms of othering. It also hints at the role of socialization practices in engendering and perpetuating the ethnic divide. Amit argues that such distinctions are not hardwired in us; rather we *learn* to make this distinctions based on socialization messages we receive from parents, teachers, and the larger society. He uses his own experience as an illustration of how young people are socialized to think that there are essential, irreconcilable differences along ethnic lines, which tend to foreclose alternative, more inclusive forms of identity.

### 3.3.3. Story 3: Selective Support

This happened at the beginning of my second semester. Our grades from the first semester had just been declared. A bunch of us were sitting in class and chatting and one of our professors came in and started talking to one of the girls. The girl was Garo and so was the professor. The professor reprimanded the girl - told her that they, as in the Garo students have not performed too well, that they haven’t been sincere enough and as a result the non-tribal students have done better. She said that was shameful. I felt really bad. She said it in Garo. Maybe at the time she didn’t know that I understand Garo and speak it fluently. I was so hurt. I just left the room. But she didn’t realize that I understood what she had said. Later she probably realized, I don’t know. So this is the thing, we are all their students and it shouldn’t matter to them who gets better grades. And they are so well-educated, all with PhDs, but they only support Garo students.

- Sanjay

Sanjay’s story bears some resemblance to Amit’s story earlier in that they both involved professors who perpetuated ethnic othering – crucially, a person in a position of
authority over them, taking a stance that clearly situated them as the other. In this instance too, the professor drew an obvious line between Garos and non-tribal students, indubitably favoring Garo students over non-tribals. This is one of the most unambiguous, and seemingly unnecessary acts of forcing an ethnic divide. When a person in a position of authority in any given context advances a divisive position, it helps to normalize what would otherwise be seen as an act of gross discrimination. Discourses about place and belonging are negotiated through divergent place discourses created by people engaged in social interaction (Soja, 1989). The manner in which the Garo professor interacts with other Garo (and non-Garo) students sends a clear message in terms of who belongs. It establishes a hierarchy along ethnic lines within the university context.

All of the above are powerful narratives that help us gauge the extent to which the conflict between tribals and non-tribals is entrenched in everyday interactions. Also embedded in these narratives of othering is the theme of exclusion. Individuals have differential levels of access and abilities to participate in community life. The experiences of being excluded in specific settings like the university are related to the larger divisive discourse that delegitimizes the presence and participation of ethnic groups other than Garos in Garo Hills. Also implied is the absence of dissenting voices that resist such routine othering. Finally, it is crucial to note the meaning of these experiences for non-tribal youth. Each of the narrators conveys feelings of hurt and betrayal at being treated as the other. Violence is inherent in the rigid categories of inclusion and the othering that it results in. Thus, any attempt to alleviate everyday violence in Garo Hills must take into account the underlying ethnic divide and othering.

Attending to these narratives was also personally instructive. I know the identities of the professors that Amit and Sanjay mention in their stories. I have interacted with them in academic as well as social contexts. The discrepancy in the ways in which they treated their non-tribal students versus their demeanor towards me highlighted several issues. It served as a humble reminder of my particular social position and how that shelters me from certain discriminatory experiences. Yet again, I was reminded that there are aspects of my experience that are not typical to being a non-tribal in Garo Hills, which precisely allows me to do the work I do. The relationships that my parents and I have nurtured through our involvement in the local community allow relative privilege. However my affiliation to a university in the United States, and working on Garo Hills as part of my dissertation is also crucial in how I am perceived and treated - a tentative and provisional representative of the
local community in a more ‘global’ context. My relationships in the community, as well my social and educational standing thus shield me from blatant ethnic othering.

3.4. Defining the Ethnic Other

Identities are constructed not only as attachments to particular people and places, but also as disidentifications with others (Hardwick & Mansfield, 2009; Said, 1978). Discursive analysis of individual and group narratives of Garo youth enabled me to discern the different categories of ‘the ethnic other’ from their standpoint. First, there is, what I refer to as the generalized ‘other communities’ of mainland India. The acute geopolitical disconnect between Northeast India and the rest of India or mainland India also results in a psychosocial disconnect where ethnic communities in those regions are perceived as the other. Second, there is the “illegal immigrant” from Bangladesh, who is viewed as the most malevolent form of the ethnic other. Finally, there is the category of the non-tribal ethnic others who live in Garo Hills. In this section, I focus on how Garo youth construct the notion of the two latter categories of the ethnic other and how they position themselves in relation to those communities.

3.4.1. The “Illegal Immigrant” and Border Policing

The issue of illegal immigration came up very early in the course of my conversations with Garo youth. They vehemently argued that the unchecked flow of immigrants from Bangladesh into Garo Hills lies at the root of the problems faced by Garo Hills (e.g., underdevelopment and violence). They also pointed out other ‘illegal’ activities (e.g., cattle and timber smuggling) of undocumented immigrants, which the youth believe are detrimental to the local economy and ecology. The sites of these activities are the border towns and villages along the 275 miles of the border the state of Meghalaya shares with Bangladesh. Patrick, a Garo youth, describes the condition of these borders.

Many trees in the reserved forests are felled. Someone is smuggling those trees in the border areas through the river. Bangladeshis are involved. My friend told me that from here it looks like the mountains have so many trees but if you go closer, then you’ll see that so many trees inside have been felled and the timber taken away. Some kind of exchanges is going on. Maybe arms, maybe money. Some kind of trading.

When I asked them about the role of forest officials on the Indian side of the border, the Garo youth pointed out two reasons for their ineffectuality. First, they believed that forest officials tend to accept bribes from interested parties from Bangladesh in exchange for their silence with respect to smuggling. Second, they acknowledged the possibility that the Department of
Social Forestry may be under-resourced with insufficient people and/or vehicles required for adequate vigilance.

Demographic Shifts and Border Policing

The Garo youth also talked about what they perceived as the shifting demographics of Garo Hills as a consequence of unchecked population flow from across the border. Saleng elaborated:

Actually what is happening is that the demography of the villages are changing…like Mohendraganj is flooded with Bangladeshis now. I don’t think there are any more Garos now. It used to be a Garo village. If you go to Phulbari and ask the people what tribe they are - they will only answer Muslims - not Garo, not Assamese, not Bengali because they don’t want to call themselves Bangladeshis. But we can understand from what they say that if they are Muslims then they are Bangladeshis.

Sengnang added:

They are even able to get Scheduled Tribe status and even the land pattas etc. and they are able to do these things because of corruption in the government.

The Garos tribe is categorized as a minority in the larger Indian context. They are ascribed Scheduled Tribe status, which makes them the recipients of a wide range of protective discrimination. The regime of protective discrimination in Northeast India has fixed the proportion of seats for Scheduled Tribes in the State Legislative Assembly in tribal states including Meghalaya (Baruah, 2003). However, the purpose is defeated when, as my Garo youth participants indicate, non-citizens acquire Scheduled Tribe status. Thus the concern again boils down to the potential depletion of resources. Garo youths’ fear of being encroached upon by the “illegal immigrants” is closely connected to their reflections on border policing and the role of the Indian government in it. Saleng reflected:

I think the government should take initiatives like issuing proper passports. Many passports are fake. Some Border Security Force officials don’t even know how to make out which one is the right passport. Also Bangladesh border is very porous. In some places there are no outposts, and even no fencing in some places. Some areas are just rice fields and you can just cross over. I have some friends in Baghmara who say that they can almost go to Bangladesh and buy some things that are cheaper out there. I think that if government could have brought up more fences and deployed more forces then infiltration could have been prevented or brought down.

The young people here are appropriating the territorial logic of the post-colonial nation state with their emphasis on crystallizing the boundaries, making them more concrete by erecting fences. Despite increased militarization of the border, cross-border interactions are an integral feature of everyday life in the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands; the interactions ranging from
informal trade to cross-border crimes like smuggling and trafficking (Ghosh, 2011). Impelled by their concern that ‘illegal’ immigrants are integrated into the social fabric using false names or getting forged documents, these Garo youth underscore the need for increased policing of the borders; since control over the presence of these ‘outsiders’ once inside is difficult.

“Illegal” versus Legal Ethnic Others

In addition to their involvement in “illegal” activities, these immigrants are also attributed certain traits that add to their perceived malevolence. In the snippet below Robin describes the character of “the illegal immigrant.”

My friends have told me that people, mostly non-tribals they say, Bengalis, I mean Bangladeshis, they cut away timber within one night. They are quick and very clever.

Robin’s statement underscores Garo youths’ tendency to impute the Bangladeshi immigrant with an inclination for deceit and shrewdness, making it difficult to check them. More importantly however, his slip between Bengalis and Bangladeshis disrupts the apparent certitude of these categories. Earlier in this dissertation (Introduction), I have explained the popular and derogatory use of the term ‘Bangal.’ ‘Bangal’ was originally used to signify the “illegal immigrant” from Bangladesh but now is commonly employed as an ethnic slur carrying undertones of criminal and parasitic existence. Robin’s slip hints at the difficulty, at times, of distinguishing between the “illegal” versus “legal” ethnic other. My Garo youth participants had pointed out that Bangladeshis often “mix with other non-tribals and go undetected.” In the absence of clear markers between Bangladeshis and Indian non-tribals, the general non-tribal population becomes the target of antagonism and violence. Sengnang elucidates:

The Bangladeshis *infiltrate* and they pose problems. The tribals think it is the other non-tribals, who are not Bangladeshis. *The troublemakers are actually the Bangladeshis but the people who pay the price are the non-tribals who are actually citizens of India.* The Bangladeshis are very clever.

Historically, the conflation of Indian “outsiders” with “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh has been a contentious issue and a source of ethnic violence in many parts of Northeast India. These present configurations can be traced to the regional unity that existed in the pre-Partition past (Ghosh, 2011; Sikder and Sarkar, 2005). The creation of the separate nation State of Bangladesh in 1971 was based on the delineation of an arbitrary and contentious boundary between people who shared considerable culture and history. The Indo-Bangladesh borderland is yet another illustration that territorial sovereignty is not absolute and
indivisible, repudiating the European myth that political boundaries correspond to differences in culture and language (Leach, 1960; Zou & Kumar, 2011).

### 3.4.2. The Non-Tribal Outsider in Garo Hills

The second set of ethnic others that I discuss here is the non-tribal outsider residing in Garo Hills. This group includes non-tribal Indian citizens who have been living in Garo Hills for generations as well as those who have moved into the region more recently. Among the issues that Garo youth enumerated as posing major problems was the “permanent settlement” of non-tribals in Garo Hills. Robin explicates:

I think that another major problem is the permanent settlement of non-tribals in Garo Hills. Some of them come here in search of jobs. Some just come here in search of a good place to live, to settle here permanently. So they end up occupying most of the places that the Garos should have.

Robin’s commentary on the ‘permanent settlement’ of non-tribals in Garo Hills is part of the larger rhetoric that problematizes the residence of non-tribal Indian citizens from other parts of India in this region. This distinction is part of the Indian constitutional rhetoric as well as the memoranda of ethnic separatist groups in Northeast India. Political scientist Sanjib Baruah has drawn attention to this phenomenon, especially the implications of constitutional provisions that limit the mobility of non-tribal Indian citizens in Northeastern tribal states (Baruah, 2003). The Meghalaya Land Transfer Act which prevents non-tribal Indian citizens from owning land in the state is clearly in violation of the constitutional rights of Indian citizens to move freely within the country. Baruah (2003) also suggests that the failure to interrogate such a “controversial” regulation by political constituencies in the rest of the country attests to the systematic marginalization of the issues of Northeast India. Thus Robin’s opinions are part of the larger discourse resisting demographic shifts in the region, rendering problematic the presence of “other communities” in these regions.

The Garo youth emphasized that the problem lies primarily with the “permanent settlement” of non-tribals in Garo Hills. Robin elucidates:

I believe that those who are not settling permanently, who are doing government jobs…in government jobs people have to travel, they can be posted anywhere and I don’t have any grudge about it. But non-tribals who come into Garo Hills just for business or something - I just don’t think they should be allowed to settle here permanently.

Robin acknowledges the existence of all India government services that inevitably bring non-tribals from other parts of India to the Garo Hills. He argues that it is all right for non-tribals to take up temporary residence in the Garo Hills but not to settle permanently. Like other
Garo youth, Robin is opposed to the flow of non-tribals into Garo Hills for explicit purposes of setting up businesses, which he feels acts against the interests of local Garo populations. His reasoning is as follows:

Usually the non-Garos are much more expert in business so they flourish rapidly and become prosperous. And if once their business has become strong in Garo Hills, then their descendants, their sons and grandchildren become well-settled out here. They become more powerful in the Garo circles and many of the times they also hold the reins of political leader - which is not very good for the indigenous people.

Thus Robin is concerned about the political power that he believes such people eventually wield based on their economic strength. He reasons that problems arise when such people become key actors yet they do not represent the interests of ordinary citizens. There also exists the perception that non-tribals only care about their businesses with no concern about the local community. This was expressed by Saleng as he continued the thread initiated by Robin.

He [Robin] has a point, I think. Some non-tribals think that ‘this is not our land, so I’ll come here, earn some money, for my benefit only.’ I think such concepts are also responsible for what is happening. I think that both [tribal as well as non-tribal] people should be involved in the development.

It plagues Saleng that “some non-tribals” do not treat Garo Hills as their land, but simply as a conduit for their personal advancement. He contends that both tribals as well as non-tribals living in Garo Hills should be responsible for the development of the region. On one hand, there exist structural barriers (e.g., the Land Transfer Act) that prevent non-tribals from acquiring land, literally meaning that Garo Hills cannot be “their land.” Yet as Saleng acknowledges, non-tribals are also stakeholders and ought to be involved in local development. This commentary exemplifies the predicament of people living in Garo Hills. The Garo youths’ solution for this predicament was to cap the percentage of non-tribals that would be allowed to reside in Garo Hills at any point in time. Robin stated - “only a certain percentage of them (non-tribals) should be allowed to stay here.” This statement served as an impetus for a discussion on the optimal percentage of non-tribals who should be “allowed” to live in the Garo Hills. Below is a vignette from that conversation:

Robin: The percentage of non-Garos should be in such a way that it benefits the state. Not in such a way that it makes the Garos suffer because of it.

UD: So, in your opinion, what would be a good percentage? Or how do you think should it be decided?

Robin: Umm…I should say…5 to 10% of non-tribals should be very good and most welcome. Because the Garos also depend on the non-Garos. I believe
that if there are no non-Garos, business in Garo Hills will not be very good because most of the traders and businessmen are all non-Garos. And the Garos are not much good at business. So, if there are no non-Garos, then there will be no business and the state economy will also come down and the people will also have to suffer.

Underlying the young people’s deliberations is an adversarial relationship with the ethnic other. Rather than positing harmonious relationship as a goal, the emphasis is on a functional relationship where the other is tolerated for what they bring to the table (e.g., a keen business acumen that aids the state economy). This vignette also underscores the contradiction that Garo youth are caught up in. On one hand they begrudge those non-tribals who set up successful businesses in the Garo Hills on the ground that they do not care about the region and are only interested in furthering their profits. Yet on the other, these Garo youth are uncertain about the complete expulsion of non-tribal business owners from Garo Hills because they question the business acumen of Garos. In reflecting on its possible deleterious impact on the state economy, these Garo youth are implicitly acknowledging that non-tribals do contribute to the state economy. This vignette also illustrates how the thinking of Garo youth is constrained by the constitutional rhetoric of quotas. Their reflections on an optimal percentage beg several questions: How should this percentage be decided? How will this percentage be maintained? Non-tribals do not constitute a monolithic category so who amongst this group would get to be the 5-10%? What happens to the people who are excluded? These questions are located on a dangerous slippery slope with the potential to open floodgates to repression and violence.

**Negative Self-definitions**

Michal Krumer-Nevo (2002) argues that we need to think of othering as an arena, where individuals and/or groups define themselves as much as they define the other. In casting the ethnic other in fixed, typically negative images, Garo youth implicitly define themselves. In forming these definitions, they draw from available societal narratives of development and protective discrimination. Their view of themselves is considerably influenced by the way in which ‘others’ view them. This is reflected in the multiple references to the need for Garos to “come up” and be “at par with” non-Garos, non-tribals, and/or people from the rest of India. For example, Robin speculates:

Personally I think that there is nothing that the Garos should be afraid of non-Garos. Because the non-Garos cannot take away what belongs to the Garos, if the Garos take care of what is theirs. But if we see the condition in Tura now, frankly speaking, most of the Garo youths do not pass with good grades like
the non-Garos. So there is stiff competition right now everything comes on the basis of merit. So, this is one thing that makes the non-Garos advantageous over the Garos. Therefore I believe that the Garos should also come up so that they can be at par with the other people of India. Mostly the non-tribals like Bengalis, etc.

Robin’s speculation reflects the uncertainty that many Garo youth have about their ability to compete and survive in a system based solely on merit. Most of these references centered on the issue of protective discrimination or ‘reservation’ and the fear that they are not competent enough to vie directly with other communities for resources. Patrick was embarrassed as he explained why he viewed reservation as necessary for the survival of Garos.

It (reservation policy) is very good because actually the Garos [embarrassed laugh] uh...are not much strong. I believe that if there is no reservation for them then we will actually be overrun by other people who are much more better than us in both education and qualification and everything. So if at least there is a reservation policy for us then we can at least depend on it to look for jobs, to acquire admission in good colleges for studies, etc.

Like Robin, he too locates the ‘problem’ within Garos implying that it is a lack or an absence as compared to non-Garos, especially non-tribals. Classification (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, race) is central to the social construction of groups as well as maintaining social order (Bourdieu, 1977). The official language in the Indian Constitution categorizes the Garos as ‘Scheduled Tribes,’ i.e., tribes that are ‘backward’ in relation to other non-tribal communities living in India and which need additional privileges in the form of quotas to be “at par” with other communities. As a consequence of this underlying assumption, tribal communities are systematically stereotyped; something that will be elucidated in the next section. Although classifications like Scheduled Tribes were originally made within a context of affirmative action, they only served to perpetuate and reinforce the cultural chasm between Garos as a tribe and mainstream India. On one hand, there are material privileges that come with the category of ‘Schedules Tribe’ and at the same time, as my participants’ narratives demonstrate, it limits Garo people’s access to cultural capital. This discussion unveils the paradox that is the regime of protective discrimination in Northeast India. The set of constitutional provisions set up in the spirit of affirmative action has become a disempowering rhetoric for the people it purported to benefit; relegating them to a space of apparently inescapable alterity.

3.5. Northeasterners: The Legacy of Alterity

The term ‘Northeast’ is an official administrative category. At the time of Indian independence in 1947, Arunachal Pradesh, the easternmost state of India was known as North
East Frontier Area (NEFA). During the postcolonial period, the term ‘Northeast’ was extended to include the entire landmass separated from ‘mainland’ India by the ‘chicken neck,’ a narrow corridor of about 12 miles. Over the years, *Northeasterner* has become an informal term used by people from the region to distinguish themselves (their ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage) and their unique concerns from the rest of India. It is also employed by people from mainland India as a blanket term to signify tribes from Northeast India. When employed by people from the Northeastern region, *Northeasterner* connotes a sense of solidarity. When used by Indians outside of Northeast India however, the term takes on a disparaging tone by conflating diverse tribes into a homogenous category of tribe. In the following vignette, Pritam, a Garo youth, discusses what it means to be a Garo in relation to the rest of India. He is baffled by the apparent ignorance of people from other parts of India about the Northeast and its geopolitics.

We Garo people lack very much in identity. I don’t think anyone from outside Northeast and sometimes even within Northeast recognize Garos. While we were going to Delhi by train we met someone from Bihar. He was asking about Meghalaya but he knew only about Khasi people. Garos are being silenced. I don’t know why that is happening. See it is a matter of general knowledge that there are 26 states, maybe 27 states. Even in seventh standard we have studied the name of the states. So I don’t know why the Delhi people don’t recognize Meghalaya. I don’t know. But it makes us feel inferior. These are the things we are facing as Garos. While living in Garo Hills, we can live like kings [laughs]. In fact we are living like that only but then once we go outside it feels very awkward, as if we are someone from the slum.

We see how the manner in which others perceive his ethnic self impinges on the way in which Pritam experiences himself - as inferior. In referring to a ‘lack of identity,’ Pritam alludes to a disconnection with his Garo roots as well as the lack of recognition by other communities. His reflections thus highlight the personal as well as transactional and reciprocal character of identity. In a self-deprecatory tone, he points out that the bravado that is typical of Garo youth falls apart when they venture beyond Northeast India. “Once we go outside it feels very awkward, as if we are someone from the slum,” he says. He uses the metaphor of slum to articulate the experience of stigma and marginalization associated with his ethnicity.

Pangsang Rudy, a Garo youth activist also referred to the relative marginality of Garos and Northeast India. He argued that the ignorance and lack of recognition on the part of mainland India is intentional. According to him, it stems from the fact that the government
at the center, whom he also conflates with “mainland India,” is merely concerned about nationalizing Northeast India.

The government and also as we say mainland India - they are not interested in what goes on in Northeast India. Northeast is only a part of the map of India. They are not interested otherwise. I am using the example of mainland India because when we are outside, we are not treated as Indians. We are made to feel like outsiders. So we also think in terms of Northeast India versus rest of India or mainland India. It feels like they don’t understand what is going on here. They only want Northeast to be a part of India on the map and not about anything else. They don’t care about development here. They only want to keep the land under their control…the government of India is not a benevolent government for the people of Northeast.

He thus perceives an adversarial relationship between Northeast India and mainland India.

The long-term presence of the Armed Forces Special Power Act in the region, granting extraordinary powers to the Indian military further alienates the people of the region. He also critically reflected upon the sense of inferiority among Garo youth that underlies their false bravado. Pangsang traced the disconnection experienced by Garo youth to the underrepresentation of Garo history and culture in school curricula. He elaborated:

Most Garo youth don’t understand the history and culture of their own people. I feel like we don’t have an identity. If we don’t know our roots, where we come from, we cannot answer the question, ‘Who am I?’ In order to answer this basic question, we have to learn about our own root. So whether you are Garo, Northeasterner, Indian, global, it shouldn’t matter if you are comfortable about your own roots. If you stop understanding your roots properly, then you will be in a confused state of mind about where to place yourself in a particular context… And professors, they were in a position of authority to do something in the main curriculum, I don’t think they’ve done much in that area. They are writing about it but not trying to put it into the curriculum. That way, only people who are interested in pursuing it as higher studies know about some history. Otherwise the general Garo populace is largely ignorant of their history, as a subject and an important part of their knowledge.

In the course of my ethnographic research, I interviewed Garo historians and educators involved in curriculum construction for elementary and middle schools and academic professionals involved in Garo studies at the local university campus (Northeastern Hill University). These interviews pointed to a systemic neglect of local history and ecology at the school level. Pangsang’s discontent was especially validated by a retired Garo professor. Taken aback by my inquiries about the typical lack of interest in Garo at the school level, she acknowledged the complicity of her generation of Garo scholars in this neglect. She reflected that in her attempts to promote graduate studies in Garo it never occurred to her to do the same for schools. There also exist structural impediments to the integration of local history with more mainstream dominant histories (e.g., nationalist history, world history). It was not
until as recently as 2004 that a history of Northeast India was incorporated in the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)\(^3\) textbooks (Sonwalkar, 2004). Yet this move only reinforced a perception of the region as a monolithic entity pitted against mainstream Aryan or Indic culture. More importantly, it failed to increase young people’s access to local historical narratives. In an interview, Ms. Brucellish Sangma explained the conundrum she faced as the Chair of the Meghalaya Board of School Education\(^4\). She pointed out that while the NCERT emphasized local history and ecology, it also laid down what was required, viz., Indian nationalist history. Struggling to develop a curriculum that did not overburden children, Ms. Sangma argued, local history was compromised since it was the portion of the curriculum over which they had discretionary power.

The limited representation of Northeast India is also a hallmark of the national news media. A study conducted in 2004 (Sonwalkar, 2004) documented the relative absence of Northeast India in the news discourse of the New Delhi-based press, suggesting that the events and issues of the Northeastern region rarely figure in the public agenda. Secessionism in Kashmir, an almost permanent presence in the news scene is contrasted with protracted conflict in Northeast India that is rarely reported, much less with nuance and sensitivity. Part of this bias, Sonwalkar (2004) argues, stems from the sociocultural binary of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ with mainland India serving as the frame of reference that signifies the Northeast, positioning the region and its people as ‘the other.’ As a result, their issues are assumed to be of ‘local’ rather than ‘national’ significance and hence not as ‘newsworthy.’

Tribal communities from Northeast India continue to encounter the ignorance and prejudice of people in other parts of India. I remember an incident that occurred when I was in middle school. I was travelling with my family and one of our fellow passengers on the train inquired about my hometown. On hearing that I was from the Northeast, he exclaimed that I was from the land of “ladhakus,” a colloquial term connoting violent, savage-like traits. The memory of smarting under the comment was a lasting one. Even at that young age, it impressed upon me the disparaging and disempowering gaze with which Northeast India and its people were viewed. In the course of my ethnographic research, Pangsang, a youth activist related a number of experiences that further illustrate the oblivion and prejudice that Garos and other tribes from Northeast India encounter in cities outside the northeastern

---

\(^{3}\) A unit of the Government of India that provides advice and support for the improvement of school education and is involved in accreditation.

\(^{4}\) A unit of the Education Department of the state of Meghalaya responsible for curriculum, instruction, and accreditation with respect to elementary as well as higher education.
region. “*They stare and they call out chinky in the streets,*” said Pangsang, referring to disparaging remarks about their appearance. He continued:

In most of the so-called Chinese restaurants, there are Nepali cooks. Once we had this real estate agent and we went with him to look for a place and the first question he had was ‘Which hotel do you work in?’ He had taken me for a Nepali and assumed that I must be a cook or waiter. We face things like this. No point seeing too much into it. It just shows their ignorance.

Pangsang also described the following interaction which occurred during a job interview that highlights how tribal communities from Northeast India are often perceived in other parts of the country:

At this interview, this person actually had the audacity to ask me, ‘Do the people in your place still live in jungles, still wear animal skins?’ I mean what do you answer to people like that? ... I have seen that many Indians are more ignorant than us from the Northeast. We study geography and we know about other places and don’t ask stupid questions like that. If being an educated person, he asks a question like that, just think…multiply it with a billion people.

This reflects how people still hold on to perceptions of Northeast India as inhabited by people who are ‘backward’ and ‘primitive.’ These perceptions are rooted in colonial legacies as well the developmentalist discourse that has been integral to the governance of Northeast India during the postcolonial period (Baruah, 2003; Hussain, 1998). Once we have a certain established definition of progress (viz., industrialization), its absence is systematically equated with ‘backwardness’\(^5\). These legacies along with the historiographical and cultural marginalization relegate the people of Northeast India to a position of almost unyielding alterity.

### 3.6. Altering Contingencies

Violence is inherent in the processes that marginalize Garo youth and accentuate their experience of being the exotic, ethnic other. It is also present in non-tribal youth’s experiences of everyday exclusions. Enmeshed and intertwined in the complex history of Northeast India exist conflicting claims by different people to the same land. Efforts to trace historical roots of the conflict often tend to emphasize the historical victim in a way that establishes a dichotomy between victim and perpetrator. This chapter underscores the multiple contexts of marginality of diverse constituencies in Northeast India. The categories of victim and perpetrator are not mutually exclusive but entire cultures can sometimes take

---

on the identity of tragic victims and unwittingly use the energy of fear to become the perpetrator. As researching subjects, it is thus ethically imperative that we do not unwittingly become complicit in perpetuating yet another totalizing discourse premised on ethnicity. Ethnic persistence has led to an impoverished public discourse, severely paralyzing the capacities of ordinary citizens to critically engage issues of conflict. Citizenship and belonging in Northeast India should be premised on more inclusive notions of community that map onto the complex geopolitics of the Northeast India, rather than being overdetermined by ethnicity.

Consistent with the arguments of a number of other scholars on Northeast India (Baruah, 2003; Bora, 2010; Sachdeva, 2000), my analysis underscores the limits of traditional discourses of law and human rights to illuminate and address protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India. My participants’ testimonies elucidate the dissonance between official ethnic identity categories and the socio-emotional experiences associated with those identities. They alert us to the crucial role of the relationship between social and physical space i.e., how people constitute their landscapes/homes and how they take themselves to be connected to it (Feld & Basso, 1996). It calls for a re-reading of ethnic conflict as more than demands for greater political autonomy. This re-reading must necessarily foreground the embodied experiences of ordinary citizens living in the region, thus situating subjects’ own constructed meanings at the heart of something previously characterized within national security frames. As long as the Indian State continues to categorize residents of Northeast India into hill tribes, plain tribes, and non-tribals with varying implications of the right to belong, we will continue to grapple with what political scientist Sanjib Baruah refers to as a ‘crisis of citizenship’ (Baruah, 2003). We have to shift away from the hegemony of ethnic identity politics to attend to the intricacies of belonging from the perspectives of the diverse communities residing in Northeast India. A stringent notion of citizenship premised almost exclusively on ethnic identities tends to preclude the legitimacy of descendants of migrants (Baruah, 2003). The rigid perceptions of difference between tribals and non-tribals cannot be comprehended adequately without also rendering visible the Garos’ relations to other groups and to larger socio-political formations. Thus it is crucial to delve into the struggles of the Garo youth as they attempt to advance their own identities and separateness while trying to achieve equality and acceptance in terms that are valued by dominant groups.

We have to examine possibilities that counter, minimize or shift attention away from ethnic othering. On a larger level, this calls for new forms of attachment to home and land, thereby opening possibilities for reworking the boundaries separating Garos and non-tribals,
and ‘self’ and ‘the ethnic other’ in the future. The next chapter details my attempt to explore possibilities that shift attention away from the blinding and divisive glare of conflict that mediates everyday life in the Garo Hills. I explore these possibilities by repositioning disenfranchised youth and providing them with an opportunity to redefine the parameters of their everyday lives outside of the divisive discourse of tribal versus non-tribal conflict. By involving local youth from different ethnic groups in the project, I attempted to create a context of inclusive participation to explore how young people engage and potentially renegotiate their sense of identity and community in such contexts. The next chapter will detail how this youth-led community engagement project subverted established patterns of marginality, social exclusion and segregation in the local community. They will also explicate the tensions that got played out as the young people grappled with notions of community and belonging and the implications for alternative ways of responding to endemic ethnic conflict.
CHAPTER 4
INTERVENTION: ALTERING CONTINGENCIES THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

4.1. Introduction

Freedom is elusive. It is easy to condemn any dream in hindsight. Yet there is something to say for delving into those bumbling moments of passion and empowerment when so much seems possible.

- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing,
Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection, p. 245

The morning of April 8, 2010 was a crucial one. That morning saw a group of ten young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds gathered before an audience of approximately 500 people at the District Auditorium in Tura, Garo Hills. They were there as part of a youth panel that discussed the problems faced by Garo Hills and the hopes and aspirations of ordinary citizens for the region. The diverse audience included local community members, non-governmental organizations, elected representatives, bureaucrats, local government officials, policy experts, retired judges, members of the Armed Forces and academic professionals from local colleges and universities as well as other parts of India. This event was countercultural in that it involved youth from diverse ethnic groups who had come together in a large public setting to talk about the local community. The sweltering heat of the April afternoon barely registered as the group of young people imbibed the overwhelmingly positive response to their panel. They were especially heartened by the response from local community members, who typically fail to ascribe agency and purpose to youth. There was a distinct shift in the way community elders talked about young people following the event. One of them acknowledged - “I never thought our youth is capable of this kind of constructive work. I feel so proud of them.” Another member underscored the uniqueness of the youths’ endeavor as he told them, “Your initiative is a lesson to older folks.” This was a profound validation of the youth group’s efforts to exercise democratic citizenship.

While, that day was special, the trajectory of the group leading up to that day was neither simple nor straightforward. My aim in this chapter is to tell the story of this community engagement project with youth in Garo Hills. This project was part of my attempt to disrupt the ethnically divisive master narrative (tribal versus non-tribal) that frames people’s everyday life in Garo Hills. Ethnic conflict and everyday violence in the Garo Hills has assumed what Martin-Baro (1994) refers to as “normal abnormality” (p.125). In other
words, conflict and violence along ethnic lines have become endemic to the social fabric to the extent that it is no longer questioned. A culture of fear pervades which precludes any social critique or protest being registered by non-tribal youth. The divisive tribal versus non-tribal discourse acts as a collective storyline mediating the everyday experiences of youth in Garo Hills. There is an accentuation of identities where the assertion of one seems to invalidate the other. There also exist competing narratives of marginality. As ethnic minorities in the Garo Hills region, non-tribal youth feel persecuted. Yet Garo youth also experience marginalization in the context of mainland India. It thus became evident that any attempt to intervene in the routinized cycles of conflict had to shift attention away from the blinding and divisive glare of the ethnic conflict. It was also critical to move away from the victim-victimizer binary typically implicated in the maintenance of conflict, while addressing the marginality of both tribal and non-tribal youth. In view of this situation, the youth project was envisaged as a way to break the vicious cycle of ethnic othering and the violence stemming from it.

The idea of organizing and facilitating a community-based project participatory project with youth was inspired by a number of related approaches and empirical literature: social psychological research on the ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport, 195), especially its more recent elaborations (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2000, 2006); identity interventions in contexts of protracted conflict (Hammack, 2006); experimental methods to intervene in youth gang violence (Strocka, 2009); use of participatory action research to engage youth in rethinking community violence (McIntyre, 2000). While the overall empirical research has largely supported the hypothesis that intergroup contact is associated with more positive intergroup attitudes, a number of conditions have to be met for actual changes in behavior - equal status of groups/members, pursuit of common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. Interventions based on intergroup contact often target youth since it is assumed that their identity narratives are not yet fully scripted and hence more amenable to change. In practice, the impact of such interventions are limited by the fact that youth do not often possess sufficient cultural power to effect community-level change; hence the importance of institutional or community support of some sort. The youth project that I describe and discuss in this chapter builds on some central features of the approaches mentioned above. It moves beyond those approaches in its attention to the ‘cooperative’ or ‘superordinate’ task. The task in this case was the community research that the youth carried out collaboratively. The project aimed to engage ethnically diverse young people in a collective research process on local community issues. The idea was to reposition disenfranchised youth as critical
inquirers, providing them with an opportunity to redefine the parameters of their everyday lives outside of the divisive discourse of tribal versus non-tribal conflict.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the challenges of securing youth participation in a culture that is largely non-participatory, which constitute the backdrop against which the youth engagement project was carried out. I then provide an overview of Voices, the youth-led community engagement project - how the project was initiated, the youth participants, and the research process that they engaged in. The next section takes up the vicissitudes of participation as they played out in the context of the youth project - the issues and how they were resolved. The last two sections describe and discuss the shifts that took place, the underlying processes, and their implications for addressing endemic conflict in Garo Hills.

4.2. Challenges of Youth Participation in a Non-Participatory Culture

Concerns about contemporary Garo youth are common in Garo Hills. This concern featured prominently in my interviews with older members of the community. For instance, Mr. I.K. Sangma, a retired educator was baffled by the absence of youth in constructive roles in the community. While he failed to come up with an adequate explanation for the phenomenon, he posited that contemporary youth are driven by a hedonistic impulse (“They are only interested in having a good time”). In the course of my ethnographic work, I noted that although young people are highly visible in social and community life, they are more commonly associated with anti-social activities, protests and disruptions. This particular pattern of youth involvement is interpreted by older community members as sign of disengagement or lack of any real community engagement on the part of youth. While older community members express concern over this apparent lack of engagement, they simultaneously question the extent and/or appropriateness of young people’s civic and political participation. This is exemplified in the excerpt below where Dr. Milton Sangma, an eminent Garo reflects offers a critique of contemporary Garo youth:

They (Garo youth) want to take over the work of the administration, the work of the policemen, they interfere with everything everywhere. Whenever you try to advise them, they will say that the police take bribes and do not take care of things. Whatever the police do, it is none of the youth’s business…I feel that students are students. First and foremost their duty is to study, not to join Garo Students Union, or this student union or that student union, not to make halla\(^1\). That will divert their attention. They should concentrate on their studies and train their minds for the future. Student life is a period of preparation for the future. They need to put their own present aside and prepare for what they will do in the future. But they just want to do it now!

\(^1\) A colloquial term for creating a stir, usually in an undesirable way.
That is why when results (test scores) come, you will see the result of the Garos from the bottom only. So I don’t encourage much involving them in any other activities.

This excerpt is representative of the stance of many older community members with respect to youth participation. The role of youth is circumscribed to that of a student. This role is viewed as disconnected from other aspects of youth lives with “studying” prioritized over any other forms of involvement in civil and political life. These notions are rooted in discourses that view youth participation as inappropriate and youth as lacking the capacity to participate meaningfully. Thus youth are fundamentally viewed as apprentices or incomplete citizens (Matthews, 2001). Community elders also dismissed youths’ claims about their marginalized location in the community. I usually sought their thoughts on how young people experience themselves as marginalized and the disempowering community narratives that they subscribed too. There was a tendency to dismiss these concerns. Sometimes the dismissals were with accompanied by outrage and indignation as is obvious in the following responses:

Where have society marginalized the youth in any field? Nowhere. They have so many facilities. But there is nobody coming forward to take advantage of the things available to them. So the question of marginality of youth does not even arise! (Member, Achik Literary Society)

This remark effectively invalidates young people’s experiences of marginalization. Instead of interrogating these experiences, there is a tendency to attribute the problem to youth themselves. A typical line of reasoning is that youth do not utilize available opportunities and hence should not have any quibbles about being marginalized. This is evident in the following conversation with an elderly community member who unfavorably compares the present generation with that of older generations.

It is my assessment that they are not doing enough for the future. They are not utilizing the time to the best of their abilities, to train themselves for their future. They are getting much more facilities now than when Meghalaya was part of Assam but the products were better then.

It is implied that on an average, the quality of the youth has deteriorated over time; something that spells as dismal future for the community.

They (youth) don’t take things seriously. Many of them don’t have any aim either. They just want to study in the college because their friends are there… For what they study, they don’t know…Students are not serious in their studies. That is my honest assessment. As a result, there is grim prospect about the Garo Hills whether in political or economic field or any field.
The local culture is by and large not responsive to youth voices and youth participation. Yet, as young people themselves acknowledge, opportunities for participation do not always succeed in securing youth participation. This issue came up in the course of the youth project. Following the completion of the project, Tina, one of the participants shared her disappointment at her failure to mobilize more of his colleagues at the university to participate in the community action project.

Some friends agreed to participate, but many of them did not agree. The first thing they said is *what is the profit if I join the seminar?* So I asked, what kind of profit do you need? Do you need money? Do you need fame? But they couldn’t answer what they wanted. I told them - if you are thinking of money, money won’t be provided because it’s not like some charity where people will come and give us money. It is social work - it is always our duty as a citizen, as an individual to contribute to a social cause, to think about how to uplift people who are not privileged like us. But monetary profit - you will not get that. So they directly said they won’t participate. I felt bad and somewhat disappointed at that time.

Her remark points towards the structural mechanisms implicated in the shifting contours of youth participation. Over the years, the Government of India as assumed what it critiqued by many scholars as a ‘policy of appeasement’ towards Northeast India (e.g., Hussain, 2007). The central government disburses extensive funds towards development in the region, often with very low accountability, thus paving the way for gross misappropriation of funds (Baruah, 2003; Hussain, 2005). This percolates to the level of local community where the State and political parties tend to co-opt youth organizations like the Garo Students Union (GSU)\(^2\) so that civic engagement becomes intricately linked to monetary gains. The availability of easy money has taken a severe toll on the intrinsic value of civic engagement. This poses a real challenge to securing youth participation in the local community. This critique was also embedded in Garo youths’ theorization of conflict and violence in Garo Hills (Appendix E).

In the context of Garo Hills, the notion of *participation* is complicated. The context is one where disruptive and confrontational behavior of youth has become the established norm. Local structures systematically exclude youth from any meaningful participation. Given these circumstances, any effort to foster meaningful, constructive, and legitimate youth engagement in Garo Hills entails a struggle against deeply entrenched perceptions and

---

\(^2\) The Garo Students’ Union (GSU) is a powerful student body in the Garo Hills region. It is ethnically exclusive in that its membership is limited to Garos. The GSU is overtly antagonistic towards non-Garo communities perceived as ‘the ethnic others’ and they resort to violence to assert their ethnic identities. The members are particularly feared by non-tribals (the non-dominant ethnic groups).
practices pertaining to youth. Thus, any attempt to secure youth voices and youth engagement must first create an alternative space or a counter space that allows youth to critically reflect on their predicament instead (McIntyre, 2000). In the course of my work with youth in Garo Hills, I observed in them a poignant struggle to articulate a vision of where they are headed as a community, even as they appropriated some of the disempowering discourses about Garos and Garo youth. These articulations occurred in interview and discussion spaces informed by participatory action research approaches. Those interview spaces repositioned young people as critical inquirers, which enabled them to interrogate and denaturalize the conditions of their everyday existence. The community engagement project *Voices* was informed by existing empirical literature (Cahill, 2000; Driskell et al., 2008; McIntyre, 2000) as well as my previous experiences of successfully engaging youth. Most people engaged in community research and action recognize serendipity as an important process variable in initiating projects and enabling partnerships (e.g., Primavera & Brodsky, 2004). What this means is that naturally occurring events, settings, and processes in our communities of interest can sometimes provide critical opportunities to further our intervention agenda. During my fieldwork, this occurred in the form of a three-day workshop organized by a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Garo Hills around which I mobilized youth through a community research project. This project illustrates how we can leverage our positionality to advance a social action agenda.

4.3. *Voices*: A Community Research Project by Youth

4.3.1. Initiating the Project

In February 2010, I learned about a three-day workshop that was being planned for the Garo Hills. The workshop would be organized by Divya Jeevan Foundation\(^3\), an educational not-for-profit, non-governmental organization based in Delhi. The workshop entitled *The Green Hills of our Forefathers: Revisiting the Vision* was proposed as part of an endeavor called Project Resurgent India\(^4\), a “campaign representing the aspirations of the Indian civil society for an Indian renaissance, driven by a unique alliance between the perceptive depth of an expert think tank, and the broad reach, hands on approach of grassroots activism.” The strategy of the workshop according to the organization was to:

“…identify visionary leaders of the Garo Hills, select some presenters who would present their visions, thoughts and actions indicating their relevance to

---

\(^{3}\) [http://divyajeevan.org/](http://divyajeevan.org/)

the current process of modernization...some constitutional experts, scholars in the concerned fields and social activists from the rest of the country will also attend the workshop as observers. They will sit through the whole exercise meant for insiders only to get the insights to enable them to appreciate the problems that torment the people from within and the challenges thrown in from outside and to feed them into the reform agenda”

A number of local community members received invitations to share their thoughts and participate in the workshop. A local coordinating body was formed, constituted largely of retired educators to take care of the logistics at the local level. I was well acquainted with all the members of the local coordinating body by virtue of personal history in the community as well as my ongoing fieldwork. Originally, my involvement in this group was animated by a desire to examine how multiple interests and agendas unfold in the course of the collaboration between the non-profit organization and the local community, and the extent to which local perspectives are privileged. I took an active interest in the proceedings and got entrusted with managing email communication, press releases, and invitations for the local coordinating body. I became aware that the workshop was planned as a large-scale community event that would bring together diverse audiences and recognized the potential of such a space for inclusion and assertion of youth voices. I leveraged ongoing community involvement and the credibility I have established over the years to propose a youth panel as one of the items on the workshop agenda. I proposed to work with students enrolled in the master’s programs at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Tura Campus. It is a very small campus with a handful of programs, viz., Garo, English, Education, Rural Development and Agricultural Planning (RDAP), and Business. I framed the proposed panel as an effort to articulate local youth perspectives. The following excerpt from the proposal illustrates the conceptual foundation of the project:

“Informed by participatory action research and critical pedagogical frameworks, “research” will be used as a vehicle through which a set of young urban adults from Tura will articulate their analyses on the aforementioned theme. Here research is viewed as a process that provides youth with ways in which they become active policy critics and agents engaged in conversation, confrontation and reform in their worlds. It is based on the principle of democratic inquiry and signifies youths’ fundamental right to interrogate the conditions of their everyday lives. Research then is reconceptualized as an opportunity for youth to create and gain strategic knowledge about themselves, their locality, their social, cultural, political heritage and about their own cities. This notion of research affords a great deal of potential and agency to youth. Thus research can be a medium through

---

5 This university setting is comparable to a community college in the US context.
which youth can be drawn in to reconnect with their local communities, and, envision and initiate change.”

This youth panel was conceptualized as the culmination of a short research project. I proposed to recruit a small group of interested students, who would then be guided through a brief, but intensive research process. In the process the youth would critically review the vision of the identified leaders of Garo Hills in light of the current socio-cultural and political milieu. The conceptual and ideological underpinnings of the proposed project, viz. youth participation and voice were relatively clear, but this very participatory and emergent nature of the project made it difficult to describe the exact product or outcome. Trust was paramount during the initial phase. Before the youth project began to take a definite form, support from the local coordinating committee as well as the participating youth was based on good faith. This is consistent with the well-documented role of trust as an essential component of successful and sustainable community partnerships (Goodkind et al., 2008; Miller, 2004).

4.3.2. Participants: The Youth Research Team

The participants in this project were students enrolled in Master’s programs at the local university. There are 5 programs of graduate study at the local campus and all the programs were represented in the group. I deliberately did not set stringent criteria for participation. The sole criterion was one’s interest and investment in local community issues. Membership varied during the first few meetings before it stabilized into a group of ten young people (five men and five women) who saw the project through to its completion. The group included 6 Garo tribal participants, 1 non-Garo tribal participant, 2 non-tribal participants and 1 of mixed ethnicity. It should be noted though that the university campus that exists in Tura in Garo Hills is only a tiny branch of the main university campus located in Shillong in Khasi Hills. Most young people who enroll in the local campus do so because they are unable to attend other universities for a host of reasons like financial constraints, poor grades, and family obligations. All the participants, barring one, were born and brought up in the Garo Hills. That participant was also from Northeast India but hailed from a border village in Assam and had moved to Tura to pursue his higher education. For these ten youth, participation was motivated by two major factors. First, they were drawn to the idea of being involved with issues in their own community. Second, the uniqueness of the project and the personal and professional experiences it promised appealed to them. Both of these reasons attest to their marginal existence in a knowledge society. Despite being enrolled in master’s
programs, the idea of doing research represented a novelty and a privilege, something that was outside of their formal educational experiences.

Table 4.1. The Youth Research Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Garo Tribal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Tribal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Ethnicity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of Recruitment</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of Mouth</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other contexts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.3. The Research Process

For the participating youth, this project was broadly framed as an opportunity for them to talk about what they view as issues of concern within the community, to engage with those issues, investigate them, and then share their understandings with a diverse audience at the workshop organized by Divya Jeevan Foundation. Participation was central to this project. While a major goal was to engage the perspectives of young people in Garo Hills and create a legitimate space for their voices to be taken seriously, an equally important focus was on facilitating participation across ethnic lines since the youth group included both Garo as well as non-tribal members. In practical terms, this meant the creation of a safe space that would enable non-tribal youth to be as involved as their Garo counterparts. As part of this project we worked together to build a community of researchers where the participating youth developed a critical lens to understand their world. They acquired research skills, which enabled them to investigate issues they viewed as pertinent. The development of research proficiency among participants in a PAR process is well documented (Lykes, 2001).

While I did not conduct a systematic investigation of the reasons why certain students dropped out, I discovered some of the reasons by talking to the youth who did participate. There were personal reasons; for example, one student was getting married the day after the seminar. Some students were not really interested but present at the first meeting because they had been asked to by faculty. Once they discovered that participation was voluntary, they dropped out. There were a few other students who attended initial meetings because their peers brought them along but dropped out later. Among this group, a non-tribal youth dropped out because he didn’t believe this setting would be any different from the ones they are used to. A Khasi tribal youth dropped out. He told me that he was from Khasi Hills and was not really looking to be engaged with local issues.

---

6 While I did not conduct a systematic investigation of the reasons why certain students dropped out, I discovered some of the reasons by talking to the youth who did participate. There were personal reasons; for example, one student was getting married the day after the seminar. Some students were not really interested but present at the first meeting because they had been asked to by faculty. Once they discovered that participation was voluntary, they dropped out. There were a few other students who attended initial meetings because their peers brought them along but dropped out later. Among this group, a non-tribal youth dropped out because he didn’t believe this setting would be any different from the ones they are used to. A Khasi tribal youth dropped out. He told me that he was from Khasi Hills and was not really looking to be engaged with local issues.
This is also the premise underlying ‘the right to research’ (Appadurai, 2006), which views research as a capacity that should be democratized as opposed to a specialized skill available only to a privileged few within academic settings. Research thus became a site for ‘counter work’ (Torre et al, 2001).

The research process from the first meeting with youth to the youth panel at the workshop spanned two months (February - April). In the general schema of research, we started with the youth discussing broad community issues, framing research questions based on those issues, gathering and analyzing data, and then strategizing how to represent their concerns most effectively to diverse audiences. As is typical of participatory action research (PAR) processes, this one too was non-linear and iterative. Within this general research schema, the specific issues, questions, methods and sample considerations emerged as a function of the youths’ growing involvement.

The emphasis of the first few meetings was on orienting the youth (researcher) participants to critical thinking. During this time, the participants learned how to position themselves structurally, examining why they matter and what/how they can contribute to their community. They also learned to think ecologically. This stage entailed identification of problem issues, seeing how they are connected, and the recognition the multiple levels of influence. The goal was for the youth to develop an appreciation of macrosocial forces in their lives while recognizing the place of individual agency.

We then narrowed our focus to local issues. Important pedagogical concepts during this phase included problem definition, ecological perspectives, and deconstruction. The participants deliberated on the issues they identified. These discussions were organized around questions such as: what do we know about the issue? What do we need to find out more? Who has access to the information? Through these deliberations, we transitioned into the actual research phase. It began with a literature review, where the young people set out to find existing documentation/information. It was a broad interpretation of “review of literature,” one that was not limited to academic sources. The idea was to take stock of what is “out there,” noting gaps and issues of access. For instance, we reflected critically on the impediments to accessing public records and its implications for youth. Through such discussions, the participating youth developed a critical awareness of the structural processes that constrain knowledge and impede people’s participation in local community affairs. In this process we segued into research objectives where the youth discussed what issues they

7 The specific activities are summarized in Appendix M.
wished to investigate and how. This was also the time that I scaffolded the youth groups’ learning of basic research skills like interviewing, ethics, survey construction and administration. Thus, it entailed a process of translating academic research into non-academic settings, outside of formal educational settings. The final phase was that of dissemination, which involved deliberation on how to document findings and to reach appropriate target audiences, the focus being on strategic knowledge production (Appadurai, 2006; Cahill, 2009).

I was concerned with engaging the young people as fully as possible at every stage of the research process. In practical terms this meant sharing the nuts and bolts of research and participating and sharing opinions in ways that did not silence others. In the course of this community engagement project, our research team engaged in a range of activities. The young people collected printed materials on erstwhile visionary leaders, viz., Sonaram R. Sangma, Mody K. Marak, and Capt. Williamson Sangma and conducted interviews with elderly members of the community, including former Members of District Council, Members of Legislative Assembly, and with families of visionaries, in order to: a) acquire an understanding of the socio-political contexts of the struggle of these visionaries, and b) to examine their contemporary relevance. As they went through the process of interviewing and reflecting on the experience, the youth research team identified a critical absence - the voices of ordinary people of Garo Hills. This emerged during the group discussions that took place following the interviews. During those sessions, we shared field notes and reflected on the salient themes in the interview. They also recognized the relative lack of opportunities or forums for ordinary people to express their concerns.

There is a need for a common voice that can highlight the problems faced by people of all communities present in the area and a medium that bring them together. (John, participant)

Responding to this need, they came up with the idea of conducting a survey to investigate the perspectives of ordinary people of Garo Hills as they navigate their everyday lives. This citizens opinion survey (Refer to Appendix J for survey items) was conducted with three major objectives: to identify issues of concern as perceived by citizens of Tura; to articulate a vision of Garo Hills as aspired by people of Tura; to examine how people think of visionary leaders today. The results of this survey were used to complement the ideas, opinions and testimonies of veteran leaders of Garo Hills. The research team presented these findings in a panel at the seminar (Refer to Appendix K for a graphical representation of survey results). They elucidated how ordinary citizens envision the Garo Hills of their dreams. In addition,
the youth research team also shared their collective vision while offering some potential solutions.

4.4. The Vicissitudes of Participation

4.4.1. Recruitment: Defining Community and Belonging

“Community” is central to a community engagement project but the construct of community is rarely as bounded, homogeneous, or unitary as is typically assumed. Community is a multi-level construct with cultural, psychological, ethnic and geopolitical elements. When the boundaries of communities (psychologically or geopolitically constructed) are uncertain, belonging is complicated and contested, as is the case with Garo Hills. Community then has multiple referents and may be used by different people in discordant ways (Blu, 1996). These tensions pertaining to community played out as a subtext of the recruitment process for the youth project. While discussing the proposed project with the local coordinating body, I had explained that the only criterion for participation was an interest in local community issues. Yet, at the very first meeting with students, I discovered that faculty members at the local university had handpicked two students from each of the departments to participate in the project. The most salient feature of this act was that all the students identified for participation were Garos, exemplifying exclusionary practices along ethnic lines that are normalized within the educational context\(^8\). Even professors default to the assumption that “local community” translates exclusively into the Garo tribal community. The default assumption is that only Garos can participate in a ‘community’ engagement project. I tried to remedy this by explaining to the students the criterion for participation and how it was open to anyone amongst them who felt a stake in local community issues. I urged them to talk to their friends and colleagues to see if anyone (who had not been selected by faculty) were interested in the project. I also drew upon my independent connections (forged as part of my ongoing field work) to encourage participation of non-Garo, non-tribal youth. This effort was critical to obtain participation from different ethnic groups, given the marginalization of non-Garo, non-tribal students in educational settings. Table 5.1 summarizes the youth research team.

On the surface, the recruitment process resembles a typical practice in a hierarchical setting with faculty members using their discretion to decide who gets to participate. This episode however was far more complicated; it speaks to larger issues of divisiveness within the community, which get played out as a subtext of these interactions. This was evident from

---

\(^8\) Previous chapter.
the tensions that this selection process gave rise to (described later). However, the youth were not the only ones struggling with issues of representation, participation and legitimacy. I found myself grappling with those issues although in a slightly different context. I wrestled with the issues in my interactions with the non-profit organization (Divya Jeevan Foundation) that was organizing the support of the local community in my endeavor. In the course of the project, I had several conversations with the Chair of the organization as part of my role in assisting the local coordinating body. During those phone conversations, the way he spoke about the workshop and associated issues positioned me as an outsider (like him). Settings and contexts to a large extent determine how we identify ourselves. In the context of a national organization conducting a workshop in the Garo Hills, my primary identification was that of a community member in Garo Hills and hence constant references to “those people,” “local people,” and “tribals” effectively positioned me as an outsider. They privileged my researcher role while minimizing my longstanding relationships with the local community. By excluding me from the local community despite my deep roots, he was also questioning the legitimacy of my belonging in the Garo Hills. The implicit logic was that my voice does not count as a “local” voice since I am not Garo. Also, his language of othering renders Garo people as objects of inquiry rather than partners in the process of envisioning social change, which is contrary to the purported goals of the organization. His approach is reminiscent of the condescension characteristic of colonial ethnographies that assume a schism between the self and the exotic other, with the latter being the worthy object of investigation. These contestations over community and belonging thus formed the backdrop against which the youth engagement project was carried out.

4.4.2. Negotiating Representation

Non-tribal youth participated in the project but their participation was wrought with anxieties. Arun was one of the non-tribal participants not among those originally selected by faculty members. He was interested in participating after he heard about the youth project from me. He describes the uncertainty stemming from the manner in which students were selected by faculty members to participate in the project.

We did have concerns in the beginning. We discussed this amongst ourselves. It started when our professor selected 2 students for this project and we were not amongst them. She didn’t even ask us if we were interested. I had already heard about this project from you so I knew that it wasn’t supposed to be that way. I have nothing against the students who were selected. They are in no way undeserving but she could have selected more students, it wasn’t necessary to just handpick 2 people. And then there was the question of
whether we were representing the university. *We were not selected by our professor so we were uncomfortable about our position. We felt like we were not representing the university.*

Even when we attended the first meeting, it was awkward. We came to the meeting and everyone else was Garo so we felt uncomfortable. We felt like they’ll be wondering what we’re doing here. We were almost given the impression that only Garos could participate in this seminar because it is about the Garo Hills. Attending meetings is one thing and active participation quite another. We wondered about our ability to actively participate. We felt a little uncomfortable.

Thus, Arun and other non-tribal youth wondered about the legitimacy of their position with regard to representing the university, despite the fact that the project was not tied to the university. The uncertainty about their legitimacy also permeated their participation within the space of the community project. In the excerpt above, Arun describes the discomfort and awkwardness they felt during the first meeting where they encountered other Garo youth selected by faculty members. He felt that as non-tribals, they had no legitimate basis for participation.

The faculty members as well as other Garo students were also responding to the theme of the workshop - *The Green Hills of Our Forefathers: Revisiting the Vision.* Possibly unaware of the implications, the faculty at the local university were interpreting the theme through an ethnic lens. Sujit, another non-tribal participant elaborates on how the theme was interpreted.

When we came for the meeting, the other two students whom the professor had selected were surprised to see us. They asked us what we were doing there. They already had a strong point because they were representing the university. Besides, all of the selected students were Garos. Maybe when they first saw us, *they* wondered why *we* were here. Even the theme added to this…it was about *forefathers,* so maybe they wondered what we would know about *their* forefathers.

Sujit interprets the phrase ‘our forefathers’ in the theme to mean ‘their’ i.e., Garos’ forefathers. Thus we see how a particular framing of community impels these young people to interpret and comprehend what is happening in their immediate environments along ethnic lines. An apparently simple decision to participate turned into a highly convoluted process, especially where non-tribal youth are concerned. This struggle around participation underscores the primacy of ethnicity in people’s notions of community. While the term “local community” often refers to the local Garo community in common usage, its meaning is not fixed. Rather, its connotations shift depending on the context, as we discovered in the course of the youth engagement project.
4.4.3. Ethnic Persistence

Divisive ethnic discourses are pervasive and entrenched and they are influential in framing the life experiences of young people (Rouhana and Bar-Tal, 1998). They inform the ways in which young people interpret events around them. For non-tribal youth, the anxieties surrounding participation did not dissipate once the decision to participate was made. It continued to be a part of their deliberations at almost every stage of the research process. Non-tribal youth in Garo Hills are accustomed to exclusionary practices that position them as ‘the other.’ They wanted to participate, but were concerned about how their participation would be interpreted by Garo participants, and later by the wider audience. They also wondered how much participation and involvement would be appropriate and safe given the fact that they are not Garos.

And then the group divisions happened. Some people would be conducting interviews, others something else. Then also we felt a little hesitation. For example Jay [participant who eventually dropped out] mentioned that he knows one of the State Education Board officials very well. Apparently the person is very well-educated and would probably have a lot of information for us. And yet he did not feel comfortable approaching a Garo person for an interview since he is a non-tribal himself. He might not take it in the right sense. We also wondered what other participants will think - why are these people interviewing a tribal person? So, initially we were hesitant to come to the forefront. We were quite reluctant. We thought, whatever we’ll do, we’ll do in the background. This feeling was there - what if there’s a problem if we’re at the forefront! Maybe not a problem really, but still… (Arun)

This excerpt is representative of the tensions that non-tribal youth struggled with. The ethnic imperative is at the center of the persistent anxiety. As this excerpt demonstrates, non-tribal youth were uncertain about their legitimacy to interview Garo community members, apprehensive that they would not “take it in the right sense.” Despite their decision to participate, these youth were plagued by a sense of overstepping their boundaries as non-tribals (who are considered ‘outsiders’ in Garo Hills). Their trepidation was also tied to the diffuse fear that “some problem will occur.” Even before the project unfolded, they were apprehensive of the possible consequences. The bases of their apprehensions can be traced back to the routine experiences of exclusions and violence that non-tribal youth experience within educational settings. The decision of these non-tribal participants to remain in the background is consistent with the accounts of the non-tribal youth I interviewed. They had explained that one of the ways in which they try to ensure their safety within the college
campus is by remaining as inconspicuous as possible\(^9\). A similar logic operates here as well. The non-tribal participants in the community engagement project were wary of drawing attention to themselves.

As students attending the small university campus, the participants in the project had some degree of familiarity with one other before they became part of the project. Thus they brought with them some preexisting conceptions about each other.

In our group, there were a couple of people who we have known as being extremely communal\(^10\) - very communal. It is with this in mind that we had originally decided to remain in the background. (Bijoy)

So the non-tribal youth were especially concerned about how their Garo peers would respond to their participation. However as the group evolved, the nature of people’s participation as well their relationship to the space altered.

As we worked as a group, things began to change. Those communal feelings were not there, the environment changed. (Sujit)
Gradually, as we progressed from first to second to third to fourth meeting, things changed. A friendship began amongst everyone and things were fine after that. (Arun)

But these shifts were partial and the apprehensions were not altogether dispelled. These apprehensions reemerged while working on the presentations.

But there still remained the question of script. Even when we decided to be a part of the presentation, we were still concerned about which part we would present, what our script would be. There was this instinct that we have to select our script. As non-tribals it was important that we don’t end up presenting a part that might make us appear communal or arouse communal feelings in other people - that is we couldn’t afford to be too critical.

Here ‘script’ refers to the narratives accompanying the presentation slides. The non-tribal participants were reluctant to present a social critique for fear that it would be misinterpreted as their personal opinion. They worried about the possibility of triggering ethnic divisiveness. While they were enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate in this project, these non-tribal participants anticipated that patterns and ethnic dynamics similar to what they encounter in everyday life would play out in this space as well. They relied on existing scripts to interpret events. For example, during one of the practice sessions close to workshop, one of the Garo participants (John) wanted to switch places with Arun. He wanted to present the introductory section that Arun was going to present and had already rehearsed. While the situation was resolved without requiring any changes in the order of presentation, it

\(^9\) Chapter 3
\(^10\) The word communal here connotes ethnic exclusivity. It is used to describe those who endorse antagonism along ethnic lines.
was unnerving for Arun, as he later explained:

In the last moment, the day before the seminar, John wanted my script. When at the last moment, he wanted my part, it was awkward - why did he want *my* part only? I was already nervous and then I kept thinking, why does he want *my* script? But then he wanted Pansy’s script too. Then I realized he wanted to go in the beginning and it didn’t have anything to do with me per se. And after everyone explained that we had all rehearsed our parts, John understood. So that was just one small thing. Overall, the experience was good.

The presentation followed a particular order starting with an introduction to the panel, historical perspectives on Garo Hills, and moved on to the citizen survey - the objectives, method, findings, and concluded with visions and future directions. So if John wanted to present at the beginning, it meant switching not only the order, but also the content of the presentation. When John asked to switch, Arun instinctively attributed it to the fact that he is a non-tribal. Also, John was supposed to present the section on the *problems* in the local community as indicated by the citizens’ opinion survey, something that Arun did not feel safe presenting. It was only when John asked to switch with another Garo participant (Pansy) that Arun was convinced (and relieved) that he was not being targeted because of his ethnicity. Eventually John apologized for his brief petulance and the panel followed the order as originally planned. This incident highlights the tenuous quality of the relationships in the face of the ubiquitous and entrenched divisive ethnic discourses. Crucially though, it highlights the need for experiences that contradict established patterns of ethnic divide and inequities, and the need for spaces to process the meaning of such exchanges.

4.4.4. Social Critique

The struggle around issues of participation was not limited to issues of ethnic identity alone. Irrespective of ethnic affiliation, the youth were concerned about the format of the workshop. The organizers had identified four individuals from Garo Hills as the leaders around whose visions the seminar would revolve. The students were concerned about the social (un)desirability of offering any critique of perspectives of people who had already been placed on a pedestal. Furthermore, one of these four people was still alive and an active politician wielding considerable power in society. The participants were especially apprehensive about evaluating this individual’s politics and vision. Their dilemma is exemplified in the statement below made by John (one of the participants).

*If we say anything good about him, then people will think we are supporting his (political) party. But he will be present at the meeting and if we criticize his policies, then he will get offended.*

Their concerns largely had to do with the potential pitfalls of speaking to those in power. A
significant proportion of the first few sessions were spent talking through these issues and allaying the fears of the participants. We eventually worked out a solution where we decided not to focus on any one leader. Instead, the emphasis would be on the present and on the perspectives of local people, especially youth. Following the successful completion of the project, the youth participants reflected on the challenges of speaking to those in power. Bijoy acknowledged:

In the very beginning, I was a bit scared. Scared in the sense, we are talking about political leaders. So I wondered what we would be speaking about them? Normally when we talk about political leaders, uh…we cannot always be explicit. We have to speak within limits. Can’t really tell anything and everything.

Other participants echoed his sentiments. They were apprehensive about possible backlash from being too vocal with their critique of people in positions of power. In the process of this project however, the youth research team learned a critical lesson - the possibility of speaking to those in power. Trish explicated:

We can always criticize people who are equal in rank to us. But criticizing someone, or talking about someone or commenting about someone who is above us in position is very difficult. And we successfully achieved that.

Research became the vehicle through which these youth could engage in social critique without being overly concerned about the consequences. They were no longer communicating their personal views but those of a number of community members; views that were gathered, analyzed, and presented systematically as part of a research project. These will become more evident in the next sections.

4.5. Everyday Peace: Negotiating Inclusivity through Community Engagement

4.5.1. Critical Shifts: From Individuals to Group

In the beginning I knew Dia, I knew John, I knew Pansy, but we didn’t really know each other. But we got to know each other better and we felt like a group eventually. It didn’t happen much at the very beginning. We used to sit separately. We belonged from different groups and some kind of aloofness was there, I felt. In the beginning I didn’t talk to some of them because I didn’t know them. But after 3 - 4 meetings when we were divided into groups and we started gathering the materials, and then you know, while preparing write-ups, summaries of those materials, like the interviews…before our meeting also we used to discuss what we were going to do that day. Like, what shall our discussion be and then…after that, in the middle, in the middle sessions, the group started becoming really close.

- Arun, participant
The term ‘group’ in the excerpt above has multiple referents. It refers to different ethnic communities, programs of study, small work teams, and finally the youth research team as a collective. While the youth were somewhat acquainted with each other, there was an “aloofness” at the beginning, which was reflected in their seating arrangement. Consistent with Arun’s observation, I had also noted the seating arrangement. During the first few meetings, the seating arrangement reflected the ethnic divide, which trumped pre-established friendships/familiarity. In other words, when there were both Garo and non-Garo students from the same program of study, they chose to sit with youth from their respective ethnic groups (from other programs of study), rather than their ethnically different classmates. With subsequent sessions, I noted that this was less the case. With ongoing engagement, the ethnic divide became progressively less salient. Here I will critically examine some of the processes that facilitated the shift. These processes are anchored in i) observations and ii) interviews with youth to reflect on the project following its conclusion.

**Physical Setting**

The physical setting of the meetings played a major role. The first few meetings were held in a classroom where the massive desks made it difficult to easily alter the seating arrangement in a way that diminished space between people. Soon, we shifted our meetings to a small office that was more centrally located. It belonged to a local non-profit organization and they allowed us the use of that space for the duration of the project. The office was sparsely furnished with a heavy wooden table against one of the walls, a cupboard and a stack of plastic chairs. The change in the venue was consequential. Crucially it was outside of the university setting where much of the young people’s experiences are mediated by the ethnic divide. This new space was perceived as a relatively neutral ground allowing the young people to develop a sense of temporary ownership that was not contingent on their ethnic identity alone. I noted that once people pitched in to arrange the chairs (usually in a circle), they were less likely to group themselves along ethnic lines.

**Friendships**

Friendships were beginning to form across ethnic lines in a way that deemphasized the ethnic divide. In previous chapters I have discussed how friendships among young people are mediated by divisive ethnic discourses. Friendships across ethnic lines are not uncommon but the awareness of ethnic differences persists. What happened here was counterintuitive in that friendships developed across ethnic lines among young people *while* they engaged in social
issues that typically polarize communities. Social psychology research suggests that friendships between ingroups and outgroups can play a crucial role in reducing prejudice. For instance, Pettigrew (1998) found that having an ingroup friend was related to greater acceptance of many categories of minorities. Wright et al. (cited in Pettigrew, 1998) have demonstrated another form of impact where even knowledge of friendship with an outgroup member relates to more positive attitudes towards outgroup. According to the contact hypothesis, there are four conditions necessary for optimal intergroup contact: equal group status in the particular context, common goals, intergroup cooperation and authority support (Allport, 1954). Pettigrew (1998) extended these conditions to include “friendship potential,” that is, the context must provide participants with the opportunity to become friends. Pettigrew (1998) viewed “friendship potential” as an essential and not just a facilitating factor in building intergroup relations. In practical terms, this translates into extensive and repeated contact across diverse social contexts. It means that the contact situation must allow for close interactions that facilitate self-disclosure and other processes that help friendships develop.

In the course of their involvement in the community engagement project, the young people found opportunities to work in small group situations with people they normally would not. The project was relatively undefined at the beginning and the young people worked together extensively, in small groups and as a whole, to give the project a more concrete shape. As a facilitator, I encouraged (and modeled) the sharing of anecdotes and personal stories as a means of highlighting patterns of inequities and injustice in the local community. The process of sharing stories and discerning similar patterns across ethnic lines served to highlight the commonalities across their experiences. Subsequent sessions witnessed increasing camaraderie among the participants. On weekdays, our meetings were usually scheduled for late afternoons at the end of their classes at the university. Initially, the students used to arrive separately in groups of two or three even though they all walked the same stretch. Soon, I noted that they started arriving in bigger groups that transcended the ethnic divide. Oftentimes, they would use that time to talk about the project, as was evident in Sujit’s comment - “before our meeting we used to discuss what we are going to do today.”

I also noted increased social interactions among these young people outside of the project. The seminar was scheduled soon after Easter holidays and the impending deadline made it necessary for us to meet during the Easter break. Pansy, one of the participants found it difficult to make it to the meeting as she was hosting a family dinner. Respecting her family commitments, I had told Pansy it was all right for her to miss that meeting. However
she insisted on attending even though she barely managed to catch us towards the end of our meeting. She brought over a freshly baked chocolate cake still warm from the oven, which she wanted to share with the group. Everyone was touched by her gesture and it inspired a sense of community, which Dia later mentioned during one of our reflection sessions following the youth panel:

And then, there was Pansy’s cake. It brought about an openness. When we were sharing the cake that day at the end of our meeting, everyone was opening up.

Thus, as a group, the youth traversed a significant and difficult distance from our initial meetings ridden with awkwardness and anxiety, to the easy camaraderie and fondness that persisted beyond the project.

**Solidarity**

Another process, closely related to friendship is that of solidarity. The young participants attended the same university, some of them even taking classes together. Their interest and curiosity drew them to the project, but they did not view themselves as a collective at the beginning. Yet an ‘organic solidarity’ (Durkheim, 1960) developed in the process of their involvement in the community action project, that is social bonds developed across differences. Amy, one of the participants describes the process.

In the beginning I thought that each one of us would have to prepare our own materials and present our stuff. It made me nervous. I never thought that all our data would be collected as a group and analyzed together. It was incredible when it finally happened. I think each one of us, as a group worked really hard and without each one of you, this seminar would not have been successful.

The participants recognized the criticality of the group process that engendered the shift in the quality of their participation from individuals to that of a collective. The initial sessions were especially structured to elicit the perspectives of young people, but also to thematically organize, summarize, and reflect back their queries. This not only enabled them to begin to think ecologically, but also to begin to see how interconnected their individual concerns were. During our reflection sessions, the participants pointed to specific group activities that were instrumental in facilitating a sense of belonging to the group and ownership over the project. One such activity involved imagining utopia (Denzin, 2009) from their standpoint as youth followed by generating means of striving towards that utopia. This was a powerful exercise for the participants. Rikseng, one of the participants alludes to the novelty of his experiences in the excerpt below:

It was a new kind of a thing that we were doing - new methods, new systems. I
remember you gave us a task at the beginning - to think and describe what our utopia is. Then I felt that something new was happening here. Not the usual stuff. And you told us to write something good, not just the bad points. At that point of time, I felt something new was happening - something new, something good, something innovative is happening now. And I knew that something would come out if it.

Researcher Identity

While these structured activities provided a context for the participants to interact with one another, aiding their awareness of the group process, the nascent group experience became more pronounced with their increasing involvement in research activities. The youth researchers interviewed several local community members. The most pivotal among these was the interview with Purno A. Sangma, the local representative. He has a long history of political involvement at the level of state (former Chief Minister of Meghalaya) as well as nation (former Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament). This interview took place when the youth were still acclimating to their role as researchers and it helped cement that role. With the exception of two participants who were out of town, all the participants were part of the group that went to interview P.A. Sangma. As a group we generated a set of questions and each participant took up at least one question that they put to their local representative. As the interview progressed, the young people felt increasingly at ease and began to ask additional, follow-up questions that were not part of the original list. If they were excited before the interview, they were euphoric after it was over. The youth group wanted to be photographed with Purno Sangma and he obliged. As we walked out after the interview, everyone started talking simultaneously, expressing their sense of accomplishment and agency at being able to engage directly as young citizens with a Member of the State Legislative Assembly.

As we engaged more deeply in research, the group identities of the youth participants became more salient. They began to experience themselves as a research team. Tina, one of the participants describes:

For me, I always felt that I was gathering data as part of a group. What we do may not be perfect but whatever we do, it is as a group. When it became clear that we were representing our group and not on our own, it felt good. And if I make a mistake, my group members will tell me and I will get a chance to correct myself. It is a learning process and I thought, yeah, this is a safe ground to learn. Even if I make a mistake...I’ll try not to but even if I do, it will still be safe. So that was very comforting. I really feel good that I am surrounded by wonderful people. Sometimes, we get nervous, it’s human…but then people like Arun, Pansy, and others - they are very supportive. They care.

Tina is essentially articulating a sense of solidarity. This growing sense of solidarity
energized the group. New ideas emerged in the group context and the participants began to
volunteer for and assume responsibility for tasks that extended far beyond the meetings.

Thus, there were several major shifts. First, there was a crucial movement from the
initial, awkward interactions with chasms along ethnic lines to the point in time, where the
participants developed friendships and experienced a powerful sense of solidarity with each
other. Second, from largely marginal positions in the local community, these young people
acquired agentive roles where they experienced and viewed themselves as representatives of
ordinary citizens of Garo Hills, rendering their voices audible. Finally, the ethnic divide
became less salient as their youth researcher identities gained more salience. The value of the
collective effort is evidenced by Arun’s testimony:

I have seen other seminars, other academic events. They work in a
conventional manner. In the end everything seems scattered. People seem
disconnected. But here, it is not that. From the very beginning things were
very systematic. We worked in groups, we shared responsibilities, we
collected data, analyzed and things were presented systematically. The success
of the seminar is the proof! People appreciated because it was about common
people but also because everything was presented so systematically.

Arun’s testimony also it attests to the distinctiveness of ‘the right to research’ approach vis-à-
vis the local context. Clearly, he recognizes the value of systematic investigation or research.
The systematic approach not only rendered the project manageable but also afforded their
claims some legitimacy. Thus, democratizing research, i.e., translating academic research
into non-academic settings outside of formal education enabled these young people to create
strategic knowledge about their community. Arun contrasts his experience of participating in
the research project leading up to the youth panel with other academic seminars. In addition
to the collective approach, the intimate connection of the project to people’s lives was also
critical. The research carried out by the youth group drew upon themes from people’s
everyday lives. In that sense too, it represented a departure from academic seminars that are
not always responsive to grassroots reality.

4.5.2. Research as Intervention: Towards More Critical Understandings

By the time the youth panel took place, the youth researchers had already begun to
conceive of themselves as representing the typically neglected voices of ordinary citizens of
Garo Hills. This effect was most conspicuous on the day of the workshop when the youth
research team presented their findings. Dia describes that experience:

All the important people were sitting in front of us and we were presenting our
slides, saying what we wanted to say. We were nervous but one thing that
strikes me is that I was feeling really good. The local people’s opinions - they
have conveyed their message to us and we are conveying it to the governor and to other people sitting there. And at that moment I felt like we can really bring change to the society. Some of the politicians may not have felt good. And sometimes from their facial expression, we could make out that they were not comfortable. But the thing was that it was not just our view, it was the people’s view, the average people’s view. In a sense it was almost being directly conveyed through us. At least their voices were heard. I think that was the best part.

Specifically, for non-tribal youth who are used to being relegated to the position of the outsider in their everyday lives, finding an equal footing was a prerequisite for participation. I drew upon my deep understanding of endemic conflict and multiple contexts of marginality to avoid reinscribing divisive ethnic discourses. The first step was to begin with a broad and inclusive definition of community. This was reflected in the recruitment process where the single criterion of participation was one’s interest and/or investment in the local community, in Garo Hills. This allowed for a wide spectrum of people to legitimately participate in the community engagement project so that ethnic identity was no longer the sole basis for mobilization. At the same time, nothing was ever said or implied to disregard people’s ethnic identities. Ethnic identity is embodied with very real consequences for the young people. Hence disregarding their ethnic identities would deny an important part of their history and everyday experiences.

A Critical Understanding of Community and Conflict

Their researcher identities also became more pronounced, especially as they got involved with the citizens opinion survey - designing and administering the citizens’ opinion survey and analyzing its findings collectively. All of a sudden, these young people who are not used to having a legitimate voice found themselves well positioned to engage people around local community concerns. The young people collected survey responses from people in their neighborhoods, which often led to extensive conversations on perceived problems in the local community. Taking on the role of community researchers with a specific goal (that of presenting the findings before a group of diverse stakeholders) lent credibility to what these young people were trying to do. Thus, the citizens’ survey became a tool for the youth researchers to engage with each other and with people on issues pertaining to the local community. It also provided a means for the youth to engage with endemic ethnic conflict, which otherwise remains a normalized aspect of everyday life, especially in cross ethnic interactions.

The potential of participatory action research (PAR) to create inclusive relationships are documented (e.g., Friedman, Razer & Sykes, 2004). While there are benefits associated with
youth participation across the different stages of research process, particular benefits accrue from the involvement of youth in data analysis; the most important of these being critical consciousness raising (Fear et al., 2006; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Sabo, 2003). A similar phenomenon took place within the youth research team as they analyzed the survey data. The responses to two open-ended items were analyzed: i) problems facing Garo Hills, and ii) respondent’s vision for Garo Hills. The data were collectively analyzed by the group. The group of ten were divided into three sub-groups, each worked with a pile of 23 surveys. In small groups of three or four, they identified key messages (e.g., need for better infrastructure) from the responses. These were messages that the sub-group members perceived as salient and important for the community to hear. They highlighted the text that conveyed the message. In the next step, all the sub-groups brought their key messages to the whole group and we sorted these key messages, grouping them into similar clusters, and then labeling those clusters. The number of responses encompassed by that cluster was used to compute the frequency of each cluster.

The data analysis was achieved through a critical dialogic process, which is associated with the promotion of critical consciousness (Nowell et al., 2006). I encouraged the youth researchers to share their own perspectives, experiences, and anecdotes that relate to the key messages or clusters. Building upon the survey results, these discussions demonstrated that local community problems cut across ethnic lines, thus debunking simplistic narratives that hold ‘the ethnic other’ at the root of all problems. Contrary to popular discourses that view non-tribal communities as usurping the resources meant for Garos, the analysis of the survey data pointed to the presence of larger structural and systemic issues that tend to go unnoticed and unresolved (e.g., lack of proper roads, poor quality of education, environmental degradation). For example, one of the key problems had to do with corruption. As the youth research team talked about corruption, they reflected on its pervasiveness and the damage it was causing to the local community.

The main problem crippling Garo Hills is corruption. It has crept like a cancer in our society. It affects everything - education, infrastructure, even militancy. Things cannot become normal and good unless we fight corruption.

Thus, the youth developed a critical and more nuanced understanding of the problems facing the local community, understandings that transcended the common tribal vs. non-tribal framing.

*Lifting the Shroud of Silence from Endemic Conflict*

The endemic ethnic conflict, the normalization of everyday violence that stems from it,
and the culture of fear that prevails around it are all factors that mediate against public discussion about the conflict. These issues are especially complicated in the context of cross ethnic interactions. These reasons informed my decisions to refrain from raising the issue of conflict in the group setting. However, the survey provided a medium for the youth researchers to approach the topic of conflict on their own terms. There were two major factors that aided this process. First, the survey data offered a relatively safe medium for the youth to engage issues of conflict. The stakes were lessened by the perception that they were talking about many people’s opinions and not just their own. Second, it took place at a later stage of the group process with growing friendships, solidarity, and collective identity as a youth research team.

The youth researchers carried out the labeling of clusters as part of the analysis of the survey data. I noted that any vague reference to or illustration of ethnic conflict and violence were subsumed under the cluster “law and order,” which became a code for the conflict that could not be talked about. The stakes were however altered by the emergence of “peace and harmony” as the most frequent cluster with respect to community members’ vision for Garo Hills (Appendix K). This suggested that although everyday violence and its rippling effects in Garo Hills are largely absent from the public discourse, in no way does it attenuate its implications for people who live there. This finding urged the youth to reflect on what peace and harmony means in the context of Garo Hills and how to strive towards such a vision. Thus, the fact that so many people talked about peace and harmony helped the youth transition into discussions of conflict. The most salient aspect of this shift was that the young people were able to talk about ethnic divisiveness in a mixed ethnic group. As a collective, they critiqued ethnic divisions and endorsed peace, an important element of ordinary citizens’ vision for the Garo Hills.

**Diminishing Salience of Ethnic Identity**

Participation was a fraught process for both Garo as well as non-tribal participants. Both Garo and non-Garo participants were apprehensive about speaking up to power, especially where political leaders were concerned. For non-tribal participants, this was further complicated by their ‘outsider’ status and fear of violence. At the start of the project, cleavages along ethnic lines were pronounced and the term ‘local community’ was interpreted as a referent for Garos. In the course of the project however, there was a distinct shift in the discourse. The young people adopted a more inclusive language of citizenship. Instead of talking about ethnic communities, they began to talk about ‘ordinary citizens’ of
Tura. This was reflected in their interest in conducting what they referred to as a ‘citizens opinion survey’. It was also evident in their reflection on the experience of presenting their findings.

It was not just our view, it was the average citizen’s view… That was the best part. (Arun)

The local people’s opinions - they have conveyed their message to us and we are conveying it to the governor and to other people sitting there. And at that moment I felt like we can really bring change to the society. (Dia)

What happened in the course of the youth engagement project was issue transformation (Lederach, 1995). This involved de-emphasizing the conflict and attenuating the divisive discourses that mediate people’s lives. In going through this project together, young people negotiated notions of community and inclusivity. As they began to mobilize around concerns that transcended ethnic lines, the ethnic divide became less salient.

Figure 4.1 below illustrates this shift from the perspective of Arun, a young non-tribal male participant.

The first quote highlights Arun’s initial apprehensions as a non-tribal participating in a community engagement project. His apprehensions point to the divisive discourses around ethnicity and belonging, which operate in the local community. The second quote suggests a subtle shift. Arun makes up his mind to participate but decides to remain in the background because of his ethnicity; an illustration of how fraught the process of participation is in a context rife with ethnic conflict. The final quote suggests that the ethnic distinctions do not go away entirely but that they become less salient. This is an instance where mutuality is fostered across ethnic lines without being paralyzed by the conflict. A related process is that
of identity transcendence (Hammack, 2006, 2010) where the primacy of ethnic identity is replaced by a more inclusive community identity ("our place - Garo Hills").

The young people’s engagement in this project afforded them an opportunity to disrupt long-standing patterns of ethnic antagonism at the grassroots. On one hand, they engaged with local community concerns, privileging the perspectives of “ordinary citizens” regardless of their ethnicities. They took up issues like corruption, underdevelopment, and education, thus speaking directly to structural factors implicated in the ethnic conflict. On the other hand, the project served as a vehicle for establishing integrative, crosscutting ties across ethnic lines, thus addressing the social-psychological dimensions of ethnic antagonism (Crocker et al., 1999). The way in which the project evolved challenged the notion of intractable conflict. Young people, through the vehicle of civic and community engagement subverted established patterns of marginality, social exclusion and segregation in the local context. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the civic/community focus of this project was paramount. Not any collective or cooperative project would have sufficed. The idea was to promote collective community engagement that cut across ethnic lines. This project in essence, demonstrates that it is possible for a culture of negotiation and accommodation to replace a culture of conflict and violence; thus pointing to the tractability of conflict.

4.6. Heal the World: Adopting a Language of Possibility

“This is not the end, it is a new beginning,” stated Dia emphatically at the end of the community action project. Contrary to the lull that typically follows a rush to the finish line, the young people were in fact deeply energized by their experience of participating in the youth panel. Several of them described it as a ‘dream come true.’ Benita, one of the participants explained:

I learned many things from this project. It was like a dream come true also. I have always wanted to do something for our society but we didn’t get the opportunity to do such work. Through this only it has become possible for us to do such work. For me it was an exciting and interesting experience!

Dia added:

I was not sure if we could share and discuss our opinions. But then I thought, if I really get a chance to get into this group, to go for it, then it might come to something, like where I can bring something fruitful, especially to our region...Personally speaking, I never felt that things would suddenly, you know, change as it did! And we received such good treatment. And afterwards, after the seminar was over, the lunch with the governor...I think it’s a feeling in all of us - like a dream coming true.

Dia’s elucidation of her thought process echoed the experiences of other participants. They
were initially uncertain about the extent to which they could express themselves as young people in a forum, which through its very theme (focusing on erstwhile leaders) established a certain hierarchy. This was also evident in Arun’s reflections:

At the beginning, just like my friends said, I was uncomfortable. What were we going to do? At first when you told us the theme - about our leaders’ vision, I thought we would have to only do research on their visions. But then, I came to understand that we are not only thinking of their visions, but we are also thinking of what is our vision, and that it is about future development also. For example - how can we improve roads and communications? How we can remove corruption? How we can build a bright future? After the seminar I really felt good. Through our awareness, other people also became more aware.

Young people are so accustomed to occupying supporting roles that it took them a while to realize that their own visions and aspirations were as valid and valuable as those of leaders. While this was a crucial part of the experience, there is another common thread running through the narratives of these youth that have important implications for endemic ethnic conflict. The narratives of the youth participants contain clear articulations of the sense of empowerment they experienced, empowerment that stemmed from their positionality - representatives of ordinary citizens. Through the medium of research, young people found a way to begin to exercise democratic citizenship. Through the process of community research, the youth began to combine the language of critique with a language of possibility.

After being a part of this project, discussing and working together for our community, it has become a part of our lives, something to look forward to…the small project was so interesting and successful – imagine what we can do as a group! (Pansy)

This energy was palpable as the youth researchers reflected on the evolution of the project. In the excerpt below, Sujit, flush with excitement described what this participation meant for them as youth.

In our first meeting, we didn’t know what our last meeting would be like, what the seminar day would be. [others chime in ‘yes’] Things just turned opposite.
It started from nothing to [another participant interrupts and says ‘something’]
No, not something, to many things. From nothing to many things.

As we worked together on the presentation, we decided to conclude it by sharing people’s visions and offering some suggestions that the young people had brainstormed. But the youth research team felt it did not adequately convey their sense of purpose and optimism for the future. We began to discuss how this might be conveyed, when one of the participants suggested the song Heal the World, by Michael Jackson. There was unequivocal agreement on the appropriateness of the lyrics for their purpose. The group decided that it would be an
excellent idea to conclude the panel by singing the first three stanzas of the song (Appendix L). Their decision to adopt this unconventional end to convey their hopes and aspirations is also indicative of a utopian impulse. Early on during the project, we went through an exercise of imaging utopia that the young people reported as novel and meaningful. This was their way of articulating a collective utopian vision for the community.

The choice of the song was significant. It embodies hope and endorses peace. It talks about “a better place” for “you and for me and for the entire human race.” These young people thus used the song to convey possibility, but also to convey utopian notions of inclusivity and a sense of place that is not contingent on overly deterministic and stringent parameters of belonging. I had no part in selecting the song but it became increasingly meaningful for me as we rehearsed it. The most poignant moment however occurred on the day of the youth panel when I sang the song with the youth group, standing before an audience of 500, the hall reverberating with our combined voices. At that moment I felt we were collectively conveying a vision for home that was the starting point of my ethnographic journey; a vision expressed most poignantly in the protagonist’s wistfulness around his hometown in Siddhartha Deb’s novel, *The Point of Return*.

I want it to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: THE LONG WAY HOME

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.
- T.S. Eliot

Home comes most powerfully and intensely into being once it is experienced as lost or left behind (Friedman, 2004). The loss of home for me was engendered by the departure from home as well as the uncertainty of return posed by escalation of ethnic separatism and violence. That loss became the impetus for my ethnographic journey engaging with issues of community, identity, and conflict in Garo Hills. My personal struggles with home were also emblematic of the contradictions that mark young people’s relationship to the home that is Garo Hills. This dissertation is an effort to illuminate those complex relationships and to develop more nuanced and discursively complex understanding of endemic ethnic conflict in Northeast India. A critical ethnography, it challenges reductive interpretations of endemic violence and conflict in Garo Hills and explores possibilities of overcoming them. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the key formulations that have emerged in the course of this ethnographic research, the implications, limitations, and future directions. Writing about the loss of home can also open up possibilities for return. Thus, I conclude the chapter by revisiting the theme of home that is the impetus and the muse for my research.

5.1. Key Formulations

This dissertation had two main objectives: first, to understand everyday ethnic violence from the vantage point of youth in Garo Hills; second, to explore possibilities of addressing ethnic conflict and violence that mediates everyday life in Garo Hills. The findings from this ethnographic project can be summarized in terms of four key formulations: i) Ubiquity and normalization of everyday violence, ii) Multiple narratives of othering and exclusion, iii) Citizenship, territoriality and belonging, and iv) Everyday peace.

5.1.1. Ubiquity and Normalization of Everyday Violence

The lives of non-tribal youth, the ‘the ethnic other’ in Garo Hills, are marked by routine acts of bodily harm, harassment, extortion, humiliation. This everyday violence is inextricably intertwined in the social fabric. It constitutes what Martin-Baro (1994) called “normal abnormality” (p.125). In other words, these youth have come to anticipate the multiple forms of violence and marginality that inform and shape their lives. The “normal
abnormality” of violence in Garo Hills results in non-tribal youth like Kavi matter-of-factly stating that being slapped or shoved are “common incidents” that happen to most non-tribal youth. Such incidents are viewed as routine and minor, not worth risking potential retaliation that might follow complaints or resistance. This violence is ubiquitous and pervasive (“It happens everywhere…Everybody feels scorched but there is nothing to be done”), placing considerable constraints on the lives of non-tribal youth - their movement, the way they dress, talk, etc. Their ways of being in the world are mediated by the imperative to evade harassment and physical harm. In scrutinizing the social geographies of violence, the educational context emerged as a major site where Garo youth engage in violence against their non-tribal counterparts. My participants’ accounts enunciate the “everyday” character of the violence where apparently innocuous, often accidental encounters are interpreted as gross infractions by Garo youth. The social and geopolitical realities of these youth compel them to cohabit social spaces, yet the antagonism that Garos feel towards non-tribals or the perceived “outsider” renders unequal the terms of inhabiting space (Ahmed, 2006). Non-tribal youth are constantly plagued by the fear of being “out-of-line.” Non-tribal youth cope with the everyday violence by relying on a well-honed understanding of safety developed as part of growing up in the Garo Hills.

The everyday violence is guided by a divisive ethnic logic where merely being non-tribal can serve as justification for being the target of violence. More than the acts of physical violence, it is the constant threat of violence, described as “a continuous fear that some problem will occur” that creates a repressive environment mediating against any social critique or protest. Moreover, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues, it is not the invisibility of these everyday forms of violence that maintain them, but their taken-for-granted character (1996). This taken-for-granted or normalized knowledge limits individual and/or collective resistance. My ethnographic research indicates an institutionalized social indifference to the everyday violence. It illuminates a set of complex processes that work together to normalize and naturalize everyday violence and the underlying ethnic conflict in Garo Hills. These include: a silence on the part of “socially responsible members” of the local Garo community who possess the social power to disrupt the normalized character of ethnic conflict; high levels of impunity enjoyed by those who perpetrate violence; naturalization of the conflict by authorities as inevitable to the “evolution of tribes.” Thus violent acts are not seen as such; rather they are deemed as integral to if not necessary to the social fabric (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). My ethnographic research uncovers the extent to which violence is enmeshed in the social fabric in communities experiencing protracted ethnic conflict. It demonstrates that in
contexts like Garo Hills, violence is no longer just a manifestation or product of a social context, but also constructive of particular social realities.

My findings suggest that we need to expand our repertoire of ways to conceive of what constitutes violence. The portrayals of violence by contemporary mass media risk the amplification and exaggeration of the global occurrence of extreme ethnic violence (Appadurai, 1998). This has contributed to an apathy or depletion of interest in contexts where violence is no longer an anomaly of the social landscape, but structured in it (Bourgois, 2004). In the context of Northeast India, ethnic violence is typically taken to mean ethnic separatism and insurgent (and counterinsurgent) violence as they unfold in relation to the two powerful actors - insurgent groups and the Indian State. Through my ethnographic findings, I argue that we need to attend to the multidimensionality of violence and refocus on the violence that occurs in normative social spaces (e.g., schools, colleges, streets, and market places) as people navigate their everyday lives.

5.1.2. Multiple Narratives of Othering and Exclusion

Ethnic conflict and violence in Garo Hills are anchored in a logic of ethnic exclusivity. Across multiple narratives, there emerged a divisive master narrative that positions Garo tribals in opposition to non-tribals (the ethnic other). This master narrative (tribal versus non-tribal) acts as a collective story line that powerfully shapes how issues of belonging and exclusion are navigated in the everyday lives of youth in Garo Hills. This divisiveness maps onto physical markers of ethnic identity. For instance Kavi, a non-tribal youth participant pointed out, “Garos see my face and know that I am a non-tribal.” Similarly, Robin, one of my Garo participants had drawn attention to the physical appearance of Garos (“small eyes, flat nose”) that sets them apart from those who are not tribal, viz., people of mainland India. People rely on these physical markers to define self and the other. The body then becomes the primary medium for orienting to difference, and hence the site of violence stemming from those differences.

Embedded in narratives of ethnic othering is also the theme of exclusion. Ethnic groups have differential levels of access and abilities to participate in community life. The non-tribal participants’ experiences of being othered and excluded within educational settings are related to the larger divisive discourse that delegitimizes the presence and participation of ethnic groups other than Garos in Garo Hills. The complicity of college/university authorities, faculty and staff members in perpetuating ethnic divisiveness points to the ways in which ethnic exclusivity has become normalized. The underlying assumption is that of a
purist stance of origin where only individuals who are born as Garos can stake a claim to Garo Hills and participate in social and political life. Ethnic divisiveness and antagonism is also rooted in a deep-seated fear about the depletion of limited resources. Different groups are viewed as vying for the same resources (natural resources, minerals, state funds) and the perceived “outsider” is then characterized as least deserving or undeserving of a share in those resources. This theme characterizes the narratives of Garo youth as well as that of the agenda of separatist groups such as the Achik National Volunteers’ Council.

The analysis of youth narratives as they reflect on their positions in relation to other ethnic communities highlights multiple contexts of marginality, othering, and exclusion. As members of minority ethnic groups in Garo Hills, non-tribal youth feel the glare of ethnic conflict as it remains intertwined in their everyday lives; for instance their inability to participate fully in the local community (“In their minds we are always separate”). These exclusions are achieved through formal (e.g., change in rules and regulations governing participation) as well as informal means (e.g., perpetuation of ethno-social hierarchies by teachers). The numerical majority of the Garos however does not immunize them against experiences of marginality and exclusion. Garo youth feel excluded in relation to mainland India, a complex response to the historiographical and cultural marginalization of Northeast India. Popular discourses of tribe originating in mainland India frame them as culturally and developmentally inferior, contributing to widespread negative stereotypes towards such tribal groups (Bhaumik, 2006). This results in young Garo people like Pangsang’s vehement assertions that “the government of India is not a benevolent government for the people of Northeast.” Pansang went on to argue that Garos and other tribes from Northeast India are not viewed as Indians but treated as “outsiders.” Thus, both tribal and non-tribal youth struggle with experiences of marginality and exclusion. Both are caught up in the hegemony of ethnic identity politics that has them pitted against each other. Divisive identity politics have engendered victim identities amongst members of both groups and in turn justify continued othering and violence along ethnic lines. Therefore, in this ethnography I make have argued that attempts to understand and intervene in protracted conflict in Garo Hills must take into account how the experiences of different groups in conflict are configured. My ethnographic findings rupture the victim-perpetrator binary and challenge us to redefine the parameters of how we think about marginality and violence in contexts of protracted conflict.
As young people in Garo Hills negotiate issues of identity and belonging in their everyday lives, they engage with the fundamental question of who can and should be considered the ideal citizen. Implicit in their deliberations are criteria for judging claims to authenticity of attachment. My participants’ experiences suggest that claims of belonging made by non-tribals on bases of emotional connectedness to Garo Hills tend to be invalidated. Non-tribal youth born and brought up in Garo Hills relate to the place as their home, yet they are relegated to the status of denizens through exclusionary practices by the dominant Garo community as well as Indian Constitutional regulations like the Land Transfer Act that prevent non-tribals from owning land in tribal states. Non-tribal communities living in Northeastern regions like the Garo Hills are labeled as “outsiders” despite being Indian citizens. An extremely stringent criterion of belonging is thus established - that of a purist ethnic origin. This purist stance is also implicated in the sense of alienation that Garo youth experience in relation to the Indian State or mainland India. They question the presence of “outsiders” in Garo Hills but they do not consider themselves as “original inhabitants” of India because of their history of migration from Southeast Asia. These struggles illuminated by my ethnography attest to the limitation of a legal constitutional framework in understanding endemic conflict in Northeast India. Within such a framework, the notion of citizenship becomes a fixed and universalist category - a given. Yet, citizenship is neither natural nor universal but created by histories of inclusion, exclusion and struggle (Kabeer, 2005; Lister, 2003). Moreover, one’s sense of belonging cannot be captured by narrow, legal categories; rather, as my participants’ narratives demonstrate, they are relational constructions.

Geographically, Northeast India is located at the periphery of the nation state. It is also peripheral to the national imagination. This is reflected in the problematic of citizenship in the region. My dissertation highlights the violence, both physical and symbolic, inflicted by state-sponsored ethnic labels that categorize the diverse people of Northeast India into those who are tribal versus those who are not. The logic underlying ethnic conflict and violence thus remain inextricably enmeshed in the language of the Indian Constitution. The origins of these categorizations can be traced to colonial historiographies that viewed tribes from Northeast India as ethnic subjects characterized by an inability to assimilate to “mainstream India” (Baruah, 2003). The sense of alienation expressed by my Garo youth participants is rooted in fundamental assumptions about Indian nationalism that constitutes them as
“incomplete national subjects” (Bora, 2010). Thus neither Garo tribal communities nor non-tribal communities can forge an inalienable relationship with the place of their belonging. Ethnographically detailing the tribulations associated with belonging, I argue that there is a critical need for alternative, more inclusive notions of citizenship and forms of belonging to address the roots of protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India. Crucially, these deliberations must be aligned against and informed by the testimonies of ordinary citizens as they navigate their day-to-day lives.

5.1.4. Everyday Peace

As much as this project is about interrogating everyday violence in the Garo Hills, it is also about exploring resistance, possibility and change. Uncovering the master narratives or meta-narratives implicated in ethnic conflict and everyday violence allows us to comprehend how conflict becomes intractable. However, individuals are not passive ‘victims’ of these meta-narratives. Rather, as my participants’ narratives suggest, they possess the ability to develop counter-narratives. Voices, the community action project with youth was undertaken as an attempt to facilitate the emergence of a collective, counter-narrative as an antidote for the divisive ethnic narratives that mediate social life in Garo Hills. Through the use of participatory action research (Cahill, 2007) and the democratization of research (Appadurai, 2006), an inclusive space was created, which positioned youth as agents of inquiry and as experts about their own lives. The collaborative-community-based research project was meant to provide the participating youth with an opportunity to engage critically with pressing local issues. My findings suggest that over the course of the project, the participating youth developed a strong researcher identity that took precedence over alliances based on ethnic identities. Research here served three major functions. First, it served as a legitimate and safe vehicle for young people from diverse ethnic groups to engage in local community issues. Second, the data gathered in the process helped to debunk the simplistic narratives implicated in the maintenance of conflict. For example, they became more cognizant of the fact that most day-to-day problems faced by ordinary citizens in Garo Hills cut across ethnic lines. This challenged the popular discourse that makes ‘the ethnic other’ the repository of all local problems. Finally, engaging in data analysis offered the youth an oblique and indirect way to approach the very fraught issue of ethnic conflict, divisiveness and violence, thus lifting the shroud of silence that surrounds those issues. All of these processes took place in a mixed ethnic group with active involvement of both Garo and non-tribal youth members. This collaborative community-based project with youth thus
underscored the need for settings and processes that engender integrative ties across ethnic groups. Such processes address the conflict by restructuring social and political fabric while fostering trust and mutuality (Gawerc, 2006; Ryan, 2007).

Protracted conflict damages the social fabric and weakens public institutions that are necessary for peaceful coexistence. Collaborative projects like the one carried out with youth in Garo Hills have a crucial role to play. Such projects begin to address those critical societal gaps by providing young people with opportunities to develop a social critique and to take deliberate action to enhance community well being. The notion of ‘everyday peace’ is rooted in these integrative community development processes. Through my dissertation, I argue that the violence that is ubiquitous, diffuse, pervasive and deeply entrenched in everyday practices necessitates a notion of ‘everyday peace.’ Everyday peace is conceptualized as ongoing processes aimed towards building local community capacities. These processes have an implicit restorative value in that they begin to restructure the social fabric of society while addressing the need for relationship change through fostering mutuality, trust, and equality (Ryan, 2007). By attending to both systemic and relationship change, these processes could potentially rework the apparently inflexible ethnic boundaries at the root of endemic conflict.

While violence continues to interest multiple academic fields (e.g., psychology, anthropology, political science), this interest has not been accompanied by a corresponding investment in peacebuilding, especially at the level of local community. Most of the literature on peacebuilding is centered on diplomacy and dialogue between principal State and non-State actors. With an increasing recognition of the limitations of macro-level dialogue, there has been a resurgent interest in peace-building efforts that give ascendance to efforts at the level of ordinary citizens (Racioppi & O’Sullivan See, 2007). While the specific contexts may differ, most instances of protracted ethnic conflict are based on non-negotiable human needs such as identity, recognition, economic security, and political participation (Azar, 1990). To that extent my ethnographic research could have implications for understanding and addressing issues of voice, representation, and participation that often lie at the center of conflict.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

This dissertation project was an ambitious one in terms of the range of topics and fields it proposed to address. However, as the fieldwork, analysis, and writing unfolded, I recognized the need to make choices in terms of the emphases that the different areas could receive in the dissertation. As a result, there are areas that the dissertation just touches or appears to
sidestep. While they constitute some of the limitations of the dissertation, those decision points also became occasions to ask more questions and to shape the future directions of this work. In this section I discuss some of those key issues and their implications for future research.

**Gender**

This dissertation offers a window into how the gendered body is entangled with ethnic identity politics in Northeast India. However it does not provide an in depth analysis of the same. Apart from the youth project, which saw a balanced participation of male and female youth (both numbers and quality of participation), the other ethnographic interviews with youth were characterized by a preponderance of male youth. As I have explained earlier\(^1\), this stems in part from the local cultural context and from the relatively higher stakes perceived by male youth. It is possible that concerted efforts to seek out and scrutinize the experiences of women can illuminate other facets of endemic conflict as well as potential sites of resistance. I intend to explore these possibilities in my future work.

In the course of the dissertation research, I noted the overarching discourse of masculinity and heteronormativity that characterizes separatist violence in Northeast India and the Indian military response to it. For example, the Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC) uses the analogy of marriage in their memorandum for a separate state - “When a marriage does not work out, eventually the only way out is divorce.” This gendered subtext is particularly compelling given that Garo society is one of the few matrilineal societies in India. Many young Garo men conflate matriliney with matriarchy and appropriate the strong developmentalist discourse around the neglect of the girl child in India to explain what they perceive as marginalization of boys in a “matriarchal” society (Appendix B). This neglect, they posit, renders young Garo men more susceptible to the proselytizing efforts of armed insurgent groups. Yet the study of matriliney in Northeast India suggests that women’s comparative advantage on the domestic plane within such societies is often offset by their exclusion from the political domain (Nongbri, 2000). These observations underscore the need for a complex understanding of gendered subjectivities located within the wider sociopolitical and cultural context of Northeast India and Garo Hills. Clearly, gendered subjectivities cannot be captured by male and female categories alone (Lugo, 2000). Thus one of the directions I anticipate for this work is to critically engage gendered experiences and absences and how they are implicated in perpetuating and/or resisting ethnic conflict,

\(^1\) Chapter 1
while locating these interrogations within larger discourses of democracy, citizenship, and global military. This line of inquiry will contribute to recent interrogations of how democratic struggles, gender, and maternal politics intersect in the context of ethnic conflict in Northeast India (Bora, 2010; Das, 2008).

Border

Given its extensive international boundaries, the entire Northeastern region is viewed as a borderland and hence the object of security-driven policies of the Indian State. The region is treated as a buffer zone and a space of exception, as evidenced by ongoing militarization (Kikon, 2010). My research demonstrates how State discourses of border, border policing, and the “illegal immigrant” are implicated in Garo youths’ definitions of ‘the ethnic other.’ However, this work does not deeply engage the contradictions. For example, Garo youth contest the sovereignty of the Indian State with the same equanimity that they endorse the Indian State’s border policing to exclude “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh. While the region is typically viewed as the borderland separating South Asia from East and South East Asia, Northeast India is better understood as a geopolitical and cultural continuum between these regional divisions (Baruah, 2002). I encountered young Garo people speculating on their community histories prior to their migration to what is currently Garo Hills. In their retelling, they emphasized their stronger cultural affinities to Tibet and Mongolia as opposed to ‘mainstream’ India that has a largely Indic origin, qualifying this disclosure with assertions of Indian nationalist identities. Thus, there is a need for future work that interrogates these struggles and to examine the fissures in the narrative of the postcolonial sovereign state as it emerges in the lives of Garo youth. Northeast India with its peculiar historical and geopolitical contingencies challenges assumptions of relatively unitary and durable historical boundaries. Instead of treating the predicament that these regions constitute a geopolitical and cultural border between South Asia and South East Asia as an aberration, there is a need to examine how these regions of exception reframe notions of contemporary borders, citizenship and community formation.

Politics of Development

My dissertation touches upon the developmentalist discourse that permeates the politics of Northeast India. It is present in my analysis of the geopolitical context of Northeast India. The British colonial order found it difficult to administer many regions in Northeast India because of the inaccessibility of those regions. Those hard to access regions
came to be declared as “backward tracts.” This characterization was carried forward into postcolonial governance so that the Northeastern region is still framed by a dichotomy of backwardness versus modernity (McDuie-Ra, 2009). My ethnographic research suggests that the people within the region also employ this binary framing in their everyday discourse. A number of other issues related to development however go more or less untouched in the dissertation. First, there have been a number of failed and/or unsustainable developmental projects over the years resulting in large-scale internal displacement within the region (Fernandes & Barbora, 2008). Thus, there is a need to attend to internal displacement and to examine its possible interplays with ethnic conflict. Second, the prevalence of developmental discourses in Northeast India has attracted investments from global and national institutions of finance and development, leading to a proliferation of the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector in the region. Despite foreign investments and NGOization, most Northeastern states have deteriorated steadily on a number of developmental indices over the past decade. Thus, it is imperative that we explore the iatrogenic effects of the burgeoning development sector in Northeast India. Finally, the discourse of underdevelopment and uneven development occupies a central role in sustaining violence with key actors theorizing and circulating an overly simplistic relationship between peace and development. Thus another direction that future ethnographic investigations could take is to disentangle the role of developmentalist discourses in sustaining protracted ethnic conflict. These interrogations could potentially illuminate the linkages between national and global economic and political processes to the more intimate forms of everyday experience.

A Note on Generalizability and Validity

As an ethnography, this study was not guided primarily by the objective to ‘generalize.’ Nevertheless, by offering ways of rethinking the meaning of marginality and belonging as they are implicated in endemic ethnic conflict, this work could crucially inform and address the issues that underlie the reproduction of ethnic conflict. My focus here could be viewed as intensely (and unapologetically) ‘local’ in that it takes up the concerns of what would be considered a relatively small group of people in a particular part of the world (the latter applies to much of social science research). However the ‘local’ or micropolitical within a specific context exist in complex interplays with macrosocial forces. As Tsing (2005) argues: “To study a particular instance offers a window into the universal. The local enfolds into the

---

global and the universal; our devotions must simultaneously know the local and its transcendence” (p. 97).

With regard to the validity of my findings, it should be noted that the analyses were influenced by my interest in the experiences and concerns of youth as they navigate ethnic conflict in their everyday lives. Thus, some other voices (e.g., some key stakeholders) that appear in the text were not engaged as fully as youth voices, which were central to the research agenda. However, I have tried not to neglect them altogether and used them to create juxtapositions or counterpoints that elucidate relevant themes. Throughout this dissertation research, I have had to continually deliberate over issues of representation. I try to highlight multiple perspectives and the predicament of both Garo and non-tribal youth. But it is non-tribal youth who face much of the brunt of the routine forms of ethnic violence in Garo Hills. Also, as a non-tribal, I am privy to information and experiences that sometimes allow me to offer more nuanced analysis of the experiences of non-tribal youth. Thus, there are segments in the dissertation where my voice clearly emerges as a non-tribal.

Finally, I evaluate my work based on Guba and Lincoln’s (2005) criterion - how secure would I feel about using my findings to inform or construct social policy and legislation (p. 205). I did use the emerging findings of this ethnographic research to inform the youth project and it is my intention to continue to use my findings to advocate for a rethinking and reframing of protracted conflict in Northeast India outside of the hegemony of ethnic identity politics. Thus, this research is valid to the extent that in this and future iterations, it will facilitate social action directly and also indirectly by contributing to the cross disciplinary literature on social change (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

5.3. The Long Way Home

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are “my people”? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space? ... I am convinced that this question - how one understands and defines home - is a profoundly political one.

- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2001, p. 487.

Feminist scholar Kamala Visweswaran argues that ‘the question “where are you from?” is never an innocent one, yet not all subjects have equal difficulty answering’ (1994, p.115). It is a question that plagues people who have suffered a rupture from home, whether the rupture “is forced or voluntary, physical and/or emotional. This question poses an existential conundrum for the immigrant, refugee, exile, diasporic, and displaced, all of whom have
experienced the loss of home in some form. As this ethnography illustrates, the question - ‘where are you from?’ opens the door to sites of conflict and contestation for the diverse groups of people in Northeast India. It is weighed down by discordant ethnic labels, which complicate issues of legitimacy and belonging. This research, which began as an attempt to make sense of the loss of home, impelled me to grapple with all of the aforementioned issues. The fieldwork propelled me into a hyphenated space where I was continually slotted into this category or that. As I grappled with these experiences of disconnection, I became increasingly cognizant of how the angst accompanying those experiences was somewhat mitigated by ‘hybridity,’ a space that I sometimes embraced. But my ability to occupy that hybrid space was also rooted partially in my class privilege, which sheltered me from some of the violent identity challenges that my participants encountered in their lives. In the course of this (ongoing) journey, I recognized that there is no ‘authentic’ position from which to speak and represent oneself.

The journey back home was fraught, especially during the initial period when I was trying to embrace the reality of my hometown as it diverged from the nostalgic version I had conjured after I moved away. During the first couple of months that I was home for fieldwork, I experienced an extreme estrangement and alienation. I confronted an altered version of the hometown of my childhood as I listened to the stories of my participants - their fraught experiences of belonging and the larger social context of apathy that was beginning to emerge. In the process, I began to lose the stronghold and the security afforded by the sanitized and fictionalized memories of the past. I found myself shifting loyalties across multiple ‘home’ locales. In examining my position vis-à-vis the local community, I confronted yet again, the fact that I could only always be a partial ‘native’ or insider. I was deeply saddened by this shift in the nature of my relationship with home, not knowing that this was not going to last either. Meditating on the relationship between home, identity, and travels, Madan Sarup has commented - “Identity is changed by the journey” (1994, p.98).

The next transformation came about in the form of the community-based project with youth. I was part of this project that I helped initiate, but it soon transfigured into something that far exceeded any of our individual involvement and imaginations. Experiencing the collective commitment of the youth research team and their capacity to transcend ethnic divisions as they articulated an empowering vision for the local community radically shifted the way I experienced my hometown. Like the youth participants, I too experienced the project as evolving from “nothing to many things.” In the process I forged a new, perhaps more mature and enduring relationship with home; my resolve to continue my engagement with ethnic
conflict was strengthened without paralyzing my ability to embrace fully the social relations and possibilities that I have always valued about my hometown. Home thus became “that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference” (hooks, 1990).
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Research Site

The site of this research is the Garo Hills region located in the Northeastern part of India. Northeast India is joined to the rest of India by a narrow strip of land (approx. 12 miles).

Map 1: Map of Northeast India

The population of Garo Hills was recorded as 869,952 according to the 2001 census with a literacy rate of 63.31 percent. It spans an area of 8,167 square kilometers.

---

1 http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/northeast/sevensisters.htm#
APPENDIX B
Glossary of Common Terms

Northeast India: It refers to the easternmost region of India (South Asia) and consists of seven states. The term Northeast India signifies more than just geographical coordinates. It was an administrative category coined by the British colonial order that has persisted into postcolonial governance. This region (outlined in red in the Map 1, Appendix A) is connected to the rest of India by a narrow strip of land, approximately 12 miles in width. Almost 98 percent of this region’s boundaries constitute international boundaries (with Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar); thus making it a strategic location from the perspective of national security.

Mainland India/Mainstream India: The Northeastern region of India, despite being a part of the Indian State is positioned as a binary opposite to the rest of India, typically referred to as mainland or mainstream India. The tenuous geographic link of the Northeast to the rest of India is associated with political, cultural, and psychological divides, which accentuate the binary.

Tribe/Tribal: The term ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ has persisted from the colonial era to describe the pre-colonial communities of the hills and plains in Northeast India. Critics of the term argue that it is a colonial construction that attempts to bring over 400 heterogeneous communities into one broad classification that distinguished them from ‘castes’. However the term ‘tribal’ is a constitutional category and is also part of the identity of the communities themselves. Most of the tribal/ethnic groups in Northeast India trace their linguistic heritage to the Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman subfamilies of the larger Indo-Chinese linguistic group. The dominant tribe in the site of my research, i.e., Garo Hills region, is the Garo tribe.

Non-Tribal: The term ‘non-tribal’ is an identity category used solely in the context of Northeast India. It is a signification of people of Indic origin, so as the term literally implies - people who are not ‘tribal’. Tribals constitute ethnic minorities in the context of the larger Indian State but within the Northeastern region, they are the dominant group so that non-tribals are the ethnic minorities in Northeast India. Like the category of ‘tribe’, non-tribal too encompasses diverse ethnic communities ranging from migrants from other parts of India, both old and recent, as well as immigrants from neighboring countries, particularly Nepal and Bangladesh.
Scheduled Tribe: During the framing of the Indian Constitution, an elaborate system of protective discrimination (in the form of quotas) was set up to safeguard the interests of certain tribal ethnic communities facing social, economic, and educational disadvantage rooted in “primitive agricultural practices, lack of infrastructure facilities and geographical isolation”\(^3\). Those tribes were designated as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ and include the Garo tribe as well.

\(^3\) http://ncst.nic.in
# APPENDIX C

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANVC</td>
<td>Achik National Volunteers’ Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALMA</td>
<td>Achik Liberation Matgrik Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNLA</td>
<td>Garo National Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSU</td>
<td>Garo Students’ Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFSPA</td>
<td>Armed Forces Special Power Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DONER</td>
<td>Development of Northeastern Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NREGS</td>
<td>National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCERT</td>
<td>National Center for Educational Research and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBOSE</td>
<td>Meghalaya Board of School Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**APPENDIX D**

**Timeline of Armed Conflict in Garo Hills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>India achieves independence from British colonial rule. Some ethnic groups in Northeast India (e.g., the Nagas) begin to petition for secession from the Indian Union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Armed Forces Special Power Act instituted by Government of India in response to armed insurgency in Northeast India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Sino-Indian war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Bangladesh war and formation of the State of Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Creation of the state of Meghalaya carved out from the larger state of Assam in Northeast India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Formation of the separatist group Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (ALMA) demanding a redrawing of internal political boundaries to establish ‘Greater Garoland’, a homeland for the Garo tribe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Dissolution of ALMA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Formation of Achik National Volunteers’ Council (ANVC), another armed insurgent group with the same demands as ALMA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>The ANVC sign a tripartite agreement with the Government of Meghalaya and the Government of India. This resulted in a ceasefire, which still holds while they continue negotiations of demands with the Indian State.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The ANVC revise their demands from a separate state to that of an autonomous tribal council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2012</td>
<td>Formation of Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), an armed insurgent group resuscitating the demand for the separate state of ‘Greater Garoland’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2012</td>
<td>Escalation of violence perpetrated by GNLA (towards ethnic communities other than Garos).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Youth people that I interacted with over the course of my fieldwork were cognizant of the pervasive violence that exists in their community. Individually and in groups, they identified violence as a central concern that shapes their lives. They were significantly more willing than other stakeholders to acknowledge the place of violence in the lives of youth. By participating in a setting that positioned them as ‘experts’ and their understanding of their contexts as valid knowledge, the youth explicated various dimensions of violence and its interconnections with individual, family, and social structural factors. Repudiating local community perceptions of youth as disengaged, these youth engaged in a collective process of theorizing developing a complex, multi-layered theory of why violence is such an intimate and pervasive part of the lives of young Garo men. They were especially concerned about Garo youth who “take up arms” and engage in violence as part of the insurgent movements. Table A.2 below represents this multi-layered theory.
APPENDIX F

Flyer for Securing Garo Youth Participation

Garo Youth Focus Groups
- Do you feel concerned about your community?
- Do you care about increasing communal violence in Tura?
- Do you find it difficult to get your voices heard as a youth group?
  - Have you ever felt marginalized?
  - Have you ever wondered about your Garo identity?

If your answer to any of the above is ‘Yes’ you might want to participate in a study exploring the perspectives of Garo youth around communal violence in the North-Eastern region of India. You can be a part of Focus Groups Discussions where 8-10 people will meet once a week for 60-90 minutes (5-6 sessions) to discuss the above issues.

Requirements:
• Member of Garo Students’ Association.
• Age 18 years and above

Contact:
Uritapa Dutta
udutta2@uiuc.edu
+91 94361 13235
+91 3651 222390

[Insert name and contact of Garo Students’ Association member who will be co-opted in the study]
APPENDIX G

Group Discussion Protocol for Youth
(After specific issues/topics are identified)

Today, we will be talking about your opinions, ideas and experiences around the issue of [insert specific issue e.g. marginalization, ingroup – outgroup dichotomy, Garo history and present day violence, etc]. I would like everyone to participate, and to mention specific examples and experiences whenever they come to mind. Please do not feel compelled to respond with answers that you think I may want, or that is politically correct. Feel free to disagree about anything. These are the following questions I will be asking about; feel free to look at them during the focus group if you would find that helpful.

- What are the first things that come to your mind when you think about [issue]?
- Who all do you think have stakes in this issue? What is your stake in it?
- In what ways do you relate to this issue from different positions? As a –
  - Garo youth
  - Student
  - Member of a minority community/ tribal
  - Male/female?
- Do you see [the issue] as problematic?
  - If so, how do you think people in power have responded to it?
  - What has been the responses of people affected by [the issue] in one way or the other?
  - How or where do you see yourself in the scheme of things?
- Do you see a connection between [the issue] and increasing violence in this region? If so, how?
- How have the current debates over the reservation policy impacted on this issue?
- Do you see [the issue] as being a problem of the entire Garo community?
  - Why/ why not?
- How has your opinion and experiences around this issue changed over time?
- Is there anything you want to add about any of these topics?

Inquiring about Differing Points of View

- Does anyone see it differently?
- Are there any other points of view?

Potential Probes to Unclear Responses

- “Can you tell me more?”
- “Would you explain further?”
- “Would you give me an example of what you mean?”
- “Is there anything else?”
- “Please describe what you mean.”
APPENDIX H
Questions and Prompts for Youth Interviews

Introductory statement:
I really appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview. I am interested in trying to understand how Garo youth relate to the increasing problem of communal violence and other related issues in the North-Eastern region of India. The explicit goal of this project is to unpack how the experience of marginalization is related to the perpetration of communal violence. I hope to take what we learn from these interviews to work on possible interventions for communal violence.

There are many issues that we could focus on regarding communal violence, but I would like to focus on the experience of marginalization, bases for categorization of ingroup and outgroup, Garo history and relationship to the mainland India. Your inputs to focus group discussions were particularly interesting and I’d like to hear about your own understanding and opinion of the issue. There is no right or wrong answers; I am just interested in your opinions, perspectives and experiences around these issues.

[The initial questions will by guided by the participant’s responses at the focus group discussion. Therefore the interview will begin with an open-ended initial question, followed by probes used as needed depending on what is shared initially, to prompt further elaboration.]

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

Initial Open-Ended Questions

• How do you feel about [insert issue]?
• How do you feel about the way it was handled in the group?
• Do you experience any change in the way you think about [insert issue] following the group discussion?
• You mentioned that [insert comment]. This was an interesting perspective on [insert issue]. Could you tell me more about this?

Other Possible Prompts

• Does [insert issue] affect the manner in which you relate to other communities?
• In what ways does [insert issue] impact your daily life?
• Does the issue have a special significance in light of your being a Garo? Why/why not?
• What images and messages have you received from the media regarding [insert issue]?
• How does [insert issue] play a role in your relationship to the rest of India and your experience or lack of experience of an Indian?
• When you talk about “other people” [insert any other term that may have been used to refer to outgroups], what are the images and feelings that that come to your mind? Are there any experiences around this that you would like to share?
• What so you think are the current challenges around [insert issue]?
• What do you think needs to be done to address it?
• Do you see yourself, a Garo youth as part of the process of any process of change?
• What are the obstacles to implementing such plans?
• What do you think will the issue look like in a few years’ time?
• How do you think of communal violence in the North-Eastern region of India vis-à-vis other forms of inert-group violence in the rest of India and other parts of the world?

Potential Probes to Unclear Responses

• “Can you tell me more?”
• “Would you explain further?”
• “Would you give me an example of what you mean?”
• “Is there anything else?”
• “Please describe what you mean.”
APPENDIX I

Questions and Prompts for Stakeholder Interviews

Introductory statement:
We really appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview. We are interested in trying to understand how Garo youth relate to the increasing problem of communal violence and other related issues in the Northeastern region of India. The explicit goal of this project is to unpack how the experience of marginalization is related to the perpetration of communal violence. I hope to take what we learn from these interviews to work on possible interventions for communal violence.

There are many issues that we could focus on regarding communal violence, but I would like to focus on the experience of marginalization, bases for categorization of us versus them, Garo history and relationship to the “mainland India”. There are no right or wrong answers; I am just interested in your opinions, perspectives and experiences around these issues.

Questions

I. Local Community Engagement:
• How did you come to be interested in local community issues?
• Can you tell me a little about your work and experience in this community?
• Does your work entail interactions with local youth? If so, could you please tell me more about these experiences?

II. Perceptions of Local Problems:
• What, in your opinion are some of the problems facing the local community?
• How are local youth implicated in these problems?
• Based on the duration that you have been involved in local community issues, do you perceive any change in the problems faced? How would you characterize the changes, if any?
• How would you characterize your role in the process?

III. Community Violence:
• How do you feel about the issue of community violence?
• How do you feel about the way it is handled (or not handled) in the local community?
• In what ways do you think it impacts daily life?
• What are the current challenges with respect to community violence?
• What are some of the things that could be done to address the violence?

IV. Response to Youth Perspectives:
• In my ongoing focus groups and interviews with youth, they have shared some interesting perspectives and their take on local community issues. I would like you to respond to some of these themes. This could include your immediate reactions to the themes, your opinions, any resonance or disagreement with youth perspectives and so on. [The specific themes will be abstracted from focus groups and interviews with youth, and presented in a de-identified manner.]

V. Concluding Questions: Is there anything else that you want to say about Garo history/culture and its impact?
• Is there anything relevant or significant that we have not touched upon?
• Would you like to elaborate on or discuss anything specific from what we have already discussed?

Potential Probes to Unclear Responses

• “Can you tell me more?”
• “Would you explain further?”
• “Would you give me an example of what you mean?”
• “Is there anything else?”
• “Please describe what you mean.”
APPENDIX J
Citizens Opinion Survey Items

Demographic Information
1. Age
2. Gender
3. Whether they attended school/college in Garo Hills

Opinions
1. Main problems facing Garo Hills
2. Visions for Garo Hills
3. Thoughts on current leadership in Garo Hills
4. Optimism for change
APPENDIX K
Survey Findings: Problems and Visions

Problem areas (frequency)

People's vision (frequencies)

No. of Respondents = 69
APPENDIX L
Lyrics of ‘Heal the World’

There's A Place In
Your Heart
And I Know That It Is Love
And This Place Could
Be Much
Brighter Than Tomorrow
And If You Really Try
You'll Find There's No Need
To Cry
In This Place You'll Feel
There's No Hurt Or Sorrow

There Are Ways
To Get There
If You Care Enough
For The Living
Make A Little Space
Make A Better Place...

Heal The World
Make It A Better Place
For You And For Me
And The Entire Human Race
There Are People Dying
If You Care Enough
For The Living
Make A Better Place
For You And For Me.

(Michael Jackson)
APPENDIX M
Youth Research Activities

I. Positioning of participants
• Why they matter and what they can contribute
• Importance of knowledge, information, representation

II. Ecological Thinking
• Issues: What do you see as the major issues in your lives? From your standpoint as youth? In the local community?
  - Generate list (individual write and group discussion)
  - Organize into domains and sub-domains
  - Organize into themes and sub-themes
  - Demonstrate how different themes and domains are interconnected
• Imagining Utopia: An ideal community and socio-political legal system - describe your utopia. It could be the ideal community in general or it could relate to a specific domain, e.g., education, health, development, etc.
  - What is the desirable outcome?
  - How are things currently?
  - What are the obstacles to this outcome?
  - What needs to change?
  - What role can we play?
• Identify issues
• See how they are connected
• Recognize multiple levels of influence
• Understand the role of macro-social forces
• Recognize the place of individual agency
• Steps towards social change

III. Review of Existing Literature/Information
• Review of existing documentation/information
• Broad conception of ‘literature’ (Public archives, books, magazines, reports, video/audio, conversations)
• Discuss implications
  - Experiences
  - Who has access?
  - What do they find/locate?
  - What is absent?
• Use discussions to segue into research objectives
  - What issues do we wish to investigate?
  - What questions do we pursue?
  - How?

IV. Data Collection and Analysis
• Interviews
• Surveys