



Éva Rozália Hölzle

Land, Life, and Emotional Landscapes at the Margins of Bangladesh

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1 Introduction: Land and Life

Abstract

Chapter 1 presents the main claim of the book that land dispossession has emerged as a means through which Bangladeshi state officials challenge the legitimacy and worth of farmers' ways of life, who as ethnic minorities, inhabit national, political, and geographical margins. Moreover, conflicts over land in Bangladesh expose the propensity of the governing authorities' desire to control and eliminate cultural differences for the survival of the nation-state. In uncovering such dynamics, the book argues for a focus on life instead of land, flipping the analytical vantage point. Furthermore, the chapter draws attention to emotions as analytical devices in getting closer to farmers' experiences of violence and their modalities of agency, unfolding in the process of land dispossession.

Keywords: land, life, land dispossession, violence, emotions, 'mobile fieldwork', extended case study

It is a bright and hot January afternoon in a small Bangladeshi border village next to Assam. The year is 2012. Villagers – women and men, young and old – fill a mid-sized room of a central house. The sun enters the room just halfway. It brightens the middle part, leaving all four corners wrapped in darkness. People sit in concentric circles to face each other while speaking. The seating is not arbitrary, however. There is a strict sense of hierarchy. Eight men with high status, who often speak during public events and whose words carry weight in the village make up the first layer of the circle. Young men in their 20s form the last lines of the seats. Hidden in the dark corners of the room, they can make jokes without being recognised and rebuked by the elders. Matthew, my assistant, sits on my left and Deibor, the village headman, on my right in the first row. Deibor summoned the meeting the day before. Villagers wish to tell us about how the Bangladeshi government has sought to force them off their agricultural and residential land for the sake of an ecotourism park for more than a decade. For three hours, the

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villagers narrate an exhausting struggle that has not yet ended and whose outcome is not decided either. 'Who knows' – some elders speculate – 'the government might succeed and then all of us need to go'. 'And then? What happens then?' – I ask – 'Would it not be easier searching for another place to live, already now?' My question is intentionally provocative. And I notice it stings, since James, one of the village elders sitting across from me, throws a withering look in my direction. 'We have been living here for many years.' – he wards my question off – 'Everything that we know is here. We grew up here. We do not have another place to go. But why should we go? We grew an affection for this land and a bond with it. We will live here even though we have troubles and problems. It is our *kchu* [soil]'. 'What is *kchu*?' – I ask. James spells out, '*Kchu* or *thaw* [place] is our life. It helps us to continue to live'. With these words, he concludes the discussion. The meeting soon afterwards dissolves. During the night, while I stare at the beams above my head, I chew for a while on James' last words, then I fall asleep. In the morning, I think about *kchu* and its connection to life once more, but then I discard James' explanation with the conclusion that it is too rhetorical and too obvious. Soon, Matthew enters my room, and we start with our usual visiting rounds in the village. For a while, I then forget James' enigmatic words until another person, at a different time and place, makes a similar assertion.

In the morning hours, the kitchen bustles with women. Agnes, the wife of the headman, gives short orders to three younger girls and two middle-aged women who regularly help her in preparing food. Agnes governs a large household. Cooking for over ten regular family members whose circle from time to time expands with occasional guests is a backbreaking task. Matthew and I try to stay out of the way in the corner while drinking our tea. Despite the rush, the women don't mind our presence. Gossiping while cooking belongs to the kitchen, just like the stove. Matthew and I use this opportunity to bring up the issues the village council debated a day before. Due to a border realignment agreement between Bangladesh and India, the villagers face the danger of losing their agricultural lands that lie between the official borderlines not far away from the point where the Bangladesh, Assam, and Meghalaya borders intersect. Agnes assures us that if the realignment materialises, 'we will be without garden and work. If we don't have land, it is useless to have only a house. And then we won't be able to stay together either'. She continues, 'If we have only a house, what we will do with a house?' She pauses for a moment then she concludes, 'We need a place that we can cultivate so that we can survive. We also need food. If we don't have land to cultivate, we won't live'.



Agnes' words struck me. They brought to my mind James' remarks expressed a few months before and that I cast aside all too quick. I wondered: What kind of living did Agnes and James imply when they spoke about the peril of losing land? At stake was more than just their livelihood, as Agnes made clear when she listed food and shelter as an addition to other aspects of living, such as cultivation and togetherness. She seemed to refer to multiple meanings and practices of living, all of which were sustained and nourished through a continuous access to land. Land loss threatened, therefore, not just the material means of Agnes' and James' existence, but the disintegration and collapse of their life in its entirety. This last point is one of the key themes of this book, which aims to analyse the dynamics and consequences of land dispossession in the north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh from the perspective of small-scale farmers who have already lost or are threatened with losing their land. The agriculturalists in focus are all ethnic/indigenous minorities (in the vernacular, *adivasis*), differing from the majority Bengali population of the country – but also from each other. They live in four different places along the border of Bangladesh with Meghalaya, Assam, or Tripura (see Illustration 1). These localities – in terms of space, social constellation, and state-society relations – also differ from each other through the modes of land dispossession. The expropriation of the land of these farmers took shape through such state-induced programmes as the redrawing of the national border between India and Bangladesh (Chapter 3), the foundation of an ecotourism park (Chapter 4), the enactment of community forestry (Chapter 5), and the establishment of a military cantonment (Chapter 6). Despite these differences, certain elements have remained constant in all four cases. The main dispossessor in each instance was the Bangladeshi state, represented locally either by the district branch of the military, the border guards of both India and Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Forest Department, or regional government officials.

James's and Agnes's remark was not a singular reaction either, since I heard similar verbalisations from different people in different places repeatedly; but in the early stages of my research, I was not entirely aware of their importance. The assertion that land sustains life seemed too rhetorical, almost trivial to me. As my fieldwork progressed, however, my view changed. I gradually came to understand that the seemingly self-evident link between land and life creates an 'illusion of transparency' (Lefebvre 1991, 33). It conceals the on-going and intricate levels of cultural practices and social efforts that enable a relationship between land and life. The threat of losing land lifts this veil, disquieting the established regularity that made the tacit connection between life and land possible. Yet the danger of being

Research Sites: (1) Nolikhai; (2) Latrymbai; (3) Madhupur Forest; (4) Ratargul.



Illustration 1. Created by the author.

deprived of land raises another illusion of transparency obscuring the stakes that lie at the heart of struggles over land. To lay bare these stakes, I insist throughout this book on turning the perspective upside down and instead of land situating life at the centre of analysis. Such a change of view reveals that the struggles over land in the north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh

are animated in a lesser degree by the capitalist desire of accumulation but more by politics that revolves around life and its multiple meanings.

The issue of land dispossession, or 'land grabbing' as it is more popularly known, has in the last ten years attained unprecedented global attention amongst activists, policy makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and journalists as well as scholars from various academic fields. The critical momentum behind this renewed awareness of the processes and various practices of land deprivation worldwide derived from the 2007–2008 rise in food prices internationally and the subsequent global market crash in 2008 (Edelman et al. 2013; Li 2014b). Initial monitoring of mass media as well as NGOs such as GRAIN led to discoveries that numerous countries, including China and the Gulf States, are involved in buying off as well as appropriating land from local farmers in some of the sub-Saharan African countries to secure their own food supply (Borras et al. 2011; Edelman et al. 2013). The financial crisis, on the other hand, motivated market speculators and transnational companies to find secure investment opportunities. Investors begin considering agricultural land a reliable asset and potential profit generator through further investments (Cotula 2013; Li 2014b). These anticipations have prompted transnational corporations to purchase farmland, targeting countries that are often squeezed into the quotation marks of the 'Global South', which implies nation-states in Eastern Europe; the African continent; Central, South, and Southeast Asia; as well as Latin America and the Caribbean (Borras et al. 2011).

Although land expropriation is not new – especially if one considers the transformation of land into a commodity during industrialisation in Europe, as well as the quest and struggle for land during colonialism – most observers stress that the contemporary rush for land is a new phenomenon. Many analysts claim that under the sway of globalisation and neoliberalism, land dispossession has taken an accelerated pace and a novel appearance. Experts thus emphasise two peculiarities. First, the bulk of contemporary land exchanges are economically and legally regulated enterprises between states, or between states and transnational companies (Borras et al. 2011). Second, '[t]he characteristic feature of a rush is a sudden, hyped interest in a resource because of its newly enhanced value, and the spectacular riches it promises to investors who get into the business early' (Li 2014b, 595). Recent findings, however, refute both claims.

Since 2013 researchers have discovered that a significant number of large-scale expropriations within nation-state boundaries happen in the name of internationally and nationally instigated development schemes, agricultural and industrial investments, or environmental conservation



projects. The involvement of foreign states and transnational companies in these enterprises is minimal. The role of bilateral donor agencies (e.g. the World Bank, various United Nations organisations) and domestic players (e.g. state actors and other nationally powerful agencies or persons such as real estate speculators), on the other hand, is far greater (Ahasan and Gardner 2016; Levien 2018). These findings have facilitated the acknowledgement that current land appropriations are outcomes of preceding events and thus have historical continuity, raising doubts about the 'newness' and suddenness of land grabbing (Edelman et al. 2013). These recent observations apply to Bangladesh as well.

Bangladesh has a significantly high population density, with around 162 million people inhabiting a relatively small area (Lewis 2011, 13). For this reason and since agriculture is still considered as a principal life sustaining strategy for over 60 per cent of the population, access to land and natural resources represents one of the most imperative issues in the country (*ibid.*, 137). Expropriations of land by the state and non-state actors in villages as well as in peri-urban areas are one of the main problems facing the country (S. Feldman and Geisler 2012, 973). Such expropriations have various reasons. The insufficient employment possibilities outside of agriculture in Bangladesh lead to excessive valorisation of land, which makes the property of small-scale farmers attractive for capture by local and national power holders. Numerous government programmes (rubber plantations, dam construction, and green initiatives such as reforestation and establishment of eco-zones) financed by international donors along with national support of large-scale industry (shrimp farms, garment) further facilitate land expropriation (see also Adnan and Dastidar 2011). At the same time, urban areas are growing at a rapid pace, and peri-urban sites are frequently occupied illegally (S. Feldman and Geisler 2012). Land dispossession most intensely affects disadvantaged population groups such as ethnic minorities and the rural as well as peri-urban poor. Yet, despite their vulnerability, these farmers often oppose expropriation attempts with surprising strength and artfulness. Accordingly, struggles over land lead not only to highly visible clashes between farmers and land grabbers, but also to more covert and diffused violent acts. As I was able to observe, such acts are part of the intimidation tactics of the Bangladeshi state either to force small scale landholders off their property or to coerce their participation in different government initiatives. These disputes represent the point where my research steps in.

During my 24 months of ethnographic research carried out between 2010 and 2016, I aimed to bring the course and dimension of conflicts related to struggles over land to the fore. I was interested in learning about manifold



manifestations and experiences of violence, as well as their effect on the daily life of farmers from their viewpoint. Additionally, I focused on how these small-scale landholders deal with critical circumstances that disconcert the regularity of local life, and thus I also worked out distinct modalities of agency. Due to this focus and due to my conviction that land dispossession must be approached from the analytic of life, I gradually drifted away from a solely political economy approach that has dominated the debate related to land dispossession until today.

According to Sherry Ortner, an exclusively capitalism-centred view of the world is questionable because it relies on over-materialistic and economic perspectives (1984, 142). In Marxist-oriented studies, specific cultural practices are treated either as secondary or are 'converted to "ideology" and considered from the point of view of [their] role in social reproduction' (ibid., 140). The symbolic meanings and values that one attaches to land and life are therefore left largely unexplored. Additionally, history is regarded as constructed from capitalist centres penetrating the peripheries. Political economy leaves, therefore, little space to address how people at the 'margins' are implicated in various ways in large events, let alone how they are actively involved in the making of their own histories (ibid., 143).

If one concentrates on the 'land grabbing' debate, the above critique can be expanded with further insights. Despite recent attention to politics from below, agrarian political economy still operates along the dichotomy of domination and resistance. It therefore overlooks the fact that defiance is just one possible mode of human action and ignores alternative ways of human agency that go beyond popular forms of political mobilisation. Additionally, the land grabbing literature considers only highly visible physical brutality as violence. As a result, micro-manifestations of violence that are embedded in the structure of everyday life and go beyond the binary of state-versus-people collision do not enter the analysis. This is because the question of experience – the only possible way through which the complexity of violence can be approached – is relegated to other areas of study. Added to this, capitalism is regarded as a totalising system. Yet if one abandons a Marxist approach with its internalised assumption of progress, capitalism will appear patchy (Tsing 2015, 5; Ortner 2016). This means not only that capitalism is incomplete but also that it is full of cracks, where alternative ways of living might strive to continue or to emerge (Tsing 2015, 5). This last point is especially important since intricate levels of existential issues provide key insights in understanding contemporary struggles over land in Bangladesh.

Throughout the book I will argue that the four dispossession cases observed in north-eastern borderlands of Bangladesh are best understood



as driven by political practices that revolve around questions of life. The Bangladeshi state at first glance indeed seems to target the land of farmers who inhabit national, political, and geographically defined margins. Nevertheless, what is really at stake in these conflicts is life. By life being at stake, I mean two things. First, land serves as a surface upon which state functionaries and indigenous farmers clash over 'acceptable' ways of life (i.e. how to live and under what conditions) and over what accounts for human life (i.e. recognitions of the worth of certain lives). Such disputes reveal, therefore, not simply disagreements about 'forms of life', but that the acknowledgement of being a human becomes uncertain (see also Das 2007).

Second, life at stake also involves the existence and legitimacy of the state along its margins, where state rule and law are especially volatile and thus require continuous re-establishment (Asad 2004). Biopolitics in this sense is not only about technologies and regulations of the life of populations, but also about assuring the survival of a political entity (Asad 2015). Bolstering state viability through dispossession in Bangladesh is achieved by sacrificing the lives of indigenous farmers whose lives, due to their minority status, are not even fully recognised as such. Land dispossession and the various forms of violent acts implicated in this process are, on the one hand, about winding up cultural differences and allowing the life forms of ethnic minorities, who threaten the image of political-national unity, to disappear. On the other hand, they are also about negating life that is already rejected and denied. Ordinarily, a double negation would result in the obsolescence of one of the refutations. Yet, those lives that are already negated 'have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). [...] Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object' (Butler 2006, 33).

Retrospectively, these state actions might appear to be carried out systematically; however, from the point of view of the affected farmers, the materialisation of state power through dispossession rests on inconsistent political practices in Bangladesh. Such politics are characterised by a series of confusing actions, offering hope and protecting lives but simultaneously denying them (Chapter 3); promising advantages while showing reluctance in fulfilling them (Chapter 4); soliciting cooperation while at the same time criminalising existence (Chapter 5); demanding loyalty while offering nothing in return (Chapter 6). These practices exhibit that the 'state itself is not a fixed object' (Asad 2004, 279; see also Hussain 2013; Schulz and Kuttig 2020) but rather is best understood as a series of procedures that 'oscillate between the rational mode and the magical mode of being'; between legibility and illegibility (Das 2004, 225). Such whimsicality rests at the heart of biopolitics.



Yet, 'the qualifier of *bio*' does not imply an interruption of older forms of politics (Han and Das 2015, 8, emphasis in original). The struggles over land, especially in the four places in focus, are neither sudden nor recent. They began during the colonial period and were carried further by the successive state powers after the British 'left' South Asia. The land politics of the contemporary Bangladeshi state along its national borders are continuations of older colonial practices of state formation. That is why I prefer the term 'dispossession' to 'grabbing'. While the latter implies a novel and abrupt practice, the former allows for emphasis on historical processes. This does not mean that the notion of 'land dispossession' is unproblematic. It suggests legalised ownership rights, while most of the farmers in focus have never had state-accepted land titles. However, a legal title is just one possible inscription device. The axe, the spade, the plough (Li 2014b), and the historical continuation of occupation represent other ways of claiming entitlements to land. This is what colonial and modern states continue to reject.

By following the waxing and waning of conflicts in the four land dispossession cases, I aim to address continuities and inconsistencies of state manifestation on the ground. Simultaneously, turning the lens away from land and towards life enables me to disclose that existential and political contestations represent not two separate realms, but rather entangled regions of the social world, where different ideas and legitimacies of living collide. Formulated differently, the entanglement of the existential and the political 'reveal the varied ways in which the biological and social are knitted into each other in the demand for recognition, [...] [thus] it may involve issues of the survival of culture, or of one's way of life, which is connected to the acknowledgment of worth' (Han and Das 2015, 9).

Questions fundamental to uncovering this entanglement are: what does it mean to attach life to land? What kinds of senses of lives are evoked through the interrelatedness of living and land? How are these senses affected or altered in cases where land becomes jeopardised? These questions are crucial because loss is not simply an expression of a deficit that can be replaced or substituted by something that has vanished (Butler 2006, 19–25). This observation is especially true for such a fixed belonging as land. Loss is a transformative experience. It alters the knowledge over and the relationship with the world, while it reshuffles subjectivity in ways that cannot be anticipated in advance (ibid., 21). Loss is fundamentally a life-altering experience because the relationships – material and social – do not simply stabilise or destabilise life, they constitute it (ibid., 22). To understand this relationality, it is not enough to describe the ties to land and how they are

constructed, but rather to develop a perspective that can capture life on the verge of being dispossessed.

This book, therefore, brings life under heightened uncertainty into the centre of analysis and begins at the point where land grab studies conclude. Consequently, the research is situated at the intersection of anthropology of life and violence. As a result, it leans on a body of literature that in the conventional sense does not deal with land dispossession yet offers analytical tools for interpreting collective and individual lives at a crossroad. It helps to understand that crisis situations are ingrained with unpredictable outcomes that on one hand come to the fore through manifold manifestations and experiences of violence, and on the other through the imaginative capacity of the parts of those who strive to survive. Life is therefore not simply determined but rather continuously emerging and becoming within social fields of unequal and ever shifting power relations. Yet, the plasticity of life does not mean that its different aspects are separable. In the imaginary of the farmers in focus, and as Agnes and James above accentuate, the multiple facets of life are interwoven. Only one aspect of life needs to be jeopardised to lead to the crumbling of life in its entirety.

Against a Divided Approach to Life

Acknowledging the multiplicity of life and at the same time stressing that the different aspects of life cannot be separated from each other does not necessarily lead to a conceptual maze. On the contrary, it allows seeing how different social, political, economic, and cultural practices interlace around myriad aspects and meanings of life.

From a material perspective life appears as always fragile and precarious. This general vulnerability of life arises from the biological limit of the body. Vulnerability is, however, more than simply bodily exposure (Butler 2016). It must be juxtaposed with social and material dependency, which implies that 'life requires various social and economic conditions to be met to be sustained as a life' (ibid., 14). The social condition of maintaining life means that survival depends, from the moment of birth, on the care of others. Humans are not simply located socially – they are at the mercy of others. This draws attention to the fact that belonging is not simply a social and cultural but an existentially charged practice. Conversely, material dependency implies that survival is contingent upon access to food, shelter, land, or some forms of infrastructure. For the farmers in the focus of this book, land is the material prerequisite to sustaining their lives.



For these farmers, however, land represents social and cultural condition too, because the relationships that allow the web of obligations as well as protection to evolve and thus belonging to flourish are connected to and constituted by the continuous access to land. The emphasis on such basic conditions for assuring life might seem trivial, yet for most of the people around the globe, including indigenous farmers of Bangladesh, social and material circumstances are not automatically granted but differentially distributed, marking a juncture where the existential and the political become intertwined in two different ways.

First, as Didier Fassin (2018) emphasises, life is not simply regulated by, but rather is the central preoccupation of politics, which also concerns meanings and values attached to the question of existence. By extending Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Fassin (2009) suggests not limiting the attention to a single dimension of life, *bios* or *zoë*, but rather paying attention to its extensions from biological existence to its political form (2009, 47). With this broadening, he specifies that contemporary societies are characterised less by 'power *over* life' (ibid., 47 emphasises added) – as Foucault's term biopower implies – and more by 'power *of* life', i.e. the 'sacredness of life' (ibid., 50, emphasis in original). The global circulation of human rights, humanitarianism, the continuous monitoring of mortality rates, life expectancy, and infectious diseases nationally and internationally are forms of public discourses and practices through which power of life can be observed in effect. Yet the ideology of the universal sanctity of life tends to mask the fact that not every existence has the same worth (Fassin 2014), marking the second aspect through which the entanglement of the existential and the political becomes visible. Despite the rise of global regimes stressing the 'sacredness' of life, contemporary politics paradoxically expresses an implicit hierarchical valorisation of lives not only within national contexts but also across the globe (Fassin 2009). The unequal worth of life means that biopolitics is more than a maximisation of life; it is also about the distribution of inequalities that have life-altering consequences. The social context in which one is born determines how and how long a person will live. These contexts can be seen as gatherings of distinct forms of political decisions from housing, education, and infrastructure to welfare, etc., that produce and dictate the circumstances of living, which in turn have repercussions for the quality and length of individual lives. The politics of 'make live' can often and easily flip into a rejection to death if a person is rendered undesirable (Fassin 2009, 53–54; Gomez-Temesio 2018). Such refusals, in which not only the state but also society at large, including the family, are sometimes complicit, do not necessarily indicate biological death

but the creation of 'zones of social abandonments' (Biehl 2005), where life according to one's own terms becomes difficult or even impossible to sustain. As I will show, land dispossession represents a critical situation for the *adivasi* landholders in Bangladesh. Through the practice of land dispossession, state functionaries not only unsettle the regularity of farmers' everyday life but also put the value and legitimacy of *adivasi* ways of life on trial. Moreover, by attempting displacement, and on other occasions using force, to pressure farmers into taking part in different government-initiated programmes, Bangladeshi state representatives are actively involved in creating zones where life on farmers' own terms becomes difficult to sustain.

These assaults question, however, not only the legitimacy and worth of culturally different constructions of life, but also raise doubts related to the sense of being recognised as human. Not accidentally, *adivasi* farmers repeatedly complaint about being disrespected, belittled, and ignored by Bangladeshi state officials as well as members of the majority society. Such injuries indicate that not even what counts as human is constant and universal (Han and Das 2015). By drawing upon Stanley Cavell's (1988) interpretation of 'form of life', Clara Han and Veena Das point out that form of life has a double connotation allowing horizontal and vertical interpretations (2015, 24). The horizontal meaning relates to forms in the ethnological sense and refers to heterogeneous constructions of living along cultural, historical, or generational differences that are contingent upon space and time (Han and Das 2015, 24). Life on the other hand draws attention to vertical contrasts between humans and other existences such as animals or machines (Das 2007, 88–89). Yet the boundary lines between human and non-human forms of life are unstable. A person can easily find herself pushed over into a realm where the criteria of being a human become unrecognisable or dismissed, legitimising neglect and in extreme cases even active destruction, as is the case in the context of land dispossession in Bangladesh. Interpreted from this angle, 'form of life' reveals that what counts as human is also not a settled issue for good (Han and Das 2015, 3). Debates and uncertainties may arise not only along horizontal forms of lives, i.e. cultural differences, but also along what counts as human (Das 2007, 89). The empirical cases presented in the book show that in such disputes not only communities but also individuals constantly struggle to find their voice and make it heard in the madding crowd. But this is not the end of *adivasi* farmers' story, since in the struggles over land they exhibit a remarkable will to live and creativity in defending their ways of life.

Disputations, therefore, at times mark discord; at other times they might signal new openings or possibilities of imagining a common future (Han



and Das 2015, 23). Thus, every limit holds the prospect of a threshold or an awakening to a new understanding and a new construction of life (ibid., 30). While in the contemporary world, precarity – ‘life without the promise of stability’ (Tsing 2015, 2) – has indeed become the general condition of all living beings on earth, this does not mean that all possibilities for future life are foreclosed. In every ‘ruin’, alternative ways of living may emerge and strive (ibid., 4). Thus, life, despite its fragility, is inexhaustible and unstoppable. Humans, regardless of structural constraints, are endowed by the desire to form their existence. The realisation of such desires is often accompanied by struggles where even the maintenance of the ordinary presents itself as continuous achievement (Das and Zengin 2010, 135). The idea that everyday life requires humble and often silent effort to be sustained stands in sharp contrast with the popular conceptualisation of human agency as a heroic act of opposition. Yet, it is not so much the transgression of rules as the struggle ‘to strike some kind of balance between being an actor and being acted upon’ (Jackson 2008, 143) which might be seen as a defining feature of human agency. Accordingly, agency as a struggle is best understood as an ever-changing course between ‘alternatives that promise more or less satisfactory solutions to the ever-changing situation at hand’ (Jackson 2008, xii). This can emerge in various forms in different contexts. In certain situations, waiting in silence is for instance more effective than opposition and loud representation. Thus, under extremely restricted conditions human agency is often a matter of endurance rather than transcendence, and ‘less a matter of freewill, but rather working within the limits’ (ibid., xxx–xxxi footnote 3). Agency understood in this way is an ‘endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived decisively, on one’s own terms’ through which viable forms of existence and coexistence can be created (ibid., xii). These observations apply also to all the actions indigenous farmers in Bangladesh are engaged in. Despite restrictions and repeated attacks, farmers’ responses rarely take laudable forms of political mobilisation or transgression. Their modalities of agency do not so much question the existing political and social system, but rather, moving within its frames, they try to enlarge the possibilities of everyday life.

To summarise the above discussion, I wish to emphasise five emerging themes around different aspects of life: (1) Life is generally precarious, which means that life cannot be regarded as an opposite condition to danger, but rather always in its potential shadow. (2) Life is not simply regulated by, but rather is the central issue at stake in politics that also concerns meanings and values attached to the question of existence (Fassin 2009). (3) Despite the rise of global regimes stressing the ‘sacredness’ of life (such as human

rights or humanitarianism), contemporary politics paradoxically expresses an implicit hierarchical valorisation of lives within national contexts but also across the globe (ibid.). (4) There is not one universal sense of life, but rather multiple and heterogeneous constructions of living, and what constitutes a human life is not a settled issue either. (5) Life is not given, but rather is an everyday and thus a constant achievement. This means that not only is life always emerging and never complete, but also that humans are endowed with a capacity and a desire to form their lives even if these lives are confined within the limits of historical, political, economic, or cultural orders.

All these above delineated reflections cover life that exhibits some form of signs of living. Yet how can one speak about viability of the state when the state in the strict sense is not a human subject or a living being? Talal Asad's answer to this question is pertinent here when he emphasises that 'Of course the state is not a living human individual, but it is accorded the sacred quality that individual human life has' (2015, 414). This is because the polity is originally imagined as the birth of a 'particular community with its own history' and the state as such is 'endowed with (a claim to) life eternal', assuring in this way the survival of a nation (ibid.). The state, therefore, must be defended at all costs, because its collapse would induce the disintegration of the nation upon which the idea of the polity was established. Moreover, the imagination of the sovereign state as a legal person justifies violence as a necessary means through which the survival of the state is assured (ibid., 420). As I will show in the following pages, land dispossession is one possible way of assuring the survival of the state by forcing *adivasi* farmers – who disturb the image of national unity – to integrate by renouncing their way of life. Land dispossession in Bangladesh is, therefore, part of the process of nation-state formation.

Research Process: Mobile Fieldwork and the Analytic of Emotions

Mobile Fieldwork

Spanning the years between 2010 and 2016, the actual time spent gathering data in the four field sites amounted to two years. Therefore, I distinguish three phases of fieldwork. The first fieldtrip, between July and October 2010, was pre-fieldwork searching for an appropriate research topic. The second research phase started in November 2011 and continued uninterrupted until December 2012. The third phase of research was characterised by four



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follow-up visits (in 2013 and 2014 for three months each, and in 2015 and 2016 for three weeks each) to probe the previously gathered data and to refine and share with interlocutors the already written analysis.

In navigating the field successfully, the help and collaboration of my research assistant, Matthew, was crucial from the very beginning of the research. His involvement in the research was beyond valuable because on the one hand he facilitated my social integration, while on the other hand he acted also as 'power fixer' between the research participants and myself. However, since Mathew was inexperienced regarding the issue of land dispossession and anthropological fieldwork, his influence did not cross the line of assistance in such a significant way as to have changed the course of the research.

During the two years of research, the concrete methodological strategies that guided the data-gathering process were determined by a combination of extended case study and a method that I call *mobile fieldwork*. While extended case study was a conscious choice prior to the start of the fieldwork due to its relevance in analysing conflict and social crisis (see Evens and Handelman 2006), mobile fieldwork was an adaptive tactic to a sensitive and combative field. Since all the places where we worked are so-called nationally and internationally sensitive zones, our presence created suspicion and irritation among state representatives, who repeatedly limited our entry to the field sites. Concretely, this meant that it was simply impossible to carry out a classical village study – in which a researcher stays long-term at a field site – because state authorities did not allow us to stay for a longer period in the villages due to 'security reasons'. These restrictions forced us to embrace a pragmatic mobility. This meant in concrete terms that we divided our visits to the village sites into shorter stays of two to three weeks to remain as inconspicuous as possible to the eyes of the national and local authorities. However, to acquire informed knowledge, we kept returning to the same places, rotating in this way among the four different locations for two years.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I wish to underscore that this approach that I am calling mobile fieldwork is not like 'multi-sited methodology', which is an exercise in mapping different terrains across space and time without, however, adopting the goal of holistic representation (Marcus 1995, 99). It also differs from the type of 'multi-site ethnography' described by Ulf Hannerz (2003), where he clearly states that through this method he was 'not trying hard to get to know [...] individuals particularly intimately' (208). My multilocal approach emerged primarily due to state restrictions in accessing the four field sites and was therefore neither pre-planned nor opportunistic.



Through constant returning to a site, the aim was to observe the progress of conflicts while investing effort into knowing the research participants intimately. This means that the approach rather resembles the method that Tania Murray Li (2014a, 4) adopted and which she terms ‘revisiting’, with the aim of tracking ‘subtle shifts in everyday ways of thinking and acting’ ‘that are hard to glean from one-shot research designs, whether based on surveys or ethnographic research’. Indeed, switching between sites provided us with the advantage of a far greater mindfulness towards variation and the subtle modifications of action (violence as well as agency), of spatial transformations, and of actors’ fluctuating involvement that constitute important aspects of events in progress – all of which might have remained unnoticed if we had stayed in one place. Pragmatic mobility combined with an extended case study proved to be a useful combination for tracking processes in a comparative manner. Yet, all these tactics did not offer solutions on how to approach violence in all its complexity. At this point emotions or verbalisations with emotional content attained significance.

The Analytic of Emotions

The interest in violence posed two methodological dilemmas. First, I was confronted with the limitations of participant observation, as the violent acts that shattered and simultaneously shaped the everyday life of the farmers in focus went beyond visible forms of physical brutality and instead lurked in the day-to-day structures of social life. This raised the question of how to observe something that is invisible. The only solution to this problem was complementing the observations with verbal data, yet asking direct questions about violence would have meant risking reification and emptying lived experiences. But even if I would have initiated straightforward discussions about violence, the overwhelming forms of violent acts were so deceitful that they lacked definition. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) assert, violence is a ‘slippery concept’ and it ‘can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality – force, assault, or infliction of pain – alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value’ (1). This simultaneously means that violence ‘cannot be readily objectified and quantified so that a “check list” can be drawn up with positive criteria for defining any particular act as violent or not. [...] Violence defies easy categorisation. It can be everything and nothing’ (ibid., 2). If violence is such a fluid phenomenon, how can one approach it?

Many researchers contend that violence can be empirically captured only through the eyes of the affected. That means it necessitates an approximation



through the experiences and narratives of those who tackle it. Yet, this is not a simple task; since when one comes to the problem of violence one is simultaneously confronted with what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922) terms the 'limit of language'. The limit of language designates here not simply an inability to verbalise or an incapability of understanding narratives that describe specific experiences of violence, but 'the unknowability of the social world' (Das 1998, 184). The lived experience is characterised by unstructured knowledge and uncertainty. A person is rarely fully conscious at every moment of the implications that everyday occurrences confront her. How to breach this problem methodologically? How to gather evidence about something that is unclear, lacks definition, yet is still present? Confronting these questions was the point in my research where emotions came into the picture.

Concretely this means that while I was listening to the accounts of addressing land conflicts, I came to realise that there is a metalanguage emerging from the narratives, where the affected farmers were very preoccupied with describing how they felt to make me understand their situation. It took several months until I came to the realisation that the emotional narratives I collected were more than simple verbalisations of feelings, but instead concern particular experiences of violence embedded in the language of emotions. Gradually, I started to see emotions as 'concentrated vessels' of (hi)stories, or 'modalities through which people recall the sensorium of violence' (A. Feldman 1995, 238–243). Throughout the book I treat verbalisations with emotional content, therefore, as methodological lenses when zooming in on violence. Yet I also go one step further when I suggest seeing articulations with emotional components not as descriptions of subjective states but rather as performative utterances, and thus establishing a link between emotions and actions.

According to Stanley Cavell (2005), the interesting element in passionate utterances is that while they are formulated in the first person singular or plural, they nevertheless are not about 'me' or 'us' but are directed towards a second person, towards 'you'. Formulated differently, not the 'I' but the 'you' ends up as the centre when I utter the sentence 'I love you', because the phrase is not simply a declaration but simultaneously an expectation or maybe even a demand. This is like Wittgenstein's famous assertion that sentences such as 'I am sad' or 'I am in pain' are not descriptive statements of an inner state, but rather an invitation to share (Das 1995, 194). They indicate a request for reaction and therefore 'cannot be treated as purely personal experiences' but rather efforts towards establishing intersubjectivity or prompting acknowledgment (*ibid.*). If one takes this argumentation seriously, then it is possible to claim that emotions have a performative force, and thus

their expression might mark the beginning of a 'language game' in which the narrator and the listener become actively engaged through interactive exchange. However, they also reveal something about our relation to the world since emotions always involve others or circumstances incited by others. It is therefore not misplaced to borrow Catherine Lutz's (1988) assertion that emotions 'retain a value as a way of talking about the intensely meaningful that is culturally defined, socially enacted and personally articulated' (5). I therefore never ask if farmers in focus really feel what they say. This is beside the point. Rather, I am interested in what is revealed about their relationship with the world when they evoke specific idioms of emotion. Moreover, I also consider their performative force when I assert that emotions are claims for acknowledgment and recognition of an active subject position, which tends to get disrupted through the dehumanising forces of violent acts inherent in the process of land dispossession. Affected farmers directed such requests not necessarily towards me as a singular listener, but rather towards the larger world, soliciting a place in it. After all, the anthropologist is just a 'messenger' like Hermes (Crapanzano 1986), or a medium lending her or his own body for the other to speak through (Cavell 1997, 98). How convincing I am in mediating I leave open to be judged by the reader and let the four empirical chapters convey the message by themselves.

Outline

In Chapter 2, I will briefly delineate the history of Bangladesh, paying special attention to the process of state formation, land politics, and social heterogeneity to provide a contextual framework for the following chapters. Chapter 3 investigates the situation of one village, Nolikhai, situated adjacent to the border of Assam, where residents face the peril of losing their agricultural holdings due to the realigning of the border between India and Bangladesh. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the circumstances of Latrymbai. The concerns of the villagers here revolve around a government-initiated ecotourism park that threatens to incorporate them. Chapter 5 concentrates on Madhupur Forest where various forest protection and community forestry programmes serve as the main drivers forcing small-scale farmers out of their land. Chapter 6 takes up the issue of the inhabitants of a small village, Ratargul, situated a few kilometres away from Sylhet Town and in the immediate neighbourhood of the Sylhet Cantonment of the Bangladesh Army. Since 1977, residents of Ratargul have been confronted with the gradual alienation of their agricultural



land with the construction of the cantonment adjoining the settlement. This alienation seems close to full completion through the new plans for extension of the military base soon to be implemented. This means that in contrast to the cases analysed in previous chapters, in Ratargul, the process of land dispossession is almost entirely completed and has reached its final stage. Chapter 7 brings the main findings together. It will offer a discussion of violence along its temporality and explore the modalities of agency that go beyond popular forms of political mobilisations. It will also address the two most important modes of living – belonging and becoming – which materialised in the struggles over land. Power – understood as a multiple field of pressures – plays a determining role across these dynamics.

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