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Laughter and Fieldwork in Nagaland: A Dialogue

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Abstract

This is a dialogue and reflection about fieldwork, laughter, and decolonizing methodology. Is there a time to laugh? How and why should researchers laugh? By focusing on the Naga people in Northeast India, an Indigenous community with a deep history of militarization, this dialogue draws our attention to the meaning of laughter, fellowship, and emotional connections. An Indigenous Naga anthropologist in conversation with an ecologist, this dialogue dwells on the meaning of laughter as sharing an experience of fellowship together. Social science methodologies are often structured on examinations, investigations interviews, fieldnotes, and observations. This dialogue opens a space to reflect on fieldwork, research, and decolonization. Laughter, as this dialogue highlights, is about affection, solidarity, and collective vision. For any long-term relationship that one seeks to establish as a researcher, acknowledging and respecting the history of the land, adopting a community-approach, and mentoring Indigenous local scholars to lead the research among their respective communities are important steps towards decoloniality.

Keywords

Indigeneity, community, research methodology, militarization, decolonization, fieldwork, Northeast India

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Beginning

The first meeting was about laughter. During a Zoom discussion in 2022 with anthropologist Dolly Kikon, Krishnapriya Tamma (Priya), an ecologist, asked a question about laughter. Do Naga people love to laugh in general? It was a question that made Dolly laugh and soon Priya joined in. For Dolly, the question about laughter and the Naga people lingered on. The Naga people in Northeast India are often associated with primitivity, underdevelopment, and violence, so the question about laughter and Naga people made Kikon reflect on the impact of solidarity and the impact of meaningful research collaborations that centered Indigenous communities on the ground. The impact of research and scholarship produced about Naga people have seldom benefitted them. Historically defined as naked and head-hunters by European explorers and ethnographers, and further categorised as wild tribes and primitive communities by Indian experts on the basis of their culture and food, the connection between research and Naga people continue to exist in silos. Research is conducted *on* the Nagas *by* experts as a larger project to produce objective knowledge that is devoid of feelings or how Nagas themselves should read and see themselves in those writings. Therefore, when the question about laughter, Naga people, and fieldwork came Dolly's way, she thought about addressing the question in the form of a dialogue. Is Naga laughter unsettling? Does it contain, as Cynthia Dobbs notes in her essay on black laughter, racism and resistance, "contradictory emotions…a cathartic release of anxiety?" (Dobbs, 2016). The core practice of decolonization is for all of us, as researchers, to work together and think about such questions that come our way together.

As a Naga anthropologist Dolly is aware that the "beginning" of Naga history is through the lens of European colonizers and anthropologists who labelled Naga people as naked and wild. This is not true because Naga oral history about land, culture, and the world around them is much older. Yet, the colonial knowledge continue as a dominant trope working on the Naga people. It is fundamental to challenge these dominant tropes in the academy. For anthropologist Dolly Kikon, the primary aim of this dialogue is to acknowledge epistemology as grounded on everyday lives of communities and their experiences. To understand the Indigenous world and their struggles for justice is to also understand the laughter that researchers encounter during fieldwork. Reflecting about laughter while studying societies who are inheritors of militarization, violence and suffering might not be considered as serious academic work. For Dolly, one must find other ways of writing about the living, those who strive for hope and believe in dignity of life. Accepting Jafari Allen's invitation to, "…consider other ways of seeing, listening, and sensing" (Jafari, 2022), she invited Priya to take part in a dialogue about ecology, solidarity, and ethics of working among Indigenous communities. How should we theorize Indigenous lives in militarized societies outside the victim/perpetrator or broken/empowered framework?

Adopting laughter is to acknowledge the invitation of Indigenous scholars like Eve Tuck to move away from "damage centered" (Tuck, 2009) frameworks while studying/writing about Indigenous communities. Often defined as marginalized and impoverished people, laughter as a trope is seldom adopted to understand Naga worlds. Yet, community events and functions across Naga homes and gatherings resonate with laughter and cultural jokes shared through songs, narratives, and folklores. It is a community practice and everyday experience. For Dolly, laughter is a play and an encounter with familiarity; satire, ignorance, hope, rage, affirmation, and irony. What feels like an extravagance – laughter during fieldwork

– in difficult places and among communities that have experienced extraordinary violence invites researchers to consider ethnographic methods and fieldwork practices as epistemology to break away from theory as an exclusive intellectual project. This dialogue locates theory as desires for liberation and freedom found in the jhum fields, and the mountaintop villages where children and dogs play at sunset as birds return to their nest in the forest.

We welcome you to this dialogue on fieldwork and laughter. Yes, laughter during fieldwork in militarized societies like Nagaland is unsettling. Researchers have arrived in Naga villages for decades seeking misery, trauma, darkness, and broken lives. They often encounter unruly and dysfunction systems in a place that has witnessed Asia's longest armed conflict in the twentieth century. There is chaos and lives are fragmented, and researchers are left with the task of assembling brokenness into magical pieces of work that underline resilience and empowerment. Eventually, the thesis turns into a manuscript and a book emerges. It is like a scriptwriting process where the scholar must frame the central argument of the book – studying a damaged society – that will communicate the findings to the academic community. Who cares about laughter?

There is no doubt that laughter is part of fieldwork, and it allows us to create fieldwork memories. In addition, laughter connects us to people, moments, and relationships. We all have some ideas about laughter, especially laughing together. It is a form of communication, a sound that bounces back and forth producing rhythms, lines, and stories. At times, one is aware that it is an awkward moment and stupid to laugh. Yet, we end up laughing. This is something Priya shared with Dolly during their first meeting on Zoom in 2022. She confessed feeling 'confused and guilty'. Encountering laughter during her fieldwork in Nagaland felt contradictory to her feelings and was confusing. Stories of militarization, violence, and counter-insurgency operations that Naga villagers experienced enraged her. One day, during her fieldwork in a Naga village, Priya was upset when she heard about the horrors that the Naga people suffered at the hands of the Indian armed forces. A field collaborator who was listening to her told her that the Naga people forgave the perpetrators and she should learn to forgive too.

This story became the beginning of a conversation. How do researchers working with Indigenous communities in militarized societies with violent colonial history engage with fragile relationships during fieldwork? Returning to the question Priya raised during the Zoom session with Dolly, what and how can we think about laughter during fieldwork in difficult places?

When Priya asked Dolly about laughter in Naga society, Dolly reflected about laughter as an emotional map with layers of resilience, grief, solidarity, and everyday joys. For Dolly, laughter collapses sorrows of the past and hopes for the future. It is both a universal experience and an intimate connection simultaneously. Imagine laughing during moments of terror, and laughing away one's miseries. In the Naga context, laughter can mean all feelings underlined. It is a universal sentiment. It feels like a shared trust that allows communities to melt their anxiety and trauma in favour of radical hope. There is no order, geography, or chronology to community laughter.

Dolly reflected on questions about laughter that Priya shared with her. Priya defined her moments of laughter during fieldwork in Nagaland as love and warmth of the Naga

people. If there can be anything as a Naga laughter, according to Dolly, it is the collective sound and breath of community, an activity and expression that translates oneness and bonding. There are different sounds of laughter. Some muffled and others rhythmic. Laughter is an audible proclamation that we are alive and can breathe together. It is a social activity. Furthermore, Dolly felt that collective laughter is a mark of an experience derived from a shared moment. There is a value, an acknowledgement of working together in that moment to appreciate one another, breathe in synchrony, and share an experience. What makes laughter so special in a community setting is its spontaneity. For Dolly, it was important that Priya sought to reflect about laughter and fieldwork in Nagaland. Social science methodologies are often structured on examinations, investigations, interviews, fieldnotes, and observations. But what about joy and laugher?

For Dolly and Priya, this was the beginning of a reflection. Through emails and phone conversations they worked on the draft of this essay, and reflected on solidarity and collaborations. They also dwelt on research relationships with communities, and how to build and sustain trust during fieldwork and long after wrapping up research projects. It is here that laughter—the deep, affectionate, full-belly laughter with community—emerged as a methodology for fieldwork. Fieldwork methodology determines the connection between field data and analysis. It is the roadmap of one's research findings from the field. Thinking about laughter as a field method is difficult. Imagine fixing an appointment for laughter during fieldwork. Of course, not all actions can be considered as research methodology. It is never that simple. But what matters is the manner in which researchers during fieldwork face uncertainties, connects with, and respects their informants. Being in the field and doing fieldwork is often about navigating social relations which can be daunting especially in militarised societies. Here, laughter operates as an invitation to build trust, like a song, an audible expression of joy encouraging the researcher to laugh *with* the community.

As researchers who do we chuckle and laugh with during fieldwork? Are we able to laugh at ourselves? Do we learn to laugh at local jokes and memes? How long do we protect our *real* faces from the communities in the field? When do we stop behaving as researchers? Laughter during fieldwork, in this context, can be considered as a medium of communication. The full-belly laughing moments disrupt the divide between researchers and informants and between scholars and communities. We invite you to join us in this conversation.

Dialogue

Dolly Kikon (Dolly): Can you tell us what about your research in Nagaland? And your background? How did you become an ecologist?

Krishnapriya Tamma (Priya): While pursuing my undergraduate degree, I realised my interests lay in ecology and evolution. After graduating, I worked as a junior research fellow on a project focusing on the phylogeography of jungle cats and leopard cats which cemented my interest in ecology/biogeography. I went on to study the biogeography and macroevolution of mammals in South Asia for my PhD. Following this, for my postdoctoral research, I focused my research on spatial vegetation patterns and multiple stable states in terrestrial ecosystems. Taking my interests forward, my current work focuses on the resilience and recovery of tropical forests. Along with my collaborators and students, I look at factors that influence the structure, composition and recovery of forests, including the role of avian frugivores in forest regeneration. Currently in Nagaland, we are conducting plant and bird diversity assessments

in three landscapes which we hope will provide a baseline for land management by local communities in the landscape.

Dolly: I was intrigued how you struggled with the question of laughter in Nagaland. It was unsettling for you due to the realities on the ground, especially the hardships and decades of armed conflict and militarization that the Naga people have experienced. I remember a story you shared with me. Once you were very angry at the violence committed by Indian security forces in a particular Naga village. As you expressed your rage, a Naga friend asked you to stop. They asked why should you dwell in anger when the Naga villagers were able to nurture forgiveness and move on.

Priya: Yes, the laughter I encountered in Nagaland intrigued me. I'll share a brief background to provide context.

Certain characteristics or traits are often used to describe communities and, as stereotypical (and offensive) as they may appear, I suppose we use these to make sense of 'other' people. For me, laughter, generosity, and resilience are characteristics that I associate with the Naga people; generosity and laughter were shared in abundance with me during my travels there. Let me illustrate this using two bus journeys I took within Nagaland in 2012-2013, which were the first instances when I consciously paid attention to the physical presence of laughter.

The bus journeys were similar in that they were defined by laughter - quiet conversations that were punctuated by bellows of laughter that erupted suddenly. Not knowing the local languages, I was a spectator, often chuckling involuntarily in solidarity with all the laughing. At times, someone would articulate bits in Nagamese to include me, but I didn't mind not knowing what was happening. Humour is cultural, and perhaps I wouldn't understand, I thought. What struck me the most was that I had rarely encountered such rambunctious and collective laughter during my bus journeys in South India. In Nagaland, on the other hand, it felt like these were collective journeys, when long periods of silence or quiet conversations would be interrupted by a loud remark or comment that would evoke laughter from everyone in the bus. We were part of a collective conversation whether or not we were part of the individual ones. What a delightful, shared sense of belonging, reinforced one laugh at a time!

Another important space where laughter dominates is the Naga kitchen, around the hearth. It is here that most of the social life of the people plays out, I suppose. In the evenings, visitors would come and go and conversation would flow along with the endless cups of phika cha (black tea). I encountered laughter here so often that I cannot disassociate the Naga kitchen from laughter.

It's not just public transport or kitchens, I find that in general there is a tendency in Nagas to find humour and grace in unexpected situations. This translated into the laughter that I encountered in personal conversations, in family gatherings, and social events. Like I said, I was intrigued but also confused. When I first came to Nagaland, around 2011-2012, there was heavy army presence, and Assam Rifle checkpoints were common along roads where we were often stopped for random checks. Perhaps I was confused at the contradiction of armed military personnel and laughter coexisting. Shouldn't there be anger, or resentment, or weariness after all these years of armed conflict? In this context, my field collaborator's comments were eye-opening.

Dolly: Experiences of colonization and military violence transform societies and lives forever. Yet, the Naga past is often designated as a place where one has nothing valuable to learn or reflect. It is easy to imagine this given the frequency with which Naga history is viewed as synonymous with savagery, barbarism, and primitivity. It is here that fieldwork moments of laughter in militarized societies draw our attention to scholarship, methodology, and ethnography. I recall my fieldwork with fellow anthropologist Bengt Karlsson. Our work *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India* (Kikon and Karlsson, 2019) captured moments about sharing stories and laughter. The lives of Indigenous migrants were challenging, but we were able to showcase their dreams and their resistance to be seen as victims. Food has been an integral part of my work to explore these connections. Social bonds, politics, and relationships exist amidst uncertain and fleeting moments of calm and peace. When I was making my first documentary film "Seasons of Life" in 2019, the frame of my anthropological exploration expanded to include community, fermentation, forest, and seasons as well. There as so much to learn about my own culture and people. I was drawn to stories of everyday survival and celebration which are often overlooked as irrelevant to understand and engage with the world around us. Among other experiences, I remember the belly-filled laughter during the shooting. we were all drawn toward it and it allowed us to see one another as part of a collective initiative about communicating the importance of fermenting cultures and the hands that produce and nurture what constitutes Naga food. Such moments break down the walls of professionalism where researchers are often driven to write about cutting-edge theories and contribute to our respective disciplines fade away. For me, the foundation of theory about fermentation starts from the lives of the Naga foragers in the foothills, the bamboo groves inside the forest, and the seasons. For me, a theory of fermentation is a relational and grounded living sets of practices about care that helps us to observe the interconnectedness of life and social relations. Here, laughter is an integral part of thinking and writing about theory because laughing together allows us to overcome our inhibitions and join a symphony of happiness. I see that in your context as well, this is happening in liberating ways where people trust you with their stories during your fieldwork.

Priya: Very true. I am grateful that people shared stories from their past with us so openly, allowing us to learn and grow. These stories, especially those around conflict and militarization, shaped my understanding of armed forces and conflict. They made me question the one-sided narratives we are exposed to in mainland India. While some of these stories must have been traumatic to the narrator, they were at times narrated in a manner that allowed us to see the humour in the situation.

This is where my initial question to you came from. I experienced so much collective laughter in Nagaland, which I hardly experienced back home, that it made me wonder whether it was innate to the Nagas and if it helped them cope with their trauma. On the other hand, was laughter a response to conflict? Did laughter allow the community and the individual to deal with intergenerational trauma and make them resilient? Did people rise from years of conflict because of this ability to make space for laughter? Is laughter embedded in the Naga worldview and its language, culture, folklore, and songs? Is laughter gendered? These questions come to my mind. I wonder what your thoughts are!

Figure 1: A basket of tender sliced bamboo shoots in the foothills of Nagaland during the filming of "Seasons of Life" (2020). Dr. Kikon's film focused on community connections with foraging, forest, and seasons. Photo credit: Mhademo Kikon. For the film, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrI4e07MYKk&t=16s

Dolly: Who knows the true meaning of laughter? Does it project sadness, joy, defeat, or sorrow of life passing us by? We join a group and fill the room with laughter, and yet feel a deep sense of emptiness. And then, we laugh around a fireplace in a Naga village and dwell on the transformative connection of humanity. There is intergenerational trauma and intergenerational joy in Naga society. Imagine laughter as the colour of threads the weaver selects to design the pattern of togetherness, a fellowship worth nurturing and caring for. Laughter is an analogy of life. It seeks to translate the meaning of our lives. In research methodology, the personality or background of the researchers seldom shows up. Fieldwork methods are neither geared to humanize the researcher nor project their vulnerability. It is impossible to predict the failure of a researcher to comprehend the scale of historical, political, and social complexities on the ground. When we exhibit our expertise and proficiency of the field site, we simultaneously exit from our *real* lives, suspending it for the time being to enter a world of *work*.

During fieldwork, laughter and all such light-hearted moments are denied any place in our analysis because it might affirm that marginalized and broken communities like Nagas do not need help or an intellectual saviour. Nagas are laughing. Oh no. Stop them! Is there an affective map for laughter? Can the dispossessed laugh? Can the subaltern laugh? We can go on with the irony. The "fieldwork moment" determines what stands out and what falls off from our ethnography, and often, the belly giggling laughter falls flat and disappears from our scholarly writings. We omit them in our intellectual pursuit of creating a cutting-edge concept that allows us to re-examine, re-work, and re-visit. We become captives of concepts,

arguments, and theories. We constantly seek to jot down work in our notebooks and fix meetings. I think no one starts their fieldwork with a determination to schedule laughter. On the contrary, laughter catches us by surprise. It does not recognize our hypothesis or proposals. It makes us visible and vulnerable as a fellow being within the community. It reconfigures our relationship with the world around us. Those who laugh together find a way to connect. In laughter a bond is created. I believe your reflections on laughter are valuable. Can you tell us how you relate laughter and trauma? Your research also deals with resilience and recovery of tropical forests.

Priya: I want to acknowledge your first statement - who knows what this laughter means! I take this as an invitation to think about laughter seriously, especially in the context of its role in fostering community, in resilience and recovery. Sometimes, I wish I was an anthropologist: I would be equipped to look at questions such as this. And then sometimes, I am grateful I am not an anthropologist: I worry (selfishly) that such an inquiry will open wounds that will reveal how much trauma these communities carry with them. Anthropologists and social scientists carry such heavy burdens. I find refuge in the fictitious objectivity of science.

What does laughter teach us as we face unprecedented challenges as societies and individuals in a fractured world? Can it be a form of collective coping mechanism? Can we incorporate more of this into our resistances and fights? Can this teach us to build resilient and hopeful communities?

I study tropical forests, their resilience, and their ability to recover from disturbance. Although these are complex processes not amenable to single sentence summaries, there are some intuitive points that emerge. One cannot understand recovery of forests or even their resilience without understanding their history, and without accounting for the composition of the ecological community that makes up these ecosystems. One needs to acknowledge and understand the past to determine the trajectory of the forest in the future. In that way, I suppose one can draw some parallels with human and ecological communities.

Dolly: How do you see scientists and anthropologists reflecting on fieldwork, methodology, and laughter?

Priya: Such an important question, especially as we face unprecedented challenges in our societies today. Although I describe myself as an ecologist, increasingly, I find that label constraining and unidimensional. I think that science is one way of understanding the world, and there are many others; perhaps, we need to find ways for these to co-exist and integrate. I am not a philosopher of science, but I wonder if the broader origins of modern western science in Europe—at a time when the notion of nature was being transformed into an extractive enterprise—has perpetuated into the way we study it, i.e., reductionist and quantifiable. But can nature be quantified? I see value, of course, in quantifying and measuring changes in forest composition and structure. I do it as part of my work and find the information useful in understanding how forests function.

Nevertheless, I also am beginning to see value in viewing landscapes as spaces of *meaning* for both humans and non-humans. This becomes, in my opinion, even more important when we talk of biodiversity conservation. Knowledge (and nature) is, after all, a human construct. How then can we look at nature, forests, and organisms from various perspectives and not just that of *science*? Perhaps, this is where collaborations between ecologists and anthropologists (and other allied fields) become crucial. Even more important

is the perspective and agency of the communities who live in these spaces. Introspective and reflective collaborations between various fields is the key. Science cannot always take centre stage in conversations around nature, degradation, recovery, and catastrophes. Meaningful collaborations with HASS (Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences) fields will allow us to break the hubris and go forward in ways that are inclusive, ethical, and equitable.

Where does laughter fit into this? Everywhere, in my opinion - as a means to make connections with team members, community, and as an emotion that physically presents itself in the lives of the communities who live there. Laughter allows us to engage with the community with empathy and equality, without always centering trauma or damage. Laughter was never far away from our fieldwork - we laughed at ourselves a lot! I see it as a positive presence, one that allows us to build relationships with and learn from the people in the region, who have such a can-do attitude in the face of numerous past and on-going transformative events.

It is only fair to add that I am frequently the butt of many jokes and I find myself laughing just as hard as the others. It has taught me to not take myself too seriously. This last point is of critical importance, especially as a scientist. Too often we take ourselves too seriously, which can lead to an inflated sense of our ability to influence change, and thereby, leads to frustrations, disappointments, and development of a saviour complex.

Dolly: Can you share your thoughts on fieldwork methodologies, and how you have built trust working with indigenous communities like the Naga people in Northeast India?

Priya: There are a couple of questions that guide me in my work - who asks questions?, who answers them? Ecology and related fields such as conservation are often elitist and exclusionary, and these questions help me centre my research. One approach to fieldwork is to collaborate with local researchers and students, and centre their learning. When we work in villages, we take consent for all activities (even when there is no legal requirement) and respect local cultural beliefs. Constantly questioning our received wisdom (such as 'hunting is evil' and 'jhum is bad') is also important as it allows us to engage with the local communities without disrespect and judgement.

My work in Nagaland, and other parts of Northeast India, is largely collaborative in nature. One researcher who I admire a lot and am incredibly lucky to collaborate with is Lansothung Lotha. We first met in 2012 in Pakke Tiger Reserve, and then Intanki National Park while doing fieldwork. We kept in touch, and our dinner time discussions in Dimapur led to a long-term research collaboration. He is an excellent mentor to young ecologists and nature enthusiasts in Nagaland and was instrumental in helping us put together a small team of researchers. Going forward, we hope to build a network of young students who we can mentor and collaborate with. This is an important point. Dr. Bidyut Sarania, with whom I worked on a project spanning all of Northeast India, made an observation that young researchers/students from the region are frequently underrepresented in or underemployed in significant projects that take place in the region. As a result, it hinders students' comprehension of the research process and leaves out opportunities that facilitate learning and future collaboration. It becomes imperative then to pursue just and inclusive research processes.

Dolly: Is it challenging for scientists to deal with themes such as trauma and emotion while working in militarized regions? What was your reaction when you first visited Northeast India?

Priya: When I first came to the Northeast about a decade ago, one of the things that struck me the most was the presence of armed forces personnel everywhere, especially in Nagaland and Manipur. Coming from a South Indian city where we barely saw army personnel, this invoked strong emotions in me, including fear and a sense of being stripped of my humanity. Conflict has not only inflicted profound violence on the people but also on the ecosystems in the Northeast. Dolly, I wonder what you think about my assertion that the forests here were agents in their own right, providing a stage for the war theatricals to be carried out. Over years, the forests provided refuge for the Nagas, Japanese, British, and the Indian army equally. Some were better able to navigate these forests, of course. The forests continue to carry the scars of the conflict: places where patches were razed, people died, and perhaps, equipment was abandoned. It takes a long time for forests to recover from any disturbance.

As an ecologist, I find it particularly fascinating that I can completely ignore the lasting impact of conflict on these forests that are home to Indigenous communities, and objectively focus on tree density, bird diversity, and soil moisture. Nothing wrong in this, of course. However, stripped of their agency, a forest simply becomes an interconnected set of species that influence each other's survival and fate, and not a place of meaning.

While the objective nature of the 'field' in scientific projects may give the perception of separation from community emotions, can we really separate these complex entanglements as humans? Who deals with the trauma of the landscape? Modern science gatekeeps the extension of agency to non-humans. Where is the question of engaging with landscape trauma when we don't even acknowledge agency of a plant? This is where one cannot ignore that most Indigenous societies extend agency to animals and plants. Maybe, this is key to 'protecting' nature.

I ask myself why can ecologists not make space for these conversations and acknowledge the wounds of the places and the people we study? Of course, this will not change our field methods—it will not impact our transects or point counts—but it will encourage us to situate our work in the lived realities of these landscapes. I hope it will also force us to reflect on what our work should mean for the future of these landscapes and the people of Northeast India.

I also want to acknowledge what you said earlier about being an angry young woman. This is an important point. I wish we could discuss a bit more. I am not from this region and a lot of what I experience is what I call *intellectualized* anger. It must have been so much harder for researchers who are from these landscapes to work while being objective. How was it for you to put aside personal grief and anger to be objective and focus on your research questions?

Dolly: Let me return to the moment of laughter during fieldwork, especially your stories of laughter with communities or even with strangers in buses and shared taxis. Your stories allow us to engage with transformative moments. As a child growing up in Nagaland, and even into my adulthood, I was angry as I shared with you. Over the decades, I realised that being politically engaged and working on difficult themes such as sexual violence, militarization, and human rights doesn't mean I should dwell in rage and sorrow. The pursuit of justice, or

dwelling on these difficult issues, are practices one must embody in our lives, writings, and ethics. It is part of one's life and should never end with an article, a book, or in our death. These ideas and practices must live on. Violence, oppression, and the case for justice will always be central themes for human society. I am not saying these are impossible goals. However, as we work towards addressing existing political questions and social relations (racism, caste, capital, market economy), the roots of these questions lie deep in the past (colonization, extractive regimes, patriarchy). I suppose I am digressing here, but what texts/books inspires your work in Northeast India?

Priya: Over the years, there have been a few books and articles that have shaped my limited understanding of the region. One of the first books I read was Sanjoy Hazarika's *Strangers of the Mist* (2000) which was such an amazing introduction to the complexities of the region. Another book that influenced and taught me a lot was Kaka Iralu's *The Naga Saga*. Your book, *Living with Oil and Coal* (2019), made me consider not just the environmental costs of coal mining but the human costs as well, especially in a militarized region. I am currently reading a collection of essays, *Gender Narratives: Reinterpreting Language, Culture, and Tradition in Nagaland* (2021), which has been an eye-opener for me. I am also reading about the Kohima and Imphal wars during WW2 and what it meant for the people living in the region. Apart from these, writings from across the northeast have helped me learn about the region, including the writings of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire.

Figure 2: A member of our research team, Dunbi, walks with Rustong as they visit sections in and around Thanamir village with different forms of land-use. Rustong is a local wildlife expert and ornithologist working with an NGO. He was generous with his knowledge, we were impressed with his expertise and commitment. Photo credit: Tekameren Jamir.

Dolly: How many years have you worked with a community-centred approach? Do you feel researchers from the sciences and social sciences working in Indigenous communities should collaborate and discuss centring community knowledge and fieldwork ethics?

Priya: Yes, researchers from the sciences and the social sciences should collaborate to find ways to centre community knowledge and fieldwork ethics. There is much to learn from each other's disciplines and experiences. I do not work on conservation projects directly. Much of my work revolves around studying ecological phenomena and how various disturbances impact them. However, we still work with communities and within community-owned lands. Our work is in collaboration with the local communities and we plan to share our data and findings with the village biodiversity committees. My collaborator, Dr. Bidyut Sarania, and I have written some joint essays, stemming from our conversations and discussions, which capture my group's research philosophy, fieldwork value, and ethics (Sarania et al., 2021, Sarania 2022).

Figure 3: The cooperation and support extended by the local community is crucial for our work. Here, our team members are visiting the plantation of Mr. Bhanben who kindly allowed us to conduct bird counts in his farmland. Photo credits: Lansothung Lotha.

Are we perpetuating inequities in knowledge production and exchange or are we willing to be allies with communities who live here? This question is an important one that we need to address as we move forward. Decolonising academia should mean more in a country

such as India. It should reflect in our efforts as scientists and researchers dismantling power-privilege structures that exist in academia. This would be important for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine) and HASS (Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences) fields in India as we tackle issues such as climate change and intolerance that threaten millions of lives. Decolonizing fieldwork methodology needs more work and investment of time, but we should not shy away from it. Many organizations and people show that this approach is truly transformative for societies. We should learn from people and organizations who are implementing equitable, and inclusive projects on ground across India.

Dolly: If there is a way for researchers to bring meaning and engagement in our fieldwork, it is by acknowledging the communities we meet are living beings. We must humanise fieldwork and add practices like respect, trust, and solidarity as part of methodology. Their relationship and participation, in good times and bad times, ought to be founded on caring for one another. Laughter, for me, is an invitation to think about fieldwork, collaboration, and decolonizing research. It calls for our solidarity and commitment to address the violence of colonization and militarization. In this context, it is fundamental for researchers to examine their existing methodology to study societies living under military occupation and terror.

Priya, thank you so much for your time and reflections. I have become richer with this conversation, and I hope we will continue to dwell on the questions you have offered us.

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