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## Toxic Ecologies

Assam, Oil, and a Crude Future

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*The ecological destruction from the Baghjan gas well blowout is part of the story of Assam's economic development. Resource extraction has been foundational to the logic of politics in Assam but has marginalised local communities.*

Billowing black clouds against the sky form the background in Baghjan, Assam. Crude oil and gas continue to burn since a devastating gas well blowout in late May. Images show dead fish and birds floating in the numerous wetlands and tributaries, which the local rural people depend on for sustenance and livelihood, and in the adjacent Dibru Saikhowa National Park. The destruction from the oil spill including loss of biodiversity is deeply material: water, soil, air, and lost animal and human lives.

The devastation continues to unfold against the backdrop of debates about the technicalities of the drilling for oil, the negligence of Oil India Limited (OIL), and the dangers involved in hydrocarbon explorations. There is a deep sense of bereavement and mourning and visible anger from various quarters of Assamese society. Greed, profit, corruption, responsibility, accountability, security, suffering, and inequality: these words appear in several commentaries and reports in Assam and beyond.

Extractive regimes in Assam have influenced social relations and politics on the ground. The ecological destruction and the loss of livelihood is part of the story of Assam's development and progress.

As we reflect on the environmental impact, perhaps we can invite ourselves to explore the causes and origins of the extractive presence in Assam. Hydrocarbon operations in the middle of agricultural lands, the oil spill destroying the biodiversity of a national park, pollution ruining vegetable patches; all emphasize how extractive regimes in Assam have influenced social relations and politics on the ground. The ecological destruction and the loss of livelihood is part of the story of Assam's development and progress.

### Hydrocarbon divinations

Modern Assam has had a deep and complicated relationship with hydrocarbon operations. Oil and gas are symbols of progress and development. It is also an awkward relationship where oil companies emulate discriminatory management techniques, speaking only to 'leaders' and pushing away local communities. The evidence of toxicity, if we look closely, lies in the oil companies distrust of local communities.

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What connects the hydrocarbon world and Assam are structures of power, violence, and a culture of management that feigns ignorance about the causes of local resentment. Extractive regimes in Assam are a 'technical matter', and the angst of communities a 'local issue'. This understanding has divided the extractive world from the community world. To exhibit or display any solidarity with the affected communities we need to confront the toxic nature and history of extraction in Assam.

Like tea and the military, oil too in Assam is contained inside secure townships. These are regimented worlds. The office of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in Nazira, for instance, has multiple security check points. Its manicured lawns, gardens, clubs, and living quarters are ordered. So are the aspirations and visions of the employees who live there. Conversations range from maintaining strict lunch breaks to scheduling meetings for expanding explorations and logistics for new rigs.

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For people inside the townships, outside lies wilderness: confusion, messy relations, and resources for exploration and extraction. In turn, residents from the villages and towns see these townships as bastions of power and privilege. These extractive worlds are,

nonetheless, deeply entangled. Travelling along the foothills of the Assam-Nagaland border in 2009, sometimes like a fugitive on motorbikes, and at other times trekking up to the jhum fields in the upper elevations, I witnessed the excitement and anxieties of communities who were quick to believe in stories about extractive projects. From timber, sand, cash crops, to pebbles on the riverbeds, the anticipation of extracting resources and making some quick money was addictive here. Oil and coal were magic chants that seemed to possess minds and soak into the souls of people I met along the border between the two states.

Visible before our eyes, moving along this landscape, were mammoth machines lodged at the back of long trucks owned by the refinery. Making their way towards the paddy fields across the village, the scale of the hydrocarbon activity was aggressive. The sight of giant trucks carrying disassembled rigs and pipes or workers drilling in different oil fields, about a few miles apart from towns and temples, became a common sight. After sunset, the night sky lit up with flares from the oil wells. When I returned to Gelekey, in Sibsagar district, and saw the flares atop the rigs on the outskirts of the town after nightfall, I tensed up. Visible too next to the rigs were Central Industrial Security Force personnel with guns. It was impossible to escape the pressure of the carbon landscape. Across the oil exploration and extraction sites of Assam, these flares underneath the dark skies of the Himalayan foothills symbolized the sacrifices made by local communities, and the condition of extractive frontiers in the twenty first century.



Oil Rigs in Sibsagar District, Assam (2010) | Dolly Kikon

## Hydrocarbon violence

The hydrocarbon world loops into the lives of people of the North East. From the young man in Nagaland who broke his back digging for coal, to the oil thieves in Assam who died after inhaling toxic fumes from a freight train, these local stories could be part of any frontier tales. For decades, youth from villages in Tinsukia and Sibsagar districts, centres of the oil industry, have come to the gates of the ONGC and OIL offices to protest and demand employment. Carrying placards written in Assamese, they shouted slogans and were often beaten up by the security forces.

On the other hand, elites and the middle-class in Assam have benefitted from the hydrocarbon operations. From contracts to jobs, the patronage for oil and gas exploration has come from politicians and local contractors and leaders. Local university departments and technical institutions, whose alumni are recruited by the oil companies, have supported the exploration and extraction of oil and gas.

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These developments alert us to a fractured history of political vision and alliances. The townships that secure the life of hydrocarbons have often refused to engage with local communities. But social relations were fluid and power alliances formed to secure contracts and

to control the disruptive voices from the villages. This polarization invites us to examine the relationship between the state and its marginalized citizens in Assam. Throughout the oil drilling districts of Assam, the world of hydrocarbons intersects with the social, economic, and the political world. Resource extraction has played an important role in defining the foundational logic of politics in the Brahmaputra valley and were the grounds upon which the politics of sovereignty and the right to self-determination came up.

The villages around Baghjan in Tinsukia district constituted one of the strongest bases for the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The ULFA's slogan, "unity, revolution, freedom," addressed the violence of colonization, and focused on sovereignty and on the redistribution of land and resources. While Assamese intellectuals and scholars critiqued the ULFA's vision to defeat the oppressive Indian state and establish a grand sovereign nation, this revolutionary call found a strong base in the rural agrarian countryside of Assam. The imaginary past that a section of Assamese thinkers and writers scoffed at was a ray of hope for a large section of poor and discontented population in Assam. Despite the excesses and the militarization of the organization itself, its vision brought an alliance of disparate social groups.

Local exchanges and activities intersected with histories of capital, extraction, and politics. Tea plantations, oil wells, and agricultural land did not exist on separate maps, they were layered, and their lives overlapped.

From this violent armed revolution in Assam, emerged a moment where the cultivator and the student mobilized for village collectives and for carrying out collective civic work in their localities. From repairing roads to carrying flood relief works, these activities seem to bring the land and the frontier alive. Local exchanges and activities intersected with histories of capital, extraction, and politics. Tea plantations, oil wells, and agricultural land did not exist on separate maps, they were layered, and their lives overlapped. Tea plantations hugged villages, oil wells shared boundaries with a wildlife park, paddy fields transformed into oil and gas gathering stations. The transformation of land, not into nature, but into a base and a project to realize a political sovereign future seemed to drive some of ULFA's political interventions in last quarter of the 20th century.

From seeing the land and its resources as being exploited by oppressors, to the depressing period of the secret killings in Assam through the 1990s, radical politics in Assam is atomized today. The most visible political movement in contemporary times is the one of land rights, headed by leaders like the imprisoned Akhil Gogoi from the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti. Yet again it is being driven by an organization that seeks to articulate the many problems of small and subsistence farmers who still depend on the land for their livelihoods. Besides that, concerns from the tea plantation world do not see big tea companies and small growers come together. Small tea growers, most of whom are local youth, have little access to factories and markets of packaged tea.

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In case of the hydrocarbon explorations, the government and politicians are the intermediaries pushing aside local communities on the ground. As the Baghjan disaster unfolded, local communities from the surrounding villages blocked work in all the adjoining oil wells. Oil India reported that the crude oil and gas production were affected due to these protests and the company had incurred losses. Among the organizations blocking their work were the All Assam Students Union, the All Moran Students Union, and the All Adivasi Students Association of Assam. There are many more environmental groups and local organizations who are vocal. But it is important, in particular, to recognize the voices of local communities in the aftermath of the oil spill and who raged and stopped the production of oil and gas.

The glory and development of modern Assam has rolled on and now threatens to break the backs of local communities from Baghjan's adjoining villages, who are the most affected people on the ground. They stare at water bodies, vegetable plants, and cultivable land, all soaked in crude oil.

## Crude realities

Experts have differing verdicts on who is responsible for the mess in Baghjan. Some say the Assam government earns royalties from the oil, so they should be accountable and take care of the oil company and their insecurities. Others say that the magnitude of the contamination is beyond comprehension. Food, lives, soil, nature, and air, all have been affected. But this is not the lens that extractive companies adopt. Neither the lives of communities nor the environmental disaster on the ground matter. The loss is estimated in extraction, profit, and protecting the brand. This is the crude reality across the globe.

It has always been challenging to find reports or news in the English newspapers from the North East about oil exploration or stories connected to the oil world. The very few reports I came across, as I was writing my book, *Living with Oil & Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*, were about the local youth seeking employment. There was a small news about Ahom heritage sites that were destroyed by the drilling of ONGC teams nearby. There was some news about oil theft. These kinds of fractured pieces defined the encounters between the oil companies and the local communities in Assam.

What is to be extracted (resources and powerful relations) and who are to be avoided (local communities and histories) are neatly demarcated. This is the logic of the extractive industry.

However, the papers covered many ONGC and OIL events and meetings. The companies promised scholarships, spoke of plans for schools and roads for the villages in the vicinity of the oil wells, and exploration sites were announced. This, after all, was progress and development. But I learnt from a Corporate Social Responsibility officer of one of the companies that these promises were made in return for accessing the extraction site in the villages. A road was promised as long as it would help rig trucks to ply and build oil wells. He categorially said that if there was nothing to gain from the villages, oil companies would not waste their time and spend their money.

What is to be extracted (resources and powerful relations) and who are to be avoided (local communities and histories) are neatly demarcated. This is the logic of the extractive industry. This was the reason engineers and technicians involved in oil and gas exploration were unable to see hydrocarbon as a political topic. It was a technical project. Their relationship was with the oil and gas preserves under the ground, and they had nothing to do with the communities living above the ground. The oil townships, besides the military barracks and the plantation estates, operated on the same logic. This opaqueness in social relations reflected the world of the Assamese society at large. The parallel universe of families from the oil and tea worlds and their dreams about the future shut off the world of the local communities affected by the Baghjan blowout. In the extractive world, oil and gas are the models of progress for Assam. They contain the story of modernization and celebration of Assam's glorious hydrocarbon heritage. They also hold the fire and rage of the most marginalized population who has been left out of this extractive deal. Nothing but a crude future awaits them.