

Land Grabbing

A Colonial Tool to Marginalize an Indigenous Rural Santal Community in Bangladesh

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“When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, the tables had been turned: we had the Bible, and they had the land.”

-Desmond Tutu

ABSTRACT

Employing a descriptive qualitative case study methodology, this article postulates that land grabbing is a man-made situation of coercion and oppression for the indigenous Santals in Bangladesh. The violent nature of land grabbing in Palashpur, a remote village in Bangladesh, has dispersed and dislocated the once closely-knit Santal community, destroyed Indigenous social and economic institutions, traditional ways of life, pristine and serene milieu, and the community's rhythm of life. The article analyses how land rights as essential components of human rights are being violated because of the colonial nature of the nation-state and its failure to protect the land of the indigenous peoples. By disregarding various international Indigenous land rights and the many state tenancy acts, the nation-state provides covert support to the land-grabbers. Thus, the state violates basic principles of human rights and acts as an accessory to the misery associated with territoriality. Moreover, the article explores a deep-seated nationalism engaged in insidious ethnic cleansing, resulting in an identity and existential crisis perpetrated through the dispossession of the Indigenous land in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Land grabbing, Indigenous Santals, Bangladesh, human rights, land rights, colonialism, Palashpur, dispossession, Indigenous social and economic institutions, state tenancy acts, territoriality

Figure 1*Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland*

Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Introduction

Land grabbing is a pervasive and insidious practice that perpetuates the exclusionary agenda of the nation-state concerning Indigenous land rights and access to land. This phenomenon not only undermines the rights of Indigenous communities but also reinforces racial inequalities within the broader socio-political landscape. Recognizing this crucial fact and its adverse impact on the lives of Indigenous peoples, Jo M. Pasqualucci¹ argues that “Indigenous peoples have long suffered violations of their basic land rights, either perpetrated by the state or by third parties who operate free of state interference.” In this context, this article analyzes a variety of mechanisms that contribute to the continual marginalization of Indigenous land rights, as well as the associated dehumanization and suffering experienced by this community. This has happened in an overpopulated country,

Bangladesh, where land is the scarcest of all resources. Indeed, land grabbing, which is the foremost cause of land dispossession in the area, is carried out by a group of corrupt people locally known as the *land mafia*² and state policies contribute to this surreptitious operation. The devious nature of the situation undermines the existence and sense of belonging of the Indigenous Santals in contemporary Bangladesh.

The predicament of the Indigenous Santals in Palashpur³, caused by land grabbing, is not an isolated occurrence. It reveals why and how the nation-state seizes the land, misappropriates resources, and exerts control through assimilation or elimination. It further exposes the colonial nature of imposing containment and control over ethnic minorities. It manifests itself in the acts of suppressing tradition through modernism and destroying spirituality and collectivism, privileging materialism and individualism. Colonialism in this respect emanates from a broader perspective, which is “conceptualized here not only as foreign or alien, but rather as imposed, dominating, and discriminatory.”⁴ Another layer of this issue is a deep-rooted Islamist nationalism covertly engaged in ‘insidious ethnic cleansing’ through premeditated dispossession of Indigenous land, resulting in a sustained decline of the

¹ Pasqualucci, International Indigenous Land Rights: A Critique of the Jurisprudence of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Light of The United Nations, 51-98.

² Interview with the author, November 2005.

³ Palashpur is a pseudonym for the site of this research. A metaphor for the contested space of neo-colonial power and politics.

⁴ Dei, *Knowledge and Educational Reforms in Ghana*, 40.

Indigenous Santal population in the region. This demographic decline of Indigenous peoples due to land alienation is the result of the non-implementation of international conventions, state laws, and regulations supporting the land rights of Indigenous peoples. Until now, those laws and regulations exist behind red tape and remain unenforced⁵. These provisions of the law, at least on paper, are to prevent land alienation among Indigenous peoples⁶. On the contrary, government rhetoric and action deliberately fail to acknowledge the endemic problem, let alone take measures to prevent the ramifications of this inhumane condition. Indeed, the battle of the rural Santals against organized land-grabbing has multiple fronts in which the Santals encounter inescapable antagonism. Actual dispossession is vicious and lacks constitutional and moral support from the divided civil society. The other front manifests as a narrative that denies such oppressive and inhumane situations.

Indigenous Perspectives in Research

In this study of the Indigenous Santal people, I attempted to follow the methodology employed in Indigenous research to ensure it is conducted in a respectful, ethical, empathetic, and beneficial fashion from the perspective of the research participants. I gave much thought to the process of decolonization in the method of knowledge production and adopted “a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices”⁷. In the process, this research is not only “a means of creating knowledge; it is simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness

as well as mobilization for action”⁸. To create an epistemology compatible with the lived experiences of the research participants, I critically reflected on the research processes and outcomes, bearing in mind that the interests of the Santals, their experiences, and their knowledge are at the center of the research. This study is based on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and feedback from the participants. To this end, I employ a descriptive qualitative case study methodology. This explores the perspectives of the subjects in their struggle for survival and experiences of marginalization and dehumanization on their own terms and in their own words. I listened to their experience of land dispossession and critically reflected on what I heard and what it meant, both to the speakers and myself. Finally, I present here the echoes of their voice and knowledge.

As I was dealing with human subjects in this politically and socially volatile region, I was concerned about various emerging ethical issues. For the protection of the community and its participant members, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants have been protected by concealing their names with pseudonyms. The names of places and communities where the participants were recruited have also been concealed using pseudonyms. I was forthright about the purpose

⁵ Roy, *The ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Population, 1957 and The Laws of Bangladesh: A Comparative Review*.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 20.

⁸ Gaventa, *Toward a Knowledge Democracy* 121-122, cited in Barua, *Colonial Education, and the Buddhist Community*, 113.

of this study and explained it to the potential participants as simply as possible with the help of community activists. The research findings have been shared with the research participants. They provided feedback for clarification.

The primary data of this case study was collected through in-depth audio-taped individual and focused group interviews and field notes recorded through personal observations, experiences, and reflections. The secondary data was collected from the analysis of the documents, census data, land records, land policies, and records of colonial and national history and the constitution of Bangladesh.

The sampling procedure involved two stages that incorporated a purposive sampling procedure⁹ and snowball techniques. In the first stage, a few leaders and grassroots-level activists were personally approached. Following the recruitment of these individuals, the rest of the participants were recruited through snowball techniques¹⁰. I spent two and a half months with the Indigenous Santal community in Palashpur and the adjoining villages of Kestapur Union in the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. All participants were interviewed in Bengali according to their choice of language. Additionally, the interviews and informal chats before and after the interviews were also audio-taped and documented through self-guided shorthand. The audiotapes were transcribed, translated into English from Bengali, and edited, and immediate reflections were recorded. Audio-taped interviews were played back to the participants for verification after each interview session. Following the interviews, there were

informal discussions, which were also recorded. These discussions offered valuable insights and understandings into the inner voices of Santals.

I used NVivo7 and later NVivo 8 for data analysis. By using NVivo7-8 as a repository, I streamlined data management and created cases from the interviews. I combined the cases with extensive coding and queries to uncover the central themes in transcribed interviews and secondary data. Those cases generated crucial themes and insights into the direct personal and collective lived experiences of the participants. Indeed, they provided a critical understanding of the mechanisms that sustain dehumanization through land dispossession. They further revealed how land dispossession affects the Santals' lives on an ongoing basis. Some of the research themes emerged inductively from the data through the initial coding, while other themes emerged from coding queries. Data-driven nodes were inductively applied in coding. Codes were transformed into categorical labels or themes. In this manner, the transcribed data and data from other sources, namely, transcribed interviews, cases from individual and focus groups, field notes, and data from secondary sources, were also imported into NVivo 7/8 for coding. After coding, I used the 'Search' function to find coincidences in the coding structures across cases. I also consulted tree nodes and free nodes for the analysis and interpretation of the data and, later, created interpretations for reporting the data. I produced this article by combining the

⁹ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Method*.

¹⁰ Debnath, *Living on the Edge: Predicament of Indigenous Rural Santal*.

frequencies of the nodes coded and qualitative examples of cases to show the occurrences of land grabbing and its dehumanization. Furthermore, identified nodes and coded queries drawn from the experiences of the participants have been used to portray the aftermath of imposed land alienation and how it violates land rights.

Figure 2

Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Land Rights and the History of Dehumanization

The land is the mother's milk of social, political, and economic power structures in Bangladesh, a predominantly agricultural society. In a country of about one hundred sixty million people with 147,570 sq. km¹¹ area, the land is "scarce and, therefore, establishing ownership right over land was always highly competitive, in which violence, speculation and other deceptive means were common."¹² The current landlessness within the broader society results from the misappropriation of state power,

the non-implementation of numerous tenancy acts, and entrenched hierarchical social and class structures in the subcontinent. For the Indigenous peoples, landlessness has been the most fundamental element of their individual and collective struggles to survive and sustain their existence, identity, and dignity.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have been living in the forest due to encroachment on their lands by the so-called mainstream population. As such, it was not a deliberate choice on their part to live in the forest. Their lived experience of adversity in the jungle within a hostile environment surrounded by wild animals, challenged by hunger, and diseases such as malaria were imposed upon them. This occurred in the ancient past, when "with the spread of *Sanskritization*¹³, the *Deva* or *Brahmana*¹⁴ would come down to the land of aborigines and would settle down there."¹⁵ According to Saxena¹⁶ "These *Adivasis*¹⁷ had been forced from the fertile land in the medieval period to seek refuge in forests by more aggressive communities who are currently the dominant ruling class." Therefore, the issue of cultural, territorial, and colonial domination of the Adivasis of the subcontinent, such as the Santals, has a long history. Not only have the

¹¹ Banglapedia, *National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*.

¹² Barkat, et al. *Political Economy of Khas Land in Bangladesh*.

¹³ *Sanskritization* has imposed social and cultural changes among Hindus and other minorities throughout Indian history.

¹⁴ *Brahmana* is the upper caste in the Hindu Society.

¹⁵ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*, 11.

¹⁶ Saxena, *The Saga of Participatory Forest Management in India*, 8.

¹⁷ *Adivasis* is the Bengali term for Indigenous peoples.

Europeans brought misery and misfortune to the Indigenous peoples, but also other more powerful groups, such as the Muslims and the local Hindus known as *dikkus*¹⁸, have disenfranchised them. Indeed, the exploitation caused by European colonial policies and practices in the subcontinent exacerbated the existing marginalization and brought new challenges to the lives of the Indigenous peoples. The present-day land alienation of the Santals in Palashpur and other regions is symptomatic of the longstanding cultural and economic colonization manifested in territorial subjugation by a more powerful dominant populace.

The legacies of past policies and their ramifications have been continuing in different forms in the present day, particularly the lands categorized as “forests” or those required for state forestry¹⁹ and mining. Until the beginning of the 19th century, more than two-thirds of the land mass of the subcontinent remained uncultivated²⁰. These virgin forests were generally comprised of infertile highlands where the Indigenous communities lived. Unfortunately, the relationship that Indigenous peoples enjoyed with the land had been under threat since the expansion of the European empires in the 16th century. Under the development theory masked as Westernization, nature was regarded as a landscape of economic resources rather than cultural and social space²¹. Nature became an object of “imaginative geography”²² in the process of the socio-political construction of conquest and exploitation based on political economy. Therefore, when the British colonized India, little thought or empathy was offered to protect or

nurture Indigenous peoples and their lands. They viewed the Indigenous peoples and themselves as parts of two different systems—modernism versus primitivism and metropolitan versus peripheral wilderness—and held conflicting interests embedded in different epistemological and ontological perspectives. Thus, the Indigenous lands became soft targets to be seized not only for economic reasons but also for spiritual purposes.

The insensitivity expressed in colonizing the land of the Indigenous peoples is outlined in Lindsey Wireman’s²³ work, which states, “colonizers saw themselves not as dispossessing Indigenous peoples but as creating economic use out of wasted land.” The colonizers felt justified in taking land from the Indigenous peoples, following the Lockean doctrine, which claims “That they had no rights to land they did not cultivate”²⁴. In Locke’s opinion, “most Indigenous people lived by hunting and gathering; therefore, they had no claim to the property.”²⁵ This discriminatory *terra nullius*²⁶ devalued the existence of Indigenous peoples as sub-humans and perceived everything belonging to the

¹⁸ *dikkus* or *dekos* are oppressors, the outsiders.

¹⁹ Lasimban, *UNDP- RIPP Regional Synthesis Paper Natural Resource Management Country Studies*.

²⁰ Singh cited in Saxena, *The Saga of Participatory Forest Management in India*.

²¹ Willems-Braun cited in Neil, *A History of Christianity in India*.

²² Said, *Literature and Society*.

²³ Wireman, *Indigenous Lands as Cultural Property: A New Approach to Indigenous Land Claims*, 1065.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Allen, *The Right to Property in Commonwealth Constitution*, 134.

²⁶ *Terra nullius* is a Latin expression deriving from Roman law meaning land belonging to no one.

indigeneity unworthy, including the time-honored Indigenous system of land cultivation. The Lockean²⁷ land position continues to control the land policies and practices of many governments around the world concerning Indigenous lands. Thus, the British presence from the late 18th century onwards brought much change to land and forest usage in the Indian subcontinent. The imperialist land policy was masked by commercial interests as the British viewed forests as crown lands, limiting private property rights only to continuously cultivated lands. Even lands managed by the communities were annexed by the government. This alienated the people from their common resources. This imposed Western values and turned the land into property and resources only in material terms, ignoring the historical, cultural, spiritual, and existential ties of the forest dwellers to the land.

By the 18th century, the British in India believed that land as private property alone could bring about progress and stability. At the same time, the *Physiocrats*²⁸ in France claimed that land was the basis of all wealth. Influenced by physiocratic views, Philip Francis²⁹, who sat on the Bengali Council, proposed a plan for a “rule of property” for Bengal. He argued that the public revenue would sink fast along with the general produce of the country if the private property was not permanently secured on a solid footing³⁰. It was undeniable that this ‘rule of property’ policy intended to reproduce the 18th century Whig notion of a British hereditary landed aristocracy in Bengal. In fact, behind this vision was an intended replication of English-Bengali gentleman farmers who would be as enterprising as their English counterparts.³¹ Unfortunately,

Francis’ policy was misconceived because it did not conform to the social and cultural reality of the native soil. However, the notion of land as the source of all wealth, based on an analysis of agricultural production according to the Physiocrats, gained momentum in the introduction of the *Permanent Settlement Act*³² by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. This new act nullified inherent rights and privileges along with the communion Indigenous peoples had once enjoyed with the land.

The British rule brought to the tribal areas a new capitalist economy manifested in profit, surplus value, and competition. It further brought money, government officials, and moneylenders into these areas. This also contributed to the process of encroachment on Adivasi land by outsiders. As a result, there were tribal revolts in several parts of Eastern India beginning in the mid-19th century. These revolts forced the administration to recognize the vulnerable position of the tribal peoples and pass laws to protect their lands from outsiders. However, in practice, most of these laws were often violated without any consequences, and as a result, unscrupulous merchants, corrupt officials, and moneylenders found ways to get around the laws.

²⁷ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government in Laslett* (Ed).

²⁸ *Physiocrats* are economists who believed that the wealth of nations was derived solely from the value of “land agriculture” or “land development.” Their theories originated in France.

²⁹ Francis, Sir Philip 1740–1818 was a British statesman and pamphleteer; appointed to the council of Bengal in 1773, an advocate of various political reforms and the advancement of individual liberty.

³⁰ Metcalf & Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*.

³¹ Guha, *Rules, Laws, and Powers: A Perspective from the Past*.

³² The *Permanent Settlement Act* was introduced in 1793 to extract revenue from land by Lord Cornwallis.

The consolidation of British authority through the land policy brought an unprecedented change in the then-undivided *Barind*³³ region, the home of many Santals. Barind is comprised of large tracts of land which currently belong to both India and Bangladesh. The Santal are the people who had cleared the inaccessible wild forests of this region and transformed them into cultivable land through their labor of love and the sweat of their brows. The historical occurrence of land grabbing in this particular context is relevant to the discussion as the site of this research is situated in this region. It was once the hotbed³⁴ of the marginalization and resistance of the Santals. Barind was torn apart by a broader colonial scheme to ‘divide and rule.’ As a result, Indigenous communities such as the Santals suffered further marginalization and territorial crises.

The current situation of land-grabbing in Palashpur is the continuation of the colonial policy that attached high value to land as private property to gain control, supremacy, and domination. This situation can be explained through the “core value” of the property theory the British employed during the periods of colonial and imperial expansion. The colonial property theory the British introduced was based on *deductive reasoning* which was a culture-free universal guide for the material and political interests of the empire. It denied the guidance of *inductive reasoning* based on contextualization and localized knowledge³⁵. Similarly, turning a blind eye to the traditional collective property rights commonly practiced by Indigenous communities, the new nation-state of Bangladesh

has also maintained and reintroduced numerous colonial land policies that have dispersed and disenfranchised Indigenous communities such as the Santals in rural areas. Consequently, this Santal community now exists in a state of isolation rather than as a closely-knit community.

Figure 3
Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Continuation of Colonial Policy

Indigenous communities across the subcontinent were territorially, politically, and culturally torn apart because of the partition. The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 based on religion had devastating impacts on the territorial privileges, belongingness, and marginalized position of the *Adivasi* Santals in

³³ *Barind* is the geographic region shared by Bangladesh and India.

³⁴ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*.

³⁵ Tanner, *On understanding too quickly: Colonial and postcolonial misrepresentation of Indigenous Fijian land tenure*.

Bangladesh. After a prolonged coercive control of British rule over the Indigenous peoples, who were identified as criminals, a large-scale civilizing mission was undertaken to show the benevolence of the British Raj. Many laws were initiated to affirm Indigenous rights, such as land rights and other rights of Indigenous peoples in various parts of the subcontinent, including the *Barind* region. Regrettably, many of the laws that were established for the exclusive interests of the Indigenous people slipped into the fog of deliberate oblivion following the partition of the subcontinent. On the contrary, many discriminatory colonial policies and practices continued with more adverse ramifications in the Islamist nation-state of Pakistan. Many such conditions, which immediately affected the lives of the Indigenous peoples, especially the land issues, were overlooked. Regrettably, the colonial legacy continues to operate in contemporary Bangladesh, which emerged as an independent nation after a bloody campaign against the neo-colonial Pakistani rule in 1971. Roy portrays the marginalization of the *Adivasi* in the new nation-state of Bangladesh. He states:

The Bangladeshi polity generally has very little “space” for the political aspirations and basic human rights of its Indigenous peoples and other minorities. This is also the case with the Indigenous peoples’ custom-based land and natural resource rights.³⁶

The first National Forest Policy of Bangladesh, which was initiated on July 8, 1979, was not different from colonial policies during the pre-independence period. This policy was guided by

the economic interests of the state, dismissing pluralistic perspectives and discounting the existentialist issues of the forest dwellers. It emphasized the preservation and scientific management of forests, as well as the extraction of forest produce for economic development and ecological balance. Unfortunately, the Forest Department has failed to achieve material or ecological prosperity. It has further denied “people’s participation”³⁷ in the management of forest resources in the country. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples were evicted from their rightful place in the forests and ancestral lands by abusing the existing laws in the name of economic development. This was done through tricks, forgery, and extreme coercion by the government and its agents in the community.

The acquisition of Indigenous lands by the government for the construction of eco-parks and the leasing of land for mining represents a common practice through which Indigenous peoples, such as the Santals, lose their foothold in the land. The actions are justified in the interests of tourism and economic development, which excludes Indigenous interests and development. The nation-state never pays attention to the fact that the misappropriation of natural resources by third parties can result in environmental degradation, which interferes with the existential relationship of Indigenous people with their land. Controversial open-pit coal mining in Phulbari³⁸

³⁶ Roy, *The rights of Adivasis on land and forests: Bangladesh Government's perspective*, 140.

³⁷ Halim, *Invisible Again: Women and Social Forestry in Bangladesh*, 86.

³⁸ Phulbari is in Bangladesh. It received international attention because of the controversial open pit- mining project and peasant movement against it.

in northwest Bangladesh is a case in point. Through an organized peaceful movement that turned violent, the local majority and Indigenous peoples had earlier forced the government to suspend a mining project by the Asian Energy Corporation, a London-based British Company. Currently, Global Coal Management Resources (GCM) has resumed aggressive efforts to push the project forward under a fresh deal with the government. If the government allows the project to go forward, it will forcibly displace 40,000 people in the region, including at least 2,200 Indigenous people whose history and tradition in the area date back 5,000 years.³⁹ According to Indigenous leaders, as many as 50,000 Indigenous people in 20 different tribal groups could lose their lands and livelihoods as mining would exhaust the water label. It would cause devastating ecological and humanitarian disaster in the region. If the project goes ahead as planned, it will violate the UN Declaration, Article 29(1), which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to the . . . productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources.⁴⁰

The issue of land grabbing in Phulbari is critically important in weighing up the adverse impacts of land grabbing in Palashpur. Undoubtedly, the Phulbari mine project jeopardizes the human rights of thousands of people due to the mass evictions and destruction of agricultural land and the pollution that will result from the extraction activities. However, low-intensity forced evictions targeting primarily Indigenous peoples are more prevalent, yet they receive no media attention. Unlike the victims in

Phulbari, the victims in Palashpur are exclusively Indigenous Santals, and the process is slow and insidious. In Phulbari, the concentration of the Indigenous groups is high. Conversely, in Palashpur, the Santals have already been dispersed and are living in isolation. Besides, the perpetrators in Palashpur are local, while in Phulbari, the perpetrators are foreigners. As such, the issue of positional marginality plays out through the notion of “race to innocence”⁴¹ in the oppression of the Santals in Palashpur. By emphasizing the marginality of the Bangladeshi mainstream agenda in the transnational context, complicity in the oppression of Santals and other minorities is masked. As a result, Santals in Palashpur encounter silent ethnic cleansing without much uproar. In contrast, the situation in Phulbari has received much local and international media attention. Indeed, forced eviction, which constitutes a violation of human rights, is widespread throughout Bangladesh. In addition, many policies of the colonial past imposed through the hegemony⁴² of the nation-state have had devastating impacts on the lives of the Indigenous peoples in this part of the world. After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1972, land reform policies were enacted; however, the implementation of land reform laws has been significantly constrained, primarily due to deep-

³⁹ Cultural Survival, *Bangladesh: Ban Coal Mine, Save Forests and Farms: Phulbari open-pit mine would displace thousands of Indigenous people*.

⁴⁰ UN Declaration, cited in Pasqualucci, *International Indigenous Land Rights*, 79.

⁴¹ Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in the Courtrooms and Classroom*.

⁴² Gramsci cited in Howson, & Smith: *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*.

seated structural prejudices within the country. These prejudices manifest in poor governance, entrenched vested interests, prevailing power dynamics, and systemic corruption.⁴³ Furthermore, the Adivasis are systematically excluded in government projects, such as the failed Agrarian Reform⁴⁴ and in the distribution of *Khasland*⁴⁵ to the landless people.⁴⁶

The most exclusionary act in the history of property rights in Bangladesh is the *Enemy Property Act*⁴⁷ of 1965 and its post-independence version, the *Vested Property Act*⁴⁸ of 1974⁴⁹. These acts have evicted millions of minorities, especially Hindus, from their ancestral lands, homes, and other property. This law, widely known as a powerful instrument for ethnic cleansing, has been cataclysmic for both the minority Hindus and Indigenous Santals who decades ago started practicing Hinduism⁵⁰. By abusing the Vested Property Act, the Santals and other Indigenous peoples all over Bangladesh, whose religious beliefs and rituals are akin to Hindu religious practices, were evicted from their lands as well. During this process, the Santals in Palashpur lost their property too. In line with the colonial past, the property rights established by the Bangladeshi government are fraught with politics of discrimination, domination, and deprivation. The Constitution of Bangladesh, a homogeneous country, does not have provisions for minority or *Adivasi* land rights, as articulated in the Constitutions of India and Pakistan. Land rights related to religious minorities and Indigenous peoples are overlooked by government and public policies. Thus, there is a total disregard for the declaration of the ILO

(International Labor Organization) Convention that states:

..... Indigenous peoples enjoy collective rights: to ownership, control, and management of their lands and territories; to exercise of their customary laws; to represent themselves through their representative institutions. It is also recognized that laws, policies, and “development” should not be imposed on them without their prior and informed consent.⁵¹

The ILO’s declaration has been discarded in the name of nation-building. The denial of *Adivasi* property rights and their customary laws negates their inherent rights of ownership, causing landlessness. Among the *Adivasi* communities across Bangladesh, customary laws do not traditionally require the type of documentation that is recognized by statutory law. In the *Adivasi* communities, personal or family land ownership and collective land ownership have always been entrusted to local chiefs and village leaders. Therefore, *Adivasis’* claims to land ownership have been considered void in the modern-day land laws that originated in the Euro-centric, colonial-imperial legal

⁴⁷ *Enemy Property Act*. The property of the Hindus who left for India in 1965 war was considered as enemy property..

⁴⁸ *Vested Property Act*: The Enemy property later turned into Vested is just a nomenclature.

⁴⁹ Trivedi, *The legacy of enemy turned vested property act in Bangladesh*.

⁵⁰ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*.

⁵¹ Colchester, cited in Ulloa, *The Ecological Native: Indigenous Peoples’ Movements and Eco-governmentality in Colombia*, 3.

system. In the name of the national interest, land laws represent an ongoing colonial desire to exploit the land, resources, and people. This law aids unscrupulous officials and the powerful landed elite in exploiting the pristine, illiterate Santals. A large portion of Santal land has been appropriated, leaving many Santals locked in bitter and futile land disputes with dishonest and powerful *land mafias*⁵². Thus, the gaps between the international and local land rights of the nation-state sustain the monopoly of exclusionary vested property rights. In the mainstream discourse, *Adivasis*, such as the Santals, are portrayed as outsiders. By denying their history in the region, the Santals are labeled as anachronistic and outsiders in terms of modernity and progress. This vilification, portraying the existence of the Santals frozen in time, denies their hard labor that turned the region into a habitable space. Denying the Santals their *Adivasi* status also disregards the historical reality of the undivided terrain of the subcontinent where the Santals once built their homes unrestricted by the political boundaries erected in 1947. These political boundaries were erected based on the notion of the nation as an imagined community⁵³ such as India and Pakistan, and later Bangladesh. Anthropology and history suggest the Santals are one of the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent and the *Barind* region. In the *Barind* region, they were the first settlers, coming before the Muslims who now claim to be mainstream people. Choudhuri⁵⁴ reports the “Santals came to Barind after 1871 in large numbers,” and “between 1881 and 1890 nearly 20 thousand Santals from the *Santal Parganas* and 16 thousand Mohammedans from Murshidabad migrated into

the district.” Ironically, the Muslims are entitled as the sons and daughters of the soil, while the Santals are portrayed as outsiders. Unless the land and property rights of the *Adivasis* are established, the Santals in Palashpur and elsewhere will continue to face marginalization and dehumanization, and their *Adivasi* status in the Constitution will remain unresolved.

Figure 4
Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Land as a Contested Terrain

Land nourishes the formation of Indigenous identity, survival, and religious practices. It is the material base for Indigenous cultural and spiritual activities that sustain Indigenous life and living. For the Santal *hor hopon* (the true

⁵² Kamal, *Alfred Soren and Adivasi's Struggle for Landownership*.

⁵³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on Origin and Spread of Nationalism*

⁵⁴ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*, 62.

men) combined with *hor desom* (Santal country) convey deep-seated emotional relationships, collaboration, freedom, collectivism, alternative local knowledge, and cultural autonomy that unite land and people in oneness. The quintessence of profound connection between the Santals and their land, along with their deep appreciation for it, is often encapsulated in the saying, “*Noa do Hor disom kana*” meaning, “This is Santal country.”⁵⁵ It is a special place for the Santal. Therefore, the land, or ‘*terra firma*,’ which is the material and physical parameter of Santal country, is inseparable from the Santal people who call themselves “*Hor*.” On the contrary, modern Western lifestyles have grown out of an increasing estrangement from the natural world or ‘*terra firma*’. The mode of modern culture places humankind against nature, an attitude that tends to target ‘Mother Nature’ as an enemy that must be conquered and controlled. In this context, the inseparable union between Indigenous culture and land can be understood, and the profound rootedness of Indigenous identity as well as their existence on that land, can be appreciated and treasured. Besides, the construct of “the nature-culture dichotomy, prevalent in Western thought, is an alien epistemology for Indigenous peoples”⁵⁶. Nature is an inseparable part of the Santal tradition. Various Santal rituals and festivities are celebrated under the cycle of nature in which the land or the village is at the center. The symbolic and real significance of land or village is well defined by Mahapatra.⁵⁷ “A Santal village is not merely a location in geography or history; it crystallizes a whole system of ritual structure. It comes into being through the special

dispensation of the *Bongas*,⁵⁸ and is sanctified by their blessings.” Thus, nature, rituals, and the lives of the *Hor hopon* are essential parts of the holistic world manifested in the Indigenous Santal worldview. One cannot exist without the other, and therefore, when one is estranged or lost by the intrusive external forces, the whole society loses its internal and external equilibrium, its “rhythm of daily life.”⁵⁹

The rhythm of their daily life “grows out of the close relationship between the activities of man and the cycle of nature.”⁶⁰ Loss of one of the elements ultimately leads to the rejection of Santalness or their tribal depth and poses challenges to their existence. Therefore, the land, known as the nucleus of nature, which sustains and ties rituals and the people together, is paramount to the unique presence, survival, and growth of the Santals. The land helps sustain the Santals and their rituals, which in turn help promote and revitalize Santal culture, history, and tradition. Due to inherent ties with forests and groves, “Santal festivals and religion rest heavily on the seasonal manifestation of nature.”⁶¹ Before colonialism, the Santals and most other Indigenous peoples emphasized the use of mutual

⁵⁵ Somer, *the Dynamics of Santal Traditions in a Peasant Society*, 57.

⁵⁶ Dodson: Ridgeway, cited in Banerjee, *Whose Land Is It Anyway? National Interest, Indigenous Stakeholders and Colonial Discourse*, 8.

⁵⁷ Mahapatra, *Modernization and Ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*.

⁵⁸ *Bongas* are spirits. The Santals believe bonga or Bongas control human destiny and diseases. They are the ones who control both visible and invisible worlds.

⁵⁹ Interview with the author, November 2005.

⁶⁰ Culshaw, *Tribal Heritage: A Study of the Santals. The Dynamics of Santal Traditions in a Peasant Society*, 24.

⁶¹ Ray, Das & Basu, *To Be With Santals*, 72.

dependence on land rather than its formal possession as property.

In the past, the Santals had collective ownership of the land under the guidance of the village headman, known as the *Manjiharam*.⁶² This contrasts with the possession of documents, known as *Dalils*,⁶³ which are the acknowledgment and authentication of private ownership or title of land in the Western system of property rights. Relying on documents is still unpopular or not taken seriously by many Santals in Palashpur. Those are the major factors contributing to the land alienation of the Santals in Palashpur. However, the life of the Santals in Palashpur, as elsewhere, continues to revolve around the land—either working on their farms or working as day laborers on them.

Although 90 to 95 percent of the Santals in Palashpur are landless farmers, they sustain a profound connection to the land. Some of the participants in this study claim that the land is “the treasure trove of natural resources for our survival and the key to eradicating poverty, the most intimate enemy in our society.”⁶⁴ They “believe if they are without land, they do not have a soul, purpose in life, or identity”⁶⁵. Under the circumstances, it is painful that the Santals in Palashpur see their lands “*hor disom*” fall into the hands of the *Dikkus*, who resort to all means of coercive ploys to evict them from their lands.

The centrality of land to the Indigenous Santal identity and their existence is to be conceptualized in material, metaphorical, and cultural terms. Land is a contested site in which power and politics play out colonial relationships of domination and subordination. Ownership

of land grants a sense of material security and the continuation of survival of the Santal community as a distinct group. This further affirms that their community is not controlled by the more dominant group. Land ensures the reclamation of territorial identity and Indigenousness. On the contrary, the violence in land grabbing denies them their rightful ownership of land, makes them outsiders, and uproots them physically, culturally, spiritually, and historically from the spatial landscape.

For the Santals, the ancestral territories not only provide an economic base for their daily lives but also are intimately connected to their cosmologies and uniqueness. The land that they occupy is permeated with their history, and it is the abode of the *Bongus*, the spirits or departed souls of their ancestors. In their opinion, their invisible presence explains the functioning of the visible world. The Santal village or *hor disom*, which is an essential part of the larger landscape, is now diminishing physically, culturally, and ecologically because of the constant invasion of the so-called mainstream people. Thus, dispossessed of landownership individually and collectively, the Santals are on the brink of elimination from the nation-state. This concurs with Anaya and Williams’⁶⁶ study, which says:

⁶² *Manjiharam* is the head of the Santal village.

⁶³ *Dalil* is title deed/documents of ownership of land.

⁶⁴ Interview with the author, November 2005.

⁶⁵ Unger, The Role of Landscape Architects in Park Management, Planning and Design with Regard to Indigenous Peoples, 8.

⁶⁶ Anaya and Williams, *The protection of Indigenous peoples' Rights over lands and natural resources under the inter-American human rights system*, 56.

Rights to lands and resources are property rights that are prerequisites for the physical and cultural survival of Indigenous communities. Thus, land as a material, cultural, and spiritual space is essential for the continuation of Indigenous societies in their existing forms and for individual and collective well-being.

Figure 5

Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Land Grabbing in Palashpur

Various tricks and treacheries are employed to alienate the Santals from their ancestral property, agricultural land, and sacred burial grounds. The perpetrators are “a network of vested parasitic groups comprised of local influentials—rural *tauts and matabbars*⁶⁷, dishonest politicians and government officials.”⁶⁸ In Santal terms, they are *dikkus* of the contemporary world, representing the more powerful and resourceful usurpers who, since time immemorial, have been denying the

Santals’ territorial identity. Consequently, the successors of the *Great Tradition* still search for the “promised land”⁶⁹ that all Santals treasure in their collective consciousness. In the following sections, four cases will be analyzed to document scenarios of land grabbing that reveal the Santals’ vulnerability, unity, and resistance.

The Cases in Palashpur: Case Study No. 1: The loss of a sacred burial ground

In Palashpur there is a burial ground for the Santal community. This place has been considered sacred and important for final rites by all members of the Santal community. In 2004, the local Santals found themselves in a difficult situation when some local Muslims claimed that the burial ground belonged to them. Through falsification, the Muslims managed to obtain the necessary documents by bribing corrupt officials at the land office.

When the Muslims took hold of the land by force, they began to oppose the burial of Santals there. The loss of their sacred heritage site shocked the Santal community. The dispossession of agricultural and domestic homesteads was a common experience for them. However, they could never have imagined that their burial ground would be taken away and turned into agricultural land. The Santals turned to the local government for help; however, their demands

⁶⁶ *tauts, and matbars* –local influentials who impose their domination and tricks over others

⁶⁷ Barkat, et al. *Political Economy of Khas Land in Bangladesh*, xxiii.

⁶⁸ Mahapatra, *Modernization and ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*. 24.

were ignored. After two years of struggle, they managed to receive help from the Deputy Commissioner who asked to see the ownership record. The *Manjiharam* (the local Santal chief) instructed a few young Santal men to dig up the bones of their buried ancestors and made an emotional plea that those were their records of ownership. Overwhelmed by emotion, the DC declared that the property belonged to the Santal community of this area; he also ordered the demolition of the illegally erected structures by the land usurpers. Even though the perpetrators were ousted through the executive order from the DC office, this case remains pending in court.

Case Study No. 2: Misplaced trust

In 19192, Bidhu Soren of Palashpur, an illiterate Santal, began to work on the agricultural farm of a local Muslim landowner named Mohammed Kalimullah. Bidhu himself owned a few *bighas* of land as well. While working in the field, Bidhu was approached by Kalimullah, who asked if he had submitted his *khajna* (property tax) for the year. Kalimullah further mentioned that if Bidhu had not paid it yet, he could pay on his behalf when he went to town.

Bidhu had never paid the property tax himself. Someone had always helped him. Therefore, when Kalimullah offered to submit his outstanding tax for him. Bidhu felt grateful and relieved. He at once trusted the smiling and seemingly modest Kalimullah. Accordingly, Kalimullah asked Bidhu for his *dalilnama* (title deed) to take with him to the land office. Bidhu gave Kalimullah his *dalilnama* without any hesitation. The *dalilnama* allowed Kalimullah and the land office to know

the details of the property. Meanwhile, Bidhu and Kalimullah reached an agreement that Kalimullah would pay Bidhu's tax money from his pocket, and Bidhu would return the debt through work on the farm. Everything seemed okay to Bidhu when, three days later, his title deed was returned.

Within a few months, Kalimullah forcefully took over a portion of Bidhu's land and built a fence around it. With the help of land office officials, Kalimullah has illegally acquired part of Bidhu's land. Bidhu Soren was dismayed. Many advised Bidhu to file a case against Kalimullah, while others discouraged him from getting into further trouble. A *shalishi* (a hearing led by the local elites) was held in which it was alleged that Bidhu Soren had borrowed a large sum of money from Kalimullah to pay his debt and had to pawn his title deed. In the *shalishi*, which was merely a staged drama, everyone took Kalimullah's side. Therefore, the transfer of land ownership was formally justified. Bidhu, a poor and illiterate Santal, found no support nor any means to pursue his case further. In the process, he lost a portion of his land once and for all.

Case Study No 3: False friends are a curse

Jitu Hashda belongs to an affluent Santal family. The family has *bighas* of landed property. Jitu associates with local Muslim leaders who appear to be his friends. Like many Santals, Jitu has a drinking problem. In 2002 Jitu was charged with rape. This was a false charge filed against him by Dhauti, a poor Santal girl whose family was forced by some local Muslims to file the charge. The law enforcement officers then went

searching for Jitu to arrest him. To avoid this, Jitu went into hiding. While in hiding, Jitu managed to settle the issue with the victim's family through the mediation of his so-called friends.

Jitu was required to pay a large sum of money to law-enforcement officers for the settlement as well. To do this, he borrowed money from his close relatives. However, the matter did not end there. More money was demanded of him, which he borrowed from his Muslim friends, who were involved in the conspiracy against him. Jitu accumulated such a large amount of debt that he had to mortgage his property to repay it. Jitu Hashda lost his land to his unscrupulous Muslim friends and became a day laborer as a result.

Case Study No. 4: Fighting for Land is a Sacred Duty

Pran Murmu is well off among the Santals of Palashpur. He has a lot of land. His father left him many *bighas* (units of measurement in Bengali) of land before he passed away. However, most of Pran's properties are disputed because he does not have written documents to prove ownership. He has been fighting for his land for decades. The dispute began in the 1950s when his father was still alive. His father had acquired the land from the then-zamindar (landlord). The agreement was, however, verbal. Before 1947, his father did not encounter difficulties. When Pakistan was formed, and people began to migrate into the area from the other side of the border, the situation began to change drastically.

Pran has several pending cases in the courts. In the past, he lost most of the cases he filed

which made him desperate to acquire permanent rights to his other properties. To this end, he has spent large sums of money. However, the ownership of most of his properties continues to be disputed. Pran is frustrated, sick, and tired due to the material, physical, and psychological costs of dealing with these issues daily. For help, he turned to the local church and eventually became a convert. However, his struggle continues unabated.

In 2003, Pran lost a case to a local Muslim, who had sent a gang of men locally known as *Mastans*⁷⁰ to prevent him from attending a court hearing. The gangs threatened to kill him if he appeared at the final hearing. Due to his absence, the verdict went against him. In addition, Pran is often intimidated by enemies who threaten to rape or kidnap female family members of his family if he pursues the case further. Under such constant pressure, Pran has sometimes considered giving up and leaving the country. However, Pran's inner drive to continue the struggle is generated by his moral and ethical obligation to protect the land he inherited from his ancestors and to keep their memory alive. Pran is energized by a sense of the sacred duty of protecting the land. Now, the question is how long he can continue to fight to establish his rights. He is engaged in a struggle against the politics of discrimination, facing a formidable coalition of the courts, the administration, and the Constitution, all of which are united against him.

⁷⁰ *Mastans are local gang members*

Emerging insights

The first case involving the burial ground of the Santal community has special significance as it triggered immeasurable shock, anger, and frustration within the Santal community. In the metaphorical and real sense, a burial ground is not only a place where dead bodies are cremated or buried but also an inherent part of a community's ritualistic and historical consciousness. A burial ground brings the past, present, and future together in a special way. Also, for Santals, the burial ground is the spiritual gateway that separates and holistically brings the visible and invisible worlds together.⁷¹ It is the symbol of running history that reminds the Santals of their ancestors whose blessings and actions are essential parts of their mundane providence and prosperity. When a sacred place such as a burial ground is taken over and ravaged by intruders as it has been in Palashpur, the whole community is denied the joy and meaning of life. Moreover, by attacking a sacred place, the intruders send a strong message to the marginalized others that nothing is safe – be it sacred or ephemeral – from their greed. Such dispossession and desecration of sacred places belonging to religious and ethnic minorities are common occurrences that often go unreported, unresolved, and unpunished. It thus exposes an extreme lack of tolerance and respect for other ways of living and believing. For the Santals, this case was a wake-up call, and it awakened their sense of solidarity and resistance, bringing the community together. In the end, they were successful in ousting the land mafias from the burial ground. This proves that Santals are not

just passive recipients of marginalization; they can be the agency that recovers their territorial rights, which embody their history, culture, spirituality, and sense of well-being.

The second, third, and fourth cases illustrate premeditated land grabbing involving individuals who had experienced the misery of uprootedness at high emotional and material costs. They also demonstrate how ruthless, aggressive, organized, and powerful the land grabbers are. Indeed, the cases are also symptomatic of the prevailing situation in which the minority and Indigenous peoples face forced, illegal, and easy eviction from their ancestral properties. Although all cases portray a common feature of Indigenous lands falling into the hands of the *land mafias*, each of them is unique and recounts individual experiences leading to collective narratives. In the second case, the victim was an illiterate and innocent Santal who paid a high price for trusting an unscrupulous neighbor whose unbridled avidity caused him untold misery and misfortune. He trusted his friend with land ownership documents that were forged before he returned. The friend did not stop there; he took a portion of his property away from him. The irony is no one trusted the victim's side of the story during the *shalishi*. Here, a racist element of contestation 'us' versus 'them' played out. Any conflicts involving Indigenous lands unite the local influentials to wreak further havoc on the victims, and the brutality is perpetrated with an intensity that violates every tenet of human rights. In this

⁷¹ Debnath, *Living on the Edge: Predicament of Indigenous Rural Santal*.

case, Bidhu Soren⁷² found no support during the *shalishi*⁷³. He got confused as different people with vested interests offered different suggestions with no real solution. The outcome of this type of settlement is always a foregone conclusion, as the perpetrators are in command of selecting the individuals on the *Shalishi* committee.

While the second case involved the issue of trust, the third case revolved around fake friendships that devastated the life of a Santal named Jitu whose life had already been mired in drinking. Drinking, which has been taking a heavy toll on the Santal community, is as common amongst Santals in Palashpur as elsewhere. Many Santals have lost their lands for this reason. In this case, Jitu's Muslim friends were playing tricks on him using his vulnerability to alcohol. By offering liquor, one can easily entrap an alcoholic for personal gain. The third case thus reveals disgraceful and unacceptable practices that the *land mafia* use to their advantage.

The fourth case outlines the vulnerability of land owned by Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. The customary *Adivasi* laws did not traditionally require the type of documentation required by statutory law. Both personal or family property ownership and communal land ownership had been entrusted to local chiefs and village leaders. With the emergence of the nation-state, these institutions have been rendered outmoded and ineffective. Pran's land in the fourth case is disputed because he does not have the proper ownership documents. He did not have a problem before the emergence of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as nation-states. Now everything has changed. The fourth case further reveals that

land-grabbers use violence and intimidation to accomplish their objectives. Pran was prevented by force and intimidation from attending the court on the day of the final hearing. The verdict went against him because of his absence. He often received threats and verbal abuse. This case thus exemplifies 'a reign of terror' the Santals in Palashpur and elsewhere negotiate daily. These cases reflect the lived experience of the Santals at the micro-level, an experience overlooked in conventional sociological and ethnic studies. These cases, instead of over-theorization, document that the land grabbers are organized and possess immense power, shrewdness, privileges, and resources to take advantage of silent support from all levels of government and civil society. Also, these land-grabbers can evade justice by abusing their power and position in Bangladesh.

Land Alienation and its implications

Land alienation has had devastating impacts on the lives of the Santals in Palashpur. It has robbed the Indigenous Santals of their physical, cultural, material, and spiritual survival and distinctiveness. It has further dismantled the traditional institutions that used to sustain their collective and individual spirit and consciousness. This consciousness grew from the memory and myth of the "Great Tradition," a guiding force of "their peoplehood and shared fate."⁷⁴ Land alienation undermines and fragments this

⁷² Interview with the author, November 2005.

⁷³ *Shalishi* is settling conflicts locally through a hearing led by the local elites.

⁷⁴ Mahapatra, *Modernization and ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*, 2.

consciousness as the loss of land deprives the Santals of their practices, ceremonies, and rituals that reinforce and renew this consciousness.

Disenfranchised from their land, estranged from the cycle of reciprocity between the community and nature, the Santals have been transformed into a commodity and have become dependent on their usurpers. They are being separated from the land where their ancestors were buried and their ceremonies and rituals were once performed. Also, they have been alienated from the land in which they pursued their livelihood and acquired and harnessed localized knowledge and skills. The Santals now have lost their sense of belonging, their physical and material security, and their intrinsic joy of living. Santals are thus overwhelmingly disturbed, dispersed, and frustrated; they have lost confidence in the law, justice, and administration of the nation-state and have been leaving Palashpur in large numbers. Many of the Santals have reportedly left the country for India. Others are turning to NGOs and churches for support.

The devastating land alienation has impoverished the Santals in Palashpur to such an extent that most of them have now become marginal day laborers and sharecroppers on the land that once belonged to them. Due to the seasonal nature of these occupations and the low wages, the Santals live from hand to mouth and remain unemployed for a significant part of the year. As a result, there is evidence of chronic poverty, hunger, and associated maladies that engulf every household. Bidhu Soren, a landless Santal Palashpur, describes his helpless situation in the following way:

If you have control over your land, you have control over your life because land is our life, our means of cultural and material survival. Now, the *Dikkus* control our land and our life. As a result, they have our land while we have their miseries and poverty.⁷⁵

A link between landlessness and poverty is evident in Palashpur. The ownership of land not only provided the Santals group solidarity but also was the means for their survival, sustenance, and financial security. The Santal community in Palashpur, as elsewhere, was highly dependent on natural resources for survival. Therefore, they had a much stronger relationship with the land than that of the mainstream people. When the Santals lost their land, the consequences were severe. The loss of land has led to a sense of powerlessness and alienation. Land alienation has undermined the Santal community's social capital or intra-community bonding. This is evident in the powerful influence of external forces such as NGOs and the churches in Palashpur. Any major decisions involving the Santals in Palashpur are no longer made by the community itself; they are pre-determined and prescribed by the churches and NGOs and come with certain conditions.

Land grabbing by the *land mafias*, together with the silent support from the government, reveals the colonial nature of state power over marginalized 'others.' The space or land that nourishes the distinctive culture and associated rituals is also under such control. The contestation of power indicates a colonial

⁷⁵ Interview with the Author, Nov. 2005

relationship in which the colonizers, namely the mainstream Bengali land grabbers under the direct and indirect patronage of the state, impose territorial, cultural, material, and physical domination over the Santals. Thus, land grabbing, as an action of exclusion, is dispossessing traditional Santal people of their ancestral land, destroying their self-sufficiency. They are stripped of their economic, cultural, and traditional autonomy forever.

The Santals' right to the land in Palashpur and elsewhere demands official and constitutional recognition of the presence of the Santals as Indigenous people in Bangladesh. Land alienation's most subtle and devastating impact manifests in the appropriation of space and history. By appropriating space, which is a site for knowledge production, the neo-colonizers put an end to the resources that produce and sustain empirical knowledge⁷⁶ for sustainable living, an intrinsic life force of survival of the Indigenous Santal community. Through dispossessing peoples of their sacred and cultural sites, such as the burial ground in Palashpur, the past is being remolded, rewritten, and finally distorted. The past "reflects the history, customs, cultural practices, ideas, and values handed down from one generation to the next generation."⁷⁷ This cementing force is being obliterated by imposing a mutated cultural imperialism manifested in the exclusionary policies of the nation-state in which Islamization also plays a role. Dispossession of Indigenous land is the first step in expediting this 'process of rewriting history' through territorial control.

Conclusion

Landlessness and associated violence cause cultural, material, physical, and spiritual extinction for the Indigenous groups in Bangladesh. Land rights are not just an issue of material belonging; they are connected to the spiritual, social, and cultural existence of the Santals with their distinct identity and history. By controlling land, the nation-state can accelerate the assimilation or elimination of the Indigenous peoples and, in the process, exclude them from the national policy of human development. This situation emphasizes the urgency of granting intrinsic and sublime integrity to Indigenous land. As long as individuals or the community have uncontested ownership over land, their material and spiritual rights remain intact. Without land, the Santal culture loses its life-support, economic viability, and contour of life and is destined to become extinct. The decreasing Santal population in the region foretells a catastrophic end to a vibrant community. Clearly, without ownership of land, they are left without an "anchor" to sustain their physical, cultural, and spiritual rootedness and material security. This research explores how the nation-state acts as a colonial agent that denies human rights by abolishing land rights outlined in Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It says: (1). *"Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others."* (2). *No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his*

⁷⁶ Dei, *Rethinking of the Indigenous Knowledge in the Academy*.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁷⁸ United Nation, Basic principles & guidelines on development-based evictions & Displacement

property.”⁸ However, the prevailing situation in Bangladesh undermines both elements of Article 17, which sets an appalling example of human rights violation through the non-recognition of the land rights of the Santals.

Hence, securing land rights would usher in the process of decolonization to reclaim Santal history and tradition, facilitating the recovery and celebration of their disappearing physical, spiritual, and cultural space.

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