Questioning dominant development practices: Emerging articulations of indigenous subalterns from the margins.
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Questioning dominant development practices

Emerging voices of indigenous subalterns

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Abstract: Guided by modernist monologic epistemologies, the dominant approach to subaltern development espouses economic-centered interventions. Contemporary theorization of development argues that the process fundamentally operates as a discourse to depict the underserved as the site of control. Further, it unilaterally exercises structural forces and applies hegemonic logic to create, sustain, and reinforce the material and communicative marginalization. The culture-centered approach (CCA), an alternative critical communicative framework, calls for a reflexive engagement with the narratives and discourses that emerges from the lived experiences of the subalterns. Grounded in the CCA, this paper uses subaltern discourses to consider the nature and consequences of dominant development practices on the lives of indigenous subalterns of the Himalayan region of eastern India. As such, this study, on the one hand, examines how dominant development practices operate as discourse and creates conditions of marginalization in subaltern spaces. On the other hand, this analysis seeks to foreground the narratives of communicative absences, discursive violence, and subaltern negotiations in the dialogic spaces of decision-making.

Keywords: Communication for development, culture-centered approach, subaltern, India, indigenous people

Though theoretically and methodologically contested, the term development can be broadly defined as the act or process of bringing about meaningful changes toward achieving growth and progress (Thomas 2004; Tracey and Anne 2008). The dominant approach, guided by western-centric modernist epistemologies, primarily embraces logics of economics in designing and implementing poverty reduction and subaltern\(^1\) development processes (Charlton & Andras 2003). Such an approach fundamentally exercises power that further, rather than ameliorate, material and communicative marginalization. Dominant approaches discursively employ their authority to identify underserved people and their spaces and as sites of control and applies hegemonic logics to justify top-down development interventions.
designed to save the subaltern populations, thus maintaining the status quo (Escobar 1995; Sosale 2008). Increasingly, scholars noticed that many of the dominant development activities and discourses failed to accomplish the basic purpose of development, i.e., to increase the well-being and improve the quality of lives of underserved populations; consequently, the socioeconomic gap and disparity between underserved subalterns and the mainstream population have increased (Keene 2007; Patterson 2010).

Critical scholars showed that the consequences of dominant development practices and discourses have often been destructive and harmful for subalterns (Harding 1998; Moose 2005). Escobar (1995) argued that by applying power and employing discursive violence, the dominant stakeholders erased locally situated development issues and voices to achieve unchallenged access in the marginalized spaces. Therefore, the powerful discursively control subaltern groups and spaces through hegemonic ways of knowledge productions and interventions. He further noted that such a discursive strategy was guided ‘not by humanitarian concern, but by the bureaucratization of social action’ (Escobar 1995, p. 53). Consequently, these moves, on the one hand, de-develop the subalterns and, on the other hand, make them vulnerable to exploitation.

To overcome the consequences of dominant development, sustainable development scholars and practitioners are increasingly paying attention to sociopolitical ecology, and freedom-oriented development praxis. An approach of creating nonlinear, community-centered dialogic development through meaningful agentic participation in bringing about social equity is embraced in sustainable development practices. Development communication scholars are also emphasizing the dialogical and participatory aspects of development praxis (Agunga 2012; Skuse et al. 2013), effectively arguing that ‘communication is integral to development’ (World Bank 2007, p.xxvii). These approaches stressed the importance of legitimizing marginalized discourses, thereby creating meaningful avenues for subaltern articulation in discursive spaces of decision and policymaking. One of the critical communicative frameworks, the culture-centered approach (CCA), calls for a reflexive engagement with the local agencies and discourses that emerge from the lived experiences of the underserved subalterns (Dutta 2011). The CCA fundamentally questions and problematizes taken-for-granted hegemonic discursive practices contained in centralized, top-down development approaches, and foregrounds subalterns’ communication, participation, and agency. Through engaged listening and dialog, the reflexive process of CCA seeks to understand development processes in undeserved spaces based on situated articulations of subalterns. Grounded in the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the CCA, this development communication research dialogically engages with the indigenous agencies of eastern India to understand the relevance and effects of dominant development practices on the lives of the marginalized subalterns. For this purpose, a three-year ethnographic field research project was conducted among the indigenous population of Buxa-Duar, a Himalayan region of West Bengal, India. CCA argues that dialogic engagement with local agencies and their articulations opens up avenues for interrogating dominant development practices; thereby such interactions cocreate possibilities of foregrounding alternate development rationalities. The local agentic utterances and
their development perspectives, in turn, build avenues for community-centered development praxis.

More than half of the world’s populations have a daily per capital income of less than $2.50 (World Bank Group 2008). Based on international development indices (e.g., the Human Development Report and Global Hunger Index), developing countries in the Global South are differentially affected by hegemonic development praxis and India is no exception. Among global poverty-stricken people, the indigenous people of India are among the most affected population (Olinto et al. 2013). According to the State of the World’s Indigenous People, a United Nations (2009) publication:

Whilst India is considered a middle-ranked country in the UNDP HPI (Human Poverty Index) ranking of countries, the indigenous communities as a group are comparable to Sub-Saharan countries, which are ranked in the bottom 25. … Scheduled Tribes (the indigenous people) also score lower in education, health and other social and economic aspects measured by the HDI (Human Development Index). (p.29)

The Indian Government’s own documents indicated that the indigenous populations have, at best, very little access to basic infrastructural resources. Such structural absence eventually ‘widens the gap between the quality of their life and [rest of] the people in the country’ (The Planning Commission of India 2008, p.113). To address this gap, the Government of India adopted a centralized, bureaucratically driven, development approach, essentially a top-down monologic approach.

Situated structural absences and communicative gaps in the marginalized indigenous spaces call for an in-depth inquiry to examine the effects of dominant development practices on the lives of subalterns. To empirically study the communicative aspects of development praxis in underserved spaces, this paper investigates the nature and consequences of dominant development practices on the lives of indigenous subalterns, as emerged from the voices of indigenous people of eastern India. Reflexively attending to the subaltern discourses, this study on one hand examines how the dominant development practices operate as discourse and creates conditions of marginalization in subaltern spaces; on the other hand, it seeks to foreground the emerging narratives and agentic negotiations of the subalterns in the dialogic spaces. Local voices from the underserved spaces, according to the CCA framework, offers us rich understanding about the local culture, context, worldviews, and practices; thereby, the emerging articulations and local agencies bring forth contextually meaningful ways of knowing, analyzing, and intervening development issues.

THE CULTURE-CENTERED APPROACH

The CCA communicatively studies the interactions among structure, culture, and agency in participants’ real-world contexts (Dutta & Basu 2007). Structure refers to elements or forms of social organization, which are instrumental in controlling access to resources (Dutta 2008). Culture shapes individuals’ communicative behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes through interaction with various historical, social, political parameters (Dutta 2008). Agency denotes humans’ ability to engage with structures in legitimizing contextual narratives through articulation and in challenging the hegemonic discourses and constructs.
The CCA emphasizes context, which refers to local environments and surroundings where people enact agency.

In the context of development communication, top-down discursive practices oftentimes create conditions of marginalization and subordination; consequently, subaltern knowledge, voices, and identity become strategically and structurally erased (Dutta 2008). Embracing critical communicative epistemology and principles of social justice, the CCA fundamentally rejects monologic, centralized development approaches and communicatively seeks to open discursive entry points for marginalized communities to actively participate in development processes. In doing so, CCA emphasizes reflexive listening and dialoguing with marginalized communities to legitimize the voices and contextual issues in the discursive spaces. Thereby, CCA challenges the hegemonic structure and creates possibilities of meaningful social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term ‘Development’ is a contested one both theoretically and methodologically. Though any agreed upon definition is yet to be reached, we might broadly conceptualize development as the act or process of making continuous change toward achieving meaningful growth and progress. Nolan (2002) defined the domain of development by using three terms; these were improvement (the processes and the evidences of betterment that local people recognize and value), empowerment (the process of building local capacities), and participation (involvement of people, especially the local agencies). The many theories advanced over the year reflect two major paradigms in development studies; namely modernization theories and critical theories. Modernization theories embrace economically based explanation (Dutta 2011). Being an expert-led, technology-driven process, this approach argues that greater extent of modernization, e.g., more production and more advancement of technology, ensures more reduction of poverty (Fair & Shah 1997). In contrast, critical theories such as dependency theory and world systems theory pay attention to the structural inequalities and power disparities in international, national, and local spaces (Dietz 1998; Wallerstein 2004), and suggest that examination of the processes of knowledge production and development policies through historical, political, social, and cultural lenses is crucial in understanding critical theories of development.

More recently, embracing the essence of critical theories, sustainability has emerged as one of the core principles of development; it seeks to make the process of development viable and capable of being maintained on a long-term basis (Hediger 2000). As opposed to the dominant modernist approach, the sustainable development talks about sociopolitical ecology and freedom-oriented development (Sneddon, Howarth, & Norgaard 2006). In bringing about sociopolitical ecology, sustainable development approach emphasizes examination of power disparities and discursive conflicts, creation of nonlinear and community-driven development avenues, and integration of agency, culture, and contexts in development praxis (Jabareen 2008; Meadowcroft 2000). Challenging the non-dialogic characteristics of the dominant model, freedom-oriented sustainable development approach recognizes the importance of political rights and responsibilities, social opportunities and
transparency in development interventions (Diesendorf 2000; Sneddon, Howarth, & Norgaard 2006). In other words, sustainable development puts emphases not on mere economic growth, but rather on bringing about social equity by consistently improving the quality of life and unfolding underserved agencies (Diesendorf 2000; Jabareen 2008).

In the last millennia, several attempts were made to define and to better understand the concept of sustainable development. According to the definition of World Commission on Environment and Development, ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Brundtland 1987, p. 43). In other words, sustainable development approaches paid attention to the social, ecological, and economical aspects of development create avenues for social equity (Hediger 2000). While addressing the essential needs of the local people, the sustainable development approach emphasizes inclusion of local agency in the decision-making processes (Hopwood, Mellor, & O’Brien 2005). Such an approach not only foregrounds the necessity of local participation, empowerment, and creation of dialogic possibilities, but also opens up possibilities of local–global collaborations (Lélé 1991). Again, to foster empowerment in underserved spaces, particularly in the context of indigenous population, an UN document (Agenda 21) argued that full partnership of indigenous communities is critical for ensuring a bottom-up people-centered development (Meadowcroft 2000). The CCA also embraces the principles of dialog and participation for bringing about sociopolitical equity in the underserved spaces.

Espousing a communicative lens, critical scholars examine how the development processes operate as discourses. Escobar (1995) showed that the dominant development discourse has created categories of ‘abnormalities’ such as ‘the underdeveloped’ (p.41), identified them as objects of control and reform, and subsequently used the logics of ‘rationality, instruments of power and control’ (Escobar 1995, p. 42) to fulfill dominant agendas. According to Harding (1998), the process of development historically de-developed the subaltern populations and exacerbated marginalization in the developing nations. Contemporary development practitioners and scholars emphasize the communicative aspects of development; consequently, communication for development dialogs is emerging. These dialogs center on fostering communication, sharing knowledge, building trust, and social inclusion of all stakeholders. From such a perspective, participating in discourse is the key aspect of development communication, which ensures meaningful development (Agunga 2012; Skuse et al. 2013).

In the context of India, historically, centralized bureaucracy-driven discourses unilaterally attempt to impose Western-centric modernist models in the name of developing its underserved population (Moose 2005). Furthermore, this approach, a residue of colonial practices, recognizes a single (i.e., dominant) way of knowledge production and strategically erase local forms of knowledge (Alvares & Faruqi 2012; Kincheloe 2008); thereby, such approaches practically derecognize the diversities and uniqueness of indigenous identities, voices, and worldviews. To achieve its development missions (typically monologic and top-down), the Indian Government periodically produces five-year plans. Given constitutional provisions, the three fundamental pillars of Indian democracy are the executive, legislative,
and judiciary branches (Balakrishnan 2008). These power structures play important roles in formulating, implementing, and monitoring centralized development interventions.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR SITUATION

In 2011, 104 million indigenous people live in India, or 8.6% of the total country’s population. More than 90% of this indigenous population live in rural areas (The Eleventh Five-Year Plan, 2007–2012). Traditionally indigenous people are described as representing lower social strata and are oftentimes portrayed as untouchables (shudra), demons (ashura), and born-criminals (Danda 2002). Moreover, the indigenous peoples’ political-economic status is unstable, due to constant denial of their voices and agency by hegemonic forces. For instance, owing to inadequate representation of indigenous people, their demands for basic infrastructure and public services remained largely unheard in the discursive space of decision making. Consequently, in modern India, millions of indigenous peoples are struggling to satisfy the minimum needs of human existence. The indigenous communities participated in this research reside in West Bengal, a state in eastern India. Across two centuries of British colonial rule, hegemonic forces systematically erased the voices and structural access of rural Bengal’s subalterns (Guha 1988). Consequently, in the postcolonial era, the marginalized and oppressed subalterns have to deal with various structural and economic and developmental barriers.

Buxa-Duar is located in the Duars region of the eastern Himalaya. Buxa villages are located inside a recently announced tiger reserve forest. Landslides and soil erosion are some of the key geographical features of the area. Indigenous tribes in this region include the Dukpa (the primary indigenous tribe), Yumlu, and Kagate. Villagers’ use Nepali, Hindi, and Bengali languages to communicate with outsiders. People walk from one mountain village to another; traveling at least 40 kilometres to access services such as a hospital or court, and travel outside their villages to work as unskilled laborers, often illegally crossing the Indo-Bhutan international border to earn a living. Previous ethnographic research conducted by the author in the region identified four types of information and communication barriers to development; namely, information barriers (limited or no access to mainstream media and other information sources), digital barriers (lack of communication technology infrastructure), linguistic barriers (lack of ability to communicate in mainstream languages), and literacy barriers (most of the indigenous villagers are semi-literate or illiterate). Overall, villagers of the region are negotiating with structural and communicative shortages.

METHOD

Data collection

The project was initiated after receiving approval from the appropriate institutional review boards. As previously mentioned, this research was conducted among the indigenous people of Buxa-Duar, a remote Himalayan region of the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Ethnographic and culture-centered engagement with economically underserved indigenous populations guided the researcher in organizing co-constructive interactive-sessions focusing
on locally situated development issues. Grounded in the participatory framework of CCA, the interview protocols were developed through dialogic interactions with members of indigenous communities and then the interviewer continually revisited the questions and the local issues with community insiders to fine-tune interviews (Dutta 2008). Examples of some of the protocol questions were, what does ‘development’ mean to you? What are the main ‘development’ issues you are negotiating in your day-to-day life? What are the key aspects of existing development and poverty alleviation practices?

Frequent visits to the villages between 2010 and 2012 allowed the researcher to make contacts and build rapport with community insiders. During these visits, participants were contacted and recruited through a snowball sampling technique; thereafter, in-depth interviews were conducted and focus groups organized involving local adult (male and female) indigenous villagers. Altogether, 15 focus groups and 2 in-depth interviews with key informants were conducted, totalling 125 participants. In-depth interviews and focus groups were held at venues where participants felt comfortable, including their residences, workplaces, or where they socialized.

Interviews began with aforementioned protocol questions to learn about dominant development practices, followed by probes that built on the basic questions about determinants and consequences of sociopolitical inequalities. Issues related to infrastructures, roles of dominant stakeholders, and discursive violence provided entry points for discussions, offering foundations for additional probes. The in-depth interviews and focus group sessions, which were audio-recorded, ranged from approximately 45 to 75 minutes in length, and were conducted in Hindi language by the author. Interview transcripts were translated from Hindi to English, the accuracy of which was further checked by an independent academician conversant in both languages (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The author obtained informed consent before each interview or focus group began. Audiotapes were destroyed upon completion of transcription, as per IRB guidelines. Pseudonyms for the participants were developed as data were analyzed, to assure participants’ anonymity.

Data analysis

Consonant with the CCA approach, grounded theory methodology was adopted for data analysis (Charmaz 2000; Strauss & Corbin 1990). The constant comparison technique was used to compare and contrast themes and concepts that emerged from the interviews to both analyze the data as well as make theoretical inferences (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were systematically used to understand emergent discourses. The authors initiated the data analysis with open coding to identify distinct concepts. Actual discourse from transcripts was examined, sentence by sentence to identify and build themes. Then discrete concepts and their relationships were studied; accordingly, related concepts were grouped; consequently, conceptual categories emerged. In the next step, i.e., the axial coding process, relationships were derived from within and among the categories. Lastly, through the selective coding process the theoretical integration was accomplished (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Once developed, codes were brought back to community members to explore whether they made sense; based on their feedback the codes were thoroughly revisited and revised as appropriate (Tracy 2013).
RESULTS

This study discusses the effects of the dominant development praxis in underserved spaces, as they emerged from the indigenous subalterns’ voices. Accordingly, this research reports four themes identified by the villagers, which describe local development issues in their community: government policies and regulations; governmental attention and intentions; government corruption; and the false assurances of local leaders.

Local utterances on government policies and regulations

The first theme reveals how development activities in India are largely centrally planned and controlled, and how the government policies and regulations play important roles in developing rural areas. For instance, in 1997, the central government of India identified the Buxa region as a Tiger Reserve forest area. Through their narratives, the villagers described how this unilateral move affected local infrastructure development activities. Given the protected designation, government departments decided not to construct roads or to allow any development in Buxa. Importantly, authorities did not allow other organization (e.g., NGOs) to build roads. One of the villagers, Sanga, narrated his frustration:

People want roads; but this area belongs to forest department and they are not giving the necessary permission. Previously, we received a financial aid from Finland [a missionary aid], but we did not get the No Objection Certificate from the Forest Department. We tried a lot. We even contacted the central forest ministry in New Delhi. We failed. They say after the construction of roads, animals of the Tiger Reserve Forest will suffer. We have not seen any tiger ever. The Forest Department treats us as animals of this forest. We think, if they treat us well, as human beings, it will be beneficial for everyone, especially for the forest.

According to the villagers, government policies protect animals at the expense of poor villagers. That is, the government strategically stopped collecting taxes from the region’s local people in 1987 so they (government officials) can claim that no indigenous villagers have been legally living in that Himalayan region. Such an administrative strategy essentially seeks to officially derecognize the existence of indigenous people in that area. Moreover, since 1992, the Government has started imposing restrictions on individual-led household development activities such as agricultural practices in the area. Ruku describes how these policies destroyed the local economy:

Forest Department is not allowing us to plough our lands. Previously, we used to yield oranges. In 1992-93, forest officials, along with their forces came and cut all our orange trees. They said, if we plant orange trees, they would come to cut them again. That incident destroyed the foundation of our local economy. They were armed police. We protested, but could not achieve much.

According to the senior members of the region, the government used a force of few thousand workers to destroy those orange trees in 13 Himalayan villages in Buxa area. Similarly, the government is not allowing individuals to build their own houses in their traditionally owned land, which also affect their domestic economy, as described by Siku:
When I was constructing my house, forest department harassed me a lot. Government officials told me that the land belongs to the government. Now that I constructed a house, they served me a notice saying, ‘you should demolish the constructed building within 7 days’. As of now, the notice is one month old. They have not yet sent government officials to demolish my house. Now, if they take any action … what is to be done? The Forest Department wants us to leave this land. We are unwanted for them.

Thus, after unilaterally declaring the region as a ‘reserve forest area’, the government is gradually imposing legal and administrative restrictions on local agricultural and domestic development activities. In such scenario, villagers are constantly negotiating with uncertainty and fear. Because of such dominant moves, the villagers are losing their status as legal owners of their traditional lands and properties. Bantu, a senior member of the indigenous community, said:

We are indigenous people. This jungle belongs to us. Do not mind, but it is a truth. For many generations, we live on this land; we grow crops here; therefore, it is our land. However, to date, government never issued any documents recognizing our existence … They surveyed our lands. They are supposed to give us the legal papers or patta. So far, we have not received any documents from them.

The villagers live on their ancestral land for many centuries; thereby they assumed ownership of the lands. However, the modern bureaucratic system recognizes legal documentations as a proof of land ownership. According to such provisions, the government departments are supposed to issue legal documents of land ownership or patta for the indigenous lands. Owing to their bitter past experiences of hegemonic oppressions, indigenous villagers were skeptical about the intentions of the legal documentation processes. Bantu further added:

We are not sure if issuance of patta will be beneficial for us in the long run or not … We asked the officers, ‘if needed, can we sell or lease the land or take loans from banks to meet our financial needs and/or to overcome adversities?’ Officers replied, ‘we are only giving you a documentation stating you are occupying government land. But, you will not have any land right or ownership to sell or lease the property.’ … Now tell me … what kind of ownership is that? We will not have any kind of real ownership. This document is just to prove that we are not outsiders. That is it.

Moreover, for issuance of patta, the government demands land documents from indigenous people. In the face of such requirements, the villagers must produce official documentations such as age-old land records endorsed by the government, and affidavits from court for claiming land ownership. From their remote residences, many of the indigenous villagers find it difficult to access land record offices and courts. Thus, for them, it is an uphill battle. Shila elaborated:

They told us to show very old land documents. Now, tell me … Who has all those documents? These are traditional land … no updated land records or documents are available … Government is asking for very old documents … for example, four or five generation old land-documents. Moreover, we are illiterate; we do not have any old documents or records …

Land means a lot to the indigenous people; like many indigenous communities across the globe, these Himalayan indigenous villagers have complex historical, cultural, and social
relations to their lands. Land is their last resort for survival; it is tied to their existence, identity, and traditions. They grow up and live on the soil. That is why indigenous people consider land as an integral part of their lives. Modernist dominant governance employs its administrative discourses, and demands difficult-to-produce age-old land records from the villagers to systematically evict the villagers from their ancestral lands. Through their articulations, the indigenous subalterns rejected the dominant move and intentions and legitimized their demands for land rights.

**Government attentions and intentions**

Villagers’ narratives also revealed a second theme, how top-down and bureaucratic governmental approaches often failed to address contextual needs of the indigenous subalterns. In fact, one might conceptualize Indian bureaucratic practices as perpetuating the colonial British approach of ‘ruling native’ people. Government-appointed officers are entrusted to run the centralized bureaucracy for solving problems of common people. However, many of the government officers have no first-hand experience with the realities of village-life because they avoid visiting those remote villages. Kendu recounted:

> Important government-officers such as Sub Divisional Officers, District Magistrates, and police officers never visited this (Himalayan) village since independence [i.e., 1947] … only local Block Development Officer visited our village twice … Truly speaking, no government officials ever visited these remote villages. Once you walk on this village road, you get a ‘practical’ knowledge. It is important to have first-hand experience. However, they never come; that is why they cannot understand our problem. When we talk about our problems, they become angry.

Indigenous discourses revealed that officials do not visit the difficult-to-access regions and villagers cannot travel to the officials as and when needed, which hinders the possibility of meaningful interactions. This reality results in communicative gaps between the villagers and the government officers. Latu shared one of the recent incidents that took place in one of the Himalayan villages:

> Not everyone can speak with them (government officers) … Firstly, they are not approachable … they deliberately maintain a distance. They act like a superior. For instance, last year, the Block Development Officer visited our village to measure the forest lands. That was a Sunday and we were attending the weekly prayers at our church. After entering the village, he looked at us and started shouting, ‘where are the villagers … I have travelled a long way to reach the village … what the villagers are doing?’ We told him that the villagers would be available immediately after the prayer. He did not pay attention and started shouting, ‘where are the villagers …?’ Then, we told him, ‘kindly wait for a couple of minutes’. He again screamed, ‘why should I wait?’ Immediately, he was preparing to leave our village. We requested him, ‘Sir, you have come to this remote village … please do something for us. Please conduct the meeting’. He again shouted, ‘what do you expect from me? Beat me, kill me’. He created a scene and threatened us. Then he quickly left the village. Now tell me … is not that a frightening experience? That is why we fear them.

Such experiences and situated communicative and attitudinal gap prevents any meaningful interaction between the common villagers and the officers; most of the villagers feel that
government officers are unapproachable. It shows how a coercive administrative attitude suppresses and erases voice of the subalterns.

Even after experiencing such injustices, villagers participate in the government-funded development projects, as they want to earn money and develop their villages. They are also aware that most of the government projects involve complex and lengthy administrative and financial processes. For instance, even after completion of government projects, they have to wait for several months for getting their payments. Consequently, they oftentimes face severe economic difficulties, as described by Jhantu:

Let us take the example of government-led rural employment generation program. Several projects are running … such as road construction, small-dam constructions, etc. After 4-5 months of job completion, we have not yet received any money from the government. If we go to Panchayet [local government institution] for money, they will say, ‘we do not have any money to pay you’. If higher authorities do not take any action… what can we do? We are helpless’. Now, tell me, why we participate in government projects? To earn our living, to educate our children or to accomplish our personal goals… right? For such delayed payment, we are not getting any benefits from the government projects.

Voice of the indigenous people foregrounded their situated pains and troubles caused by delayed payment and non-responsiveness of government officers. Moreover, corruptive praxis of dominant stakeholders oftentimes aggravates the conditions of injustice and exploitation at the margins, which is discussed in the next sub-section.

Government corruption

The third theme revealed in the narratives seemed to confirm that one of the key reasons for underdevelopment of indigenous people is the existing corruption in the government sector. As per Transparency International’s ‘Corruption Perceptions Index 2012’ report, India ranked 94 out of 176 countries in the globe. Scholars have argued that corrupted government officers and their nexus with politicians and businesspersons are responsible for slow growth and underdevelopment in the rural sector in India (Abdulraheem 2009; Sondhi 2000). Depictions of the villagers revealed that government officials not only harass or threaten the villagers, but they also abuse government resources to make more money for themselves. Paku commented:

Paku: Government makes budgets, and the departments get those funds. They do not do adequate development works. Most of the money goes into the pockets of officials.
Interviewer: But Government is claiming that they are doing a lot to develop this forest area.
Paku: Mediated claims of the Government are false
Interviewer: Why so?
Paku: Corrupted officials from forest department are destroying the forest and selling the woodlands illegally, to make individual profit.

Villagers argued that corruption among the local officers is a major cause of under-development of indigenous regions. Many villagers reported that local businesspersons such as contractors are involved in such corruptive malpractices. According to the villagers, the
government officials manipulate job records to systematically deprive and cheat poor villagers. Somu raised questions:

In our village, panchayet members collected all our job cards. Villagers are helpless; they handed over their job-cards. Can’t they realize that the government officials will manipulate the resources? Without doing any actual work, the officials are earning money, just by producing false documents. For example, in vouchers there are four columns; namely, the name of the labourer, number of workdays, total amount and signature. They only allowed us to write our name and sign. They told us not to fill the workdays and amount column. Under that condition, we got the job and they manipulate the figures and make illegal profits.

The author collected one such signed document, where the date columns were kept blank deliberately. Understandable, jobless villagers see no other option but to sign such documents.

Sometimes, the clerical staffs deliberately delay payment and expect bribes for expediting file-processing and payment-making. As Silu said, ‘if they get bribe they expedite the payment process. Otherwise the payment will be delayed considerably.’ Buka shared his experience with delayed payments:

Some of the payment is still due for five months. Pradhan[^1] [the head of the panchayat] should take more initiative. Therefore, we went to the panchayat office and met Pradhan in this regard. He said, ‘we are trying our best; but if state government do not allot any money, what can we do?’

We told pradhan, ‘why are we getting only 25 days of work when we are entitled to get 100 days of employment? In response, pradhan used abusive words.

For resource-scarce villagers timely payment of wage is crucial for their domestic economy. The officials and elected members of local government oftentimes refuse to expedite the process of wage payment; moreover, the indigenous people oftentimes have to negotiate with abusive attitudes of the dominant stakeholders.

Many of the villagers considered that many of the government officials lacked responsibility and accountability in developing indigenous communities. In turn, government officials blame local politicians, and vice-versa, for underdevelopment of marginalized spaces. Sama explained how these practices keep common villagers economically deprived:

Local political leaders keep saying, ‘we will bring administrative order and funds for constructing the road for you; but you know because of non-cooperation of the (government) Forest Department, we cannot do anything. Local political leaders and government officers keep blaming each other; we (the villagers) are getting nothing.

Both the political leaders and the government officials, the representatives of power structures, try to prove or project themselves as sympathizers of the poor and the oppressed. The narratives of the indigenous people on one hand revealed the exploitative and corruptive development practices of the dominant structure; on the other hand, villagers foregrounded the situated negotiations of the subalterns at the margins.

Political leaders and their false assurances

While ‘Legislation’ is one of the three pillars of parliamentary democracy in India (Balakrishnan 2008), a fourth theme revealed in the villagers’ narratives, confirmed
previous scholarship suggesting that political parties and their leaders often exploit rural subalterns to grab legislative powers to become powerful (Sondhi 2000). Indigenous villagers shared their experiences about aforementioned discursive malpractices such as false assurances; for example, Riku said:

Riku: Local political leaders cheat us the most. They give us lots of assurances. Most of us (the villagers) are very simple; we believe them and cast our votes. After getting the votes, they never keep their promises.

Interviewer: Why? Do they disregard your demands?
Riku: Our demands never receive adequate attention. They never say ‘no’ in front of us; but in reality, they rejected our proposal all the time. If you create pressure, they will say that the project will be started in a few days; that is all. They will never say ‘no’.

In election-oriented politics, as soon as the elections are over, the politician forgets the villagers. Villagers said that, before and during elections the political parties gave a lot of assurances to please the villagers and to get their attention. Latu was elaborating on political campaigns and their aftermath:

Latu: At the time of election, representatives of many political parties come to our village. They campaign to convince us. They say ‘if we get elected, we will build hospital in this village’ … ‘we will fight to give you land rights’. However, after getting the vote, they say ‘you know it is very difficult to go to your village in the mountain zone; you people could come to us to discuss your problems’. We believe that after the election they do not consider us as human beings.

Author: So, you know that they will not keep their promises …
Latu: Yes, we do. Since our childhood, we have heard that they will construct roads if we cast our votes. After getting votes, they have never visited us.

Interviewer: And … you still believe them?
Latu: It is not belief or trust; it is our hope for betterment. For instance, if they will construct roads, we will be happy.

Interviewer: So, if somebody claims, they basically cheat you all …
Latu: Yes, they make a fool of us. We are poor. Moreover, we are illiterate. We cannot send our children to higher school because we cannot afford. They seek the vote. … we cast votes. However, we do not have any road, school or hospital to date.

The voices of the villagers showed that how the political leaders exploited the villagers by giving false assurances. The leaders took advantage of material and communicative absences of the villagers, and thereby made the villagers targets of their opportunist practices.

The emerging articulations of the subalterns foregrounded their views and thoughts on dominant development policies and interventions as well as on situated manipulations and discursive violence. Subaltern delineations reveal how hegemonic discourses such as government policies and regulations are increasingly disempowering indigenous subalterns; e.g., expediting the processes of evicting indigenous people from their ancestral land, and imposing restrictions on development work in the name of ‘reserve forest’ are some of them. They also depict that the dominant discursive agendas reinforce structural and communicative absences at the margins. Again, culturally inappropriate attitude along with rampant corruptions in government ruined the indigenous development prospects. Consequently, poor villagers of the remote regions remained deprived, and increasingly they were losing
faith in the dominant development initiatives. Thus, this research attends to emerging narrative from the community insiders by studying the dominant development practices and its aftermaths on the lives of the indigenous people, and legitimizes the subalterns’ voices in the discursive spaces for bringing about sociopolitical equity for the underserved.

DISCUSSION

The CCA argues that through engaged and reflexive participation, a researcher opens up avenues for building solidarity with local agencies, and thereby cocreates alternate discursive avenues for understanding and conceptualizing development processes. Such a journey of co-construction of solidarity, according to CCA, builds the spaces for social change and equity. Reflexive engagements with subaltern realities enable a researcher to bring forth the local politics to the global spaces; thereby such interactions opens up the possibility of legitimizing local issues in the global academic and development policy landscapes. This article focuses on the academic components of CCA; the wider practice-based components of CCA, which seek to facilitate social equity through participating in policy dialogs, social media, and producing documents such as white papers, are not discussed here. Based on the culture-centered pronouncements of the villagers, this section discusses four aspects of subaltern development: the following sub-sections describe how the development processes operate as discourse, how dominant attitudes influence the local development prospects, and how communicative factors shape the underserved spaces.

Development and dominant discourse

Emerging narratives of the villagers foregrounded how the processes of development and dominant discourses work together in creating sites of control and intervention for implementing hegemonic agendas to strategically maintain the status quo. Espousing the modernist epistemologies described by Charlton and Andras (2003), the dominant development approach and their monologic discourses on one hand sought to ignore the local issues and identities of indigenous people and in addition, these top-down discourses aggravated the conditions of marginalization by imposing administrative restrictions and structural barriers.

Hegemonic discourses, under the tactical facade of government rules and procedures, attempted to establish dominant control and thereby to facilitate systematic eviction of indigenous people from their ancestral lands; such incidents took place in various parts of the globe (Poirier & Ostergren 2002; Spence 1999). A culture-centered perspective argues that such structural moves are integral to the gradual processes for erasing identity and existence of indigenous people (Dutta 2011). Indigenous villagers’ narratives in this study showed how that monologic dominant discourses and top-down interventions in the Himalayan villages excluded local people from development processes; thereby, such moves severely affected the sociopolitical rights of indigenous agencies and the development prospect of the underserved region. Using the rhetoric of administrative policies, the Government of India unilaterally announced the area as ‘reserve forest’, and subsequently stopped collecting taxes for last few decades to disregard and efface the indigenous villagers’
existence. ‘This is our land’ is therefore no longer a valid subaltern-claim in the democratic state. Moreover, owing to villagers’ inability to provide government-recognized evidences of their land ownership, they are gradually becoming conditional residents in their traditionally owned lands, and that too, without having any land rights. Thus, the very basis of indigenous existence is now experiencing a threat from the structural and systematic de-legitimization praxis (Amnesty International 2011; Mukasa 2012).

Aforementioned dominant moves and structural de-legitimization of subalterns are essentially tied to sociopolitical inequity and underdevelopment of the remote indigenous villages (Muehlebach 2001; Frederick & Foley 2006). The culture-centered articulations of villagers herein revealed that the remote, underserved regions remain neglected in terms of access to basic minimum infrastructural resources. In addition, geographical isolation and lack of access to structural resources led to the material and communicative absences, and diminished the prospect of local development. In such reoccurring structural negligence, the indigenous utterances foregrounded their agentic negotiations with seemingly perennial underdevelopment, and legitimized the conditions of inequalities, which yielded senses of hopelessness among the subalterns at the margins.

**Discursive misdeeds and manipulations**

Emerging voices from the margins narrated that dominant stakeholders, specifically the members of the executive and legislative structures of governance, oftentimes use rhetoric of hope and ‘win-win’ possibilities to mislead people and to implement hegemonic agendas and strategies. Theoretical framework of CCA essentially questions the dominant praxis as they create and sustain the condition of marginality. CCA argues that the contextual articulations of the underserved legitimize the discursive misdeeds and thereby communicatively create spaces for social change (Dutta 2011).

Executive stakeholders such as government officials and departments portray rather glorified images of subaltern development and welfare (Basu 2009). Culture-centered pronouncements from the margins, fundamentally ruptured the dominant welfare-narratives and logics of ‘serving the underprivileged’, and foregrounded the hypocrisies, contradictions, opportunism, and lack of accountability embedded in dominant intentions and enactments. Subaltern voices described how representatives of the executive and legislative forces oftentimes blame each other to establish that the development initiatives are affected primarily because of non-cooperation, negligence, and lack of good intentions of dominant stakeholders other than them.

Again, as described in the interview data here and confirmed in previous scholarship, legislative stakeholders such as political leaders and members of legislative bodies, guided essentially by election-centered politics, engaged themselves in unethical discursive practices. Political parties and their regional leaders oftentimes co-opt soft, positive, and pleasant words to impress indigenous people and grab political power. Culture-centered dialogic articulations showed that community insiders considered local political leaders as corrupt and opportunistic; expressing their skepticism the villagers talked about how the leaders provided false information and void assurances to win elections, and how the local leaders refused to listen to local development needs as soon as the elections are over.
Culture-centered interactions in the underserved spaces revealed, by committing discursive misdeeds, the dominant stakeholders tried to get attention, win sympathy, trust, and support from the villagers in order to fulfill the dominant mission and agendas. Such dominant enactments, according to the local agencies, diminished the prospect of building dialogic avenues and establishing sociopolitical democratic rights in the underserved spaces.

Dominant attitude and colonial legacy

Maintaining the colonial praxis, modernist structures, historically consider indigenous people as inferior and savages. Scholars reported examples of such depictions from various indigenous spaces across the globe; e.g., colonial discourses represented the aboriginal people of Australia as savages (Anderson & Perrin 2008). Many of the Himalayan villagers reported that dominant authorities treated them as animals or even less important than the literal animals (e.g., the Tigers) who have more rights than the villagers do. Consequently, the subalterns are abused, harassed, threatened when they raised questions about their rights such as demands of local development or of timely payment for work performed. Culture-centered articulations of the villagers not only brought forth the issues of human rights, social disparities and hegemonic denial of indigenous agency, but also showed how, most of the indigenous villagers become victims of near-colonial praxis, irregularities and manipulations practiced by the dominant power structures. The articulations of the villagers, on one hand, raised concerns about the lack of empathy and tolerance in the dominant mind-set; on the other hand, they foregrounded various structural and communicative aspects of social injustices such as mis-governance, corruption, and manipulation of public resources. Through articulation of their voices in culture-centered interactions, the villagers described how discursive violence and dominant malpractices sought to create and reinforce conditions of silence and powerlessness among the subalterns.

Communication gap and voicelessness at the margins

In order to maintain their all-encompassing control (Escobar 1995) over the subalterns and sustain hegemonic dominance, the structural forces oftentimes use the power of coercion and discursive violence. A culture-centered perspective argues that power disparities and dialogic-exclusions yield discursive constraints and communicative absences. Emerging subaltern articulations in this study explicitly demonstrated how dominant stakeholders took advantage of shy and peaceful behaviors of indigenous people of Himalayan villages. Being cognizant of the marginalized existence of the subalterns and their negotiations with lack of education and communicative power, the dominant forces use discursive violence to erase the voices and contextual narratives of the subalterns from the spaces of dialog. The culture-centered perspective argues that such silence (of the subalterns) provides the dominant stakeholders an avenue to enact material and discursive violence to impose and intensify the condition of voicelessness and powerlessness in the indigenous spaces. Modernist epistemology enables the dominant forces to take control of the situated powerlessness of the poor; such moves make the villagers vulnerable to exploitations and social injustices (Escobar 1995); thereby, it fundamentally perpetuates discursive erasures to efface indigenous
identity and existence, and mute the indigenous subalterns in discursive spaces of decision-making.

The CCA to studying development communication situates subalterns as the key stakeholders in the development processes, and put emphasis on the potentials of subaltern agency in challenging modernist agendas. Agentic engagement in development dialogs, as per the CCA, brings forth subaltern consciousness that essentially challenges the dominant construction of subalterns as ‘devoid of agency’ (Guha 1988). From a critical communicative perspective, emerging agentic pronouncement of local development perspective and indigenous worldview from within subaltern communities are instrumental in promoting plurality of voices in the processes of subaltern development.

Engaged dialoguing and reflexive listening are the two core components of the CCA, they are instrumental in foregrounding development realities of underserved regions in the discursive spaces of development planning and policy-making. Participation in development dialogs with subalterns is tied to the politics of social change, as it addresses the conditions of marginalization, challenges the inequitable social realities, as well as questions the taken-for-granted development assumptions. More importantly, local participations in such development dialogs disrupt the conditions of silences and voicelessness of the underserved. In other words, dialogic participation of the subalterns creates discursive avenues for examining and questioning dominant development practices as well as offers entry points for change.

Articulations of local development issues from the subaltern perspectives and legitimization of those narratives in the discursive spaces, according to CCA, situates the subalterns at the center of the development processes and thereby facilitate shifting the dominant conceptualization of development processes and problem-solving practices at local, national, as well as global levels. As the voices of the subalterns are historically erased from the discourse, engaged listening and dialoguing are keys to legitimize them in the discursive spaces. Emerging narratives of the subalterns oftentimes rapture the dominant constructions and argue in favor of sociopolitical equity by challenging the status quo. The voices of indigenous villagers indicated that active and engaged dialog among the stakeholders and inclusion of subalterns in the development processes are crucial to foster social change in underserved spaces. Moreover, multiple development thoughts and perspectives emerged from the marginalized spaces create avenues for advancing development discussions.

This culture-centered research seeks to advance the communication for development research by engaging with various indigenous communities from diverse geographical regions such as coastal and desert areas. Researching different regions and communities would enable a researcher to understand different material conditions, sociopolitical realities, contextual challenges, and subalterns’ negotiations with various conditions of marginalization. Such research engagements with the underserved populations would cocreate avenues for legitimizing multiple subaltern realities, experiences and development perspectives in the discursive spaces of development thinking; which would in turn foster plurality of voices and discursive ecology. From academic research perspectives, such inductive research praxis, would lead us to explore connections among the emerging subaltern discourses from various underserved spaces, which ultimately would aid us to better understand and theorize about subaltern development issues.
DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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NOTES

1. Subaltern: The term subaltern refers to a ‘name for the general attribute of subordination … in society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way’ (Guha 1988, p. 35).
2. Panchayet: Village/block level local government institution consisting of democratically elected representatives and a few government officials (primarily clerical staffs).
3. Pradhan: Democratically elected chief of a Panchayet, and not a government employee.

REFERENCES


