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Peace and People's Security: An Agenda for Neoliberal Times

Samir Kumar Das

2024

Peace and People's Security: An Agenda for Neoliberal Times [1]

Samir Kumar Das *

The paper begins with a brief reference to the CRG work under the series entitled *South Asian Peace Studies* and argues that the work under review calls for a reappraisal, now that radical changes have taken place in the national and global context. The second section accordingly makes a case for redefining Peace in terms of 'Security of Life' rather than rights, justice and democracy. While civil society organizations have hitherto played a great role in catalysing peace across the world particularly during the 'Rights Revolution' of the 1970s and the 1980s, they face the threat of becoming increasingly irrelevant in the present-day world. The new human solidarities that are seen to have sprung up in the face of growing insecurities of life per se hold out the promise of initiating peace in neoliberal times. The third section outlines the nature and modules of human solidarities drawing on our recently conducted ethnographic works in different parts of India. The paper ends with a few concluding observations.

South Asian Peace Studies

CRG's four-volume work on South Asian Peace Studies published between 2004 and 2009 (Samaddar 2000; Das 2005, Banerjee 2008, Singh 2009) made a departure from the conventionally understood Security Studies. What we conventionally calls Security Studies – hitherto masquerading as Peace Studies in most of the Indian universities and research institutes - would have defined peace negatively as the absence of war and made it synonymous with security. Paraphrased into simple terms, it means, if two or conflicting parties are of roughly equal power, there is always the fear that the first strike by one will invariably be met with massive retaliation by the other provided (a) the other has the power to absorb the first strike and (b) retaliate massively. The fear of massive retaliation is likely to deter one from the first strike at the first instance. Security, in the discipline of International Politics, is therefore keyed to the doctrine of balance of power. Most of the Indian Universities still continue to offer Security Studies of this variety in the name of Peace Studies with very few exceptions. Our objective at that time was twofold: One, disconnecting peace from conflict and war (war being the most heightened form of conflict) on one hand and, two, reconnecting it with such ethical values as rights, justice and democracy. These three values of rights, justice and democracy are said to form a triad because of their largely overlapping nature.

The four-volume work marked a paradigmatic break in both the above senses of the term. Once conflicting parties achieve some form of a balance of power between themselves, they are successful in postponing – rather than preventing - war. Peace predicated on the doctrine of balance of power is therefore precarious and constantly haunted by the spectre of war. Peace may be

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threatened even by a momentary disturbance in the balance which at times is very delicate. Or peace is seen to be threatened if one of the conflicting parties (a) has greater power over the other or (b) expects to gain by way of disturbing the balance. Inevitably peace comes to an end in such a situation and war ensues.

For us, on the other hand, peace is not merely postponement of war. It is the quality of peace that matters more than peace per se. We were advocating for peace in the crematorium that entails vanquishment of enemies – 'sepulchral peace' as someone has summed it up quoting our work. The disconnection-reconnection dyad has two implications for Peace Studies: One, peace, over and above, implies pre-emption of conflict and war. And establishment of ethical values is a prerequisite for such pre-emption of conflict and war. Two, separation of peace from war also calls for releasing peace from the clutches of the warring parties. It only means that there are other stakeholders and they too have an abiding interest in establishing peace. Peace therefore is of multiparty nature. The stakeholders are seen to have established peace in many cases without necessarily establishing the triadic principles. Peace-making is too large an issue to remain confined to the conflicting parties. The wider society too has a stake in peace and its making.

Thus, to cite an instance from CRG's ethnographic works, women's role in conflicts is not necessarily that of a peacemaker – let alone being the only peacemaker. More positively, these works however point out how in every instance of conflict, their bodies serve 'as the field where war is waged' (Banerjee 2008: xiii). These works also go a long way in showing how their role in making peace is implicit in the everyday performance of their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters within their family, kinship group and community albeit with a spin that separates these from their conventionally understood patriarchal connotations. In other words, peace-making does not make it imperative on the women's part to desert their traditional roles. Nor does it want them to establish their identity *purely* as women while making peace. Their role as peacemakers is enmeshed in the everyday performance of their roles, but making a difference to them. To illustrate the point, Donjalal Haokip and Rebati Devi, who have no biological children of their own, operate The Ema Foundation home in Keithelmanbi, the sensitive zone[2] between the Imphal Valley and Kangpokpi of the Indian state of Manipur, the former dominated by Meiteis and the latter by Kukis. The hill state has witnessed sporadic, sometime intense, ethnic clashes since May 3 2023 between the majority Meitei community and the Kukis, resulting in the loss of more than 200 lives and displacement of over 60,000 people. The couple, who have been running the orphanage since 2015, fosters 17 children, including Meitis, Kukis, Nagas and even Nepalis. They remember vividly the events of May 3, 2023 when ethnic clashes broke out over a 'Tribal Solidarity March' organised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. "The first threat was that we are a Meitei-Kuki couple and then we had children from the communities... our family feared that we will be a very easy target. But we decided to stay put and despite difficulties we have managed to survive, " Haokip said. "We are safe so far but it's no longer the same...we cannot go to either of the areas.. we cannot move around even for basic chores. Earlier, people from different parts of Manipur used to visit us because they wanted to spend some time with children or celebrate occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, but that has completely stopped now. So, there are no visitors now and children miss it", Haokip added. Both of them remember how they have been threatened by the militants belonging to both the communities to close the orphan home. But the villagers turned them away. Haokip and Rebati hope better sense will prevail and people will look for peace rather than fight each other. They have an altogether different perspective on what peace is and how that can be

achieved – a perspective that is not taken into account by the conflicting parties negotiating peace (Anonymous 2024).

Peace as Security of Life

Peace interventions – mostly by the superstates and their allies[3] – ironically in the name of establishing peace - have become very frequent across the world. Poorer States compete amongst themselves for weaning away funds available for establishing peace from other countries. All this is done posing a grace threat to human life especially when is compounded by 'neoliberal restructuring and the production of insecurities', as the Concept Note so eloquently illustrates.[4] The context has substantially changed during the last two or three decades. The liberal utopia of recognizing the 'inalienability' of life enshrined in such national and international instruments as The Declaration of Independence 1776, The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789 and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1949 has given way to the "the sovereign right to kill or its covert attendant, the right to maim" (Puar 2017:X). The differential value of life – as one of its concomitants is now grossly displayed in such instances as (a) denial of livelihood opportunities to the mainly 'intimate' and algorithmic labour threatening their livelihood and life; (b) the discriminatory nature of State responses to the Covid19 pandemic; and (c) climate disasters causing grossly unequal vulnerabilities within any given population.[5]

People employed in 'intimate' and algorithmic labour were the hardest hit amongst the labourers during the pandemic. We will refer to a series of ethnographies CRG has conducted during or immediately after the pandemic that bring out how one's life in the sense of sheer survival was put at stake. Bishakha Laskar – herself a sex worker and President of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Samiti, an NGO working with the sex workers – told a CRG interlocutor that in such an intimate profession like sex work which necessarily involves 'physical touch and contact', Covid19 Pandemic pushed the sex workers into 'a zone of touchlessness' (Sur 2013:40) and deprived them of the means of livelihood. The same report also notes that 'phone sex' was not found to be a viable alternative means of livelihood. There has been an exponential growth in the 'gig'-economic sector since 2020 when the lockdown was announced. According to a report by NITI Ayog, the increase in the number of gig workers in India rose up from 6.8 million in 2019-20 to 7.7 million in the 2020-21. The agency also predicted that the number would further increase to 23.5 million in the next few years. Correspondingly, the number of informal workers shot up from 37.8 per cent in 1999-2000 to 54.4 per cent in 2011-12. The number further jumped up to an astronomical 81 per cent in 2022-23.[6] Sur refers to a variety of factors that hold them from organizing themselves and agitate for their labouring rights. Besides, their flexible worktime, many of the 'gig' workers are employed in multiple platforms. They are divided along caste, communal and ethnic lines in a country like India. The legal identity of the 'gig' and platform economy workers as "partners" made them even more vulnerable stopping them from availing the workers' rights. According to labour experts, the workers in the gig sectors cannot get any protection or employment benefits because their employers have not recognised them as workers. They are assured instead that they would get a share of the profit earned by the delivery app. Contrary to what Article 23 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declares[7], the workers' inability to organize themselves for their rights plunges them into a state of abject rightlessness. Trade union activism is otherwise viewed as the key to workers' enjoyment of rights while the number of trade unions has recorded a decline in recent years. As

Chakrabarty, Dhar & Dasgupta point out: "Conventions of political praxis and the conceptual and empirical demands of the new age do not seem to be in sync with one another" (Chakrabarti, Dhar and Dasgupta 2016:p.19). As they chase from one 'gig' to another, their biological clock is turned upside down putting their life at great peril. Many of them face mental health issues and lose 'the spatial and temporal consistency of their life' (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2023:9). Their body is supposed to be 'docile' as they are required to conform to the rigours of algorithm that govern them. The less the conformity, the greater is the risk of their being punished, logged out and losing job, livelihood and life.

CRG studies in life during the pandemic point out how the official responses to the unprecedented public health crisis were informed by the premise of differential value of life. While people who could afford to stay indoors while keeping social distancing, buy equipment (e.g. mask, PPE etc.) and sanitizing material were 'safe' as per the WHO guidelines, such groups as sweepers and scavengers, health workers, delivery boys and couriers, poor migrant workers and the poor domestic labour were particularly exposed to the risk of contracting the deadly pathogen.[8] As they were deprived of their right to health, the pandemic impinged directly on their life. Samaddar shows how 'life and death were negotiated' (Samaddar 2021: ix) during the crisis, how such techniques as 'exclusion, separation, identification, confinement were deployed interchangeably and simultaneously in order to gain control over all individual bodies' (Samaddar 2021:11). Human body is brought under the subjection to the technologies of power.

CRG studies have tellingly brought home the differential impact of climate disasters on human life. While reviewing CRG's volume on climate disasters (Basu, Roy & Samaddar 2018), Arupjyoti Saikia – himself an eminent climate historian from India's Northeast - observed: "… the essays offer compelling insights into the fate of the people who inhabit and pursue fragile livelihoods on the *charlands* – the temporary lands thrown up by the rivers" (Saikia 2020:138). In simple terms, unlike in the people living in the mainland, the 'fate' of the *char* inhabitants of India's East and the Northeast hangs precariously on the emergence and submergence of their lands. What Saikia calls 'fate' also includes their ability to access the rights guaranteed by the Consttituion of India and law of the land. Many of them find it difficult – if not impossible – to establish their identity as citizens thanks to the geopolitical vicissitudes of the *chars* they inhabit. As they lose their identity as citizens, they are also deprived of their rights. A study on the *chars* of the Brahmaputra in Western Assam included in the volume, for instance, argues: "In modern nation-state this rootedness or belongingness is all the more important as it confers citizenship rights through which legitimate claim can be articulated and directed towards the state" (Parveen 2018:137). We will have occasion to return to this point in the next section.

The above ethnographic works of CRG's own repository, in other words, illustrate how the context has changed, how the early concern for upholding and protecting "inalienability" of human life has given way to what Jasbir Puar called 'sovereign power to kill and its covert attendant to maim' thereby establishing differential value of human life. In short, security of life has become the most crucial question now and it is not to be considered 'a false problem conjured up by the State'.[9] The earlier expectation that peace would guarantee security of life has nowadays been turned upside down: it is the security of life that ensures peace. As a result, peace today – unlike during the time of Rights Revolution in the 1970s and the 1980s - is required to reckon with the more basic and first-order question of life per se and its sheer survival. One must exist as a healthy, living body as the first condition, to be able to claim other rights. With the security of life preoccupying the agenda, the one of rights has been reduced to secondary importance. Never before in history, has the biopolitics of

people's security acquired so much importance as it has now, making it imperative on us to redefine peace as people's security thanks to 'neoliberal restructuring and production of insecurities'.

Ironically, the chronic insecurity of life has the opposite effect of securitizing our life – making life an object of surveillance and security. The next subsection deals with this question in greater detail.

Securi(ti)zing Life

The objective of one of the earliest projects on human security initiated in South Asia by the Asian Dialogue Society, as Amitav Acharya et al sum up, is 'to develop specific tools that would enable policymakers to address human security challenges' (Acharya et al 2011:2). In other words, the discourse on human security surfacing more prominently with the turn of the new millennium is accused of having securitised rights in the name of securing them: "[S]ecuritisation is the outcome of a political process based on the choice of security framing over any other types of frame when an issue is securitised, it is shifted from the domain of 'normal' politics to that of the emergency" (Kolas & Miklian 2014:9). Security thus becomes a new form of power in today's world that directly impinges on our life. The term itself is an invitation to albeit urgent intervention – whether by the State, non-State actors or the superstates – and gives them unlimited power to intervene in situations wherever security is perceived to be at risk without taking any responsibility. As they disengage, the countries are thrown back into the stone age of chaos and disorder as the recent experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya etc bear out. What is called 'urgent intervention' also requires that the intervening parties are equipped with emergency powers beyond the Constitution and normal law of the land. The Constitution and law of the land are considered as ruefully inadequate to deal with a situation mired with insecurities. A distinction is made in Contemporary Political Theory between the power of law and the power that one acquires by way of providing or simply promising to provide security. Giorgio Agamben, for instance, points out: "While the law wants to prevent and prescribe, security wants to intervene in ongoing processes to direct them. In a word, (law) wants to produce order, while security wants to guide against disorder." The apparatuses of security try to control the series of random events - the imponderables and unforeseeables that could occur in a living mass in anticipation of a risk. While law seeks to discipline our behaviour into a set of patterns sanctioned by it and obtains certain degree of uniformity of behaviour, security is meant for tackling deviations by way of making exceptions to these laws. Security, in other words, calls for the 'rule of exception' (Das 2011).

That is the reason why much of India's 'troubled' Northwest and the Northeast is ruled by a plethora of extraordinary legislations. Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 is only one of many such acts that keep the Constitution of India and the normal law of the land in abeyance.[10] While our everyday transactions and exchanges with the State are supposed to be conducted in the language of rights assuming that the state functions according to the Constitution and law of the land and thus is restrained from doing anything that abrogates or curtails our rights. The Constitution and normal law of the land cease to be the key to the entitlement of our rights in times of emergency. By contrast, the conventionally understood concept of 'security' is reserved to refer to those extraordinary situations which are legislated and resorted to when the State finds it impossible to conduct through the Constitution and normal law of the land. Chronic insecurities constitute an extraordinary situation that calls for extraordinary response.

'Right to have Rights'

The paper seeks to develop an agenda for people's security situating life at its centre. A large number of people across the world simply lose their life or lives a life that does not 'let them die' - instead of offering them the opportunity of having a healthy and living body enabling them to claim their rights. Borrowing from the celebrated phrase used by Hannah Arendt, one may say that people's security builds on their 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1958:296). The paper seeks to reflect on the first-order 'right' - 'right' in singular - that enables one to be entitled in turn to the second-order 'rights' such as right to free speech and expression, of movement and settlement, of education and so forth.[11]

Arendt does not think that one's identity as 'human beings' could be an answer to the tangled first-order question of 'right' in singular. As one of her contemporary commentators observes: "Being human as opposed to being a citizen, certainly did not save six million Jews from being killed by the Nazis" (DeGooyer et al 2018:7). Arendt's suggestion, according to her contemporary commentators, works in the opposite direction today: "Having detailed the disparity between citizens who can enjoy their rights with some security and human beings who have been stripped of rights, Arendt's insight here is that right that is really needed, and missing, is the right to be a citizen of nation-state, or at least a number of some kind of organized political community" (DeGooyer et al 2018:9). One may recount Arendt's exceptionally strong words from the same book: "The very phrase "human rights" becomes for all concerned – victims, persecutors, and onlookers alike – the evidence of hapless idealism, or fumbling, feeble-minded hypocrisy" (Arendt 1958:269).

This paper focuses on the newly emergent solidarities as a probable answer to the first-order question of 'right' in singular. We situate solidarities between the world of human beings on the one hand and the 'nations or organized people' on the other. Solidarities in their new avatar mark at least two major departures from Arendt's answer to the question: First, one's first-order 'right' is realized through one's belonging to different modules of solidarity that are being explored albeit on experimental basis. These modules do not have any central organization, let alone any command-and-control structure within themselves. More often than not, they are unorganized or underorganized still in the nature of experimentations with different modes of becoming a 'people' at a much more local or regional level. The following section draws our attention to three such modules of solidarity as they have been highlighted in CRG's recent works. These modules - being experimental – are of short span, ephemeral and transitory. Unlike a nation or an organized people that establishes its continuity with a longer scale of history with a will to live together in future, solidarities are issued from the imperative of sheer survival. As I argued, it is not survival in the Darwinian sense. Following Kropotkin, one may say that this demands survival depends on one's association with others (Das 2019).

From Civil Society Activism to New Solidarities

The Rights Revolution also witnessed a remarkable rise in civil society activism in the 1970s and the 1980s as a key to the entitlement of rights. With the 'crumbling of the militaristic, state-centric, national security paradigm since the 1990s', civil society and non-governmental organisations 'have gained increased significance' (Khan 2022:8). As the Revolution lost its steam with the beginning of the 2010s, civil society groups fighting for second-order 'rights' in plural face the threat of becoming irrelevant. In a sense, this was inevitable. With security of life or what Arendt calls 'right to' -

overshadowing the question of second-order rights – a certain collapse of civil society activism hitherto overinvested in the struggle for rights was not altogether unexpected. Solidarities are now people's answer to biopolitical insecurities.

Three Modules of Solidarity in Covid Times

Solidarities let people live a dangerous life without being insecure. The life is dangerous for, it is neither one of a healthy, rights-bearing body nor that of the 'living dead' but is one of fulfilment of freedom and rights. We will come back to the question in the next section.

In this section, we propose to focus on the modules. The first module may be called direct social vigilantism. West Bengal reported its first positive case of coronavirus as a student who returned from United Kingdom on 15 March 2020 tested positive. The 18-year-old student was tested positive on 17 March. According to a newspaper report: "Bengal's first identified carrier of the deadly coronavirus and members of his family moved around Kolkata for more than 48 hours without any restriction…". His mother – a high-level government official – went to her office on 16 March 2020, held several meetings with many including the state's chief minister, chief secretary and other high officials. All the high officials went into quarantine as a result of this. Neither the State nor the society had any mechanism to make the boy abide by the quarantine rules and the boy - already infected – did not have to suffer at all as it spread the virus from one to the other. By contrast, when the first case of coronavirus was reported in the Northeast from a foreign returnee student of Manipur on 24 March 2020, many localities and villages in the state closed the roads leading to their areas. Communities living in the remote areas enforced the lockdown independently of the mediation of the state.

Govindo Molsom worked as a cook in Agartala, the capital of the state of Tripura. On his return he was surprised to notice that his village Kalagaon Mausambari on the Indo-Bangladesh border observed strict 14-day quarantining of the outsiders on their own: "My village strictly follows a 14-day isolation rule. Anyone who lands there will have to stay in the community quarantine centre for a while. The villagers are monitoring the situation very closely." Although he missed his family, he acknowledged that 'it [was] better to bide his time here.' Spaces like treetops, floating boats, burning ghats and crematoria, church and community dormitories were specially marked where the returnees could be accommodated and kept for quarantine. In Nagaland, quarantine centres were set up outside the entrance gate of the village. In several places, churches had been converted into makeshift quarantine centres. Village elders who are usually considered as the custodians of customary law were leading the community surveillance programme. Nagaland Baptist Church Council general secretary Rev Zelhou Keyho said: "We have also started a prayer helpline for those feeling anxious, worried or lonely." The churches in many areas worked as counselling centres and oxygen parlours for the people who were in distress. With about 5500 kms of international borders, the states of the Northeast were alerted in advance about the looming threat of the pandemic. In Mizoram, every day, a batch of men from Champhai and Serchip went to the long and porous Myanmar and Bangladesh borders to keep out smugglers and gunrunners. The residents feared that these people might bring coronavirus with them. Such organizations as Naga Hoho in Nagaland and in the hills of Manipur, Meira Paibis in Imphal valley, Mizo Zirlai Pawl, Young Mizo Association, Local Level Task Force (LLTF) formed in every locality in Mizoram, Mukti Sangha in Tripura played an important role in exercising surveillance, identifying and quarantining outsiders, detecting, isolating, and helping the infected with medical care and medicine and so forth. In simple terms, the

pandemic notwithstanding many of its evils helped create an autonomous space for social action – autonomous from the State.

Secondly, there were self-help solidarities. Many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, we found out, seem to practise their own indigenous systems of quarantining and isolation in times of epidemic The Galo tribe performed *Ali-Ternam*, a customary lockdown, to avoid the spread of the pandemic. The Adi tribe observes a ritual called *Motor*. The Nyishi tribe too observes a ritual called *Arrue* that involves the concept of self-quarantine. Almost all the Tani tribe groups and the Shertukpen perform customary quarantine rituals.

Thirdly, we may also refer to the solidarities based on public good. Governing the pathological, in other words, calls for separating the virus allegedly in the bodies of the manual labourers or the stranded workers from the healthy bodies of the nation in a way that serves what Foucault would have called the 'common' or 'public good'. For, keeping the two separate is considered as the sine qua non of maintaining public health at least in two senses of the term. First, public health is considered as indivisible. It is important to isolate every other member of my community – be it the nation, neighbourhood or the family - from the virus so that my family and I stay safe. In other words, my family and I have a stake in the safety of my community. Secondly, one man's entitlement to safe health does not in any way diminish the probable entitlement of another. Since entitlements are complementary to each other, public good is also considered as non-rivalrous. Take masking as an example. Masking is considered as one of the three principles of maintaining public health in times of pandemic, besides social distancing and (hand) sanitization. A team of our students conducted a study on a sample of over 100 respondents in the immediate aftermath of unlockdown in 2021 in order to figure out what they might think about the prescription of universal masking. About 18 percent do not know how important universal masking is in maintaining public health under the present conditions. Roughly about 77 percent do not think that wearing masks by them will make any difference though they grudgingly wear them out of compulsion. Why are they so much averse to the prescription? Interestingly the arguments they offer shuttle between twin extremes: One, wearing mask does not make any difference to one when one knows that one is not infected and everyone else in the society wears it. One chooses to be a 'free rider' – enjoy all the benefits without sharing the cost or rather the pain of wearing it. Sometimes the argument is turned upside down and we are told, if no one else is wearing it in the society then it will not make any difference if they wear them – pay the cost by way of bearing the pain of wearing it. It is like arguing that I should not suffer for a gain that will benefit all. In Economic Theory, this is called the public good dilemma. In other words, rules of sanitization, masking and social distancing – in short SMS - will not be ordinarily observed unless the one is forced to do so. Many of them would not have observed the rule of masking had they not been forced or compelled to do so by the State authorities.

Our inquiry suggests that in some cases help and assistance in Covid times cut across the ethnic boundaries and were informed by a public good perspective. When the State retreats from this public good kind of healthcare, society chips in. In the hills of Manipur, several villages produce vegetables locally and do not have to rely on external supply at all. When the people of Konsakhul, a village in the hills of Kangpokpi district of Manipur, came to know that villagers in the plains were suffering due to the shortage of vegetables, they (the Liangmai Naga community) started supplying vegetables to nine villages in the plains. All these villages comprise mainly the ethnic groups of the Kukis and the Meiteis with whom their relationship had soured after the violence of the early 1990s.15 The gesture of mutual help turned out to be short lived. Much of 2023, for instance, has

already been a standing witness to lingering violence between these communities taking a huge toll on human lives and property.[12]

Trans-Ethnic Solidarities

The Lower Subansiri Dam, officially named Subansiri Lower Hydro Electric Project (SLHEP), is a gravity dam on the river Subansiri. The dam is situated 2.3 km upstream of the river that descends from Arunachal Pradesh into Assam's floodplains. Once completed, the mega project is expected to generate 2,000 MW of electricity. Its reservoir is estimated to submerge a 47 km stretch of the river and occupy 37.5–40 square km of forest and agricultural land and the Tale Valley Wildlife Sanctuary. The sanctuary is intersected by an elephant corridor that exists for time immemorial. The earthquake of 1950 that rocked the entire region and recorded 8.5 on the Richter scale was devastating. The river Subansiri changed its course and the telltale signs of such devastation are still there for everyone to watch. Insofar as the natural flow of the river is choked and a reservoir is created, it is bound to trigger flash floods in an earthquake-prone region. Besides, the construction of the mega project is feared to submerge land, displace large masses of people, wipe out the forest cover and kill the biodiversity. About 3.9 million displaced people will suffer the loss of their livelihood.
A series of extensive ethnographic visits was organized by us to the affected areas in 2012. We spoke to various cross-sections of people who were going to be affected by the dam's construction. During the discussion it was found that an overwhelming number of people - regardless of their class, gender and other divisions - supported the anti-big dam movement: "Our support for the movement is in a way our struggle for our own right to life", one announces, as the others surrounding us nodded in affirmation. While the spectre of an imminent ecological disaster hangs heavy on the villagers, the concern for survival was instrumental in bringing the various cross-sections of people – Misings, Dewries, Nepalis, Assamese, Ahoms and others - together and formed a kind of solidarity that was unprecedented and new to the region. Many of them opined that the movement was not for any particular ethnic group in exclusion of others unlike most of the autonomy movements of Assam, but it was "for survival of the people of Assam" (*Asombasi*). It "directly concerns our life and livelihood", one quipped. If a dam bursts, it does not discriminate between the Misings and the Dewris, between the rich and the poor, between men and women, but affects everyone irrespective of one's ethnicity, class, gender and so forth. Never before in Assam's history has life per se become so crucial as to produce solidarity that cut across all those divisions coming into the open in the wake of the collapse of the developmental consensus.[13]

Living in Solidarity Dangerously

Solidarity is tied to the paradox of living life dangerously yet securely. While living in solidarity with others endows one with what one perceives as 'freedom', accomplishing it in times of insecurities is by no means an easy task. For, it extracts a price more often than not endangering one's life. Between the unfreedom and permanent rightlessness on the one hand and enjoyment of freedom with the danger of threat to one's life and debility on the other, the choice is not always too obvious.

Temsula Ao's widely read short story 'The Curfew Man' may serve as an illustration. The story revolves around a man who got one of his knees smashed while he was in the paramilitary forces and was involved in carrying out an operation against the insurgents. He was forced to take retirement on a measly pension and he accepted a job in the house of the Commandant. He soon

realized that his was the job of an informer. The job brought him money, but he could not morally accept what he was asked to do. He was given a password and with the help of this password he could walk freely during curfew. This is the reason why he used to be called 'the Curfew Man'. He did not know how to wriggle out of the job that he found to be very humiliating and he was most unhappy with his work. He suffered a fall that smashed his other knee and this gave him the opportunity to leave the job. As Ao tells us: "If the first bad knee had secured him the pension from the Assam Police, the second injury truly secured him his freedom from a sinister bondage (Ao 2006:42).

He was unhappy as long as he remained employed and ostracized by his community. As he decided to live in solidarity with his community leaving his job, he started living his life dangerously, yet enjoying freedom. Living life dangerously is also his idea of enjoying 'freedom'. According to Jasbir Puar: "The Right to Maim situates disability as a register of biopolitical population control, one that modulates which bodies are hailed by institutions to represent the professed progress made by liberal rights–bearing subjects" (Puar 2017: XVIII). Unlike what Puar says, the curfew man does not live a bare life. He lives a life of freedom which is bargained at the cost of his own debility.

In an incident of violence in Kakopathar (Assam) back in 2006, the army had fired upon a 20000-strong mob protesting against the killing of Ajit Mahanta, apparently an innocent wage earner from the area. This triggered a prolonged saga of violence in the area with the effect that their everyday life went on side by side with the violence. Barbora's study, for instance, shows how the villagers got adjusted to the everyday violence while also registering their protest independently of any civil society organization. They were only in solidarity with themselves. As he puts it: "Apartments, temples and other such common spaces are reminders that conflicts occur without the suspension of everyday life. The effect of mundane places becoming associated with calculated acts of violence can be corrosive and demoralising for civil society (Barbora 2012:113).

Concluding Observations

While security, as it is conventionally understood, is preceded by an anticipation of risk, it produces a seemingly irresolvable paradox: The more we anticipate risk the more we subject us to the apparatuses of security. One may indeed stretch the argument and point out that it is the anticipation of risk that puts the security apparatuses in place. So far we took rights as the prerequisite of peace (and security as its synonym) and risk as a factor that originates from outside and has to be mitigated with the apparatuses of security. One may wonder what happens if the spectrum is reversed. What if instead of anticipating risk, we build security on trust? Peoples' solidarity practices in each of the modules we have cited builds on trust and not on the anticipation of risk. Is trust then the way, through which we may address and mitigate risk? Security of life today calls for trust. The apparatuses only create unending spirals of insecurity. The neoliberal anxiety of 'regulating' trust so that risk could be minimized opens the scope of trust beyond the 'closed communities' and allows us to live a 'richer life' by laying it on "stable expectations" (Hardin 2006: 11-22ff). Stabilization and regulation of expectations or what we called anticipation of risk are the mantra of today's security apparatuses. Unless stabilized and regulated, the anxiety only contributes to the production of growing insecurities. Trust is the antithesis of risk and may serve as the crucial key to security. The argument that the minorities in India must 'earn the trust' of the majority in order to secure themselves gains currency in this context. Trusting the Constitution and law of the land *alone* are not

enough.[14] Security of life, in other words, requires a gearshift from mistrust and anticipation of risk to trust and building of solidarities on that basis.

CRG studies on the state assembly elections in West Bengal, Bihar and Assam in 2022 also point out that these biopolitical solidarities do not become an electoral issue. Many of the solidarities remain invisible working more as popular strategies of survival than as objects of public display and demonstration, campaign and publicity (CRG 2022). Survival, according to Samaddar, 'goes beyond the electoral time'. It will certainly require a fine-grained social anthropologist to work on these invisible solidarities. These solidarities are strewn across various levels of our body politic with different life spans. Their ephemeral and episodic nature can hardly be overlooked.

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Notes

[1] Many of the ideas incorporated here draw on my discussion with Prof. Ranabir Samaddar. I am alone responsible for lapses, if there are any. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from original non-English sources are mine.
[2] Manipur is under the throes of a prolonged and continuing ethnic conflict with the consequence that the state's territory today is effectively partitioned between the ethnic groups.
[3] Before the large-scale US disengagement, the US and NATO forces were considered as such superstates.
[4] Concept Note on 'Security at the Crossroads of Rights, Justice and Vulnerabilities' prepared by CRG.
[5] Although the literature on agrarian crisis affecting the lives of millions in India is both growing and rich, CRG is yet to embark on any study on deepening agrarian crisis in India affecting both food sovereignty and security.
[6] All figures are quoted from Sur (2023).
[7] As Article 23 of UDHR declares: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."
[8] In a different context, this resonates with Singh's distinction between what he calls 'epistemic community' having the potential of benefiting from canonically formulated provisions of human rights in international and municipal laws and the community of 'suffering and struggling' people marked off from the 'epistemic community' by 'a spatial, communication and intelligibility barrier' (Singh 2009:xv).
[9] Ranabir Samaddar said this in his opening remarks to the international workshop on 'Security at the Crossroads of Rights, Justice and Vulnerabilities' organized by Calcutta Research Group on 27-28 July 2024 in Kolkata.
[10] I have discussed it in the context of the Northeast (Das 2021).
[11] The Supreme Court of India has been almost consistently expanding the scope of Article 21 of the Constitution of India that guarantees the right to life and loads it with all such rights as right to work etc.

[12] The above ethnographies have been taken from Das (2023).
[13] Adapted from Das (2024:247-250).
[14] One of the participants makes this argument in the international workshop on 'Security at the Crossroads of Rights, Justice and Vulnerabilities' organized by Calcutta Research Group on 27-28 July 2024 in Kolkata.

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