

Exploring Epistemologies of Rural Informalities Among Forest Squatters in the Reserved Forests of Assam, India

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It has now been well established that forests in South Asia are postcolonial political zones. In Assam, this was accomplished through the colonial project of converting jungles into Reserved Forests. Using the politics of dokhol, as an entry point, I interrogate the comparative epistemologies of forms and trajectories of squatting and informality in urban and rural contexts. Dokhol is a local Bengali/Assamese word that literally translates to grab or occupy. This inquiry becomes particularly important since the focus on relational ties between squatting and informality has been predominantly urban centric. Neither has there been any systematic attempt at understanding everyday forms of life and informality in these rural settlements. My intent is to systematically unpack the everyday practice, maintenance and sustenance of dokhol within the reserved forests of Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD), where dokhol emerges as a form of gray legality. This entails an extension and confrontation of the existing scholarship on formal-informal dichotomies in relation to rural squatters, in particular those on forestland. I do so by using a methodology, combining an ethnographic study of dokhol by rural squatters with three influential strands of critical scholarship on urban squatting, namely Partha Chatterjee's political society, Asaf Bayat's quiet encroachment, and Ananya Roy's take on planning and deregulation. My agenda is to push the case of rural informalities further and open a dialogue between the two forms of informalities – rural and urban, especially in the context of South Asia.