

## Dilemma of Bengnapara

### A Case Study on importance of VLUP

The young girl was not able to forget the shadows of sadness in the eyes of her grandma that deepened as they traversed the vast expanse of paddy fields. Her name was Mintu and she was a student of class eight. She asked her mother if she had also noticed the sad eyes of the old lady. She hadn't.

'Something happened, grandma?'

She decided to ask her directly.

'It has been happening all this while.'

The old lady muttered, straightening the loose strands of the rope.

'Can't you be more forthright?'

Mintu was getting restless.

'Didn't you hear them say they were sad and even scared?'

The old lady was still far from being forthright.

'I am not talking to you.'

Mintu got up to leave, enraged.

'They miss the space that belonged to the Earth, and Earth only.'

An affectionate smile lit up the wrinkled face of the old lady seeing the confused expression on the beautiful countenance of the young girl.

'They share it with you only; but don't they need to have it to share with anyone?'

'I don't get it.'

'They used to be happy to see the children climbing up the grassy knolls, running to the orchard for blackberries as rains lashed down, playing hide and seek. They loved the sparrows and squirrels; cuckos and cranes.'

Old lady spoke slowly, dewy-eyed, her nostrils flaring as if to catch a whiff of the smell of the space.

The young girl struggled to imagine there could once be clusters of knolls in that flat swath of paddy fields. She asked his father if he also missed the space that belonged to the earth only.

'Don't we need land for growing food?'

Her father patted her cheeks gently.

'Doesn't Earth exist for us, grandma?'

The young girl looked convinced by her father's self-assurance.

Bengnapara, a village of about two hundred fifty households, was blessed with fertile land, but most of the households were of small and marginal farmers, and about fifty of the households had no land at all. They lived in small huts constructed on the land of the households they assisted in farming or cattle-rearing; and could make some extra pennies by selling milk, thanks to the vast community grazing land of more than hundred bigha their cattle spent most of their time on. It hadn't crossed anyone's mind to use the land for growing green fodder, but the natural grass growing there itself had been able to sustain the livestock. They thanked their stars that their cows and bulls did not have to eat paper and plastic, a disgusting scenario they often came across in the district town.

The river that passed by the village did get flooded almost every year, but Bengnapara had a vast low-lying area along the river banks punctuated with depressions of varying sizes that absorbed and stored the flood waters. A lot of it they could use to grow vegetables after harvesting the paddy. The flood that year presented a different spectacle altogether. Flood waters penetrated deep into the village and refused to drain out for days together. Bengnapara couldn't recall a rainy season before that when it had lost its cattle because they had no place to take shelter in the midst of rampaging flood waters and was gripped by acute embarrassment witnessing helpless inhabitants rushing to a government building outside the village to take shelter.

Old lady refused. She wasn't to leave her village.

Diwakar Hazarika went around the village exhorting villagers to join a protest in front of Circle Office ascribing the plight of the villagers to the neglect of the village by government and blaming local MLA for having left them in their lurch.

'No one left you in the lurch.' Mintu had never seen her grandma shaking with anger, 'It's we who left ourselves in the lurch.'

Diwakar hazarika had left looking sheepishly at the villagers gathered there.

Diwakar Hazarika had made some money running a shop of cement and building materials at the Block Headquarters and had been toying with the idea of setting up a brick kiln, seeing the demand for bricks rise both in the government and private sectors. He shared his plan one day with a rich business man from the district town to seek his advice if there was a way to get government approval for setting up brick kiln on the government land lying vacant. He had his eyes on the community grazing land which he considered a waste of resources. The resourceful business man saw an excellent opportunity

in Diwakar's plan and assured him of government inaction if only he was ready to enter into partnership with him to set up four brick kilns on that empty piece of land, and could ensure that villagers didn't create any problem. Diwakar told him that it wasn't to take more than organising a feast and if at all someone felt envious, he could always be won over by an invitation to grab whatever portion of the community land he wanted. 'Can you see anyone able to resist this offer?' He chuckled and wasn't wrong. Whole village assembled to celebrate the occasion of the setting up of brick kilns. Mintu was also there. Her father had used it as an opportunity to extend his field to a large parcel of land along the river bank. Even the landless people exuded happiness that there will be some work for them during the lean working season.

The old lady refused to have food that day.

'Diwakar uncle is an entrepreneur. My teacher said Bengnapara needs many more like him.'

Mintu had no idea of her agony.

The old lady wondered if her teacher deserved to be a teacher.

Bengnapara had not witnessed much of development since independence. The twelve feet dirt road that linked it to the pucca state highway was pock-marked with ditches and grooves formed by bullock carts and turned into a difficult-to-negotiate mass of slush for about four months of the year. Villagers preferred to walk through the waterlogged paddy fields rather than the slushy and slippery road. The primary school on the outskirts of the village ran in a brick-walled, tin-roofed hall with a kutchra floor and those wanting to pursue education beyond class V had to travel about two kilometers to reach the nearest Upper primary school. Nearest hospital was seven kilometers away; and villagers except four-five households depended on the small ponds attached to their houses for drinking water.

There was a young man in the village by the name Jivan Hazarika, who had mastered the art of earning livelihood by doing nothing. He spent nearly whole day at the Block headquarters, shuttling between the Block and Circle Offices, and to his surprise, there would always be a few persons in need of someone to be introduced to the Block or Circle Officials. The young man was envious at the success of Diwakar and wondered why he couldn't turn the under-development of the village into an opportunity to enhance his own stature. He soon found himself thinking if Diwakar can use the community land to feather his nest, what stopped him from doing that too. He was to exhort the landless families who supported him against Diwakar to grab whatever piece of government land they wanted by assuring them protection from the officials of Circle Office. He could project himself as a champion of the poor and denounce Diwakar for helping the rich to grab land. The idea struck an instant chord with the landless and there was a rat race to build huts in the grazing land. Some of them even filled up the low-lying areas along the river bank and raised huts there.

Mintu got up with a start hearing the sobs of her grandma in the middle of the night.

'What happened. Grandma?'

'I heard the river crying.'

Old lady was shivering as if in fever.

Mintu watched her in bewilderment.

I saw darkness looming over the village; a long road merging into a vast ocean of darkness.'

'You are scaring me.'

Mintu was really scared.

'Why are they not scared? Jivan, Diwakar and his supporters?'

Mintu couldn't figure out what to say.

The young girl could see tears lurking in her eyes.

'I wish one doesn't have to be a grandma to be able to see this.'

Old lady let out a deep, long sigh and slumped into the bed.

Bengnapara had lost the old lady who cried for it that very night.

Mintu told the villagers gathered in front of her house that grandma saw the village marching on a long road into an ocean of darkness' and asked if they saw any merit into it.

Bengnapara found it hard to shrug off the old lady's nightmare.