UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA PRESS | Media+Environment

Vemuri, Ayesha. 2026. "Slow Violence, Suspended Justice: Speculative Futures after the Baghjan Blowout." *Media+Environment* 8 (1). https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.170886.

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Slow Violence, Suspended Justice: Speculative Futures after the Baghjan Blowout

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Keywords: Baghjan blowout, environmental justice, reparations, elemental media, speculation, expertise, slow violence

https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.170886

What are the temporal boundaries of petrochemical catastrophes? How are justice and compensation calculated and contested in their aftermath? And how do speculative finance and ecological harm shape the governance of fossil-fuel extraction? This article examines these questions through a joint analysis of differing media formations of the 2020 Baghjan gas blowout in Assam, northeast India: discourse analysis of government reports; intersections of history and temporality; depredations of extraction; and elemental media. The six-month-long leak and fire caused severe ecological damage, displacement, and loss of life. Six years later, affected communities remain in a state of suspension, awaiting final rulings on compensation, while extraction continues.

Drawing on fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis, I critique dominant framings of the blowout as a bounded event. I argue that while the disaster has been widely understood through the lens of slow violence, the Baghjan blowout reveals forms of petrochemical harm that are not only temporally delayed but also structurally produced and elementally mediated. Through comparative analysis of three forms of disaster media—(1) a Supreme Court–mandated expert report, (2) *Inside the Burning* (a corporate documentary by Oil India Limited), and (3) *Baghjan Reels* (an independent film amplifying community perspectives)—I examine conflicting narratives of harm, accountability, and justice.

Bringing theories of expertise from science and technology studies into dialogue with elemental media theory and environmental humanities scholarship on speculation and temporality, I argue that dominant media forms tend to contain petrochemical violence within event-based logics. By contrast, an elemental media approach enables attention to the durational, saturated, and historically embedded nature of extractive catastrophe, foregrounding how land, water, and air act as media that store and transmit toxic residues across time and space.

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This article situates Baghjan within a longer history of colonial and developmentalist violence, highlighting how both corporate and state narratives foreclose more expansive notions of justice. I propose ecological reparative justice as a relational, long-term framework—intimate, historical, and future oriented—for reckoning with the ongoing afterlives of extractive disaster.

Introduction

On the morning of May 27 2020, Niranta Gohain,[1] a local ecotourism operator and environmental activist in Assam's Tinsukia district, was working in his family's compound when a massive explosion shook the earth. At first, Nirantada[2] said,[3] he feared an earthquake. But soon, phone calls confirmed a blowout at an oil well (well no. 5) in nearby Baghjan village. He rushed to the site on his motorbike, only to find it already roped off by Oil India Limited (OIL). That evening, from his home in neighboring Notun Rongagora, he watched in horror as a dense plume of oil and gas coated the air and land in condensate—vaporized hydrocarbons. The leak continued for twelve days until, on 9 June, the volatile gas ignited, killing three OIL workers. Eyewitnesses described a plume of fire fifty meters high, visible from over ten kilometers away. International experts from the United States, Canada, and Singapore were flown in to "snub" the well, but India's COVID-19 lockdown slowed containment efforts. The leak was finally stopped on 15 November—nearly six months later.

The blowout unfolded alongside the pandemic and Assam's annual floods, compounding precarity for thousands of villagers. "The government and OIL acted quickly," Nirantada recalled. "They evacuated thousands... and provided food and other supplies. But it was hardly enough."[4] Relief camps were overcrowded and lacked basic safety infrastructure. Some were not far enough from the toxic zone to avoid exposure to the condensate and the smell of burning gas (Phukan and Hazarika 2020; NDTV 2020). Though his family wasn't evacuated, their fields were devastated, and they lived through months of tremors. Pointing to cracks in his neighbor's wall, Nirantada asked bitterly: "If this is what it did to concrete, what do you think it did to our bodies? Our bones? Our organs? No one really knows."

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1 I do not follow the accepted convention of using pseudonyms for all my interlocutors. My choices are determined by the stated preferences of each interlocutor and the ethical considerations of protecting and representing their interests. Niranta Gohain is a grassroots environmental activist who has publicly campaigned for environmental justice both prior to and after the Baghjan blowout. He is named as one of the community spokespeople for the plaintiffs in this case and has been a public voice regarding the deleterious impacts of the blowout. I use his name here based on his own preference, as well as to highlight his voice and the role he has taken on with regard to demanding compensation for the effects of the Baghjan blowout.

2 In Assamese, the word "dada" is used as a term of respect to refer to an elder brother, relative, or community member. The shortened version "da" is often affixed to a person's name as a sign of respect.

3 Niranta Gohain in discussion with the author, March 2022.

4 A note about language: My interviews with Nirantada were conducted primarily in Hindi, occasionally with a mix of Assamese and English words. All quotes included in this chapter are translations by me unless otherwise indicated.

No one, he insists, can fully grasp the extent of the damage. But as a resident, a guide familiar with the region's ecology, and a petitioner in the ongoing Supreme Court case for compensation, Nirantada speaks from lived experience, ecological knowledge, and legal insight. He notes, "The amount of oil condensate that is now in the water and soil means that drinking the water, eating the fish, even eating plants will be like eating poison. It doesn't just disappear. It stays in our bodies, in the animals, the fish, the plants... it will affect this place for a long, long time."

His account exemplifies Rob Nixon's widely appreciated notion of slow violence, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2013, 2). Such violence often exceeds representation, due to its invisibility, long temporality, and the limits of media and storytelling. The Baghjan disaster typifies slow violence: Though briefly visible in spectacular images of a towering fireball, the disaster quickly faded from national headlines even as its consequences continued to unfold across the land and lives of residents. When I visited in March–April 2022, the oil field still appeared scorched—an ecological wound in an otherwise verdant landscape. Today, little has changed. Villagers still petition the state on a fair ruling on compensation while their fields, drinking water sources, and fish stocks remain contaminated (Chakravartty 2024; Gogoi and Kikon 2024). Meanwhile, oil extraction continues, with twenty-two wells operating in Baghjan alone. For Nirantada and others, the disaster is not a past event but an ongoing condition of exposure, uncertainty, conflicting stories by multiple publics (Mukherjee 2020), and suspended justice.

Yet the Baghjan blowout also exposes the limits of slow violence as a framework. As developed by Nixon, the concept foregrounds the temporal dispersal and representational challenges of environmental harm, drawing attention to forms of ecological toxicity whose effects unfold gradually and often invisibly across time and space. For Nixon, slow violence is primarily concerned with the long afterlives of environmental contamination. But the violence of the Baghjan blowout, I argue, does not begin with the spill itself. Rather, it emerges from what I call structural toxicity: toxicity that is not limited to the event of contamination but is rooted in the historical, social, economic, and political conditions that have long devalued life in the region. Colonial infrastructures and postcolonial developmentalist policies have rendered Assam an extractive frontier, producing structural toxicity that conditions the material toxicity of petrochemical disaster.

The blowout itself was a spectacular industrial explosion, but its violence unfolds through much longer histories of colonial extraction, postcolonial developmentalism, and the devaluation of Indigenous life in the region, histories that both follow and precede the event. Thus, understanding this catastrophe requires attention to both the past and the future. Furthermore,

I argue that we must attend not only to temporal delays that trouble representation but also to the ecological substrates—land, water, and atmosphere—through which petrochemical toxicity circulates, accumulates, and persists materially, in places, bodies, and relations. These elemental substrates are not simply environments within which media circulate. They are themselves elemental media: material infrastructures that store, transmit, transform, and redistribute histories of extraction, toxicity, and ecological relation. In Baghjan's riverine landscape, petrochemical contamination moves through wetlands, groundwater, and sediments, transforming these ecological substrates into archives of extractive violence.

Attending to these elemental media reveals that the violence of petrochemical extraction is not only slow but also structural and saturated: It precedes the moment of industrial rupture while simultaneously persisting through the ecological media that sustain life in the region. Foregrounding elemental media also clarifies what is at stake in such disasters: the contamination of the very substrates that sustain life—water, land, cellular life, and food systems. In a region where rivers, wetlands, and seasonal floods structure everyday rhythms of survival, the seepage of oil condensate into water and soil threatens multispecies ecologies that extend far beyond the immediate site of the blowout. The disaster thus unfolds not only through time but also through ecological media that hold the imprints of colonial engineering, industrial extraction, and contemporary petrocapitalism.

While recent scholarship in media theory has turned toward the concept of elemental media to foreground the material substrates through which communication and history unfold, this framework has also drawn critique for its tendency toward abstraction and universalism. In John Durham Peters's (2016) foundational formulation, elements such as air, water, and fire are treated as infrastructural conditions of mediation in ways that risk flattening their geopolitical and historical specificity. Subsequent scholars have sought to provincialize this universalizing tendency. Yuriko Furuhata (2019), for instance, argues for a geopolitically grounded understanding of elemental media that situates infrastructures and environments within imperial, colonial, and technological histories. Building on these interventions, I approach land, water, and atmosphere not simply as environments within which media operate but as elemental media in their own right: material substrates that store, transmit, and transform histories of extraction, toxicity, and ecological relation. Their capacities to mediate are neither universal nor natural but are historically produced and shaped by uneven relations of colonialism, capitalism, and state power (Starosielski 2019). Drawing on political ecology and feminist science and technology studies, I further argue that these elemental media are always situated. As Donna Haraway and other feminist STS scholars have long argued, knowledge emerges from specific material and epistemic positions. Attending to elemental media through this lens allows us to understand land, water,

and atmosphere not as neutral backdrops to human action but as historically produced, contested, and differentially valued media whose transformations are inseparable from colonialism, capitalism, and local struggles over survival.

This article thus extends the framework of slow violence in three ways. First, it foregrounds the role of elemental media in storing and transmitting petrochemical toxicity. Second, it examines how spectacular industrial events coexist with durational ecological harm. And third, it situates environmental disaster within the speculative temporalities of fossil-fuel capitalism, where extraction continues despite ongoing contamination and unresolved claims for justice. Here, it is important to foreground the geopolitical context within which petrochemical disasters like Baghjan occur.

Unlike many petrochemical or large-scale environmental disasters involving multinational corporations—such as the Bhopal gas disaster or the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, for instance—the Baghjan blowout was caused by a state-owned enterprise operating within a formally domestic regulatory framework. This apparent absence of foreign corporate actors in Baghjan might suggest a different geopolitical configuration of responsibility. However, Oil India Limited's operations are entangled in global circuits of petrocapitalism: Extraction in Assam supplies international energy markets, and the company's future is secured through speculative financial arrangements that depend on continued resource valuation. In this sense, Baghjan reflects not a departure from colonial extractivism but its mutation, where postcolonial state institutions inherit and reproduce earlier infrastructures of resource frontier governance. The disaster thus reveals how environmental harm can be produced through national development projects that are themselves structured by global regimes of energy demand and financial speculation.

Taking an elemental media approach reshapes how harm is measured and therefore how justice itself is conceived. For Nirantada, justice is inseparable from questions of how harm is calculated—how the blowout, in all its ecological and bodily effects, is assessed, represented, and judged. His questions echo those at the heart of this article: How are the spatial and temporal boundaries of disaster defined amid slow, accumulative harm? Whose knowledge counts in determining value and loss? What forms of evidence shape the terms of justice, and which are disregarded? How do different media mediate these questions?

To explore these tensions, I focus on three representational media forms through which the Baghjan blowout has been publicly narrated, reading them in relation to the elemental media of land, water, and atmosphere that materially store and transmit the disaster's histories. The first is a court-mandated expert report (Katakey 2020; Katakey et al. 2021) by scientists and ecologists with legal authority in the Supreme Court case. The second, *Inside the Burning* (2021a, 2021b), is a two-part documentary commissioned by OIL to document its technical efforts to control the blowout. Though it is

presented as "educational," I argue that it functions as corporate propaganda, legitimating continued extraction. The third, *Baghjan Reels* (2022), is an independently produced documentary that foregrounds villagers' voices and centers the disaster's long-term ecological and social impacts. These texts articulate competing regimes of expertise, evidence, and representation that can be read alongside the elemental media of Baghjan's ecology. In the absence of institutional accountability, documentary media become a crucial arena for contesting the meaning of disaster. Through competing aesthetic strategies, including technical explanation, corporate heroism, and community testimony, these films attempt to stabilize different truths about Baghjan's causes, consequences, and futures, even as the elemental media of land and water continue to register forms of petrochemical harm that exceed representational containment.

Following Lisa Parks and Janet Walker (2020), I examine these as forms of disaster media—not just records of crisis but powerful mediators of visibility, temporality, and political possibility. Like many environmental disasters, the Baghjan blowout is contested terrain: shaped by divergent knowledge systems, values, and stakes. Through these three texts, I examine how disaster is framed—as rupture or continuum, accident or structure—and how these framings shape the conditions of justice. I argue that a hierarchy of expertise emerges in which state-sanctioned, technocratic knowledge is granted epistemic authority over ecological, embodied, and community-based forms of knowing. Disaster media aligned with institutional power tends to frame the blowout as a discrete, time-bound event—an industrial accident with clear beginnings and ends. This framing enables what I call temporal containment: The blowout is rendered into an event, a past rupture rather than an ongoing condition. What, then, would it mean to produce disaster media capable of conveying the full temporal, ecological, and political extent of a disaster like Baghjan?

Throughout this article, I treat media relationally. Documentary films and expert reports mediate competing narratives of disaster, while land, water, and atmosphere function as elemental media that materially store and transmit petrochemical histories. Reading these forms together reveals how representation and material environments jointly mediate ecological violence. This is not only a methodological or an epistemological concern, but also an urgent political one. For residents like Nirantada, the blowout is not over—it is a structure of harm, one that saturates land, water, and bodies, and persists through institutional delay and extractive indifference. As I show, justice—like compensation—is suspended, deferred, or denied. In response, this article develops the concept of speculative eco-reparative justice: an analytic and ethical framework that takes seriously the slow temporality of petrochemical harm and foregrounds transformative, historically accountable approaches to ecological justice.

Importantly, disaster media do not operate only through representational logics. They also materialize through land, water, air—substrates that both mediate and store harm. In a place like Baghjan, which has long been subject to colonial and developmentalist violence and extractivism, land and water retain these histories. Ecologies themselves serve as media of violence, memory, and resistance. To theorize justice, I extend elemental media theory to foreground how land and water hold the imprints of violence. Unlike universalizing approaches, I root this reading in political ecology and history, tracing the colonial, economic, and legal structures that render Baghjan's ecology both a site and a medium of harm.

Dibru Saikhowa: A Soaking, Saturated Ecology

To understand the histories and entangled ecologies that created the conditions for the Baghjan blowout, we must turn to the landscape's material and colonial sedimentations. These sedimentations are not merely historical deposits but are themselves forms of mediation: They record the accumulated effects of colonial engineering and extraction while shaping how petrochemical violence continues to move through rivers, wetlands, soils, and bodies over time. Baghjan lies on the fringes of Dibru Saikhowa National Park and Biosphere Reserve, a protected area surrounded by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries—the Dibru, Lohit, and Siang. The region's extensive rivers, wetlands, and aquatic ecosystems form a characteristic "soaking ecology" (Mathur and da Cunha 2009), where water is central to survival. Inhabitants organize time and life around watery temporalities: Monsoons and floods punctuate and pace life. Water *is* life in every sense of the phrase.[5] Oil condensate leaching into these waters threatens multispecies relationships, as contamination spreads across interconnected waters and persists over time. The riverine landscape is thus not merely a setting but also an elemental medium that holds the material residues of both colonial engineering and petrochemical harm.

The Baghjan blowout produces and extends a relationship of hydrocolonialism (Hofmeyr 2019; Sultana 2022; Quijano 2007), where relations of knowledge, engineering, and extraction established during British rule persist today. The Brahmaputra is both a key infrastructure for life and an early frontier of colonial governance—an entry point for conquest, resource extraction, and coerced labor (Hofmeyr 2019; Swyngedouw 2015; Mitchell 2002). Such riverine systems, which have served as conduits for colonial and postcolonial projects of extraction, are also forms of elemental media: dynamic, memory-laden substrates that absorb and transmit harm across generations.

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5 I deliberately evoke the call to action and resistance used by the Indigenous Sioux nation in North America to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock to underscore the relatedness of the struggles of diverse Indigenous communities across the globe resisting and calling attention to the violence of petrocapitalism.

In Assam, the Brahmaputra was not only the first site *through* which colonizers entered the state, but was also among the first sites *of* colonization, by means of embankments, steamers, maps, and geological surveys.[6] As Arupjyoti Saikia (2019, xxiv) writes, the British Empire "made the river; and the great energy lying within, its ally." While the river was by no means an uncomplicated asset—its high sediment load, braided flow, and frequent floods posed massive challenges to navigation, infrastructural development, and mapping—it was the key means through which Assam was brought under colonial rule and made into a productive part of the British Empire. To do so, it was heavily engineered—embankments, dams, bunds, dredging, and other solutions have been used to "tame" its "unruly" flows and better allow it to function as a conduit for resource extraction (Baruah 2022; Saikia 2019). This history shows that the Baghjan blowout is not an isolated event but part of a longer structure of hydrocolonial violence.

Tinsukia district has been shaped by a history of extractive industries—particularly oil and tea—and structural violence that ensures "the easy coexistence of capitalist profits and extra-constitutional violence" (Barbora and Phukan 2023, 224). Like other formerly colonized regions, "big, abstract, and universalizing ideas like development and progress" (Barbora and Phukan 2023, 224) have been used to justify militarized extraction, devastating local ecologies and economies. The discovery and extraction of petroleum in Assam exemplifies the ways in which extraction and ecological devastation are intertwined in this watery ecology. British amateur geologists began surveying the region in the early 1820s, and in 1825, Lt. R. Wilcox noticed the seepage of oil and bubbling gas by the banks of the Burhi Siding River. He wrote, "On the edges green petroleum is seen floating, but it is not put to any use by the Singhpos" (quoted in Saikia 2011, 49). Wilcox's discovery opened up Assam to extractive interest, while his claim that the oil was not "put to any use" justified colonial appropriation.

The discovery of oil was met with great excitement as it promised a means for the British Empire to compete with the superior industrial opportunities presented by oil in the newly independent American states. As Saikia (2011, 48) notes, "like tea plantations, exploration of petroleum also attracted international capital" and international speculation, attracting funding and expertise from other parts of the empire. This ushered in the transformation of the region into an extractive zone (Gómez-Barris 2017, xvi). Extractivism is based in a colonial way of seeing "territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 5).

6 Such maps and surveys are themselves forms of representational media that have helped shape the governance and ongoing petrochemical violence within this landscape. While analyzing these media would be fruitful to understand how such forms of knowledge making and representation precede the blowout, such a study lies beyond the scope of this article.

Fueled by the promise of petroleum and investments from global financial capital, colonial actors viewed Indigenous lifeworlds as expendable—waste to be cleared in pursuit of productive extraction.

Initial studies speculated that Assam would yield as much or more oil than the rich oil fields of neighboring Burma. For instance, H. B. Mendicott of the Geological Survey of India (GSI) wrote, "only thin layers of petroleum had been 'skimmed off' by the Assamese, 'everything was in a state of nature'" (cited in Saikia 2011, 50), an evaluation that promised large reserves. Similarly, R. D. Oldham, a leading scientist of the GSI, urged the expansion of areas for oil exploration, suggesting that rules and regulations should be altered to give mining concessions in previously protected areas (Saikia 2011, 51). Circulating through geological surveys and colonial administrative reports, these speculative assessments produced Assam as a frontier of petrochemical promise. In doing so, they helped justify new investments, territorial expansion, and the reorganization of the region into an extractive zone. Despite such early promises and expansion of extractive zones, decades of exploration yielded little oil of commercial value. The state, however, blamed poor yields on geologists rather than geological limits.

Speculation is simultaneously financial, geological, affective, and imaginative, fueling what Kikon (2019, 123) calls "carbon fantasies"—visions of frontier wealth that conjure both opportunity and violence for local communities and state-run extractive industries alike. As Steven Shaviro (2019) notes, "speculation is concerned with *possibilities,* no matter how extreme and improbable they may be," and is characterized by an openness to risk taking and uncertainty. Shaviro recalls that while Marx (1993) referred to speculative finance as "fictitious capital," its effects are deeply material. As Aimee Bahng puts it, both speculative fiction and speculative finance "generate cultural fictions that then produce material effects" (2018, 5). The transformation of large tracts of Assam and surrounding regions of Nagaland into oil-producing regions is proof of the world-altering, transformative effects of speculative finance.

Even though Assam's oil fields have never yielded the quantities they were speculated to have held, oil has become a point of contention between the national and state governments. Assam's elites saw oil as key to regional prosperity and economic independence. The Indian state, meanwhile, saw it as crucial for energy independence, leading to conflicts that have fueled regional separatism (Saikia 2011). As these two conflicting visions repeatedly came against one another, "oil exploration came to be seen as a major example of Indian internal colonialism" in Assam (Saikia 2011, 56). Oil and gas are a key issue for the separatist group the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which has argued that "the relationship between Assam and the central government of India is predominantly economic, founded on 'large-scale exploitation'" (Kikon 2019, 11). The politics of petrochemical

extraction, then, are also central to questions of sovereignty and the right to self-determination. Yet, for communities like the Moran in Baghjan, such extractive logics—whether ruled by the colonial or postcolonial state—dispossess in the present, and foreclose alternative futures. Speculative finance imagines profit, but speculative eco-reparative justice demands we imagine accountability—not only for what was taken, but for what continues to haunt the land, waters, and lives of those rendered expendable.

Today, the state-run public sector undertaking OIL continues to explore, extract, and produce oil and natural gas in Assam, with increasing revenues and global investments. OIL's website stresses its long history as well as "ambitious vision with extensive thrust to exploration potential" and promises investors that it will double its revenue by 2030. Despite disasters like the Baghjan blowout, speculation around future profits remains unchanged. This "financial colonization of the future" (Bahng 2018, 5) perpetuates the extraction of resources at the expense of local communities and ecosystems. The postcolonial state, much like its colonial predecessor, maintains an extractive logic that prioritizes economic growth by leveraging carbon fantasies over the well-being of communities and the ecology. These speculative futures are both represented and contested in the three disaster media texts I analyze in the following section.

Accounting for Harm, Calculating Compensation

If land and water operate as elemental media that store petrochemical histories, the three documentary texts examined below can be understood as attempts to render those elemental processes visible—or to obscure them. The three media texts I examine here represent distinct ways of framing and responding to the Baghjan disaster. They constitute a representational constellation intrinsically related to and not separate from the conflicting visions, imaginaries, and fictions discussed above that are also specifically idiomatic in nature. The expert committee report aims to provide a purportedly objective, scientific assessment of the disaster and its effects, in order to be used in legal proceedings to determine culpability, harm, and compensation. However, as Rahul Mukherjee (2012, 2) notes, while scientific and legal explanations of disasters are necessary, they "might lead to obscuring other ways of comprehending the disaster." Read relationally with the elemental media of land and water, these forms can be understood as competing attempts to render the material circulation of toxicity visible or invisible. In this case, the two films I analyze are deeply subjective: *Inside the Burning*, a corporate documentary, uses the expository conventions of technical documentary in an attempt to mitigate the damage of the blowout through altering public perception of the disaster. *Baghjan Reels*, on the other hand, draws on testimony to foreground community knowledge and lived experience, and render visible those aspects of ecological, social, and affective harm that are otherwise invisibilized in the media.

The expert committee report, commissioned by the Supreme Court of India, is a legal-technical document tasked with determining culpability, assessing ecological and livelihood impacts, calculating the costs of ecological restoration and community compensation, and proposing preventive measures for future oil extraction (Katakey 2020, 4). Chaired by retired Justice B. P. Katakey, the committee included representatives from the Pollution Control Board, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Biodiversity Board, the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, the government of Assam, and an environmental scientist. Its findings were published in two parts: a preliminary report in July 2020 (while the well was still ablaze) and a final report in December 2021. The report operates within a technocratic and legal-rational frame, emphasizing quantifiable ecological and economic damage while sidelining community knowledge and affective experiences of harm.

Inside the Burning, a two-part documentary commissioned by OIL and produced by Discovery Channel, focuses on technical efforts to contain the gas leak. Marketed as an "investigative documentary" highlighting the bravery of engineers and technicians, it centers OIL's efforts to control the blowout and restore operations (Jaiswal 2021). The film adopts what Bill Nichols (2024) calls the expository mode of documentary: authoritative voice-over narration, technical graphics, and expert interviews combine to produce an aura of objectivity. This formal structure reinforces the epistemic authority of OIL engineers while marginalizing other forms of knowledge.

In contrast, *Baghjan Reels*, an independent film by Tahin Ojah, foregrounds the lived experiences of Baghjan's residents returning to burned homes and devastated fields. Rather than adopting an expository structure, *Baghjan Reels* draws on observational and participatory documentary practices, privileging extended testimony, ambient sound, and handheld camerawork to foreground the situated knowledge of those living within the contaminated landscape. Through intimate testimony and observational footage, it traces the blowout's lingering afterlives—displacement, loss, and uncertainty—and indicts development as a moral narrative that legitimizes extractive violence. The film offers a grounded account of environmental racism in which marginalized communities shoulder the burden of state-corporate extractivist development. By foregrounding villagers' voices and the material effects of the blowout on their lives and the land, rather than technical experts, the film challenges the hierarchy of expertise that structures official accounts of the disaster. Instead, it aids in creating "ethical communities" (Sarkar and Walker 2009, 38) that render widely visible the political and social impacts of the blowout on local communities.

In the case of the Baghjan blowout, documentary media become a key terrain where competing claims about expertise, responsibility, and temporality are articulated. Read alongside the elemental media of land and water, these

documentary forms reveal not simply competing representations of disaster but competing regimes of knowledge through which harm is rendered visible, measured, and made governable. This relational reading exposes the coloniality of technical expertise, the racialized logics of development, and the representational limits of documentary media in accounting for the slow, uneven, and protracted violence of petrochemical disaster.

The Cause of the Blowout

The expert committee report communicates its assessment through an evidence-based, legal-rational framework. It attributes the blowout to both OIL's failure to implement "necessary health, safety, and environmental safeguards" (Katakey et al. 2021, i) and the state's failure to ensure regulatory compliance. The report details multiple violations, including faulty cement plug placement, neglected integrity testing, and the absence of senior OIL officers during a critical phase of drilling—each a breach of safety protocol that allowed the leak to escalate into a full-blown disaster.

The committee further critiques the complicity of state institutions. Given Baghjan's environmentally sensitive location, it questions how the Union Environment Ministry approved drilling, especially since the same ministry permitted OIL to operate inside Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, in violation of environmental law. The report highlights the absence of key documentation typically required for such clearances, including baseline ecological assessments and contingency plans for petrochemical spills in wetland and seismic zones. This lack of foresight reveals a systemic disregard for ecological risk. The blowout, the report argues, was not an unforeseeable accident but a preventable disaster caused by negligence and regulatory failure.[7]

The preliminary report states that OIL and the Assam Pollution Control Board showed a "discernible pattern of alleged infractions" of mandatory environmental authorizations (Katakey 2020, 51). It cites evidence of noncompliance with Supreme Court orders and failure to follow procedures under the Air and Water Acts after the disaster. "This indicates a serious and grave infraction against statutory environmental safeguards," the report concludes (Katakey 2020, 54). It recommends further scrutiny of all OIL operations in Assam. In short, the report suggests that the Baghjan blowout may be symptomatic of a wider pattern of institutionalized negligence.

Compared to this technical assessment, *Inside the Burning* provides a strangely cosmic—and disconcertingly comical—explanation. It opens with a cosmic montage: Earth as the "blue marble" erupts into flame, interspersed

7 The Baghjan blowout is not the first accident of its kind—in 2005, an oil spill and fire occurred in Dikon, Dibrugarh district, not far from Baghjan. Despite the knowledge of these risks, drilling at the Baghjan oil field was commenced without basic safety and risk management infrastructures being in place.

with ritual images of fire and a poetic voice-over extolling fire as central to birth, death, and the fullness of life. This bewildering prelude positions the fire as elemental and inevitable—an aesthetic move that naturalizes the blowout while romanticizing the danger. As the film shifts to Baghjan well no. 5, it adopts an authoritative documentary style: voice-over narration, animated graphics, and technical expertise, with engineers framed against the backdrop of industrial infrastructure. These aesthetic choices lend them authority and appear objective, enhanced by drone footage that provides a god's-eye view of rapid disaster response, positioning the viewer above the site and reinforcing the film's claim to technical mastery and situational control.

Corporate spokespeople explain that although gas wells are usually exhausted after a few decades, at OIL "wells have been worked over literally to their last potential reserves." This framing normalizes extractive risk as responsible resource management. It justifies the removal of the blowout preventer as a necessary step to extract this final reserve, framing cement plug placement as a high-risk task in which "even the best preventive measures" can fail. The narrator speculates: "something similar may have happened in the case of Baghjan's well no. 5." With no mention of OIL's protocol breaches or management lapses—key findings in the expert committee report—the disaster is framed as an unfortunate but understandable result of responsible extraction. The viewer is left with the impression that OIL did all it could.

This narrative continues as the film intercuts concerned-looking OIL executives making phone calls with close-up shots of workers donning heavy-duty boots, helmets, and fireproof gear. Set to a dramatic musical score and accompanied by the voice-over declaration that "protocol kicked in immediately," the sequence constructs OIL's response as disciplined, efficient, and technically authoritative. Senior OIL officials are reimagined not as negligent but as moral and technical heroes. At one point, the narrator likens the well to a "toddler throwing a tantrum," casting OIL engineers as patient caregivers taming an errant child. This metaphor infantilizes the disaster and deflects attention from structural culpability.

Baghjan Reels' community-led perspective offers a stark counterpoint. In its opening sequence, a villager declares, "We denounce OIL India. We denounce the state government and central government. Our pleas have fallen on deaf ears and we have lost faith in them." Though it focuses less on technical cause, the film makes clear that residents see the blowout as state-sanctioned environmental injustice. Hemanta Moran, a local activist, recounts how the Assam Pollution Control Board issued a closure notice to OIL after the blowout—only to rescind it days later. "We fail to understand what sort of an agreement they arrived at that the notice was revoked," he says, gesturing to the opaque alliances that sustain extraction despite evident risk.

These testimonies reframe the blowout not as an isolated failure but as a consequence of corporate-state collusion that devalues ecology and community well-being. Filmed on location in damaged homes, polluted wetlands, and agricultural fields, the documentary embeds villagers' bodies within the devastated landscape, transforming personal narratives into visual evidence of ecological harm. This emplacement of testimony visually links environmental degradation with lived experience, transforming personal narratives into evidence of ecological harm. While drone footage also appears in this documentary, its juxtaposition with villagers' testimony emphasizes environmental loss rather than technical mastery, transforming aerial perspective from a tool of surveillance into one of collective witnessing.

Together, these accounts expose a discursive terrain where responsibility is contested and risk is rendered differently—either as a technical failure, a heroic challenge, or an act of systemic injustice. At stake in these competing explanations is a debate not just over the blowout's cause but also over whose knowledge counts, what stories get told, and how justice is—or is not—imagined.

The Impact of the Blowout

Read as a media form rather than merely a technical document, the expert committee report mediates the blowout through the epistemic conventions of scientific expertise. It makes ecological harm legible by translating it into quantified evidence—documenting petrochemical contamination, species mortality, livestock deaths, acres of polluted land, and homes destroyed. It accounts for visible and sonic disturbances caused by the fire, including seismic vibrations (3–4 on the Richter scale) and noise levels akin to industrial activity, all detrimental to human and nonhuman life. Yet the absence of baseline ecological data prior to drilling renders many of these statistics speculative; the full extent of harm is, paradoxically, incalculable. The committee relied on previous studies and a rapid postdisaster assessment conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) to quantify damage.

The WII assessment found alarming levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in the soil, water, and sediments of the Lohit and Debra Rivers and the Maguri-Motapung *beel* (wetland). These carcinogenic compounds—produced through incomplete combustion of crude oil and gas—pose severe risks to aquatic and terrestrial life, with long-term effects on biodiversity, reproduction, and ecosystem stability. Both the expert committee and WII acknowledge the gravity of the contamination and warn of enduring ecological harm. Notably, the committee's preliminary report recommended that OIL provide health insurance for affected communities, suggesting an awareness of ongoing health risks. However, this recommendation disappears from the final report—a significant omission that signals the desire to treat the blowout as a bounded event, not an ongoing disaster.

In contrast, *Inside the Burning* evades any sustained engagement with the blowout's effects. While the film spectacularizes fire as an elemental force, it largely omits the slower, less visible processes through which condensate seeps into wetlands and groundwater. In doing so, it privileges combustion over contamination, rendering some elements cinematically legible while disavowing others. By focusing almost exclusively on the technical challenge of stopping the leak, the documentary displaces attention from the long-term consequences of petrochemical exposure. It frames the disaster as natural and its resolution as heroic, with OIL engineers cast as selfless responders. The first reference to affected villagers appears nearly ten minutes in, when we are told that OIL promptly set up four relief camps. Villagers are shown resting on mattresses and receiving meals in converted school buildings, subtly portraying them as grateful beneficiaries of corporate care. Absent, however, are accounts of overcrowded conditions, lack of sanitation, or the many who chose to return home for safety and dignity (Katakey et al. 2021).

As the narrative unfolds, the film's emphasis becomes clear: not restoration or accountability, but the speculative promise of future extraction. Dr. P. Chandrasekharan, director of exploration and development, frames the disaster in terms of the basin's "untapped potential," citing 5.5 billion tons of reserves. Chairman Sushil Chandra Mishra similarly stresses Baghjan's role as "the future of OIL India," predicting that gas production would double by 2023–24. Here, the "impact" that matters is on shareholders and production timelines—not on local ecologies or lives.

As Steven Shaviro notes, contemporary economic activity is governed by speculative logics: "Today, all economic activity, no matter how physically real or productive, is refracted through, and largely governed by, the abstract calculative mechanisms of financial speculation. The object of such speculation is always the future, with its chances and its differences from the present" (Shaviro 2019, 5). Speculation is fictive in that the future may never arrive, yet it acts materially in the present (Amoore 2013). In *Inside the Burning*, the response to Baghjan is anchored not in responsibility but in the necessity of securing an extractive future. As Mishra puts it plainly, "We have a responsibility to our shareholders." That responsibility outweighs ecological restoration or reparative justice.

By contrast, *Baghjan Reels* offers a slow, intimate account of ongoing harm. It opens with haunting imagery: scorched forests, oil-slicked wetlands, and the remnants of burned homes. Through the voices of Baghjan's primarily Indigenous Moran community, the film foregrounds long-term trauma, loss of livelihood, and the unraveling of everyday life. By situating testimony within flooded fields, oil-streaked water, and damaged vegetation, the film treats the landscape itself as a witnessing medium, allowing ecological substrates to register harm alongside human narrators. Residents describe how OIL promised development, prosperity, and employment—but in the

aftermath, those promises have given way to despair. Women speak of their families' precarity and their own psychic exhaustion. Kajoli Saikia says, "I simply can't figure a way out... I feel like digging a hole and ending my life in it." Her husband, once a fisherman, can no longer work because the river is now dead.

Interim compensation from OIL—25 lakh rupees in some cases—has done little to restore agricultural life. As Bonali Moran explains, it takes years for nut and fruit trees to mature; a farm is a generational investment that a one-time compensation amount cannot cover. Village headman Rajani Hazarika elaborates, "It takes at least twenty-five to thirty years to grow a farm. I am doubtful whether we will be able to regain what we have lost... The soil has lost its fertility as it was exposed to harmful chemicals. I am doubtful if we will be able to live here permanently." The community's imagined future—one where they can return to sustainable lifeways—is not just deferred but rendered improbable by petrochemical saturation and ecological degradation.

This contrast is perhaps most painfully crystallized in the testimony of Labanya Saikia, a young widow. Her house was destroyed in the blowout, and she now drinks water drawn from a tube well: "The water has a strange, reddish color, and an odd taste... It makes the skin itchy and sore when you bathe with it. There is a burning feeling when drinking it." Yet, she says, "The authorities—be it the state administration or OIL India—have not told us that the water is unsuitable for consumption or that this place is not yet suitable for resettlement." The silence of officials leaves her with no choice but to drink contaminated water—another instance of the slow, everyday violence inflicted by petrocapitalism.

Baghjan Reels shows the impossibility of measuring, bounding, and fully apprehending the impact of the blowout. It illuminates the many ways in which the blowout constitutes a form of "slow violence," which Nixon describes as "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2013, 2). While the Baghjan blowout certainly was spectacular at first, its violence is protracted over time and space, accreted in bodies and ecosystems in ways that are not entirely knowable and countable.

Despite the accounts of communities in Baghjan and Notun Rongagora, OIL spokesman Tridiv Hazarika insists, "Financially they will be in a very, very healthy condition." His assurance stands in stark contrast to the lived reality of displaced, traumatized communities whose futures have been foreclosed. The speculative future imagined by OIL—increased production, doubled profits, investor confidence—sits uneasily alongside the speculative, uncertain futures that residents like Labanya or Kajoli Saikia must now navigate. These futures, it appears, are incommensurable with one another.

Disaster Media and the Question of Justice

The question of compensation—central to villagers' ongoing struggle—points to a larger concern about justice in the aftermath of ecological disaster, and the uncertain temporalities through which such justice is imagined, deferred, or denied. If the previous section showed how media forms frame harm and responsibility in divergent ways, this section considers how those frames shape the very possibility of reparations. The three disaster media texts analyzed here not only document the blowout's impact but also expose the persistence of colonial logics in postcolonial state practices—particularly the privileging of scientific expertise over community knowledge, and the reliance on developmentalist narratives to justify extractive violence.

As Nirantada observes, the legal fight for compensation revolves around abstract data and scientific metrics—measures that often feel disconnected from the lived experiences of farmers and villagers. While *Baghjan Reels* most closely registers the longue durée of harm, both the expert committee report (which carries the greatest legal authority) and *Inside the Burning* (which reached the widest public audience) frame the disaster as a contained, time-bound event. In doing so, they obscure the unfolding, everyday nature of petrochemical violence.

As experts debate the levels of saturation of oil into the grounds and waters of Baghjan and the surrounding ecology, the lives and futures of the people and nonhuman residents of the area remain in suspension. Suspension here is not a passive condition but rather one of protracted violence, uncertainty, and despair. Suspension exacerbates the slow violence of the Baghjan disaster, as the state employs strategies of delay, noncompliance, and circumvention to avoid accountability for the blowout and possible future catastrophes. This suspension also allows OIL's extractive operations—and its speculation for new deposits of oil and natural gas—to continue unimpeded.

Despite the fact that the expert committee report as well as community activists have shown the ways in which both OIL and the state are complicit in the disaster, over four years after the blowout, villagers still await the court's decision on compensation. As Noihrit Gogoi and Dolly Kikon (2024) write, the people of Baghjan and Notun Rongagora "live in a state of suspension; squandering time, commitment, and money to follow up on the case." Several villagers, including Nirantada, claim that the Assam government has been deliberately delaying the NGT's process by failing to provide data or refusing to comply with court orders. In the meantime, villagers continue to live in a toxic and devastated ecology, traumatized by memories of the blowout and unable to reconstruct their homes, lives, and livelihoods. There have been multiple reports of villagers dying by suicide or attempting to take their own lives in the aftermath of the disaster (Gogoi and Kikon 2024; Chakravartty 2024).

As Nirantada claims, this can be seen as part of a historical pattern in which community knowledge and lived experience is dismissed in favor of scientific expertise and ideologies of development and progress. As Dolly Kikon argues, the rift between local knowledge and scientific expertise is long-standing, and it becomes starkly visible as the case for compensation unfolds. She writes, "What connects the hydrocarbon world and Assam are structures of power, violence, and a culture of management that feigns ignorance about the causes of local resentment. Extractive regimes in Assam are a 'technical matter', and the angst of communities a 'local issue'" (Kikon 2020). The separation of local knowledge from expert analysis allows the disaster to be represented in terms of numbers relating to extraction, profit, and compensation without attending to how local communities' lives have been disrupted, and how their ability to continue living in the region has been compromised. The blowout, in this framing, becomes something to be managed and priced—not something that demands structural accountability or reparative justice.

Ultimately, the question that haunts Baghjan is not only *how* compensation will be calculated but also *what counts* as harm—and for whom. Justice, in this case, is not just delayed but reshaped by epistemologies that render some knowledges legible and others irrelevant. In these conditions, as the final section will explore, speculative justice—rooted in care, repair, and the demand for accountability across time—emerges as a necessary counter to the extractive futures imagined by the state and industry alike.

Conclusion: Toward Ecological Reparative Justice

From a media studies perspective, we must also consider the representation limitations of disaster in capturing slow violence. Reports and documentary films such as the ones analyzed here largely frame the Baghjan blowout as a singular, bounded event. Even *Baghjan Reels*, which most closely attends to the protracted nature of petrochemical violence, ultimately treats the disaster as temporally discrete. Yet attending to Baghjan's lands and waters allows us to witness—geologically and hydrologically—how extractive and colonial violence saturates this ecology, extending far beyond the spectacular moment of rupture. This approach draws on the elemental turn in media studies, which foregrounds how material environments, infrastructures, and the natural world enable and mediate communication (Peters 2016; Starosielski 2019). In the case of slow violence and toxicity, it is only by turning to land and water as archives of violence that we might begin to apprehend the full scope of disaster—and thus imagine a form of justice that is likewise unbounded in time.

However, elemental media approaches alone are insufficient. As critics have rightly noted, they often risk ontological flattening, abstracting mediation into everything (while meaning nothing), while obscuring geopolitics, historical specificity, and power relations (Starosielski 2019; Furuhata 2019, 2022). In response, I argue that an elemental media approach to disasters

like Baghjan must be grounded in a political, ecological, and historical understanding of place, to attend to the *specific* conditions through which the blowout was made possible, as well as the ongoing toxicity—both material and speculative—that saturates Baghjan's ecology.

As political ecologists and Indigenous geographers remind us, land, water, and air are never neutral. They are historically situated, politically contested, and intimately inhabited. In Baghjan, these elements have become saturated not only with petrochemicals but also with the residue of colonial and developmentalist violence. A media theory adequate to such slow disaster must move beyond abstraction toward a situated, relational account of mediation—one that centers land (and water) as a site of history, memory, resistance, and future-making. In this article, I have shown that situating the Baghjan blowout within a longer history of extractivism helps reveal how notions of justice are too often constrained by the temporal boundaries of disaster. For OIL and the state of Assam, treating the blowout as an unfortunate but isolated accident enables a similarly contained notion of justice: one-time payouts rather than enduring responsibility. However, as I have argued, when the disaster is understood as part of a longue durée of hydrocolonial violence, its harms—and its claims for redress—must also be reimagined in relational and temporal terms.

The extraction of oil and gas in Baghjan is entangled in a global system of finance, power, and pollution that has consistently prioritized financial gains at the expense of the collective futures of people and the planet. The blowout is not simply an unfortunate accident—it is one moment in an ongoing process of life-depleting extraction. Speculating on what meaningful justice might look like for the communities of Baghjan, Notun Rongagora, and neighboring villages thus raises broader questions about the future of ecological and climate justice.

I propose that ecological, reparative justice for the victims and survivors of the Baghjan blowout must attend to three interrelated considerations. First, the conversion of Baghjan into an extractive zone, with the subordination of existing ecological and social life to the needs of financialized speculation, must be historicized as arising from a history of colonialism both externally, by the British Empire, and internally, by the Indian state. Financial speculation, moreover, is a process through which the future of Baghjan is colonized—it is a means of ensuring the ongoing extraction of resources from this rich ecology. An ecological reparative justice framework, then, would need to be *anticolonial*, naming the saturation colonial toxicity in the past and cautioning against its continuation in the future. Second, treating Baghjan as site of resources rather than as an ecology enables the conversion of its inhabitants into sacrificial sites or sinks for pollution—a form of slow, pernicious pollution that adheres to living bodies, transmits across food webs, and impacts generational health of humans and nonhumans.

Justice, in this case, would need to be similarly *intimate* and *durational*, keeping OIL in a relationship of responsibility toward the people and ecologies impacted by the blowout for lifetimes and generations. Justice, in this view, is a relationship, a process, that would need to follow the scale, depth, and temporality of the injustice. Finally, justice would need to be *constructive,* as Táíwò argues, to rebuild the world otherwise. Drawing on Ta-Nehisi Coates's (2014) call for reparations as "full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences" and a means of thinking about reparations as "more than recompense for past injustices" but rather a transformation of social and political structure, I argue that justice for Baghjan would mean grappling with the past to ensure that such disasters can never again be possible. I use speculative eco-reparative justice not as a policy model but as an analytic for imagining forms of redress adequate to slow and structural ecological harm. Ecological reparations for Baghjan, in other words, would involve a historically informed, anticolonial, slow, and transformative reorientation toward the future of planetary life.

Acknowledgments

I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and generative feedback. This article is based on sections of my doctoral dissertation, "The Case for Letting Assam Flood: Risk, Expertise, and Infrastructural Mediation in the Brahmaputra Floodplain," and is based on research supported by the Joseph-Armand Doctoral Fellowship provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research of Canada (SSHRC CGSD 767-2019-1909).

Photo for the online version by Ayesha Vemuri.

Submitted: July 16, 2025 PST. Accepted: July 17, 2026 PST. Published: November 06, 2026 PST.

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