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# Academic Social Responsibilities and Social Activism: Insights from Shankar Guha Niyogi and Ganesh Devy

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Academic Social Responsibility (ASR) represents the delicate interplay between academic and social spheres. These spheres are not mutually exclusive; they intersect in dynamic, reciprocal ways. This article explores their interconnected functions and examines how each contributes to the practice and understanding of ASR. This article will focus on questions such as how ASR plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and praxis. How does ASR instrumentalise the question

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of Indigenous Knowledge Systems to play a pivotal role in the post-independence Indian context? Does ASR pave the way to place together separate activism originating from their respective political ideologies? If yes, what kind of role does ASR play in that context? This article will unpack these questions with reference to Ganesh Devy's activism and Shankar Guha Niyogi's ideation and practice of activism. Researchers and thinkers are quite apprehensive about placing the names of these two figures in a single sentence, as their respective political ideologies are poles apart and radical in their own ways. However, this article will focus on Devy and Niyogi's activism as advocacy for land-based rights movements, the propagation of land-based knowledge systems, and the provision of overall protection for the local indigenous population, including their health, education, and livelihood practices.

Academic Social Responsibility might give one the impression that it is strictly confined to academic spaces and makes people in the academic circle feel

'holier than thou.' However, a close examination of this term shows that the academic circle cannot be exclusively drawn from other social spheres, as it works in tandem with people from heterogeneous class and caste backgrounds, especially in India. At the same time, it shifts the horizon for people in academia by including extra-academic spheres in their conceptualisation, as their responsibilities are not confined to classroom spaces and pedagogical processes. In the case of Ganesh Devy's activism, it can be observed that he has built a strong network of activists and researchers from and beyond the concerned indigenous communities. On the other hand, in the case of Niyogi's activism, people from different academic circles and class positions are coming to the Dallirajhara region to help set up garages, hospitals, and schools. Through these forms of activism, a mobilisation process emerges in which a heterogeneous mass forms.

In both cases, this emerging mass acts to ensure education and health facilities, and to protect the

Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which are hugely dependent on the local indigenous population. Their ideation and practice of activism fostered camaraderie across communities. One can argue that these movements helped pave the way for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Still, it is worth noting that these movements were already in place well before the United Nations conceptualised the goals. Furthermore, these groups of activists sought to foster local land-based knowledge systems and to help develop new skills associated with them, while avoiding any tampering with traditional Indigenous knowledge systems or any unilinear standardisation of terms such as 'well-being' and 'development'.

To further elaborate on the point of Sustainable Development Goals, it is vital to mention the politics of globalisation and globalism and how they influence the conceptualisation of SDGs as propagated by the United Nations. Robert O. Keohane defines globalisation as the manifestation of globalism—a state of interdependence

across continents involving flows of capital, goods, ideas, and people. He categorises globalisation into economic, military, and socio-cultural dimensions (Keohane and Nye 109). Social and cultural globalisation involves the transmission and imitation of practices across societies, often placing the source culture in a dominant position and the recipient culture in a subordinate one—a process termed 'cultural isomorphism.' This leads to distortions in cultural identity, politics, and individual consciousness.

Globalisation's interdependence raises crucial questions: How are ideas transmitted? Who benefits from this process? Does it truly aid developing countries? While globalisation shortens physical distances through rapid communication, it simultaneously accentuates *cultural distance*—differences in understanding shaped by local politics and institutions. Thus, globalisation does not erase the nation-state but redefines the nature of politics beyond its traditional boundaries.

Though globalisation has fostered the idea of a 'global village,' stark disparities persist between developed and developing nations. The system, primarily designed by developed countries, serves corporate and financial interests, often undermining local economies and perpetuating colonial hierarchies. Despite claims of openness and progress, globalisation remains tied to the Western hegemonic structures and perspectives. The Western model emphasises unification across cultures and nations, yet for many in developing societies, it signifies a continuation of imperialism. Hence, the experience of globalisation is deeply subjective shaped by one's cultural position, political realities, and historical context.

As a result, the universal nature of the SDGs poses significant challenges in the Indian context. The SDGs, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, emerged as a response to both opportunities and imbalances created by globalisation. Though it is undeniable that the SDGs contain a standardisation element. This trace of

standardisation can be located in the listing of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs incorporate 'quality' education (SDG 4), 'good' health and wellbeing (SDG 3), and 'decent' work and economic growth (SDG 8) (United Nations). Other than these specific SDGs there are 14 more goals which deal with poverty, hunger, gender ineuality, sanitation, clean energy, industry infrustructure, climate action etc. However, this article will structurally focus on SDG 4, SDG 3 and SDG 8 as these goals directly linked with the core argument it posits.

These sepcific adjectives, such as 'quality,' 'good,' and 'decent,' have culture-specific meanings, significance, and politics. In the context of India, the adjectives mentioned above do not have a unilinear meaning, and imposing such unilinear standards further complicates the politics of the center and its peripheries. It should always be questioned what quality education, good health, well-being, decent work, and economic growth signify in the Indian context. This article

comceptualises the term 'localisation' in contrast to 'globalisation.' In this context, 'localisation' underscores cultural traits and attributes in a more local, Indian way, where components such as education, health, well-being, and economic growth are not compared to alien cultural parameters. It highlights the local cultural community's demands in the Indian context.

In this background, this article highlights Ganesh Devy's activism concerning Indian indigenous communities, their cultural lives, and languages as an example. It is to be mentioned that the activism Devy and his team have performed to date has structurally endorsed community representation and empowered their agency. Ganesh Devy is a thinker and cultural activist who is based in India. Devy was a professor of English at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda from 1980 to 1996. In order to initiate his work with the Denotified Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) and other marginalised indigenous communities of India, he left that job in 1996. He initiated the nationwide language

survey, called the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), which documented around 780 languages in India, whereas the Indian government has constitutionally recognised only 22 languages (Devy).

Ganesh Devy has made substantial contributions to the preservation of language and culture by establishing centers such as the Bhasha Research and Publication Center (1998) and the Adivasi Academy (1999). This article will highlight the functions and activities of the Bhasha Research and Publication Center and Adivasi Academy, which emphasise community well-being and participation and support entrepreneurial initiatives within the indigenous communities of that region.

At this point, it is crucial to mention Bhasha's and Adivasi Academy's stance on working with the indigenous communities. The organisations view the world's cultural heritage inclusively and consider indigenous culture a serious field of research. As part of

its inclusive research ethics and methodology, this organisation believes in community leadership development. In line with the leadership-building objective, all planning for developmental projects and documentation activities involves community members. All these actions unite people and make them aware of their social, anthropological, and political aspects in local and larger scapes. This leadership-building agenda also emphasises the sustainability of these communities. Bhasha believes that entrepreneurial organisations established under its guidance and that have grown over time should receive independent recognition and affiliation at some point. As a result, the primary goal of sustainability, which Bhasha conceived in the Chhote Udeipur region, was adopted by these other organisations and spread to other marginal indigenous communities residing in rural and urban areas.

From the Chhote Udeipur region, every year, nearly 60,000 tribal people migrate in search of livelihood, which destabilises all these people's lives

and, at the same time, the entire anthropology and ecology of this belt. G N Devy, in his multiple books and interviews, has stated that the main objective of his activism is language. So, it is unquestionable that if the ecology and anthropology of a region are destabilised, the survival and existence of the region's languages are also destabilised. To address this issue structurally, he focused on and preserved the anthropology of this demography. So he highlighted the need to build infrastructure to protect the health, knowledge system, indigenous arts, and cultural practices, and to stabilise their sources of income. Here, Adivasi Academy can be considered a model. This model can yield fruitful results when applied in a given location, taking into account the actual needs and requirements of the communities residing there.

The Adivasi Academy dedicates itself to making local indigenous communities self-reliant and to preserving their languages and innate knowledge systems. There are several departments in the academy,

such as Basanthshala- the residential school, Vaacha- the museum exclusively endorsing indigenous culture has gained national and international eminence; a health section named 'Prakruti Clinic,' which has its own lab capable of running laboratory tests and with regular visiting doctors from the city and a library with 5500 books where aspirants from the local villages visit and prepare for their competitive exams. There is also an agricultural section that cultivates various seeds and provides them to local farmers, and a textiles section capable of producing textiles through dyeing, seeding, and weaving—all of which inspire, influence, and exemplify indigenous, eco-friendly textile production.

Basanthshala, established in 2006, is a residential school that now serves sixty students from local indigenous communities, most of whose parents are migrant laborers from underprivileged backgrounds. The school's core mission is to prevent children from entering the migrant labor system and to protect them

from malnutrition. All students receive free food, education, and lodging (Rathwa 117).

Basanthshala follows a multidisciplinary, multilingual pedagogy. Students learn in four languages—their respective mother tongue, Gujarati, Hindi, and English. Rather than imposing a single language, teachers learn from the students' diverse linguistic backgrounds and use those languages to build communication. In this way, students shape the classroom's linguistic environment (Rathwa 118).

Because most students come from agricultural families, the school's guiding philosophy is *"Ek hath me kitab, dusre hath me fawda" (Books in one hand and plough on the other)*—a balance of academics and practical life skills. Classes are named Prakruti, Jagruti, Sanskriti, Swakruti, and Pragati, corresponding to grades 1–7. Across these levels, students receive training that supports daily living, incorporates indigenous learning methods, and nurtures imagination through activities

such as storytelling and story writing in their mother tongues. These stories are disseminated for a wider reach through the institution's social media handles.

In 2021, Basanthshala was registered with the Gujarat government, enabling it to issue transfer certificates and help students pursue further studies after completing their time at the school (Rathwa 117).

In his book *The Question of Silence* (2019), Devy mentions a disease called sickle cell anemia that became an epidemic in Amaravati, Maharashtra (Devy 89). To understand and resolve the situation, the Maharashtra government formed a committee. Later, it was observed that this disease is present among the indigenous people of the Chhote Udeipur region. The symptoms of sickle cell anemia include frequent pain, swelling of the hands and feet, frequent infections, delayed growth and puberty, and vision problems. This disease shortens a human being's life span. To understand the overall health situation, Ganeshji and his

team organised several health camps in Western Gujarat, home to several indigenous communities. Adivasi Academy continues to run regular health camps in that region and maintains proper documentation.

The Adivasi Academy is also working on traditional textiles from the region. The local Rathwa community used to weave their own clothes from threads. The weavers themselves prepared all the ingredients for this. The traditional cloth made by local weavers is called 'Kasota'. However, Kasota, as a form of conventional attire, is no longer used due to the modernisation and corporatisation of cultural practices.

The former director of the Adivasi Academy observed that the Kasota weaving tradition was rapidly declining and required patronage and proper infrastructure to survive. In response, the academy began efforts to revive the craft. With the support of local Kasota weavers, they established five pit looms and resumed production. To ensure long-term sustainability,

they developed a business plan that includes showcasing Kasota in metro cities, attracting target buyers, and securing fair remuneration for the artisans. They aim to increase the visibility of these weavers and to earn them long-overdue recognition at national and international levels (Meena 98).

Alongside this, the academy has built a self-reliant, eco-friendly production system. They cultivate jhimti (indigo) by renting land and use indigo and other plant-based dyes for their textiles. The academy hosts the whole dyeing and weaving setup, supported by trained professionals.

Sustainability is further strengthened through knowledge-sharing. The academy invites external experts to conduct research and train local indigenous communities, ensuring that artisans learn the entire process—from dyeing to weaving. As a result, several community members are now skilled, independent

practitioners capable of managing the entire production cycle themselves.

However, this article argues that Ganesh Devy is not the first to advance alternative perspectives on sustainability. Devy has repeatedly acknowledged his grounding in Gandhian philosophy. From the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, during the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi articulated his vision for an educational system rooted in local culture and indigenous knowledge—an explicit contrast to the English system shaped by Macaulay's Minute. Central to Gandhi's educational thought was the ideal of self-reliance and sustainability. He therefore proposed handicrafts as the organising principle of the school curriculum, a vision he elaborated in "Nayi Taleem" or "New Education". For Gandhi, integrating handicrafts allowed students to bridge school and work life, foster an activity-based approach to learning, and cultivate independence from an early age ("Nai Talim | Village Swaraj: Complete Book Online").

This reveals a crucial point: Gandhi's conceptualisation of education was inherently political. He sought to free education from the colonial framework that marginalised indigenous pedagogies. His advocacy emphasised local and regional diversity in educational practice, supporting a more localised model that resisted imperial influence ("Nai Talim | Village Swaraj: Complete Book Online").

The Wardha Scheme of Basic Education significantly shaped early plans for inclusive education. In 1937, Gandhi outlined his concerns about India's failing education system in *Harijan* and later reiterated them at the National Education Conference in Wardha. The scheme produced three key resolutions: seven years of nationwide free and compulsory education; adoption of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction; and an activity-based curriculum centered on productive work rather than examinations. To support this, the scheme emphasised grounding education in the physical and social environment, with craftwork as a central

component ("Wardha Scheme of Education 1937 – GKToday").

In post-independence India, the contributions of the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMS), the Chattisgarh Mines Sramik Sangh (CMSS), and Shankar Guha Niyogi to economic sustainability in the Chattisgarh mining area should be noted. It is also worth noting that the structure of Adivasi Academy resembles the activism of CMSS, CMS, and Shankar Guha Niyogi. The modus operandi of the Adivasi Academy takes into account the overall sustainability of human life, incorporating education, health, economic sustainability, preservation of the mother tongue, and the cultural traits associated with it. The CMSS and CMS had taken cognisance of these same pointers before the Adivasi Academy entered the arena of activism in a different part of India, catering to the local communities of that region.

The Chattisgarh region can be best described as "rich land inhabited by poor people." Shankar Guha Niyogi and the organisations involved in his politics sought to address sustainability issues by destabilising the paradox of 'rich land' and 'poor' people. The vested interest in dominating Chhattisgarh's economy and politics persisted from colonial times. As a result, there has been a historic rush to exploit the region's natural resources, with nearly no concern for the poverty and neglect the local people were subjected to. In this context, Niyogi's activism is intricately tied to the story of mining and development in Chhattisgarh's Adivasi heartland. In 1977, Niyogi became the secretary of the trade union organisation of Dallirajhara. In this period, Niyogi and organisations aligned with his ideology experimented with social struggle interventions in the social sector, giving rise to new slogans such as *"Sangharsh Ke Liye Nirman, Nirman Ke Liye Sangharsh" (Build for Struggle, Struggle to build)* (Sen 75).

The social setup of the mines and the township adjacent to them constituted two worlds, inextricably linked by the lack of homogeneity among the working class of the mines. This trait of lack of homogenisation can be regarded as the typical manifestation of the 'two Indias': people with technical education, training, and secure salaries, who came from more developed parts of the country and brought their own regional cultural baggage. In contrast, the local people of this region were tied to the contractors under the lease and were referred to as 'unskilled laborers' (Sen 71). As a result of the mines' management's failure, a pervasive sense of alienation emerged. In this context, the CMSS engaged with local people to address life issues, not just bread-and-butter issues. To provide low-cost teaching aids for science education, CMSS founded the Shaheed Garage, where they trained the youth in technical education.

On the other hand, to address the deteriorating health conditions of the local people, they set up Shaheed Hospital, and the CMSS appealed to the

workers, seeking volunteers to take responsibility for running the hospital and to be trained as health workers. Shaheed Hospital still prides itself on the fact that its management, even today, is almost entirely in the hands of the local people who worked and trained there. The CMSS also founded Shaheed School for the children of the mine's contractual laborers, where they promoted education in their mother tongue without tampering with their 'Chhattisgarhi Identity.' Under Niyogi's leadership, six primary schools and an adult education program for illiterate workers were established (Sen 72). Prior to this, there was no provision for the education of the children of contractual laborers.

As a first step in their research, young scholars are taught about their ethical responsibilities. There are many ethical responsibilities regarding one's respective research. However, there is a vast difference between learning about and performing those responsibilities. Academic Social Responsibilities intersect with ethical duties in this context. This article focuses on activism

aimed at protecting land-based indigenous knowledge systems and lifestyles. For this purpose, it concentrates on the corpus of work by Ganesh Devy and Shankar Guha Niyogi. The fulcrum for choosing these two political personalities is that their work shows clear overlap across different social, cultural, and political dimensions, such as health, education, ensuring a secure source of income, and community representation, which prevent concerned communities from social and political destabilisation.

It is a fact that, through education and community relationships, the two personalities they developed over time were reflected in their corpus of activism. This is the steering factor for community mobilisation and the secured participation of the masses, comprising people from heterogeneous backgrounds but dedicated to a common cause. Without the participation and representation of the respective community members, these activisms have no meaning in a broader context. The ethical responsibilities Devy and Niyogi

learned about through their respective academic and social trajectories were transmitted to the community members, and the transmission process remains in flux as the institutions continue to operate at full strength to date.

At this juncture, it is essential to note that the term 'Academic Social Responsibilities' encompasses a range of experiences, understandings, learning, and unlearning processes one goes through in and beyond the academic sector. As a result of these processes, the educational and other social sectors form a reciprocal relationship. Through this, a particular kind of atmosphere is created in which one can bridge the gap between theory and praxis. Devy and Niyogi's activism in this context is no exception. Through their respective activism, they attempted to sensitise community members to their social, political, and economic situations. This sensitisation process further propelled them to take action against their adverse situations and inspired them to advocate for themselves. Subsequently,

it instrumentalised the question of indigenous knowledge systems to play a pivotal role in their respective contexts.

During Shankar Guha Niyogi's time in the Dallirajhara region, people from diverse areas with different educational and occupational backgrounds gathered. Among doctors, Binyak Sen and Asish Kundu were the first ones to arrive, and they came in response to the union's stated need to start a hospital and maternity home that would prevent deaths of the adivasi mine workers (Sen 70). As a result of their efforts and the local adivasi people's cooperation, the Saheed Hospital came into being. Arvind Gupta, an IIT graduate and crusader of popularising science, spent over a year at Dallirajhara. A big name today in the development of low-cost teaching aids for science education, he worked to set up the Shaheed Garage (Sen 71). There are several personalities, like A.P. Shukla from IIT Kanpur, Dr Sharat G. Lin, a human rights and peace activist from California, Vidyasagar Gadgil, and Mariette Correa, graduates from Tata Institute of Social Sciences,

Mumbai, who stayed in Dallirajhara and contributed to the development of this region in their own respective capacities (Sen 74).

In the case of Ganesh Devy's activism, community representation and the formation of community leadership were further strengthened. The Rathwa community, an indigenous community in India, predominantly inhabits the Chhote Udeipur region of Gujarat state, where the Adivasi Academy is located. The people in charge of the various sections of the Adivasi Academy are from the Rathwa community and have completed a postgraduate diploma course in Tribal Studies. During this course, they came into contact with and were trained by various intellectuals, writers, and activists, including Mahasweta Devi, Dr Bhagwandas Patel, Lakshman Gaikwad, Kanji Bhai Patel, and many others. Basanth Rathwa, who is in charge of Basanthshala; Narayan Rathwa, who is in charge of the Vaacha museum; and Bhav Singh Rathwa, who is in charge of library operations, all completed the

postgraduate course and later joined the academy (Rathwa 103).

It is evident from the facts mentioned above that the activists involved in their respective movements underwent a sensitisation process that enabled them to understand the broader political dynamics affecting their communities. It is crucial to underscore the class positions of these communities with respect to Devy and Niyogi's class position. Niyogi completed his education from the Industrial Training Institute, and Devy completed his PhD from a public university. Niyogi was well exposed to the Naxalite Movement led by Charu Majumdar, so he had an understanding of the political and social pulse of the contemporary Indian state. On the other hand, Devy had exposure to different academic institutions around the globe. As a result of this exposure, he recognised the intersection between academia and other social sectors across different socio-cultural contexts. Their receptive experiences and exposure help constitute their own understanding of

ethical responsibility, which was successfully transmitted to community members over time. Niyogi and Devy's political ideologies are poles apart, but their perceptions of Academic Social Responsibility have brought them to a similar page.

As this article focuses on activism regarding land-based indigenous knowledge systems, it is essential to mention one contemporary event in India. The Deucha-Pachami-Devanganj-Harisingha coal block in Birbhum district is home to traditional forest dwellers, predominantly Santhal, who live there. In April 2011, the Indian central government announced that the coal ministry would auction 58 coal blocks across seven states. Of these, Deucha Pachami in Birbhum, West Bengal, has the largest coal reserve. In December 2015, the West Bengal Government established a special purpose vehicle, Bengal Birbhum Coalfield Limited, to develop a mine in the Deucha Pachami region. From 2018 to 2020, the West Bengal government did no work, but from 2021 onwards, it started to progress on the

mining project. It is surprising that the state authorities, which first came to power in 2011 by asserting that its primary political agenda was to ensure land rights in the context of the Singur–Nandigram issue, are now promoting mining projects that will destabilise the livelihoods of local Indigenous communities and harm local biodiversity. In 2025, the local indigenous people began to build resistance as they realised the proposed mine would occupy over 11,222 acres, of which over 9,100 acres (81%) were indigenous land. As many as 4134 houses located on the coal block belong to people from the Scheduled Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, and other minority communities. The resisting indigenous communities have refused to accept compensation or rehabilitation in exchange. They fear forceful eviction and loss of houses, agricultural land, water bodies, and forests in eleven mouzas of five-gram panchayats in Mohammadbazar block, affecting 53 villages of that region (*DEUCHA PACHAMI and COAL MINING - PRELIMINARY FACTSHEET: A Documentation*).

Past events in this region show that many have been displaced and dispossessed due to the construction of large dams and the establishment of mining-related industries or stone quarries. An estimation shows that more than 21000 people will be displaced, of which 43% will be Adivasis from the Santhal community. The Santhal community is an indigenous group that strongly believes in the ideology of "*Jal-Jangal-Zamin,"* - a delicate balance between environmental resources without exploiting them (Ray). If the mining project takes place, they will not only be dispossessed from their homeland, but also their right to natural resources and livelihood based on foraging and forest dwelling would come under threat. Subsequently, their land-based knowledge systems and life practices, which are handed down to this indigenous group from generation to generation, will automatically come under threat. To resist, the local Santhali people have formed a platform, the Gram Sabha Samanya Hool Committee (GSSHC), to fight for Adivasi rights and against land appropriation. In

their defense, the government claimed that most of the mining project would be carried out underground, without requiring any evictions (Basu). However, the government has failed to produce a substantial plan for waste management, pollutant processing, and the rehabilitation of local biodiversity (*DEUCHA PACHAMI and COAL MINING -PRELIMINARY FACTSHEET: A Documentation*).

The local indigenous people demand that they do not want coal Mines for development; instead, they are in dire need of schools, hospitals, and functioning primary health care centres. This is the juncture where the activism of CMSS, CMS, and Ganesh Devy plays a crucial role as they identified the fundamental needs of the local indigenous people and acted accordingly to safeguard the free flow of land-based knowledge systems and life practices. Through their activism, they introduced modernised medical and educational practices that worked in tandem with existing indigenous traditional practices.

In the current Indian state, where resisting voices go through an arbitrary scanning and structural profiling processes, indigenous voices are aphyxiated by the state-sponsored repression systems often implemented by the forms of different policies. In this context, acts of resistance, such as the Deucha-Pachami case, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, or the Bhima Koregaon-16 case, have faced consistent state-sponsored threats, which are nothing but the 'new normal'. The core argument of this article was to ephasise, underscore and underline the different forms of activisms which are functional to protect and constitute advocacy for land-based knowledge systems and indigenous communities. For this it concentrated on the trajectory of two activists— Shankar Guha Niyogi and Ganesh Devy. However, one takes into cognisance that in order to have a better grasp how state-sponsored repression operates in contemporary India—particularly in relation to marginalised communities and land reforms—it is essential to examine the policy-drafting process, the

clauses embedded within these drafts, and the strategic machinery of NITI Aayog. Writers and activists like Gautam Navlakha, Arundhati Roy, Late Gauri Lankesh and many more have critiqued specific policies from time to time in their own voices. As a result at times, they had to pay the price even with their lives and incarceration processes.

In this context, learning about the ethical responsibilities of a student, a researcher, or an academic serve as a sensitisation process. It paves the way to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. On a broader scale, Academic Social Responsibilities, as a concept and practice, can forge a space where individuals from different backgrounds can build camaraderie to resist state-sponsored atrocities against marginalised indigenous communities and to support land-based rights movements and knowledge systems.

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