

Disasters-Induced Displacement vis-à-vis Policy Framework: A Study of the Mishing Community of Majuli, Assam

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Abstract

One of the main causes of impoverishment of the rural areas of Assam has been the recurrent floods and riverbank erosion. One of the life-changing consequences is Displacement. This results not only in loss of livelihoods but also has wide-reaching socio-economic and cultural effects. Thus, due to such disasters not only families but communities too are being displaced at large. This compels them to find temporary shelter and begin life from scratch. The role of the state has been highly negligible, with displacement not being perceived as an 'issue' to be addressed. A more holistic approach is thus needed to take socio-economic, cultural, political as well as ecological considerations into account.

Keywords: *Displacement, Human-induced Disasters, Marginalised communities, Policy Framework*

Introduction

An infinite passivity perpetuated through waiting (Anonymous)

History unveils that some great human civilisations have grown in nature's most precious gift – river basins. It is difficult to say whether it is some inscrutable natural change or the indiscriminate use of modern technology or the destruction of natural resources by human species that has led to certain grave changes in nature. The most recent example in the country is the massive humanitarian crisis that took place including landslides, erosion and floods in Uttarakhand in June, 2013.

Beyond the more obvious and immediate outcomes of loss of life, property and infrastructure, any disaster caused due to natural hazards or aggravated due to human-induced elements has long-term and difficult outcomes. These are in terms of vulnerability to various elements: increased poverty, malnutrition, adverse affect on the psycho-social well-being, out-migration from villages, enhanced social disparities and strife.¹ *Displacement* from one's native land is one such effect, which

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has life-altering consequences. Getting displaced results not only in loss of livelihoods but also has wide-reaching social-economic, psychological and political effects. Studies suggest a pertinent point that the plight of the riverbank erosion-induced Internally Displaced People (IDPs) is much more severe than that of the victims of flood. One of the main causes of impoverishment of the rural areas of Assam has been the recurrent floods and riverbank erosion (Das, 2007).

This paper is based on a set of case studies of an academic study spread over two years (2009-2011) with the Mishing tribal community of the Majuli island of Assam (Chetia, 2011). A total of 70 households were selected using quota sampling from seven different villages of Majuli that were located in various administrative and geographical locations of Majuli including Upper, Central and Lower Majuli blocks. Four among the seven were relocated villages along the banks of the Brahmaputra in Kamalabari block and three were located at the centre and lower-end periphery of the island. Access to knowledge of political and economic rights and their exercise hold limited significance among this perennially displaced community. Given the nature of this community's vulnerable residential space (an island) and their economic capacity, recurrent bank erosion implies the kind of displacement that is of a permanent nature. This is also true to a great extent in the rest of the state. However, in the case of countless Mishing families of Majuli, a home lost once is a home lost forever.

Setting the Context

Das (Ed.) (2007) notes through case studies of displacement in his widely-read book *Blisters on their feet*, that 'displaced' persons are displaced not simply from their homes or places of habitual residence but from the world of law that establishes the principle of equality for the citizens and treats them at par with each other. The widespread and repeated floods across the north-eastern states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh triggered the largest displacement in the world of 6.9 million people out of the total of 31.7 million worldwide in 2012. In Assam, the Central Water Commission estimated that as many as 6 million, 20 percent of the state's population, were forced to flee by rising waters.

Assam is a land of rivers by the virtue of its unique geographical location amidst the northern, eastern & southern hills, highlands and humid tropical monsoon climate. Assam happens to be a land of innumerable rivers and their tributaries. The entire state is drained by the dense networks of two river systems viz. the Brahmaputra system and the Barak system. Both these river systems are international in their extensions and go out to Bangladesh (Figure 1). According to hydrological experts, 45 percent of Assam's total landmass is prone to flooding by the Brahmaputra. The

river's wide alluvial channel in Assam having an average width of 6-8 km is dotted with more than 600 small and large sandbars, locally called '*chars*'. As regards bank erosion and channel migration, the river is found extremely unstable at some vulnerable locations, such as Mailjan, Bhairabpur, Kaziranga, Howlighat, Palasbari and Majuli (Chetia, 2011).

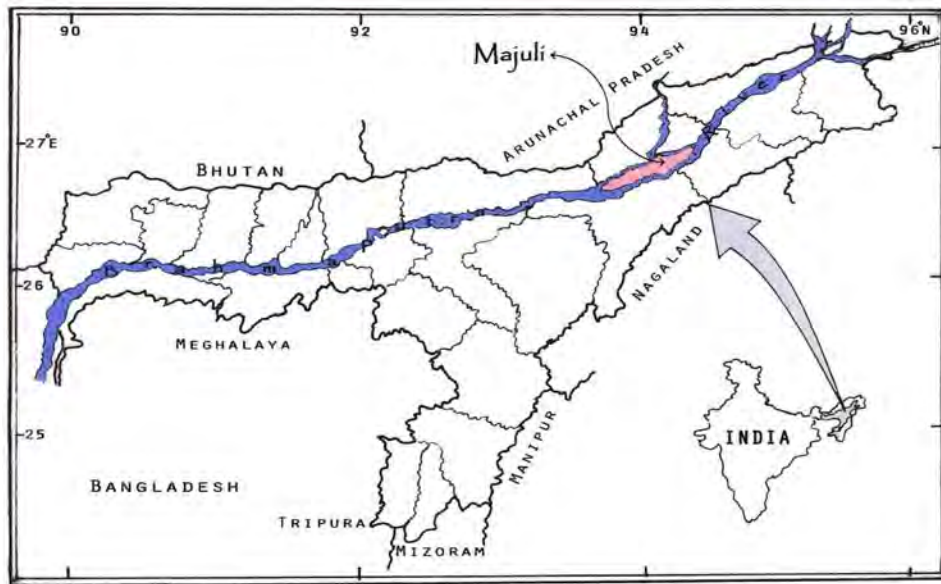


Figure 1: District map of Assam indicating location of Majuli River Island

Situated in the remote North-Eastern corner of Assam, *Majuli* is one of the largest human-inhabited river islands of the world which has a significant existence from various sides – geographical, anthropological, socio-cultural as well as political (Hazarika, 2001). It is a subdivision of the Jorhat district and is situated at the very confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri rivers. It includes 155 villages under three revenue circles (Salmora, Kamalabari and Ahatguri). The island has a population of 1.68 lakh as per 2011 census. The Majuli sub division has 45 percent ST (plains) population among which 35 percent is the Mishing tribal community. It has 20 village panchayats of which 11 are reserved for ST (Plains) communities. The tribes inhabiting the island are Mishing, Deoriland Sonowal-Kachari, of which the Mishing constitute the largest ethnic tribe in the Island (Gam, 2013).

The Mishing community is one of the scheduled tribe communities of Assam. Scholars across disciplines unanimously hold that they belong to the Tibeto-Burman

language speaking greater Mongoloid race whose ancient civilization flourished in the upper course of the Yangtse-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho-river-valleys of north-west China (Research Scholar, 2013). Hence, racially they belong to the Mongoloid stock and ethnically to the group of tribes known as Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. They have lived in Arunachal Pradesh as cognate tribes of the Adis. The community migrated to the plains more than five centuries ago and settled in the upper Brahmaputra valley (Pegu, 2012). The Mishing community inhabits the districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat of Assam state. There are about 16,000 Mishing people in three districts East Siang district, Lower Dibang Valley, and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They were referred to as Miris in earlier times. The Constitution of India still refers them as Miris. However in the recent times, they have popularly come to be known as the Mishing community. Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 12.4 percent of the total population of Assam in which the Mishing tribe hails the second place after the Bodos. Demographic features of Mishing population is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic data on the Mishing community of Assam

Details	Percentage (%)	
Population	17.8*	
Urban Population	1.8**	
Literacy Rate	Female:48.3	Male: 71.4
Category of Workers***	85.6	
Child Marriage	Female: 1.3	Male: 1.5

Source: Census of India, 2001.

* Total ST population: 3,308,570

** Total Urban population of STs: 4.7%

***Cultivators

While flood inundation has been a feature of the island since 1570, it is crucial to maintain here that the loss of land area due to erosion has been taking place since 1950 (and more rapidly in the recent past) which is comparatively much more serious, as it displaces people from their roots and occupations. The present system of embankments have also failed to check the erosion problem, therefore threatening the existence of the island and its inhabitants (Chetia, 2011). According to a study using remote sensing data and interpretation, the Brahmaputra river increased its width from 6.75 km to 8.95 km on the eastern side of Majuli island in the period between 1972-1992, eroding away a large tract of land on both the banks of the

Study of the Mishing and Deori community of Assam; Lade Jayant Deoram, Research Scholar, Dept. of History, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya; International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (<http://www.ijrssh.com>) (IJRSSH) 2013, Vol. No. 2, Issue No. III, Jul-Sep ISSN: 2249-4642

Brahmaputra (Figure 2). The present system of embankments has completely failed and rather aided to the erosion problem, therefore threatening the existence of the island and its inhabitants. Worst affected are those people who try to make out a livelihood on the edge of the river. About 47 percent of the population of the island belongs to the Mishing community. As their land and villages have disappeared over the last few decades, they have been transformed from land owning farmers to homeless and landless labourers (Chetia, 2011).

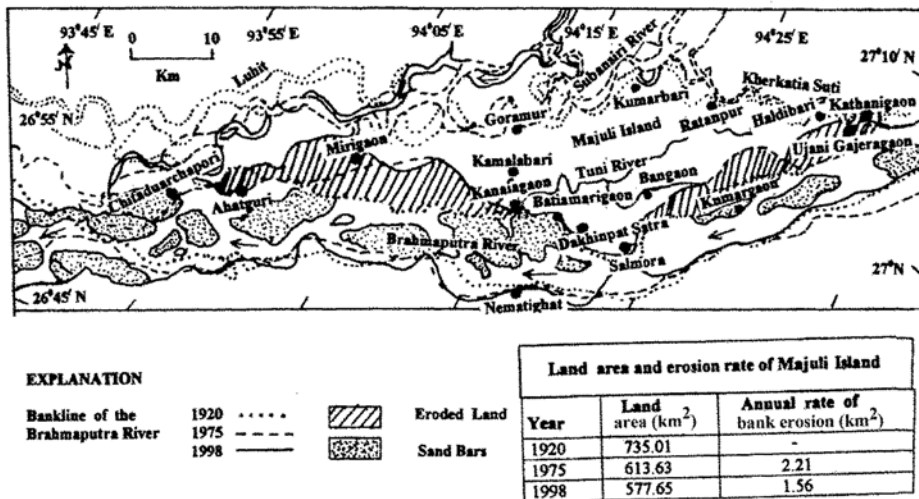


Figure 2: Map showing the rate of land area and erosion of Majuli Island

Methodology

The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to meet the proposed objective. The tools used were of Structured Interview Schedule-I and Self-reporting Questionnaire - 20. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as qualitative tool for data collection in order to get an in depth understanding of the various factors leading to the particular effects of floods on the population and also to attain a deeper understanding of the ways in which this population copes with this disaster.

Within the framework of a collaborative study on Strategies for Extending Mental Health Care, coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Self Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ) was developed as an instrument which was designed to screen for psychiatric disturbance in primary health care settings, especially in developing

countries (Chetia, 2011). In recent years the SRQ has been used in some 30 studies from which its psychometric properties can be assessed and in languages as varied as Portuguese, Spanish, Hindi, Bengali, Kashmiri etc.

The sampling procedure employed was quota sampling. Data was collected in two phases through the months of May and October, 2010. The sample population among the Mishing community was selected from seven different villages of Majuli that were selected from various administrative and geographical locations of Majuli including Upper, Central and Lower Majuli blocks. The data was based on structured interview schedules conducted with 70 participants and another 10 participants with whom in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Analysis, Results and Discussion

Impacts of Displacement

This study brought out that 81 percent of the participant-households had experienced multiple displacements, over multiple times. Out of these, 49 percent were displaced within the range of 1-5 times in their life time. For instance, the entire village of Naambotiamari of Central Majuli was displaced for over more than four times till 2010. Three percent of the households among these were displaced for 11 times and above. It is but natural for such high frequency of displacement from one's habitual residence to have multiple implications on those displaced. Borgohain & Lahiri (2011) note the plight of the people of Rohmoria, a mouza (Taluqa) in the Dibrugarh district. The place has been suffering severe bank-erosion post the earthquake of 1950 in the south bank of the Dibru-Saikhowa segment of the Brahmaputra causing rapid bank line migration in both the north and the south banks. By 1979, a significant portion of the Dibrugarh, Rongagorah, Tinsukia metalled road, the main link that used to connect Rohmoria with the two important townships of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, was cut heavily due to this erosion. All of a sudden, the lifeline for business and general transportation was snapped and the earlier well-connected Rohmoria was reduced, almost in one go, to a hinterland, a very interior place to which most of the town-based doctors would refuse go even in an emergency. Therefore, erosion can make a peasant landless overnight. Massive rate of river-borne erosion tends to open up a Pandora's box of related issues. These can be in the form of encroachment of forests by the uprooted people from the erosion-affected places, subsequent eviction of these displaced people by the state, pauperisation of these affected people and then rapid rate of internal migration and overpopulation of the urban centers with "unauthorised" people who lose the right to claim even the basic amenities of a civil society.

Therefore, few striking elements of such multiple-displacements are:

- Increase in poverty rate,
- Lack or absence of livelihood opportunities,
- Increased dependence on market,
- Disorientation of family identity and role-reversals,
- Adverse effect of lack of education or its poor quality on health,
- Changes in community life,
- Food habits and social networks.

Following case vignettes highlight the qualitative nature of the aforementioned issues.

In the words of a 52 year old male participant from a low middle-class socio-economic background,

“In times when the flood was not a problem, we were much closer and happier. We would all sit together and have our meals and chat over food. However, over the last few years, we had to dislocate to various secure places away from the river. The number of members in the family also decreased during this time. This resulted in the decrease in the amount of interaction with each other.”

Introspecting on his family’s dwindling economic condition, he said,

“Although we had our own land, it was all washed away by the erosion. (“maati asile jodiu khohoniyai sob loi gol”). Our economic condition deteriorated only after the bank erosions started to take place.”

According to a partially visually challenged, 80-year old male senior citizen from a low socio-economic status, he is habituated now in making a public street his home. In his words,

“When my family was together, we used to cultivate our own land and grow crops on our own. But in that flood, when this area was completely flooded, all our land was washed away and we started living on the roads.”

A 42 year old male primary school teacher from a low middle-class socio-economic background said:

“I had to discontinue studying because my mother had got Tuberculosis. And we did not have cycle or anything in our family at that time to call any local person for help. However, somehow we managed to take her to Tiyouk Civil Hospital in Jorhat for treatment.”

In the words of 27-year old financially independent female participant, the quality of life of her family has decreased due to displacement.

“The floods have displaced us from our permanent place of residence and we had to shift our house to new places. Since carrying cement pillars from one place to another was a herculean task, we had to leave those back at the original place and build a “kachha” chang-ghar the first time we shifted our house. Since then, every time we have left a place of stay, the family has been living in a kachha house.”

A 56-year old home-maker feels erosion and floods have decreased the nutrition-content of her family's diet. In her words:

“...during those times the island used to be covered by large forest areas. Different kinds of vegetables used to be available there. Moreover, we had our own piece of land where we used to grow vegetables for the family. Hence, the diet used to be very nutritious and rich. However, the situation has changed now. The forests have either been turned to places of human inhabitants or are under the mighty Brahmaputra.”

Impact on livelihood

Forty percent of the participants were engaged in agriculture, as cultivators in their own land or as landless labourers; 21 percent were in the organised sector, 6 percent in the unorganised sector while 17 percent were self-employed and 16 percent were homemakers. With regard to income in cash, 19 percent earned between Rs. 20000 p.a. to Rs. 50000 p.a. while 3 percent earned below Rs. 10000 p.a.; 20 percent earned in kind i.e. rice grains between 100 to 500 kg per annum. Majority of them worked in other's land as labourers or had taken land on lease. Many others were self-employed either in private jobs, shops, government offices as well as to do petty businesses which could not fetch all the needs of the family at all times. Therefore, the families did not have a stable source of income nor did they own any immovable property like a piece of land which was the most disturbing or troubling aspect of this entire process of change for them. The insecurity of survival and instability in

the source of income are the basic causes of worry and undesirable events in their families.

Says the 80-year-old partially visually challenged male participant, “The children are earning a meagre amount just enough for survival through as daily-wage labourers. We are meeting our basic needs in that way” (Original statement in Assamese: “jene-tene lora suali-bure enei hajira kori, taake khaisu aru”).

Coping mechanisms of the Mishing community

Centuries of experiences of Majuli’s Mishing community have taught them how to live with floods and erosion. Studies highlight that the Mishing community of the Dhemaji district uses various coping strategies to deal with the yearly flood problem such as building Stilt houses (*‘chang-ghar’*), residing in embankments which are preferred for immediate shelter during floods and some people who have lost their homes stay back for a long time, and even permanently, on the embankment (Global Estimates, 2012). Different forms of alternative livelihoods of these people include selling fish including dried fish, selling liquor, carpentry, daily wage labour, and labour migration. Food-storage techniques are both novel and creative to protect it from floodwaters. Although it has decreased to a great extent now, one of the most common and old practices is to leave their old homes and settle in new areas when their old villages were engulfed by the river or became too vulnerable to erosion.

Coping Mechanisms adapted by the Mishing Community of Majuli:

- a) *Jovial and buoyant nature of the community:* One of the striking characteristics of members of this community observed throughout the period of data collection is their ever-energetic and jovial mood. This community optimism appears to have also helped them to fight with floods and erosions all these years. Thus, despite of living like nomads with insecurity of life and livelihood at most times, they can carry a bright smile on their lips and say, “*What will we do getting angry or upset with the Brahmaputra? Floods are a law of nature. They will come.*”
- b) *Adapting to alternate livelihood options:* Every participant of the study was a farmer or a cultivator by origin. However, most of them had changed their occupations during the period of the study. Most people are engaged in unskilled work like daily wage labourer or construction worker, semi-skilled work like carpentry (for the better-off), making and selling local liquor (Aapong), barbers, landless labourer, driving, conductors in ferry services etc.

Few women pursued their traditional knowledge of weaving into a profession. Others had taken to poultry, and other kinds of animal husbandry.

- c) *Strong identity as a community:* Mishong festivals of Ali-Aai-Ligang, Porag festival, Dobur Puja and so on are about celebrating the spirit of the community, its culture and unique identity. These festivals bring the young and old of the community together to feast, dance and celebrate their sense of belongingness as one community. These kinds of celebrations give individual members a sense of belongingness to a community which in turn also gives a sense of security when the need arises. Thus, this spirit of togetherness is visible not only in good times but also in times of crisis when the whole community runs for rescue of one another and offers help as per one's capacity.
- d) *Stilted houses called Chang-ghar:* Chang-ghar is the Mishong word for a traditional Mishong house. It is stilted and has a thatched top and is patterned simply like the letter 'T'. It is built usually with wooden posts, beams, truss and supporting forks, but bamboo is used extensively for flooring and roofing. The more the number of nuclear families living in the same house, the longer the 'T' would be. This design of house serves two basic purposes. In the earlier times, to live on fertile banks of a river primarily for occupational purposes and still be safe, they started building their houses with a considerable gap from the ground so that when floodwater comes, it cannot enter into their houses. This same rationale is behind the Mishong community of Majuli living in Chag-ghars. Moreover, they are also generally found living in joint families where the number is quite huge. Hence, this particular design enables them to accommodate a large number of family members.
- e) *Keeping boats for transportation and food storage:* Those families who had a comparatively strong socio-economic background generally keep a boat in the premises of their chang-ghar. The boat was used at times of emergency when floodwater would enter their houses and they are required to escape from that place. Moreover, at times when escaping would not be an option and their chang (floor of the chang-ghar) would get drowned, they built another temporary chang on top of the original one, put their boat (s) on it and use it for preparing their meals.

Displacement: a critical eye on policy framework

As the largest democracy of the world, India has no dearth of systemic regulations in any sector. These are in the form of various policies, schemes, programmes, acts and laws, government agencies and so on. Likewise is the case in the field of disaster

management, where a whole set of regulations, statutory bodies and functionaries exist to handle the situation in need. However, framing policies, keeping the macro picture in perspective is one art and managing the micro picture on the ground with equal efficiency is another. This section endeavours a critical review of the various schemes and policies of both the Government of India and the Assam government regarding Disaster Management in Assam vis-à-vis displacement.

Measures at the state level

To prepare comprehensive plans of flood management for Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, the Brahmaputra Board, an autonomous statutory body was set up by Act of Parliament (The Brahmaputra Board Act, Act 46 of 1980), under Ministry of Water Resources. However, floods continue to play havoc to the people of Assam and their lives despite measures taken by the Centre as well as the State Government. A study by Das (2007) showed that one of the worst floods of the state was in 1998 in which the level of submergence crossed all previous records. Of Assam's then existing 23 districts, as many as 21 districts were affected in the most devastating flood. As per the funds for relief, restoration and rehabilitation, the requirement was put at Rs. 1000 crore in a memorandum submitted by the Government of Assam (GoA) to the Government of India (GoI). The same study highlighted that the annual damages have increased since 1998. In his memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister on 21st. November, 2004, the then Assam Chief Minister reported that the damage due to flood during 2004 was tremendous. It affected a population of 1,30,00,000. A total of 491 people were killed. The loss of cattle was estimated at 65,000. More than 6,000 houses were damaged. The damage to crops, buildings and public infrastructures, such as bridges, roads and embankments amounted to Rs. 2,400 crore in terms of money. GoI's assistance in that year was the highest – Rs. 557 crore. Compensation in the form of land was provided by the state government in earlier times to the people displaced by erosion. However, in the recent decades, the state finds it difficult to continue with this due to ever increasing pressure of population on land and conflict on territoriality. Only meagre compensation (in cash) is provided by the state, for fully damaged houses it is Rs 4,000 per family and Rs 1,500 per family in case of partially damaged houses.

Schemes of the Centre

The PM National Relief Fund was set up by the then Prime Minister of India in 1948 primarily with public contributions to assist displaced persons from Pakistan. In a period of last five years from 2008-2013, the fund has raised an amount of Rs. 1107 crore of which Rs. 827 crore has been spent on various kinds of disasters

including riots, flood, drought, earthquakes, cyclones, tsunami etc. Rs. 280 crore is the balance which is in the fund. The National Calamity Contingency Fund (NCCF) is another Central Government scheme. It was set up in the financial year of 2000-2001. Under the revised Scheme for Constitution and Administration of the NCCF, the kind of Calamities to be covered under the Scheme is mentioned. In the words of the Constitution, *Natural calamities of cyclone, drought, earthquake, fire, flood and hailstorm, considered to be of severe nature requiring expenditure by the State Government in excess of the balances available in its own Calamity Relief Fund by the National Centre for Calamity Management (NCCM) will qualify for relief assistance under the Scheme.* Tsunami of 2006, Kosi Flood of 2008, Orissa Super cyclone, Gujarat Earthquake of 2002 are few of the calamities that have been provided financial assistance through this scheme.

The nature of assistance provided through both these schemes by the Central Government is that of grant, implying the non-return of the aid provided. In the case of any such calamities in Assam, only a partial assistance has been provided as Grant. Das (2007) reported that the demand for Assam's flood to be declared as a national problem is also crucial because it would then imply that all central assistance for structural flood control measures are grant. Currently a major portion of it is received by the GoA as loan from the GoI. For example, from 1974-1975 to 1999-2000, Assam received a total of Rs. 401.03 crore as central assistance for structural measures out of which Rs. 390.94 crore was in the shape of loans and only the remainder Rs. 10.09 crore as grants. However, the GoI has yet not agreed. It is worth mentioning here that the anti-erosion measures require a huge fund and without the Central Government's assistance it is not at all possible to execute any major anti-erosion work for an economically weak state like Assam.

National policies: Government of India adopted the National Water Policy in 1987, which was subsequently revised. It embodies the Nation's resolve that planning, development and management of water resources would be governed by national perspective. The National Water Policy however has to be backed by the State Water Policy with an operational action plan. One of the most intriguing facts is that flood management is a State subject. Flood control schemes are planned, funded and implemented by the state governments out of their own resources and as per their own priorities, whereas the role of the Central government is only to assist the states in terms of technical, catalytic and supportive aspects. Hence, the primary function of the Central government is to provide the financial and logistical support which is implemented through PM Relief Fund and the NCCF. Thus, the management of a flood disaster can be well-managed in an economically sound state like Tamil Nadu

whereas the managing of an equal or bigger similar event can weaken the economy of states like Bihar and Assam. The apex technical organisation in the country for the development of for development of water resources is the Central Water Commission (CWC), an attached office of the Ministry of Water Resources. Implementation of the National Water Policy is an important concern of the Commission. CWC's one of the most important functions regarding flood management is flood forecasting and warning systems and maintaining uninterrupted communication.

The year 1996 witnessed floods in the state of Assam that affected a population of 30.76 lakh, the number of deaths caused was 42 and there was a loss of 3000 livestock. About 27539 houses were damaged which were spread over 4797 villages. Hence from such studies, it is only natural to be doubtful about the effective implementation of such national policies and programmes.

The Disaster Management Act, 2005: The DM Act came into force in 2005 under the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) of which the Prime Minister of the country is the Chairperson. The bringing of this Act to the table indicated a major paradigm shift to the management of disasters in the country, in line with the global orders. Until recently, the focus was of management after a disaster on relief and rehabilitation. However, the present focus puts greater emphasis on mitigation and vulnerability reduction. The Government of India has adopted mitigation and prevention as essential components of its development strategy. Several programmes and projects are in existence to deal with different types of disasters, e.g., earthquake risk mitigation, a project for cyclone mitigation (estimated cost Rs 1,050 crore), disaster risk management programme (for 17 multi-hazard prone states with the assistance from UNDP, USAID and European Union).

Many countries across the world have disaster-related legislations including Japan, South Africa, New Zealand and Canada. Several Indian states have relief codes, like the state of Gujarat has a specific legislation known as the Gujarat State Disaster Management Act, 2003 which came into existence after parts of the state were ravaged by an earthquake in 2001. In the light of such legislations and also the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, few gaps seems to still exist in the Act after almost a decade of its enactment.

First and foremost, the definition of a 'disaster' as an event of substantial loss of life and property is a vague one in nature. There is no yardstick mentioned anywhere in the Act or by the NDMA about the criteria to define an event as a disaster. Under Section 13 it refers to 'disasters of severe magnitude' which is again left for the reader's faculty of deciphering. Secondly the Act refrains from zoning and mapping of 'disaster-prone'

areas which comes as a natural mandate of an Act of this nature. Zoning of disaster-prone areas especially flood, erosion and earthquakes will only aid in mitigating the disaster more effectively and also contribute to the preparedness of the localities situated in such zones. This classification is well-detailed in the Gujarat State DM Act. Like most other national acts and policies formulated including the recent ones of Food Security Bill and the National Action on Climate Change, there is no scope of engagement of those communities on which the Act shall be implemented, those who would have a better understanding of the local context. As Sarkar and Sarma (2006) note, one of the striking features under the Emergency Programme Act of British Columbia, Canada, is the importance of decision-making placed in the hands of the local authority. The local authority is empowered to declare local emergency, if it is satisfied that an emergency exists or appears imminent. The Gujarat Act makes the community, private sector enterprises and even the individuals duty-bound to assist the collector or the commissioner in countering disasters. More importantly as is noted further, another significant gap in the Act is the limited acknowledgement and use of traditional knowledge-system of the local communities. For instance, stilted houses made of locally available materials are used in many flood-prone areas of India. However, the emphasis appears more now on a western model of 'building codification' which stands redundant in a rural area here. In a similar context, Felding (2013) notes that the main approach of the Central Government and the Government Assam to address these risks are through the implementation of technologies to control the river (Brahmaputra).

Additionally, as per the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 of the United Nation's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), the third priority for action is use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels. Compilation and dissemination of relevant knowledge and information on hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities are an essential part of this action.

What is most alarming in the current context is the absence of mention of the issue of *displacement* (of any kind) arising due to disasters in the entire gamut of the aforementioned policies & programmes. Additionally, there is an urgent need to recognise and acknowledge the issue of displacement as one that is so integrally associated with most natural disasters, especially in a country like India. Riverbank erosion besides floods is a grave problem in Assam leading to displacement of people due to the disappearance of villages year after year. The total area that has eroded from 1954 till date is approximately 386476 ha which means that about 7 percent of the land in the state's 17 riverine districts has been lost due to river erosion in the last 50 years. Vulnerability to natural disasters combined with socio-economic vulnerability of the people living in the state pose a great challenge to the government machinery

and underscores the need for a comprehensive plan for disaster preparedness and mitigation. Assam, is in fact one of the most socio-economically vulnerable states of India with approximately 36 percent of the population living below poverty line (ASDMA, 2014). This only adds to the problem. [Cross-border displacement due to ethnic conflict in Assam: An influx of migrants from Assam's neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Nepal and Burma (Myanmar) has caused a massive population increase and subsequent competition for resources and jobs. This has also spurred ethnic conflicts over land and fighting for political autonomy or secession. Ethnic clashes over territorial issues, insurgency against the Indian government for separate homelands and communal violence among the Assamese against 'foreigners', mostly immigrants from Bangladesh, have led to widespread displacement. In November 2003, communal violence displaced at least 18,000 people who fled to about 40 camps in and outside Assam. Besides the Bangladeshis, the Nepali population in the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) areas constitutes 2.5 percent of the total population there. However, the presence of the Nepalis along with the 63 percent non-Bodos (Bodos make up 34 percent) constituted a major threat according to the Bodos. During the ethnic cleansing of these areas a considerable number of Nepalis was displaced].

Disasters-induced displacement

An overview of International Regulations

According to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, an internally displaced person(s) or groups of persons are those who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result, in addition to others, due to natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border. It categorically states that it is the primary responsibility of the state to prevent and avoid arbitrary displacement of its people. Ironically, the Act appears to have concentrated more on disaster management through government system rather than focusing on the fact that the affected communities also have a right to relief and rehabilitation as well as the right not to be displaced involuntarily. Therefore the case of displacement due to natural or man-made disasters can be contextualised well even in the Indian scenario as has been adapted by many other countries as well.

The Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters has been adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2006 and revised in 2010; they apply to all disaster-affected persons, including displaced persons. The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, ISDR, UN framework promotes a strategic and systematic approach to reducing vulnerabilities and risks to hazards. It underscored the need for, and identified ways of, building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters. It

points out five major priorities for action that include (a) Governance: organisational, legal and policy frameworks; (b) Risk identification, assessment, monitoring and early warning; (c) Knowledge management and education; (d) Reducing underlying risk factors; (e) Preparedness for effective response and recovery.

The currently existing most important international document on climate change adaptation is the Cancun Adaptation Framework (Framework), part of the Cancun Agreement the main formal result of the 2010 UNFCCC COP16 in Mexico. The Framework argues that the final approach to climate change adaptation has to be “guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional and indigenous knowledge” (Cancun Agreement 2010, paragraph 12). This is in a context of climate change according to the Cancun Agreement (2010, p. 2) being “felt most acutely by those segments of the population that are already vulnerable” emphasising among other geographical location, status as indigenous and gender as factors that determine vulnerability. The Framework calls for the first time in the history of climate change negotiations under UNFCCC for action taking into account measures “in regard to climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation, where appropriate, at the national, regional and international levels;” (Cancun Agreement, paragraph 14f) (Felding, 2013)

As noted by Klein (2011) existing human rights norms and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement provide sufficient protection for those forcibly displaced inside their own country. For Example, IDMC notes that many countries have yet to develop comprehensive legal frameworks or policies to guarantee IDPs’ rights. Progress was made, however, in the Philippines, where congress enacted the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons Act in February 2013. In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation initiated the development of a national policy on IDPs. The challenge is proper the implementation, not the lack of appropriate norms. The main challenge is to clarify or even develop the normative framework applicable to persons crossing internationally recognised state borders in the wake of sudden-onset disasters as a consequence of slow-onset disasters in the aftermath of the “sinking” of Small Island States. However, a close critical review of such literature reveals its nature which is essentially international and not contextual in the Indian scenario. In a country like India and more so in a state like Assam which is still an agro-based economy, for displaced people fleeing borders due to climate change-induced disasters is hardly heard of or recorded. Extremely limited financial and governmental resources, lack of well-functioning state agencies, high-level of corruption in this border state make migration plausible and possible only within the state or at the most within the boundary of the country.

The state of landlessness, lack of suitable livelihood opportunities and resulting nomadic-like state make the internally displaced people of Assam, least potential vote bank for those wishing to rise through power. With nearing elections, a few sheets of tarpaulin and blankets does it all to earn back their trust. Those are the invisible faces whose existence does not help in the cause of an economically globalising state and country. As was also reiterated through this researcher's study, *Rajib Lusan Pegu* (a Mishing person), the current Minister of State for Water Resources is serving his second term in office hailing from Majuli. As noted by one of the participants living in a PWD constructed road, "The wheels of his (R.L.Pegu's) speeding car make my whole house dusty almost twice a day at times. However, he has never found the time to step down from that same car and come looking for our needs except of course when he comes with folded hands and a bright smile on his face just before the elections".

Thus, for the erosion & flood displaced Mishing survivors of Assam, equality, justice and home, with the element of permanence is still a secluded dream.

Conclusion: The Exigent yet Achievable

Ameliorating the cross-cutting issue of marginalisation based on community/ language, economic and social backwardness and limited accessibility to constitutional and political rights forms a major part in the road to justice. Hence, effective implementation of any inclusive developmental activity still remains a distant dream for such refugees in their own land. Therefore, in a state where huge landmass gets eroded by bank erosion and flood water every year and there always exists a fight over territoriality of land, an urgent need arises to study the subject of Disaster Management while treating the northeast of India as a unique case study. Additionally, as Borgohain & Lahiri (2011) note, "the energy and speed with which the state (Assam) is implementing the massive hydroelectricity projects in the mountains surrounding the upper reach of the Brahmaputra valley is only seen in war-like situations. In comparison to that, even a bare minimum interest is not shown in understanding and addressing the problem of erosion and the consequences that come along with it."

Few pragmatic efforts that can be initiated are included below:

Rigorous efforts need to be made by the state as well as non-state actors to explore, develop and implement programmes that make such displaced communities financially independent. Ideas about such adaptive livelihood measures and aptitude of the communities in question must also be taken into consideration.

At the policy-level, the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) in particular and NDMA through the Act need to make it conveniently compulsory to recognise and take action on displacement as a crucial element of disaster management. To begin with, both these authorities require to develop a broader perspective through the serious consideration of the UN Guiding Principles and implementation of actions on the suggested lines. Additionally, the Hyogo Framework is binding to all DRR activities executed in the country.

It is around time that the ASDMA shifts its focus beyond emergency relief and urban development and protection to the appropriate implementation of DRR and rehabilitation activities in rural Assam, which is the start and end points of the displaced people. A well-delegated coordination between the DM and relevant Department personnel shall add quality to all aspects of the service-provision, as is already a key focus of professionals working in the field.

Under the first priority for action, social and economic development practices like promoting food security in ensuring the resilience of communities to hazards; Endeavouring to ensure, as appropriate, that programmes for displaced persons do not increase risk and vulnerability to hazards; Promoting diversified income options for populations in high-risk areas to reduce their vulnerability to hazards, and ensure that their income and assets are not undermined by development policy and processes that increase their vulnerability to disasters need to be initiated.

All of the aforementioned efforts deem to be addressed with the realisation that for any such efforts, it is the survivors and the would-be-victims/survivors of such disasters that are at the receiving end. Therefore, taking their consent and traditional knowledge into consideration while engaging in such actions is but natural.

Through a closer look at India's The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, a greater need is sought for concerned actors, both at the governmental as well as non-governmental levels, to cohesively advocate the inclusion of such populations as aforementioned within the Act's ambit. Although the term Never mind the word 'displacement' skips the nascent Act in entirety, it is to be reiterated that these are the citizens of the country who lose their land due to the combined acts of various natural hazards, aggravated to attain the level of disasters through human-induced endeavours of industrialisation, development of essential infrastructural facilities and urbanisation as is mentioned in the said Act. Such be the case, it shall not be too late for the displaced people due

to natural disasters of Assam to be included under the Act. Assam and the entire Northeast India is a growing hub of numerous upcoming ambitious multi-purpose river valley projects besides other development-related activities, wherein the equilibrium of demand and supply are beyond any quantifiable measures of balance. The wait shall not last too long.

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