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Abstract

The twin processes of flooding and riverbank erosion have over the years re-shaped the Brahmaputra Valley landscape in the northeast Indian state of Assam. While flooding and erosion have always been part of the natural landscape of the valley, they have now turned disastrous causing agro-ecological instability and large-scale displacement of the local population. This dissertation is based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in different parts of Assam, with a special focus on Majuli River Island, located in the middle of the Brahmaputra River, and Rohmoria in the upstream. It examines the political ecological processes of the re-production of disastrous geographies in the Brahmaputra Valley, the ways in which disasters have transformed rural livelihoods, and the politics of resistance among the disaster-affected population in the valley. At the heart of the dissertation lies the question of the state. By combining Marxist and postcolonial theorizations of the state and paying special attention to hydraulic infrastructures, my research presents an in-depth analysis of the role of the Indian state in the making of hazardscapes in Assam, thereby advancing our understanding of the state, especially in the postcolonial context. The dissertation also foregrounds the question of popular resistance in the valley, demonstrating that disaster-affected communities are not mere victims of disasters but that they have political agencies, which they deploy, given the conducive circumstances, to re-shape environmental governance processes and the state in general. Throughout the study, I advance an analysis of the ways in which hazardscapes are produced through the multi-scalar interactions between political economic processes, state and non-state actors, and biophysical nature.

SUFFERING FOR LAND:
ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS AND POPULAR STRUGGLES IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA
VALLEY (ASSAM), INDIA

by

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Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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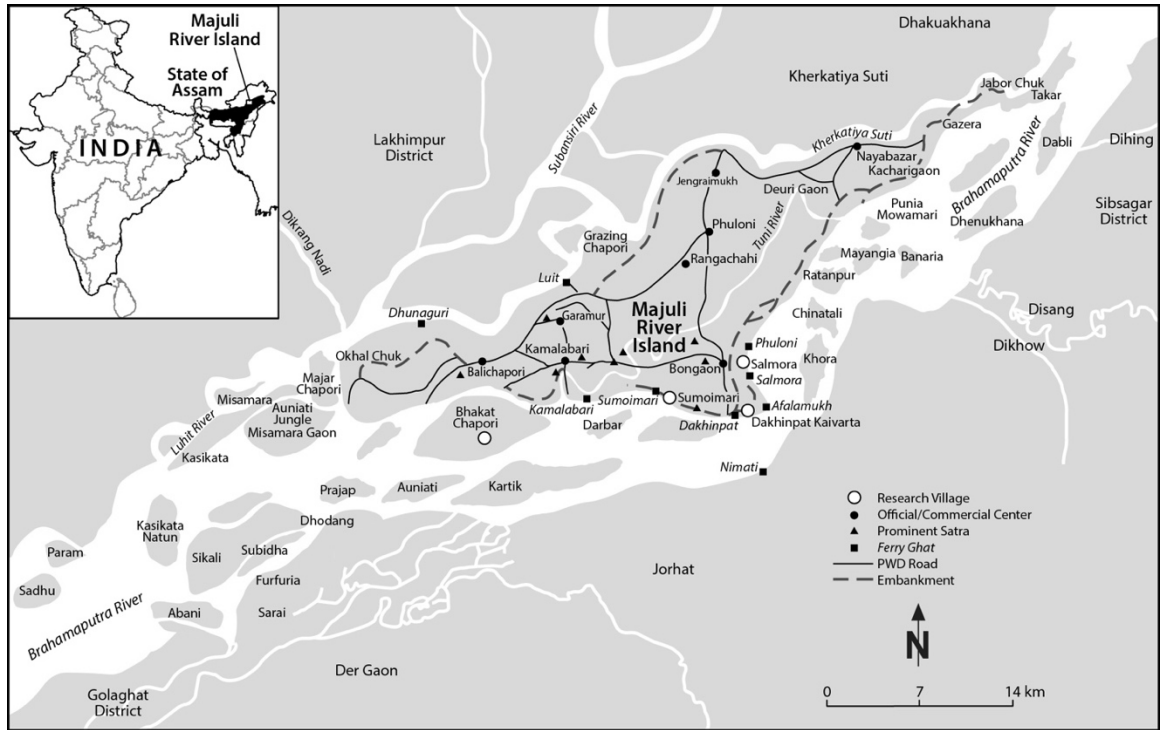
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List of Acronyms

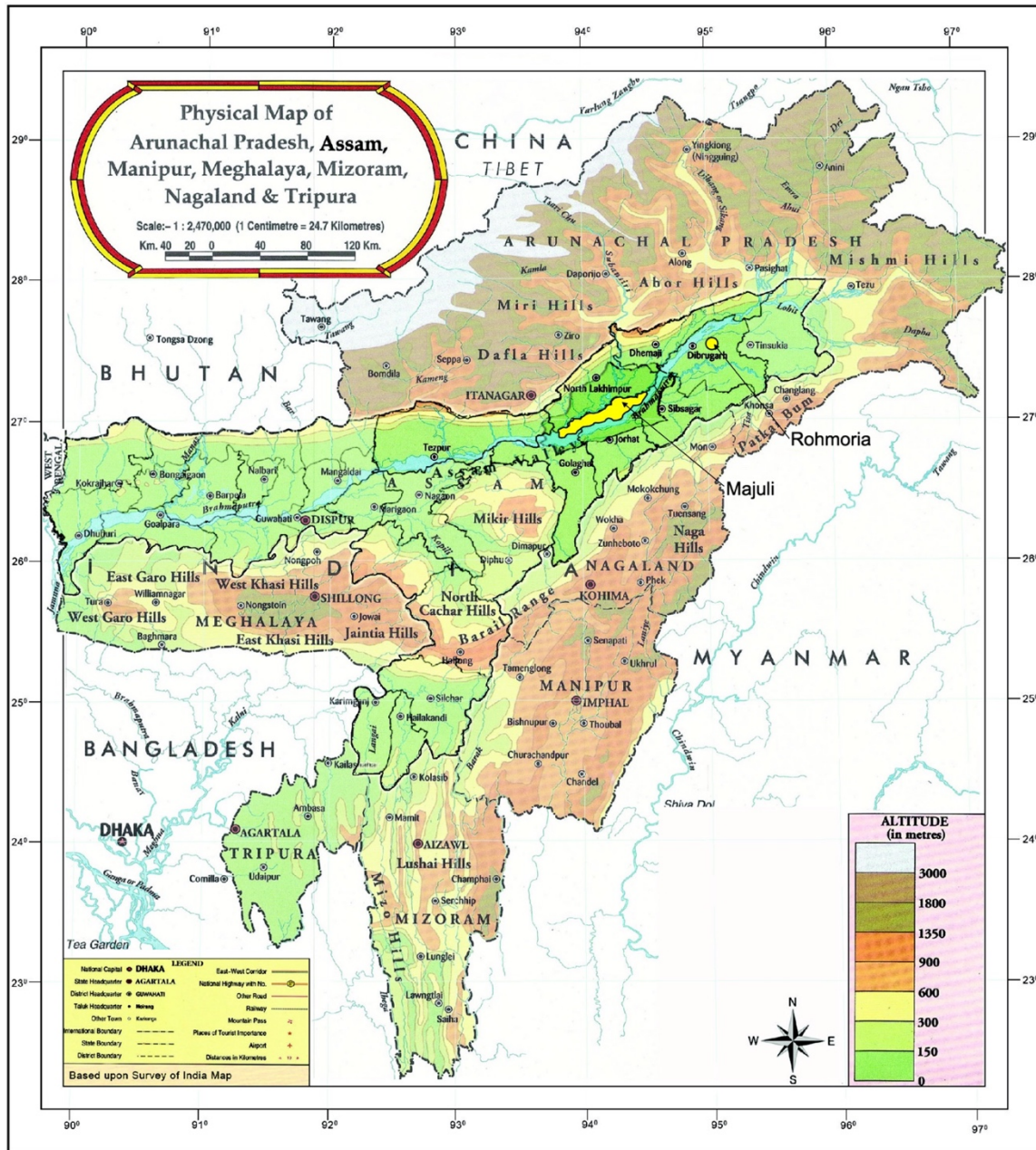
AASU	All Assam Students' Union
AJYCP	Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad
AVARD-NE	Association of Volunteers for Rural Development, North-East
BB	Brahmaputra Board
CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
KMSS	Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti
MSSM	Majuli Suraksha Samannay Mancha
OIL	Oil India Limited
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Corporation
TMPK	Takam Mising Porin Kebang (All Mising Students' Union)
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
WRD	Water Resources Department

Figure 1: Map of Majuli



(Map by Joe Stoll, Syracuse University Cartography Lab)

Figure 2: Map of Northeast India (Majuli and Rohmoria in focus)



(Map by Survey of India)

Chapter 1

Introduction

Growing up in Majuli, a river island located in the middle of the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India (see figure 1), floods and riverbank erosion were integral to my childhood experiences. As a young boy I, like all my peers in the village, used to be excited about annual flooding in Majuli, because it meant ample opportunities for swimming, boating, and fishing. What could be more thrilling at that age than fishing from the porch; or, better yet, literally fishing from inside of the house? However, this childhood excitement soon vanished once I began to witness and understand the larger impacts of flooding in Majuli. After each flood event, the island would have to wrestle with a whole host of challenges for the next several months, such as food shortages, broken roads and bridges, water contamination, and diarrhea and various other waterborne diseases. I remember how our family would spend days on a bamboo platform (*saang*), temporarily raised for the flood season, with a small boat acting as our life support system.¹ Not every household in the village owned a boat. For such households, life was much more challenging during the flood season since their mobility entirely depended on other families in the village whose boat they shared. Early on, I also witnessed the impact of riverbank erosion on the island. Many places in Majuli had disappeared, bit by bit, due to the process of erosion. Families who used to live in those places either became homeless on the island or had to move elsewhere. Some of those families were my relatives.

¹ Boats are ubiquitous mode of transportation for the rural families in Majuli for a good part of the year. These are wooden, unpowered boats, locally made in the island. Some of these are dugout canoes. The Kumar community in Majuli is well known for its boat-making skill.

These lived experiences shaped my understanding of environmental processes and exposed me to the ways in which the *natural* and the *social* are always interacting with and co-producing each other. My interest in the subject of rural transformation due to environmental hazards is, thus, deeply rooted in my real-life experience of growing up in hazardous geographies. Besides, this interest is also motivated by my personal commitment to a place, a place of my belonging and one that has shaped my environmental consciousness. My research therefore fuses together the personal and the scholarly, thereby endeavoring to both advance hazards research and inform environmental policies for better governance of the Brahmaputra valley landscape and other places facing similar crises. Research of this nature also comes with great challenges, such as navigating questions of positionality and reflexivity in doing fieldwork in one's hometown and addressing the local people's expectations from the researcher, which are generally high since the researcher is one from within. I will discuss some of these challenges in greater depth later in this chapter.

Over the years, the Majuli landscape has transformed drastically due to the twin processes of flooding and erosion. From a landmass of arguably 1255 km² in the beginning of the twentieth century,² the island has now shrunk to mere 421.65 km² (Sarma and Phukan 2004). In the process, more than five dozen villages were wiped out from the island, including an entire *mouza* (revenue block)³, and several places of historical significance. Thousands of families have

² There is some controversy surrounding the original size of the island. Although it is widely believed that the island had an area of 1255 km² in 1901, the accuracy of this data, which is based on census report, is questionable since the first proper survey of the island was conducted only in 1917 by the Survey of India (SOI). As per SOI survey, the island had an area of 751.31 km² in 1917, which raises doubts about the 1901 census figure since erosion of this magnitude may not be possible in such a short period (Sarma and Phukan 2004). However, even with an area of 751.31 km² in 1917, the island has had a rapid loss of landmass during the course of the century.

³ Ahatguri mouza in the westernmost corner of the island has been almost entirely wiped out over the years. Several villages from this *mouza* had resettled as fragmented entities in different *chaporis* in the middle of the Brahmaputra.

had to relocate to places outside of Majuli, while many more displaced families have continued to live like refugees within the island, inhabiting precarious places like roads and embankments. During this process, the agrarian economy of the island has been severely destabilized. Majuli is not the only place in Assam facing such crises, however. Rohmoria in the upstream of the Brahmaputra, Lahorighat and Palasbari in the middle portion, and South Salmora in the downstream area, to name a few, are prominent places with similar challenges. Indeed, over the years, the entire Brahmaputra valley has been re-shaped by the processes of flooding and erosion. About 40% of the total land area of the state is flood prone, which is four times the national flood prone area.⁴ Many places in the valley are ravaged by three to four waves of flooding in a year, leaving the agrarian economy of the state completely paralyzed. The impact of riverbank erosion has been worse, although erosion often goes unnoticed due to its *slow* and non-catastrophic nature. Between 1954 and 2012 alone, about 7.4% of the total landmass of the valley succumbed to erosion, which amounts to about 3,860 km² with an annual erosion rate of 80 km² (Phukan et al. 2012). More than 2,500 villages and 18 towns, including sites of cultural heritage, and several tea gardens were wiped out during this period and destabilized the livelihoods of millions of people (Phukan et al. 2012).

The overall theoretical question that I address in this dissertation is the following: *How do political economic processes, state and non-state actors, and biophysical nature interact and (re-)produce disasters and hazardous landscapes?* In order to address this question, I have pursued an ethnographic study of the processes of flooding and riverbank erosion in the

⁴ This information is based on government data available in the website of the Water Resources Department of Assam Government: <http://assam.gov.in/web/department-of-water-resource/home1>, accessed on May 23, 2014.

Brahmaputra valley, with a particular focus on Majuli and Rohmoria. There are three key arguments that I put forward in this study, which are as follows:

First, the state plays a fundamental role in the production of environmental hazards and hazardous geographies. In its constant pursuit for accumulation, the capitalist state finds it imperative to construct massive hydraulic infrastructures as a way of harnessing the river systems. Through this process, the state transforms hydraulic processes like flooding and riverbank erosion into calamities. At the same time, there are also other forces shaping the functioning of the postcolonial state, some of which include the role of non-state actors, cronyism and corruption, and the everyday bureaucratic practices. Thus, an in-depth understanding the role of the Indian state vis-à-vis the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape calls for an approach that combines Marxist and postcolonial analyses of the state.

Second, disasters are not just one-time catastrophic events; instead, they are processes that can have long-term, structural impacts on society. Disasters like flood and riverbank erosion, for instance, can lead to irreversible depletion of land and water resources, which are central to many traditional rural livelihood practices. Thus, disasters can permanently destabilize rural economies and traditional ways of living, thereby causing socio-cultural ruptures. Understanding disasters, then, requires looking beyond their immediate manifestations, and paying attention to the broader, structural trans-local connections of these socio-environmental processes.

Third, while disasters cause irreparable damages to society, they can also create spaces for resistance and social movements. When a disaster strikes, the existing inequalities in a society deepen further, thereby triggering mobilization from below for social justice, equality, and a better environment. Such processes of resistance and social movements can potentially reshape the role of the state, depending of course on specific historical-geographical factors.

In developing these arguments, I have drawn on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and a variety theoretical frameworks. This chapter does not present an exhaustive discussion on the literature that has informed my theoretical perspectives, since I engage with them further in different chapters with particular reference to the topics discussed in those chapters. However, this chapter presents a broad overview of my theoretical frameworks. But before I do that, let me present a brief description of the socio-geographical context of the Brahmaputra valley, with a special focus on my research sites.

Introducing the field

One of the most gigantic river systems in the world,⁵ the Brahmaputra river originates in the Himalayan glacier in southwest Tibet, and then traverses through the mountainous regions and the plains in northeast India, and flows down to Bangladesh before discharging into the Bay of Bengal. The Brahmaputra valley in Assam refers to an area of roughly 720 km long and 80-90 km wide, covering the entire length of the state of Assam, with its elevation ranging from 120 meter to 28.45 meter (Goswami 1985). Roughly 40-50 percent of this area is under cultivation and has a diverse agrarian economy (Goswami 1985). The valley is also home to millions of people belonging to a wide variety of communities, and it is also a repository of centuries' long socio-cultural practices. For this research, I have conducted fieldwork in two areas in the valley – Majuli river island in the midstream of the Brahmaputra and Rohmoria in the upstream region (see Figure 2) – with a more in-depth focus on Majuli.

⁵ The Brahmaputra is a massive river system with a 580,000 sq. km basin that spreads across China, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. The river travels a distance of 2880 km through Tibet, India, and Bangladesh, receiving as many as 58 major tributaries in this journey, finally emptying into the Bay of Bengal. It is one of the most sediment-charged large rivers in the world, second only to the Yellow river in China, and it is fourth largest river in the world in terms of average discharge in its mouth (Goswami 1985; 2008).

Believed to be one of the largest inhabited river islands in the world (MCLMA, GoA), Majuli is located close to the Himalayan foothills in the northeastern part of Assam. It is bounded by the main channel of the Brahmaputra on the south and the Luit and the Kherkatia *sutis* (*suti* means branch) on the north-west and the north-east respectively (see Figure 1). The island is predominantly rural, with a total of 243 small and large villages, inhabited by one hundred and sixty-seven thousand people (Census of India 2011) who represent a mix of different castes and tribal groups. More than *an* island, Majuli is in fact a cluster of islands, consisting of a few dozen *chars* or *chaporis* (i.e. silt islets, also known as sandbars) that surround the mainland. *Chars* are common landforms all along the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta region that form through specific dynamics of fluvial geomorphological processes in a river system (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013). Although temporary in nature, these are lived-in geographies, supporting different forms of rural livelihoods that are based on agriculture and livestock-rearing. Majuli is also endowed with numerous wetlands that possess great ecological and economic significance. However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, these wetlands are in the process of fast depletion due to a mix of biophysical and anthropogenic forces.

Majuli occupies a special place in the socio-cultural landscape in Assam. It is the nerve-center of the *sattras* – the religious and cultural institutions that emerged in Assam as part of a 15th century Neo-Vaishnavite reform movement.⁶ Thus, the island is often referred to as the “spiritual hub” of Assam. The *sattras* are the center of a variety of cultural activities, including devotional music, songs, plays, and different forms of dance. Also, the ‘*Sattriya* dance’ has been

⁶ Neo-Vaishnavism refers to a reform movement within the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism that took place in the 15th century, led by saint Srimanta Sankardeva. This reform movement brought in a whole array of cultural diversity to Vaishnavism, expressed through music, drama, dance forms, social institutions, and literary masterpieces. Sankardeva also strived towards social harmony by reaching out to people of all castes and tribes through the Neo-Vaishnavite practices. For more details on *sattras* and Neo-Vaishnavism, see Neog (1953; 1980; 2004).

recognized as one of the eight classical dance forms in India. Until about 1970s, Majuli had a total of 64 *sattras*, but many of them had to move out of the island at different points because of erosion.⁷ Today, less than half of these *sattras* exist in Majuli, and some of them are still struggling to survive due to unabated riverbank erosion. The cultural heritage of Majuli is further characterized by diverse art and craft forms that the local communities in the island practice, some of which include pottery, boat-making, mask-making, and traditional textiles. Because of its rich cultural heritage, the Government of India has recently nominated Majuli for UNESCO World Heritage Site status; however, the island has yet to receive the designation.

My other field site for this research is Rohmoriam. Located about 200 km. upstream of Majuli, Rohmoriam is not an island, and it is much smaller than Majuli both geographically and population wise. It is a *mouza* within the Dibrugarh district, comprised of more than fifty large villages and a few tea estates. The economy of Rohmoriam is more diverse given its proximity to big cities like Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, which are rich sources of oil and natural gas, and they also have a large tea industry. Rohmoriam is also as diverse as Majuli in social composition due to the additional presence of tea laborers, which influences the local politics in Rohmoriam in distinct ways, as I highlight in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Much like Majuli, Rohmoriam also has gone through drastic socio-ecological transformations over the years due to the processes of flooding and erosion. More than three dozen villages, six tea estates, various public infrastructures, and a large agricultural landmass were washed away from Rohmoriam over the past five to six decades (Borgohain, n.d.). Thus, as far as the impact of disaster goes, there is a great deal of commonality between Majuli and Rohmoriam; although the forms of resistance in the two places varied widely, as I discuss in depth in this dissertation.

⁷ This information is based on reports obtained from the Circle Office, Kamalabari, January 2013.

Hazards, political ecology, and the state

In examining the processes of hazardous geographies in the Brahmaputra valley, I have paid careful attention to the interactions between biophysical nature and political economic forces, especially foregrounding the question of the state. This political ecological analysis of hazards has benefitted from my firsthand experiences of witnessing how disasters unfold on the ground and how the state is intrinsically implicated in the production of hazards. There are material dimensions to the processes of flooding and erosion in the Brahmaputra valley. As various studies have shown, the Great Earthquake of 1950 in Assam radically changed the course and configuration of the Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries (Goswami 1985; Pahuja and Goswami 2006; Sarma 2013; Sarma and Phukan 2004). This earthquake, with a magnitude of 8.7 on the Richter scale, raised the Brahmaputra riverbed in the upstream portion by several meters, thereby accelerating the processes of flood and erosion in the valley (Goswami 2008). A host of other important biophysical factors have also influenced the hydrological characteristics of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries and created conditions for processes like flooding and erosion. Some of these factors include the highly potent monsoonal regime in the Brahmaputra basin; soil erosion in the Himalayas (“denudation”) and the resultant accelerated sedimentation (“aggradation”) in the valley portion; active seismicity of the northeast Indian region that has serious implications for the channel patterns of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries; the braided nature of the Brahmaputra, which means it has tendencies to form new channels; and the presence of sandy soil in many places along the Brahmaputra riverbanks, which makes these places highly prone to erosion (Goswami 1985; Sarma and Phukan 2004).

While these biophysical factors are important constituents of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape, they alone do not explain the production of these disastrous geographies. Rather,

the question of the state and larger political economy looms large in understanding how natural processes are re-shaped, appropriated, and turned disastrous through specific forms of environmental governance. Piers Blaikie's (1985) groundbreaking work, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, drew our attention three decades ago to the fact that the biophysical process of soil erosion is deeply rooted in political and economic forces. According to him, "soil degradation and erosion directly result from cumulative land-use decisions through time and that these decisions must be considered as a part of a wider political economic analysis" (Blaikie 1985: 117). Watts (1983b: 240) called the dominant hazards research paradigm as "ahistoric" and "atheoretical," and instead proposed a historical materialist approach to hazards. In his classic study of famine in Nigeria, Watts (1983a) demonstrated how the pre-capitalist traditional economy of the Hausa society was eroded by the incursion of colonialism and a capitalist economy, leading to the introduction of a market economy, cash crops, and heavy taxation on the peasantry, which pushed the peasantry into a 'simple reproduction squeeze' and made them extremely vulnerable to droughts. In his groundbreaking work, *Poverty and Famines*, Sen (1981) laid out the idea that famine is caused by people's lack of "entitlement" to resources and not by natural processes. Sen's notion of "entitlement" became highly influential in political ecology research (Leach et al. 1997; Bebbington 1999). Several other scholars from across disciplines have similarly critiqued the technocratic approach to hazards research and stressed the importance of locating hazards within the broader political economic contexts (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Hewitt 1983; Oliver-Smith 2004; Wisner et al. 2004, among others).

Recent scholarship in hazards has deployed the conceptual framework of "hazardscape" for a political ecological understanding of these processes. Hazardscape connotes the idea that hazardous geographies are produced through a combination of both "material geographies of

vulnerability” and discursive processes. The latter refers to how these geographies are “viewed, constructed, and reproduced by the expert/technocratic discourses about them” (Mustafa 2005: 566). Drawing on the idea of “landscape” in cultural geography, Mustafa (2005) further highlights how a hazardscape is not just a site of vulnerability and suffering, it is also a site of contestations and struggles over wider social justice.

After Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans in the US in 2005, critical geographers and others further engaged the question of disasters. By looking into how the capitalist American state, the developer lobby, the insurance industry, and hydraulic infrastructures together constituted the New Orleans catastrophe, these scholars reinforced the idea that disasters are integral to the capitalist economic system (Bakker 2005; Braun and McCarthy 2005; Smith 2006, 2007; Klein 2008). They argued that the so-called natural disasters are part of the processes of the capitalist state’s constant commoditization and financialization of nature for the purpose of capital accumulation. While the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape is not the same as New Orleans – the two places are characterized by distinct historical-geographical processes – the post-Katrina scholarship has helped me look at the disastrous geographies in Assam against the broader global backdrop.

This research pays careful attention to the role of the state in the (re)production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. To do so, I draw on a mix of Marxist and postcolonial theorizations of the state. While there are different approaches within the Marxist theorizations of the state (for example, the *instrumentalist*, *structuralist*, and *class struggle* approaches), a broad theme that unites these approaches is a focus on the class character of the state. The state is generally viewed as a complex social relation. Marxist theorists have pointed out that the state constantly works towards creating conditions for the accumulation of capital in order to satisfy

the ruling elites (Clarke 1991; Harvey 2001; Jessop 1990). However, Gramsci's (1971: 182) idea of the "unstable equilibria" reminds us that this process of capital accumulation by the state – or the *hegemony* of the state, more broadly – is constantly challenged and thwarted by class struggle in society. In other words, for a deeper understanding of the state, the question of accumulation needs to be problematized. As I show in this dissertation, Indian state's flood and erosion control measures in Assam (e.g. embankments, check-bunds, spurs, and dams) have historically focused on transforming the Brahmaputra riverscape into commodity form (cf. Das 2007). Nonetheless, the local population in the valley has tried to challenge the hegemony of the state through various forms of resistance and movements, albeit not always successfully.

Postcolonial scholarship on the state, on the other hand, goes beyond the analytic of capital accumulation in examining the third-world state. Akhil Gupta (1995: 376) argues that instead of focusing primarily on large-scale structural aspects and major policies, a focus on the "quotidian practices of bureaucrats" can help us understand the *effects* of the state on the everyday lives of rural people. Thus, for Gupta (2012), there is a need for a "disaggregated" analysis of the postcolonial state, which requires paying attention to practices of corruption and the arbitrariness of bureaucracies. Mitchell (1991) argues that the state needs to be understood as a set of "structural effects," which is a different perspective from the Marxist structural approach to the state (Poulantzas 1974; 1978). A structural effects approach looks at the state "not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist" (Mitchell 1991: 94). Thus, in both Gupta's (1995; 2012) and Mitchell's (1991) invocation of the state, the emphasis lies less on the "structure" and more on the "effect" that the state has on society manifested itself through various everyday practices. In the context of the postcolonial state, scholars have also noted several other distinctive features, such as the role of

various non-state actors and cronyism (Harris-White 2003), the state's recourse to overt forms of repression and violence (Alavi 1972; Glassman and Samatar 1997; Saul 1974), the state's and people's multiple ways of *seeing* each other and their implications (Corbridge et al. 2005), and the question of the 'political society' in shaping the postcolonial state (Chatterjee 2004).

My examination of the Indian state in this dissertation pays attention to some of these postcolonial specificities. However, instead of trying to resolve the tension between Marxist and postcolonial state theorizations, I draw on both and combine them for a more nuanced understanding of the Indian state. At the same time, I have paid attention to the question of nature's materiality and how it interacts with political economic processes across different scales. In this sense, my dissertation undertakes a political ecological examination of the state. As I examine the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape by focusing specifically on the role of the state, I do not intend to overlook other important factors, climate change being one of these. In fact, I am quite mindful of the grave challenges that climate change poses to the Brahmaputra valley. The very fact that the Brahmaputra is a Himalayan glacial river indicates how susceptible the river and its entire geographies are to the impact of climate change. After all, the Himalayan glaciers are melting, the monsoonal patterns in the South Asia region are changing, and the specter of "climate refugees" has already started to haunt downstream places like Bangladesh. That said, this dissertation does not engage with the question of climate change; instead, it focuses on factors that have, independent of climate change, played a vital role in the production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. Once climate change gains center-stage of analysis, there is a general tendency to ignore other forces that have shaped geographies of hazards for a long time, in multiple ways. This dissertation seeks to avoid that tendency.

Rural livelihood and the peasantry

The rural livelihood crises in the Brahmaputra valley is multi-faceted, rooted predominantly in the loss of the land and water resources; incursion of capitalist economic systems and the resultant breakdown of the traditional societies, including its moral economy; crisis of labor in different sectors of the economy; and a gradual erosion of the welfare state.

Topics that could be categorized under livelihood studies have been studied for a long time under a range of different disciplines within both natural and social sciences, including “village studies, household economics and gender analyses, farming systems research, agro-ecosystem analysis, rapid and participatory appraisal, studies of socio-environmental change, political ecology, sustainability science and resilience studies (and many other strands and variants)” (Scoones 2009: 174). However, it was with the emergence of the idea of sustainable livelihoods in the late-1980s that livelihood studies became a more formalized area of inquiry. Chambers and Conway’s (1992: 6) paper has become foundational in livelihoods studies where they defined livelihoods thus:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base.

This framing was certainly influenced by the cross-disciplinary livelihoods scholarship as mentioned above, but unlike the previous work, Chambers and Conway’s was a much broader framing of livelihoods that encompassed diverse concerns. In the 1990s, the idea of ‘sustainable livelihoods’ gained salience particularly with DfID’s⁸ *Sustainable Livelihoods Framework* (SLF)

⁸ DfID or the Department of International Development is the UK equivalent of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

that drew directly on Chambers and Conway's theoretic (Scoones 2009). At the same time, the DfID framework popularized the idea of five capitals – human capital, social capital, natural capital, physical capital, and financial capital – eventually gaining widespread popularity globally through NGO networks.

The dominant livelihoods scholarship and approaches have, however, pursued a narrow economic focus (Scoones 2009; Carr 2015). As Carr (2013: 80) points out, the distinct focus on *capitals* in the sustainable livelihoods approach actually presumes an economizing logic, that is, the idea that “livelihoods are principally about the maintenance and improvement of the material conditions of life.” On the other hand, a political ecological understanding of livelihoods helps us view livelihoods in a more holistic way moving beyond the narrow economism of traditional livelihoods frameworks. Carr (2015: 332) explains political ecology and livelihoods studies as “natural partners” – both must consider the local environmental/agricultural decision-making within the broader/extra-local, political economic processes and discourses and pay due attention to questions of power as well as biophysical nature. Bebbington (1999), for example, has noted how assets are not merely means of living for people, but they also give *meaning* to people's life. In other words, for Bebbington, livelihood is much more than the material conditions for survival. Scholars pursuing political ecological analysis of livelihoods have situated livelihoods within the conceptual frameworks of “capabilities” (Bebbington 1999), “environmental entitlements” (Leach et al. 1997; cf. Sen 1981), “spatiality” of livelihoods (King 2011), and the broad concerns of environmental conservation (Batterbury 2001; Bebbington and Batterbury 2001; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Goldman 2011; McCusker and Carr 2006).

My examination of the livelihood crises in the Brahmaputra valley draws on these political ecological approaches. It brings together the questions of scale, power, and role of natural resources in rural livelihoods. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, at the heart of the livelihood crises in the Brahmaputra valley lies the issue of depleting natural resources. In Majuli, for instance, the livelihood crisis is rooted in, among others, the erosion of wetlands – resources that are vital to the fishing communities in the island; the loss of agricultural lands and the incursion of capitalist agrarian relations, including the expansion of cash crops; and the erosion of the clayey soil along the riverbanks that are fundamental to the livelihoods of the potter communities in the island. Bebbington (1999) is right in cautioning us against focusing too narrowly on natural resources and agriculture in rural livelihoods studies, since rural livelihoods need to diversify, especially when faced with depletion of natural resources. Tania Li (2011: 295) echoed a similar observation in noting that instead of wanting to stick to their “locally oriented production on small family farms”, rural populations actually like to escape such livelihoods in favor of new forms of livelihoods and labor regimes. I agree with the above authors that rural livelihoods should not be essentialized as natural resources centric. However, as my study of the Brahmaputra valley shows, in the absence of alternative resources, and due to the growing phenomenon of what Li (2011: 281), in a different context, calls the “educated unemployed,” rural livelihoods in the valley continue to be heavily dependent on natural resources. The degradation of these resources has therefore paralyzed the traditional livelihood systems.

As mentioned earlier, 40-50% of the land area in the Brahmaputra valley is under cultivation. In Majuli, it is much higher since agriculture is the primary occupation for a large majority of the island’s population. Thus, against Hobsbawm’s (1994: 415) announcement of the

“death of peasantry”, the case of the Brahmaputra valley reinforces the continued relevance of agriculture (and the peasantry) (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a; 2010b). The question of the peasantry has been a major preoccupation within Marxist scholarships. More than a century ago, Kautsky (1988 [1899]) illuminated what is popularly known as “the agrarian question”. For Marx himself, peasantry as a class was condemned to disappear with the advance of capitalist relations in the countryside (Mitrany 1961). Lenin (1899) prophesied that the old peasantry would be “completely dissolved” (Harris 1982: 131) and a “process of ‘depeasantising’” (Harris 1982: 134) would take place as capitalism advanced into the countryside. Kautsky, however, framed the agrarian question slightly differently by positing that the agrarian question should not be concerned mainly with the fate of the peasantry. Peasant production, he argued, is an integral part of the capitalist economy and society. For Kautsky, the primary focus of the agrarian question should be on the transformations of agriculture under the capitalist mode of production. While reinforcing Kautsky’s observation that the peasantry remains important in a capitalist mode of production, other Marxist scholars have pointed out how capital exercises enormous control over the peasantry, effectively turning them into “disguised proletariats” (Bernstein 1982) or “wage-labor equivalents” (Banaji 1977).

Overall, the agrarian question remains relevant as ever in understanding rural changes and the transformations of the peasantry in the increasingly neoliberalized world that we live in. It helps us unravel “the common processes at work in the countryside of a range of developing capitalist countries as well as the substantive diversity that can be witnessed within and between those countries” (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a: 198-199). In recent years, scholars have widened the scope of the classic agrarian question by weaving in various new questions concerning rural changes, such as the question of food (McMichael 2008), the ecological question (Blaikie 1985;

Watts 2009), the question of resistance among the peasantry (van der Ploeg 2010), and so on. As I articulate in Chapter 3, understanding the rural changes in Assam requires taking into account the changing relations of production in rural societies, wrought especially by the incursion of capitalism, manifesting in processes of depeasantisation and the transformation of the Brahmaputra riverscape into a commodity form.

One of the vital questions characterizing the agrarian crisis in the Brahmaputra valley is the question of *land*. Unlike situations where the land either becomes unproductive or is being incorporated into the system of accumulation, in the Brahmaputra valley, the land itself is disappearing. Land thus acquires a new meaning in such a context. In her profound article, *What is Land*, Tania Li's (2014) argues that land is a "strange object" (2014: 590), since it "stays in place" (2014: 591) and cannot be removed. This "material emplacement" of land, Li (2014: 600) argues, shapes people's association with and rights over land in distinct ways. Li's invocation, however, fails to explain the land question in the Brahmaputra valley where instead of *staying in place*, land actually erodes and disappears continuously. Yet land remains highly critical for the peasantry in the valley, and the struggle here is to protect the land from its absolute disappearance. Hence, I argue that the question of land and its importance for the agrarian question need a different analytical lens in the case of such geographies. This dissertation pays careful attention to these nuances, and situates rural livelihood crises within the broader realms of resource depletion, the role of infrastructures, labor crisis, vulnerability, and peasant resistance. Thus, this dissertation is an attempt to advance critical debates in agrarian studies and rural livelihoods.

Social movements and resistance

The question of social movements and resistance occupies a central place in my dissertation. As mentioned earlier, hazardscapes are not simply sites of vulnerability and sufferings, but are also places of struggle for social justice and equity (Mustafa 2005). To put it differently, hazardscapes contribute to and are the result of social inequities (on multiple axes, such as caste, class, gender, and geographical locations); such landscapes are fertile ground for social movements aimed at better environmental governances as well as a just society. Van der Ploeg (2010) conceptualizes the twenty-first century peasantries in terms of resistance. Peasant resistance, he argues, takes multiple forms depending upon the contexts, mainly aimed at resisting subordination and deprivation of the peasantry and securing self-controlled resource base. This view echoes Habermas' (1987) theoretic that resistances are apt to emerge when people's "lifeworlds," that is, their domains of the everyday, meaningful practices are "colonized" (cited in Bebbington et al. 2008: 2890). The Brahmaputra valley hazardscape exemplifies this phenomenon. The processes of flooding and erosion have not only marginalized the peasantries in the valley as a whole but they have also amplified the divisions within them. Thus, both in Majuli and Rohmorria the peasantry has resorted to a range of different forms of resistance and struggle to put pressure on the state for more effective environmental governance. At the same time, these struggles have also attempted towards building a more equitable society by dismantling the existing power structures.

The scholarship in social movements and resistance is huge, transcending multiple disciplines, and I have drawn on relevant aspects of this literature from across disciplines. Within geographical scholarship, resistance is largely viewed as a 'spatial practice' (Pile and Keith 1997; Routledge 1997). Accordingly, geographers have explored the "geographical

embeddedness” (Gregory et al. 2009: 647) of social movements, thus highlighting how particularities of place influence the emergence, character and strategy of movements (Routledge 1993); the geographical dilemmas faced by movements and unions in the age of globalization (Herod 1998); and the role of social movements and resistance in shaping political and social geographies (Miller 2000). Scholars from other disciplines have also noted the role of place, and that of material specificities in particular, in social movements (Guha 2010 [1989]; Moore 1998). My analysis of the processes of social movements and resistance in the Brahmaputra valley further foregrounds the “geographical embeddedness” of struggles. Thus, I demonstrate how the differences between Rohmoria and Majuli – in terms of the form and power of the struggles – are largely due to their specific geographical attributes. In presenting this argument I focus on questions of location, the resource base in the two geographies and their other specific characteristics, and how these attributes have interacted with the political and cultural processes in the respective places.

In their discussion about social movements in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Andes, Bebbington et al. (2008: 2889) noted how the trajectories of social movements varied across different locations, reflecting “distinct geographies of social mobilization.” However, these authors also situated social mobilization within the context of specific experiences of dispossession that are shaped by specific accumulation dynamics. In his classic work on the Chipko movement in India, Guha (2010 [1989]: 98) similarly argued that “forms of domination structure forms of resistance.” Thus, Guha explains the specific forms and formulations of the Chipko movement by taking into account the long history of different forms of domination of subjugation of the peasantry in the hills. Such analytical lenses have influenced my examination of resistance by the disaster-affected communities in the Brahmaputra valley, which I have

situated within the overall historical context of peasant resistance in Assam (Saikia 2014). Additionally, I have also drawn on, among others, scholarship that foregrounds the role of “alliances” – transnational or domestic – in bolstering social movements (Bebbington et al. 2008; Della Porta and Diani 2008; Keck and Sikkink 1998). As my comparative analysis of popular struggles in Rohmoria and Majuli in the Brahmaputra valley shows, one of the key accomplishments of the activists in Rohmoria, unlike that of their counterparts in Majuli, was their ability to forge alliances with like-minded groups across different scales. This has not only helped the Rohmoria movement gain salience at the state level, it has also created spaces for the Rohmoria activists to work towards a statewide movement of the flood- and erosion-affected people.

There is also a large body of scholarship that looks at myriad everyday practices, symbolic and material, that challenge domination and oppression of various kinds. James Scott’s (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* remains a key text in this genre of scholarship. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott puts forward the idea of “everyday resistance”, which he defines as various ordinary acts, such as footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, etc., that the peasantries often deploy in order to mold the system to their minimum disadvantage instead of overtly challenging the authorities. Notwithstanding its usefulness, the “everyday resistance” framework has come under criticism by various scholars. While some scholars pointed out that Scott’s framework presupposes “rational peasantry” (Mitchell 1990: 548; Haynes and Prakash 1991), others argued that Scott’s analytic risks conceptualizing almost every action as resistance thereby diluting the meaning of revolutionary commitments and long-term political mobilization (Pile and Keith 1997). I have engaged with the idea of “everyday resistance” critically. In Majuli, in the absence of a mass social movement,

the hazards-affected population has resorted to myriad forms of everyday resistance as an expression of their dissent and to ensure improved protection measures in the island. However, I also demonstrate that such everyday forms of resistance have fallen short of exerting enough pressure on the state for it to be more accountable to the local population in its environmental governance processes.

Research methods: navigating fieldwork dilemmas

I moved out of Majuli in the mid-1990s to go to college in Delhi. But since my family and relatives still live there, I have continued to visit the island once every year. During these short visits, packed as they were with social obligations, I have always tried to inquire about the flood and erosion situation in Majuli. It was not until the 2011 summer that I went back to the island as a researcher for an in-depth investigation of these issues. That summer was an eye opener for me because during the three months I was there I traveled to some of the most vulnerable places in the island that I had not seen before. I visited some remote *chaporis* in the middle of the Brahmaputra where everyday life was defined by “uncertainty;” I witnessed the miseries of families who were subsistence peasants until their homes and lands were eroded, and now, they are living in camps near the riverbanks. And, I met many families who lived in makeshift homes along the earthen embankments for decades and who are still waiting to be re-settled by the government. I also spoke with people from various walks of life, which was helpful in gaining an understanding of the crises of flooding and erosion in Majuli and outside, and identifying my potential research sites.

In December 2012, I went back to Majuli to conduct field work for thirteen months. Just six months prior to this, a massive flood – the worst in a decade – ravaged the island. More than

23,000 hectares of agricultural lands were inundated, causing a serious food shortage on the island. About 450 hectares of additional farmlands were silted, and more than 300 homes were completely washed away while many others were partially damaged (Circle Office, Kamalabari, Majuli 2013). The government agencies were still in the process of compiling reports of the flood damages, and the *gaonburas* (village headmen) were lining up in relevant government offices demanding compensation for flood victims within their jurisdictions. The physical destruction of infrastructure was still visible on the landscape. Even as the rural communities on the island were reeling from the devastating effects of this flood, there was no letup in the erosion crisis, given that erosion is a continuous, everyday phenomenon in the Majuli landscape. Thus, my fieldwork toward understanding the Majuli hazardscape was timely to say the least.

This research is based on roughly sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, combined with household surveys and analysis of governmental and non-governmental policy documents. During this period, I conducted the following: participant observation with rural communities in Majuli; 81 semi-structured interviews with community members, political leaders, activists, contractors, and government officials; 15 focus group discussions with community members and activists; and 107 household surveys in three villages (see Annexure 3 for more details on fieldwork respondents). In Majuli, I carried out fieldwork in three villages, namely Salmora, Dakhinpat and Sumoimari, and one *chapori* named Bhakat chapori (see Figure 1). Together, these sites provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of flooding and erosion on the island, taking into consideration of different communities, the questions of livelihoods, and micro-geographies within the island. All the three villages are located on the southern bank of the island where flooding and erosion are most acute due to its proximity to the main channel of the Brahmaputra and the specific role of embankments, which I will discuss in

Chapter 2. Bhakat chapori helped me gain an understanding of how the disasters unfolded in the *chaporis* and the responses of *chapori* dwellers to disasters and the state. In terms of social composition and economy, together these places represented the overall diversity of the island. Salmora is a Kumar village, that is, a community with pottery as its traditional source of livelihood; Dakhinpat is a village made up of the Kaivarta community whose traditional source of livelihood is fishing; and Sumoimari is the Mising tribe's village, which is the largest community on the island that practices a mix of agrarian livelihood and wage-labor. Bhakat chapori consists of several villages with a mix of different communities that uses agriculture and livestock-rearing as their key livelihood sources.

I stayed with different families in these villages, and sometimes commuted from my parent's home, located within 20 minutes to one-hour motorcycle ride from the researched villages. When I commuted from my parent's, I left home as early as 6-7AM on my motorcycle and returned home after it was dark, thus spending most of the day in the field. Staying at my parent's place enriched my fieldwork experience in many ways. Located in the middle portion of the island, relatively far from the river, this area is not as severely affected by flooding and erosion as villages I researched. Staying at my parent's provided me with a broader geographical perspective of the disaster in Majuli. It also allowed me the opportunity to interact with community members in my own village. Thus, I was able to gain insight from people who live in relatively safer areas and their views on the disasters, the role of the state, and the necessity of activism. Furthermore, by staying at my parent's, I was able to closely observe the ways in which caste dynamics operated in Majuli because people in my native village belong to relatively higher castes than those in the villages I researched. The caste dynamics has shaped the ways in which these communities view and respond to disasters, since caste is an important determinant

of people's access to resources and hence their ability to cope with disasters. Thus, by interacting with people of different castes and tribes I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of disasters and the production of hazardscape in Majuli.

While in the field, I interviewed and informally chatted with people at their home spaces, in community centers, and by shops and market places within the village-spaces where people generally hung out in the evenings. My interviewees and my focus group discussions included both men and women. Compared to rural societies in many other parts of India, women in Assam and the northeast India are much more outspoken, and they play an active role in the social spheres. Therefore, I did not have much difficulty approaching women in the field. The Kumar and Mising women were particularly vocal.⁹ I interviewed several women members in these communities, some of which were also elected representatives of their respective Gram Panchayats.¹⁰ In Salmora I spoke to a large number of women since their role in the pottery industry was vital. By talking to women, I was able to gain deeper insight into pottery-based livelihoods and the ways in which flooding and erosion have impacted this traditional livelihood practice. In all my research areas, both in Majuli and Rohmoria, men and women were almost equally present in the focus group discussions. In all three communities in Majuli – Kumar, Kaivarta, and Mising – men played a larger role in the outdoor activities, such as pottery trading, fishing and goat trading, and wage-labor respectively. The womenfolk played a very important

⁹ There is, in fact, a popular phrase in Majuli called “Kumaronir mukh”, which literally translates as ‘the mouth of Kumar women’. This is a reference to the exceptionally vocal nature of women in the Kumar community.

¹⁰ Panchayats (assemblies) are institutions of local self-governance in rural India, which are lineages of the traditional rural governance systems, later on included into the Constitution through the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1992. The *Panchayati Raj* is a three-tier governance system, organized in the order of Gram (village) panchayat, Anchalik (block) panchayat, and Zila (district) panchayat, with the representatives at all levels being directly elected by the people.

role in the household spheres including economic activities, such as pottery, brewing rice-beer to sell locally, and handloom weaving. By interacting with the women, I was able to understand the gender dimensions of the hazardscape, the distinct ways in which flooding and erosion impacted men and women in the rural societies, and the role of women in household economies as well as in broader political processes. However, my interaction in the government offices and with the contractors remained restricted to men alone since these sectors were dominated by men.

As part of participant observation, I accompanied the peasants and the fishermen to the fields, *beels*,¹¹ and rivers; spent time with the potter women and men observing their activities; and attended various community events such as *bhaona* (drama), *raas* (traditional story of Krishna described in Hindu scriptures), weddings, and other such celebrations for a better understanding of their livelihood practices. Sometimes, I hung out with village elders sipping *among* (local rice beer) and chatting on a wide range of subjects. I always carried a notebook, a camera, and a digital voice recorder with me in the field and used them effectively based on the suitability of situations. One of my favorite pastimes in the villages was to sit by the river with community members – young and old – in late afternoons and chat. Those were casual conversations where people generally opened up a lot more and shared things that they otherwise would not.

I also spent a lot of time in government offices on the island interviewing officials, collecting documents, and sometimes simply observing the everyday functioning of government agencies. The following are some of the government agencies/offices where I spent hours conducting my fieldwork: the office of the Water Resources Department, the office of the Sub-

¹¹ A *beel* is a kind of a wetland with static water in the Ganges-Brahmaputra floodplains in the eastern Indian states of West Bengal and Assam (as well as in Bangladesh). These wetlands are typically formed through the processes of inundation of low-lying lands during flooding. They vary in sizes and are usually owned either by the state or village communities. *Beels* are great sources of aquatic diversity.

Divisional Officer (Civil) and Magistrate, the Circle Office (Revenue), the Block Development Offices, the Char-Anchal Development Office, and the office of the Brahmaputra Board. I also made a few visits to some of the prominent *sattras* in Majuli and had conversations with the *sattradhikars* (head of a *sattra*) and the *bhakats* (the devotees). Furthermore, I spent time at different worksites of the Water Resources Department and the Brahmaputra Board, talking with the contractors and the laborers, and observing workplace dynamics.

Doing fieldwork in Majuli was at once an advantage and a challenge. As a native of Majuli, I was familiar with the landscape and its socio-cultural norms, I spoke the local language(s), and I also had extensive contacts and family ties on the island. Thus, in many ways, I was an insider in Majuli, which helped me to gain access to the local communities as well as activists and politicians. To paraphrase Abu-Lughod (1988) and Hill-Collins (1990), as an *insider*, I had the advantage of using my knowledge of the local population in Majuli to gain intimate insights into their opinions (cited in Mullings 1999). On several occasions, community members or leaders alike on the island would refer to me as “*amaar nijor lora*” (our own boy) or as “*Majulir xontan*” (son of Majuli). It seems they were generally comfortable sharing their personal stories, political positions, and grievances against the state with me. It was as if there was an inbuilt trust between us, and that our shared commitment to Majuli glued us together.

However, as Mullings (1999: 340) rightly points out, the ‘insider/outsider’ binary in fieldwork is “not only highly unstable but also one that ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space.” According to Mullings, no individual can consistently remain an insider or outsider; instead, the insider/outsider position is a fluid one. My fieldwork experiences in Majuli drove this observation home for me. Even though I was considered an insider – *nijor lora* – by many in the island, this was not always the case. There were several “trenchant

markers of difference” (Sultana 2007: 375) along the lines of class, caste, and educational backgrounds that separated me from the rural communities on the island. Unlike most people in the villages I researched, I was English educated, and I have been in high-profile educational institutions within and outside the country. Similarly, most people in these villages had not even been to Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, while I was living in the US. Indeed, I was the only person from Majuli to have ever studied in the US. People saw these attributes as clear signs of class difference between us. I was therefore a subject of curiosity to many on the island. They would ask me all sorts of questions about life in the US – for example, what kind of food people in the US ate, what type of crops were grown by farmers in the US, if problems like flooding and erosion existed in the US, and so on. They asked me these questions out of sheer curiosity, but at the same time, I also realized that these were things (and places) beyond their reach. Thus, in answering these questions, I also felt as if I was in a powerful position vis-à-vis the local communities. This relation of power was further shaped by caste position. Although I did not belong to an upper caste community in a traditional sense,¹² my caste position was still higher compared to the communities in these villages, and people were aware of that. I was therefore both an insider and outsider in Majuli, depending upon specific contexts. Or, as Sultana (2007: 377) puts it: “[I was] simultaneously an insider, outsider, both and neither.”

As an insider researcher in Majuli, I faced another specific challenge. Most of the rural families in my research areas had experienced repeated dislocations due to the loss of home and land to riverbank erosion. The frustration of these families with the state for the latter’s failure in

¹² I belong to a caste that qualifies for the Other Backward Class (OBC) status, which refers to various caste groups that the Indian Constitution has identified as “socially and educationally backward classes.” In the caste hierarchy, the OBCs are however considered higher than the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities that the Kaivartas and the Misings in my field area respectively belonged.

addressing the environmental crisis and providing necessary compensation was palpable. So, when they realized that one of their own (*'nijos lora'*), especially coming from the US, was investigating the crises facing the island, they started placing expectations on me. People were quite vocal about it: "*Aami aaxa koru tumi amaar bedona Guwahati aru Delhir sarkarak jonaba*" (we hope you will tell the governments in Guwahati and Delhi about our sufferings). Even though I had made my role as a researcher quite clear to the communities, they still hoped that my research would have an immediate impact on government policies. Even when I was writing my dissertation in Syracuse, there were periodic "missed calls" from community members in the field, and when I called them back, they would inquire about the progress of my research with anticipation of some positive returns. I have thus come to realize that doing research in/about one's own place and community comes with a special sense of responsibility.¹³ I had to deal with several questions and ethical dilemmas – questions about the politics of knowledge production, the expectations of delivery, and how to speak about, with, and for the communities that I belong (and do not belong) and whose struggle I want to advance (Nagar 2002, 2003). Thus, even as I critique the local leadership in Majuli for their failure in social mobilization, my criticism remains empathetic, for I am aware of some of the constraints faced by this leadership, and I also want to find ways to encourage their effort instead of disparaging it. This is a position that comes out of our shared commitment to a place and a struggle.

The election season

Both 2013 and 2014 were election years in Assam. In Jan-Feb 2013, there was *Panchayat Election* in the state, which involved months of campaign across all rural areas, including Majuli.

¹³ Spivak's (1994) deliberation on 'responsibility' is instructive here.

With Majuli being entirely rural, that is, there is no municipal corporation in Majuli, as mandated for urban areas in India, the panchayat election affected every corner of the island. People were divided along different political lines at all levels of the society. Doing fieldwork in such a political climate was both a useful and frustrating experience. On the one hand, I gained a nuanced exposure to the local politics on the island, but on the other hand, it was almost impossible to get community leaders, politicians, and government officials to talk during those days because they were either too busy with election related activities or were too tightlipped about their opinion lest their own opportunities in the election were jeopardized. Furthermore, as the election became a top priority, developmental activities all over the island had practically come to a standstill for weeks. I observed how ongoing embankment repairing work by the Water Resources Department, work that needed urgent completion, or the Public Works Department's works on roads and bridges came to a halt because of the election frenzy all over the islands.

Then came the maiden election of the Mising Autonomous Council (MAC)¹⁴ in October. Once again, Majuli was particularly affected by the MAC election since the Misings constituted the largest majority of the island's population. The following fieldnotes provide a glimpse of the political environment on the island during the run-up to the MAC election.

¹⁴ The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution lays down a framework of autonomous decentralized governance among the tribal communities in northeast India. Accordingly, an autonomous regional council and an autonomous district councils are constituted, which are empowered with legislative and executive power over a number of subjects, including water, land, trade, and local customs. The Mising Autonomous Council (MAC) was established in 1995 under the Mising Autonomous Council Act, passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly, after decades of struggle by the Mising community. The 2013 election was the first election MAC.

Fieldnotes: September 23, 2013

The MAC election seems to have stopped the normal course of life on the island. The government offices are hardly functioning, using the (usual) election excuse; all the Mising villages are crowded and dusty with cars and motorcycles coming in and out all the time on election campaigns; there are sporadic cases of violence in some villages; and alcohol seems to be overflowing among a community that already consumes a lot of apong. The leaderships among the community are quite tightlipped these days on various issues, since they all want to play politically safe at this point. Yet, a great deal of political calculations and reconfiguration is happening on the ground. Many families that voted for the Congress in the panchayat election a few months ago are now openly supporting the Ganashakti (a political party) candidates for the MAC election. All the Mising dominated areas on the island are bustling with activities. But I don't see the issue of flooding and erosion figuring in at all in any of these activities – neither in the meetings nor in the posters, pamphlets, and election manifestoes in general. If the MAC does not care about the real issues facing the Mising people, who will? I like the fact that the rural population is so actively engaged in politics. Yet I wonder if this is the right kind of politics that will benefit the common Mising person.

There was a festive environment in the Mising villages in Majuli for weeks leading up to the election. Finally, the election took place with a massive 78% voter turnout (The Telegraph, Oct 8, 2013), and the Mising community had elected its leaders to the Autonomous Council offices. While it remains to be seen whether these leaders fulfil the expectations of their people, for me as a researcher, being in Majuli during this process was a learning experience.

The Lok Sabha Election (i.e. the national parliamentary election) was coming up in early 2014. Thus, mid-2013 onward, the whole country was getting invigorated for this election, resulting in new political configurations at different levels in the society. Doing fieldwork during this important period in the country's history was particularly instructive as I was exposed to important processes that help shape the role of the state and state-society relations. For instance, I closely witnessed various political fissures within the rural societies, the role of local leadership, the ways in which cronyism functioned, and spaces of social mobilization across scales. I was frustrated with the pace of my fieldwork during the election seasons since it was hard to get both political leaders and community members to talk. They were all too busy with the election processes. At the same time, it was a unique experience to be in the field in the thick

of such a dynamic and vigorous political process. It exposed me to various facets of the socio-political processes in Assam, which would have been not possible in times of political inactivity.

Doing fieldwork outside Majuli

Not only did my fieldwork lead me to discover new geographies within Majuli, but it also took me to new places all along the Brahmaputra valley. Going into my fieldwork, I was only planning to focus on Majuli. I had certain preconceived notions about the place and especially about the responses of the local people in the island to both disasters and the state. Since I had previously heard about the *Majuli Suraksha Sammanay Mancha*, an alliance of several local and statewide activist groups for the protection of Majuli from flood and erosion, I was expecting a vibrant social movement scene in the island. However, once in the field, I soon found out that this was not at all the case. On the other hand, I got to know about other places in Assam facing similar crises but marked by different political processes at the grassroots level. Thus, I became interested in examining the socio-ecological processes in these different geographies for a more in-depth understanding of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. The bulk of my fieldwork still focused on Majuli, but I also travelled to places both in the upstream and the downstream portions of the river to conduct fieldwork.

Rohmoria in the Dibrugarh district was one such place. The impact of flooding and erosion on the Rohmoria landscape has been devastating despite being smaller in scale when compared to Majuli. What is distinctive about Rohmoria was the presence of a sustained mass movement there, which was not the case in Majuli. In Rohmoria, therefore, my primary focus was to understand the processes of the social movement. In doing so, I conducted several semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and village-level meetings in Rohmoria in addition to

collecting secondary material that focused specifically on the movement. I tried to understand the making of the Rohmoria movement, its key characteristics, and if and how the movement has helped shape environmental governance processes in Rohmoria.

Located in the Morigaon district in the downstream portion of the Brahmaputra, Lahorighat is another place that has gone through drastic transformations due to flooding and erosion. I travelled to Lahorighat and conducted a few semi-structured interviews and focus groups to get a sense of the crises facing this place. During the course of my fieldwork in Majuli, I also learned how a large number of families from each of the villages I researched had out-migrated to different parts of Assam over the course of the last fifty to sixty years. I was interested in visiting some of these families to learn more about their experiences. Therefore, I visited Dogar Chuk, a small village near Jorhat town, that was settled by families displaced from the Salmora village in Majuli.¹⁵ In 2004, the Assam government rehabilitated a small group of 53 families in this village, which has since grown almost double its size. Similar to my work in Lahorighat, the fieldwork in Dogar Chuk was also conducted over a short period that consisted of a few interviews and focus groups. Neither Lahorighat nor Dogar Chuk have figured prominently in this dissertation, but by conducting fieldwork in such expansive geographies all along the Brahmaputra valley, I was able to gain a broader understanding of the political-ecological processes shaping the hazardous geographies of the valley as a whole.

¹⁵ As people in Dogar Chuk explained to me, this resettlement was not an easy process, however. Instead, it was a result of two years of struggle by the displaced families in Salmora, involving relentless protest and follow-up with the local and the district administration. Besides, on behalf of the district administration, a group of men from these displaced families had also actively searched for available lands in Jorhat and Golaghat districts for their resettlement, and later on, they had to further carry out forest clearing to make their current place habitable. This information is based on the focus group discussion that I had conducted with villagers in Dogar Chuk on September 14, 2013.

Going to Guwahati

My fieldwork also involved several trips to Guwahati, Assam's state capital, where I collected documents from various governmental and nongovernmental sources and interviewed high-ranking government officials and politicians, including ministers in the Assam government. In particular, I spent time in the Assam government secretariat, the headquarters of the Brahmaputra Board and the Water Resources Department and the central office of All Assam Students' Union.

Travelling between Guwahati and Majuli was an arduous task – a whole day's journey one way that involved ferry rides that can vary from an hour to over two hours depending upon the season and a bus ride which takes several hours and has multiple transfers. To my surprise, however, I would often look forward to these trips to Guwahati for reasons beyond fieldwork. After spending months at a stretch in Majuli, I used to crave a break, as Majuli's remoteness posed various challenges. I had never valued internet as much as I did while being in Majuli. There were only two *cyber cafés* on the entire island and both were located in Kamalabari, the island's main commercial hub, which was not very close to my field areas. Thus, accessing internet and staying connected with the world was a major challenge. Whenever I went to one of the two cafés, I always carried a "to do" list with me so I could at least take care of the most important things, given the limited internet access that I had. Many a times, I would make it to Kamalabari all the way from my field only to find out that the cafés were either too busy or they were shut due to long hours of power outage, a common occurrence in Majuli.

The trips to Guwahati would, therefore, fill me with the joy of connecting with the outside world. In addition, there were mundane things, such as the desire to go to a good restaurant, a bar (not an option in the rural landscape in Majuli), or to eat some food other than

the traditional Assamese meal, which, despite being delicious, could get monotonous at times. Sometimes, I would yearn for some space to be able to wander around without someone always recognizing me and wanting to have a conversation on topics ranging from life in the US to my research. This urge to take a break from Majuli and re-connect with city life was a reminder to me about my ‘insider/outsider’ duality in the island. Despite being rooted in the island in so many ways, I also realized that over the years I had distanced myself from the rural landscape of Majuli. This duality also helped me navigate the questions of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ as a researcher. As an insider with personal stakes in the resolution of the crises of flood and erosion in Majuli, I could not escape my subjective lens as a researcher. Yet, two decades of separation also significantly distanced my physical and emotional association with the island thereby allowing me to look at the socio-political developments on the island with a great degree of objectivity. Indeed, I found myself better suited as a researcher with my dual position as an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ simultaneously.

The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. In *Chapter 2*, I discuss the role of the Indian state in the production of hazardscape in the Brahmaputra valley. By focusing particularly on two government agencies – the Water Resources Department of the Assam government and the Brahmaputra Board of the central government – and the role of infrastructure, I demonstrate how and why the state has been fundamental in turning the Brahmaputra valley into a hazardous landscape. In *Chapter 3*, I discuss the socio-economic impacts of flooding and erosion by looking into the question of rural livelihoods transformation in the valley. In particular, I focus on three forms of livelihoods – agriculture, fishing, and pottery – and examine their

transformations. To do so, I draw on a political ecological analysis. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 are about the resistance and social movements. In *Chapter 4*, I lay out different forms of activism among the disaster-affected people in Majuli and Rohmoria, and highlight how the two geographies are characterized by very different forms of social mobilization despite their shared experiences of disasters. This issue is discussed in greater depth in *Chapter 5* where I critically examine the processes that have shaped the geographies of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria differently. This chapter also focuses on how the varied forms of activism have influenced the role of the state in distinct ways vis-à-vis Majuli and Rohmoria. Finally, *Chapter 6* is a concluding chapter where I synthesize my main arguments in the dissertation and indicate possible future directions for this research. At the end of each chapter, I provide a few pictures from my field research that are relevant to the topics discussed in that chapter. These pictures were taken by me during my fieldwork. Through these pictures, I try to provide to readers a visual representation of the different aspects of the Brahmaputra valley landscape.



Figure 3: Ferry ride from Jorhat to Majuli. March 2013.



Figure 4: the ferry ghat at Salmora, Majuli. December 2013.



Figure 5: Pastureland – a typical *chapor*i landscape. Majuli, September 2013.



Figure 6: Buffalo grazing on a wetland at Dakhinpat, Majuli. October 2013.



Figure 7: *Saang ghar* (stilt house) of a Mising family. Ukhalchuk, Majuli, June 2013.



Figure 8: A bamboo bridge connecting two villages. Majuli, August 2013.

Chapter 2

Hazardscape and the State

Introduction

“Nadikhon bor komal. Moromere subo laage” (The river is very delicate. It should be touched with love).

A villager at Sumoimari village, Majuli, 2013 (Translation mine).

On a cold January morning in Majuli, after riding my motorcycle for a little over an hour on an earthen embankment that ran parallel to the Brahmaputra, I reached the *gaonbura*'s (village headman)¹⁶ home at Salmora, a village devastated by years of flooding and riverbank erosion. Although the occurrence of erosion is unusual for this time of the year, the *gaonbura* informed me about ongoing erosion in the village. After a brief chat over a cup of tea we both headed to the riverside to meet the erosion-affected families. We stopped at Manik Hazarika's house.¹⁷ Hazarika, a man in his mid-80s, visibly frail, was sitting on the verandah of his modest house, gazing at the mighty Brahmaputra, while his sons were working in the family farm. For the past eleven years, the Hazarika family has lived in their current house – a stilt house, now typical of Salmora, with wooden floor, tin roof, and walls made of bamboo with earthen plastering on both sides. In mid-February when I visited the Hazarika family again, the old house was gone, the farm had disappeared, and the family was living in a makeshift tent nearby. A month later, when

¹⁶ A *gaonbura* (village headman) is one of the lowest rung government posts in Assam administration, continuing since the colonial period (Guha 1977). This post is generally filled on a hereditary basis. A *gaonbura* can have one or more villages under his jurisdiction.

¹⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I have substituted the real names of community members, activists, local leaders, politicians, and government officials with pseudonyms to protect their identities. The names of places and agencies are however actual names.

I again visited the village, the Hazarika family had moved farther away from the river, to a place considered to be relatively safer, and over the next couple of months, the family re-built their home. When the Hazarika family first moved in, this new location had only three-four families living there. But over the course of my fieldwork, the place became packed with dozens of families as more and more displaced families from the riverside kept pouring in. Almost every family at Salmora has gone through multiple rounds of displacement due to the combined effect of flooding and erosion. The Hazarika family, for instance, has had to relocate twelve times between 1948 and 2013. Yet the family has not yet received any compensation from the government. Once during a conversation, Hazarika expressed his anguish thus: “We have been like the *aghoris* (the nomads). We do not have a permanent home, always on the move from one place to another. [...] The government does not care about us. We are the forgotten citizens.”

Sumoimari, another of my research villages, is located a few kilometers west of Salmora, and is also adjacent to the river. Cases like Manik Hazarika’s were commonplace in Sumoimari as well, but the story of Robiram Kutum’s family affected me the most. Owning more than 200 cattle and a sizeable farm in the nearby *chaponi*, once the Kutum family had a decent livelihood. But then came the catastrophic 1987 flood. The floodwater rose so fast and furious overnight that Kutum could barely save his own life let alone rescue his cattle. Most of his cattle drowned on the premise of the *khuti* (ranch); the younger ones were washed away alive; and the few that survived the flood eventually died of starvation. “I couldn’t believe what I saw in the *khuti* that night. And the memory of that horrific sight still has not left me,” was the only comment made by Robiram, who is now in his mid-70s, while his daughter and wife narrated the whole flood episode and its aftermath to me. Rumi Kutum, Robiram’s daughter describe her father’s condition as: “After the 1987 flood, my father stopped behaving normally. He neither talks nor

goes out, not even to the neighbor's house. Any conversation about flood brings him to tears. I think he has not recovered from the 1987 disaster, and the sight of mass drowning of his cattle still haunts him." Rumi further explained that between 1987 and 2013, the family had moved four times from one location to another because of erosion. She commented, "We have not yet received any compensation from the government – neither for the flood damages nor for the repeated loss of land and properties due to erosion. The government makes a lot of promises, more so during the election time, but these are false promises, never delivered."

The cases of the Hazarika and the Kutum families give us a sense of the impact of flood and erosion on the Brahmaputra valley landscape in general and Majuli River Island in particular. Stories like these are far too common all over Majuli, especially in villages located nearest the river. At the same time, the above two cases also indicate how the state is implicated in these hazardous processes. Manik Hazarika's descriptions of people like him as "forgotten citizens," or Rumi Kutum's remarks that the government made "false promises" that it would never keep, highlight the role of the state in the socio-ecological crises facing Majuli. Indeed, during the course of my fieldwork in the valley I came across numerous instances where the local communities held the Indian state responsible for the flood and erosion hazards. People in the valley were unequivocal in highlighting measures, such as embankments and spurs, as not only failures but also as means for profiteering by the powerful section of the society.¹⁸ It is this question of the state – that is, *how and why the Indian state contributes to turning the Brahmaputra valley landscape into a hazardscape* – that I investigate in this chapter.

¹⁸ The embankments in this case are earthen structures built along the rivers mainly for the purpose of flood control. These are structures stretching over a long distance (several kilometers). The spurs, on the other hand, are structures made of a mix of earthen materials and boulders, the latter used to fortify the earthen structures. These structures are smaller in size compared to embankments and they are specifically targeted at preventing riverbank erosion.

In examining the relations between the state and the hazardous geography in Assam, my dissertation particularly foregrounds the role of infrastructure. Studies on the relationship between the state and hydraulic infrastructure have a long tradition within geography and other disciplines (Wittfogel 1957; Worster 1982, 1985; among others), and political ecologists have engaged with this issue more critically in recent years.¹⁹ Akhter (2015) deploys the notion of the “infrastructure nation” to explain the politics of nation-building in postcolonial Pakistan and the particular role that hydraulic infrastructures have played in this process – as catalysts for both integrating and fragmenting the Pakistani state spaces simultaneously. Keeping the question of nation-building aside, what Akhter’s (2015) work shows is the enormous power of infrastructure in the production of spaces and the shaping of politics. This is instructive in understanding the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape where the state’s intervention vis-à-vis the river and its various hydraulic processes have been overwhelmingly based on infrastructures. As I argue in this chapter, these infrastructures are integral to the “accumulation strategies” of the capitalist state (Jessop 1990; Parenti 2015). However, I also situate the accumulation imperative of the Indian state within the specific historical-geographical context of postcolonial India, thereby taking into account a host of other factors, including the role of the corrupt bureaucracy, the influence non-

¹⁹ Wittfogel’s (1957) *Oriental Despotism*, especially his concept of “hydraulic society” has had considerable influence on non-Marxist, as well as some Marxist, scholars looking at the relations between the state and the governance of the hydraulic regime. However, as Robbins (2004: 48) observes, the “hydraulic society” thesis was “fundamentally flawed on both empirical and theoretical grounds.” Robbins calls this thesis a continuation of the same “orientalist” tradition that many Eurocentric theories maintained. Providing an incisive Marxist critique of Wittfogel’s thesis, D.D. Kosambi (1957) argued: “What makes despotism inevitable is not Orientalism, nor hydraulics, but the particular type of production: how much surplus is forcibly expropriated by the state for its own use and that of the class it mainly serves” (cited in Shabad 1959: 325). Nonetheless, Wittfogel’s work is important in understanding the linkages between production and socio-institutional systems they necessitate. In particular, it helps us understand what Evers and Benedikter (2009) called “hydraulic bureaucracy,” which is quite elaborate in places like India.

state actors exercise over the state, and the specific role of militant groups in Assam (Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2012; Harris-White 2003).

The structure of the chapter is as follows: First, I present a brief historical overview of (a) how the rural population in the Brahmaputra floodplains have co-inhabited with the processes of flood and erosion, and (b) the ways in which the state has approached the hydrological processes of flood and erosion. Here, I highlight the proliferation of infrastructures such as embankments, spurs, and dams in the valley during the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Second, I demonstrate the processes of (re-)production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape by situating it within the context of the state's interventions. In this section, I present an in-depth discussion of the hazardous geographies of the villages and chaporis in Majuli I researched. The role of *embankments* receives particular attention in this section. Then I proceed to address the question of *why* the state intervenes in specific ways vis-à-vis flood and erosion. The answer to this question is presented in two sections. The *first* one explains the role of the state with the logic of accumulation of capital since the state is viewed primarily as a capitalist state. *Second*, I discuss the role of the state by engaging with the concept of 'shadow state', which is particularly instructive in understanding the historical-geographical specificities of the postcolonial state. The *conclusion* brings together the overall argument that I have made in the chapter while also drawing attention to some of the new hydraulic interventions by the current regime, which might further deepen the vulnerabilities of the local population in the Brahmaputra valley.

Controlling Flood and Erosion?

Flooding and riverbank erosion have been part of the Brahmaputra valley landscape over the long haul of history. The Brahmaputra is one of the largest rivers in the world both in terms of

the volume of water that it carries and the extent of sedimentation (Goswami 1985). It is the second largest sediment-laden river in the world after the Yellow river in China (Goswami 1985). It is a highly braided river, characterized by the processes of channel migrations and riverbank erosion all along its course (Goswami 1985; Sarma and Phukan 2004). The high seismicity of the Brahmaputra valley further adds to the volatility of the local environments. The 1897 and 1950 earthquakes, for instance, which had a magnitude of 8.1 and 8.7 on the Richter scale respectively, reconfigured the Brahmaputra river system significantly leading to new patterns of flooding and erosion in the valley (Saikia 2013). The 1950 earthquake has had particularly drastic impacts on the courses and configuration of the Brahmaputra and its several tributaries: the riverbed of the Brahmaputra was drastically raised up to a few meters in some places; new river channels were formed; some old channels were completely diverted; and silt load in the river dramatically increased (Goswami 2008).²⁰ As a result, the riverbank erosion processes in the valley accelerated.

Flooding is an annual occurrence in Assam and is integral to the natural history of the Brahmaputra valley (Saikia 2013: 10). During the monsoon season, the Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries particularly swell up and inundate the valley in multiple waves within a year. Traditionally, however, the Assamese society lived intelligently with annual flooding as well as the processes of mild riverbank erosion. Borrowing Gayatri Spivak's (1994: 48) lucid description of the Bangladeshi peasants, it can be said that the rural communities in the Brahmaputra valley "learned to manage [the annual floods], welcome them, and build a life-style

²⁰ Many old people in Majuli narrated the horrors of the 1950 earthquake to me. Some of them also shared their observations about how the local environment was affected by this massive earthquake. Manik Hazarika from Salmora, for example, described how he saw a rapid acceleration of riverbank erosion in his village since the earthquake. Another person in Dakhinpat, a seasoned fisherman, explained to me how the earthquake led to drastic changes in the courses and configurations of the Brahmaputra and several wetlands within Majuli, resulting in shortage of fish in the island ever since.

with respect for them.” Indeed, to paraphrase Linton and Budds (2014: 176), as part of the hydrological processes in the valley, annual floods have found their place within the *hydrosocial cycle*, thereby producing “rhythms” against which the Assamese society has organized its economic and cultural activities (cf. Berry 1998). Floodwaters enhanced agricultural productivity in the valley through the deposition of fertile silt (*polosh*); the rivers and wetlands were supplied with fresh fish stock thus supporting local livelihoods; and the flood season also helped support trading and transportation activities. Flood dependency for the Assamese peasantry was, thus, an “accepted wisdom” for generations (Saikia 2013: 6). It was only when massive infrastructures, ostensibly aimed at “flood control”, began re-shaping the hydraulic processes in the Brahmaputra valley that flood events became dramatic and disastrous. The society that was “living in the rhythm of water” (Spivak 1994: 55) suddenly started to witness unprecedented events, and the “hydrosocial cycle” was forever broken (Linton and Budds 2014).

In Assam, flood control measures such as embankments go back to the 15th century when the Ahom rulers²¹ built such infrastructures by deploying *corvée labor* (that is, a form of unpaid labor instituted by the Ahom state on its subjects) to expand wet-rice cultivation in the Brahmaputra floodplains (Guha 1967). However, the scale of these interventions was small then. But it was mainly in the course of the twentieth century that the hydrological regime in the Brahmaputra valley has gone through unprecedented changes due to massive techno-engineering interventions – first under the colonial regime and later accelerated by the postcolonial state (Saikia 2013). In the postcolonial era, the Assam Embankment and Drainage Act of 1953 was instrumental in allowing rapid expansion of flood control measures in the state. Within half a century of independence, the Assamese state built a large network of about five thousand

²¹ Originally descendent of the ethnic Tai people, the Ahoms ruled Assam for six centuries (1228-1826) before the British took over.

kilometers of embankments along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries (Government of India 2013). In addition, a range of other infrastructures such as dykes, boulder spurs, geo-textile bags and mattresses, RCC porcupines and screens, and small and large dams have been developed as flood and erosion control measures.

Large dams, celebrated by the country's first Prime Minister as "temples of modern India" (Roy 1999), constitute one of the important hydraulic infrastructures in the Brahmaputra valley. The efforts towards damming the Brahmaputra goes back to the early twentieth century when the colonial administration carried out a massive survey exploring the hydroelectricity potential of the river for industrial purposes, and proposed a number of dams in the valley (Saikia 2013). However, these projects could not take off then due to the global political and economic uncertainties of the 1920s-1930s (Saikia 2013). In the postcolonial era, however, dams gained salience in Assam keeping in line with the overall countrywide push towards big dams (Baviskar 1997; D'Souza 2006; McCully 2001). This obsession for dams continues to date. In recent years, for instance, there has been a special impetus for dams in the northeastern region of the country. The Indian state has declared the northeastern region as the "future powerhouse" of the country (Vagholikar and Das 2010). Thus, in a "great leap forward in hydropower" (Baruah 2012: 44), the Indian state has proposed as many as 168 large dams in the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the northeast with an estimated capacity of 63,328 MW of electricity (see Figure 10 below) (Vagholikar and Das 2010).

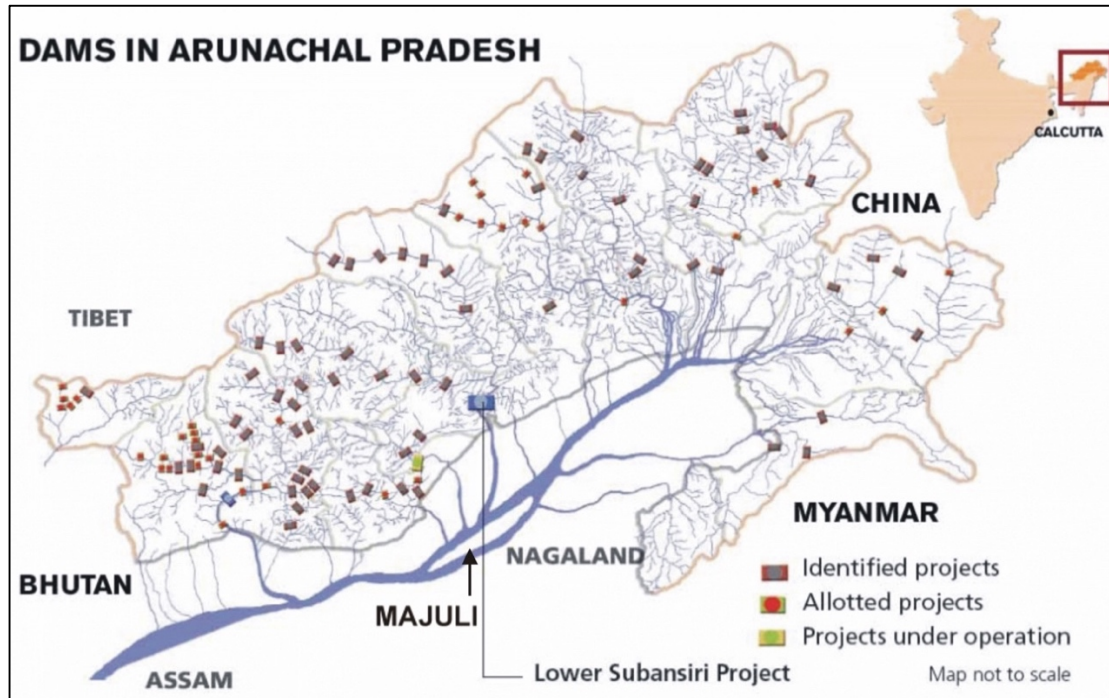


Figure 9: Map of proposed dams in Arunachal Pradesh (Source: www.internationalrivers.org)

While these dams have yet to be built, the potential downstream impacts of such infrastructures have raised serious concerns among the local communities in the valley. The downstream impacts of large dams already have been documented by scholars globally (McCully 2001; Sneddon 2015; Sneddon and Fox 2006, 2008). In the Brahmaputra valley as well, a similar hydropower project that has been in operation for a decade has produced unforeseen damages in the downstream areas (Baruah 2012). Baruah (2012: 49) talks about the “enclosure effect” of hydropower dams whereby he highlighted the role of dams in the changing property rights regime in downstream areas and increased vulnerability of agrarian communities. With regards to the proposed dams in Arunachal Pradesh, a *Technical Experts’ Committee* instituted by the Government of India recommended against these dams since the seismo-tectonic volatility of the local environment makes such infrastructures “unsafe” (Down to Earth, March 12, 2013). But the

Becoming a Hazardscape

“Pranot aghat laage! Bhogali din heruwai aami ghorotei ‘refugee’ holu.” (The heart aches. We have lost those days of plenty and became refugee at our own home).

Biseshwar Kutum, Sumoimari village, Sep 1, 2013 (Translation mine).

Despite these expansive infrastructures, indeed because of these infrastructures, the crises of flooding and erosion have gotten worse in Majuli. Processes that were defining characteristics of the island for generations have now turned disastrous, rupturing the “rhythm” in the hydrosocial cycle. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the landmass of Majuli has shrunk drastically over the past few decades due to the constant processes of erosion and resulted in the large-scale displacement of families and disruption of their traditional livelihoods. At the same time, between 1962 and 2012, 13 catastrophic floods have devastated the entire island while relatively moderate floods have affected the low-lying villages on an annual basis.²² The combined processes of flooding and erosion have rendered close to ten thousand families in the island homeless over the past five-six decades (Circle Office, Kamalabari, 2013). A closer look at the villages I researched will help us better understand the hazardous geographies in Majuli.

In Majuli, I conducted fieldwork in three large villages, namely, Salmora, Dakhinpat, and Sumoimari, all located on the southern bank of the island bordering the main channel of the Brahmaputra, and a *chapor*, Bhakat Chapori, located to the southwest of the island in the middle of the Brahmaputra River. All of them have gone through significant geographical and socio-economic transformations due to flooding and erosion. None of the three villages are in their original locations today as each of them have had to move inward several times due to the

²² This information is based on household surveys conducted in 110 households in three of my research villages in Majuli.

constant process of erosion. Salmora is perhaps one of the worst victims of erosion in Majuli. Believed to be the second largest village in Assam at some point²³, Salmora has experienced significant erosion of its landmass over the years, resulting in repeated displacement of most of its families and the outmigration of many. As many elderly villagers recounted, 50-60 years ago, the village was located at least 2-3 kilometers away from its current location, an area that is now completely taken over by the mighty Brahmaputra. Between 1962 and 2012, close to five hundred families from Salmora outmigrated to different parts of Assam, a trend that continues unabated.²⁴ Many other families, on the other hand, have had to constantly relocate in and around the village, as was the case with the Hazarika family discussed earlier. These constant relocations come at a very high cost since a displaced family has to not only buy a new plot of land and rebuild their home, but a family often finds itself having to look for a new source of livelihood since it is separated from the resource base supporting its traditional livelihood. I discuss livelihood implications of such disastrous processes in detail in the next chapter. There are also irreplaceable social costs of relocations. As a family constantly moves from one place to another, away from its neighbors and kinfolk, it loses its social support system, which is often a key to survival especially for families living in poverty (Hutton and Haque 2004; Zaman 1989).

For Sumoimari village, the most serious spate of erosion crisis took place in the late-1980s to mid-1990s when the village was dislocated repeatedly and many families moved away to different places within and outside Majuli.²⁵ Today, the village is sandwiched between an earthen embankment and the river – a highly inhospitable environment with susceptibility to

²³ Most elderly people in Salmora claimed that it was the second largest village in Assam after Sualkuchi, a village famous for Assamese *muga* silk, until a few decades ago. However, I could not find any documentary evidence for this claim.

²⁴ Data obtained from the Salmora *gaonbura*, 2013.

²⁵ This information was obtained from the Salmora *gaonbura*.

frequent flooding, cramped housing, and constant noise and dust from vehicles running on the embankment since the embankment functions as the only road leading to several *ghats* on the southern bank of the island. The story of Dakhinpat, located along the same embankment, is similar to Sumoimari's. Being a predominantly Kaivarta village²⁶, the traditional source of livelihood in Dakhinpat is fishing. However, the processes of flooding and erosion, as well as the infrastructures created to control these processes, have led to the gradual depletion of the wetlands and other water bodies in and around Dakhinpat, thus posing serious threats to local livelihoods. This issue will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3. Over the years, close to a hundred families have left the village, and those who continue to live in the village find it increasingly difficult to survive due to the lack of livelihood options.

Deepening the woes of all three villages is another common factor, that is, the constant changes in the geography of the *chaporis* located nearby. Situated just on the bank of the river and lacking adequate land resources, these villages relied on the neighboring *chaporis* for firewood, fodder, and farming purposes. Some families had large *khutis* (cattle ranch) in the *chaporis* while others grew seasonable vegetables there for commercial purposes. An informal usufruct regime governed the different land use practices in the *chaporis*, allowing the neighboring village communities to make use of these resources for their agrarian livelihoods. However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, the *chaporis* are transient geographies, formed and de-formed from time to time (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013). They are highly prone to erosion as much as they are product of the erosion dynamics of the river system. Any reliance on the *chaporis*, therefore, also comes with uncertainties. Over the years, some of the large *chaporis*

²⁶ Kaivartas are a fishing community in Assam. They belong to lower rung in the caste hierarchy within Hindu society.

located close to the above villages gradually disappeared, thereby adding to the vulnerability of these villages.²⁷

The vulnerability of Bhakat Chapori, then, needs to be situated within the context of the transient nature of the *chapori* geographies. Even though Bhakat Chapori has evolved as an agricultural hub in Majuli, primarily due to the rich alluvial soil in the *chapori* and also because of the industrious nature of some farmers there, there is a constant fear of the instability of the *chapori*, which poses grave challenges to the people living there. More importantly, the entire population in Bhakat Chapori consists of people originally displaced from different parts of mainland Majuli. A large majority of them used to live in the erstwhile Ahatguri area in the westernmost part of the island, now completely wiped out (Circle Office, Kamalabari 2013). Thus, this population has already been the victim of flooding and erosion. Now, living in a *chapori* in the middle of the river, they are further faced with an ever present sense of insecurity.

The above discussion gives us a sense of the hazardscape in Majuli produced through the twin processes of flooding and riverbank erosion, processes that are deeply rooted in the specific role of the state. The state is involved in the production of this hazardscape in two ways: *First*, through the construction of a range of infrastructures, ironically aimed at flood and erosion control, the state has actually made these hydraulic processes disastrous and rendered the population in Majuli, and the Brahmaputra valley in general, vulnerable. *Second*, even though the people in the valley have lost their land, home, and livelihoods due to unabated flooding and

²⁷ Darbar Chapori, located close to Sumoimari village, was once considered the largest *chapori* in Majuli. It supported the livelihoods of families from Sumoimari and several other villages located in the proximity. But Darbar *chapori* has eroded significantly in the past two decades with only a small portion of it currently existing. For Dakhinpat and a few other villages, Radha Chapori performed a similar role up until recently. Today, this *chapori* does not exist at all, since all of it has been eroded away. Such transformations in *chapori* geographies have severely impacted the agrarian population both within the *chaporis* and in villages located nearby in the mainland.

erosion, the state has not taken adequate measures for the rehabilitation of these displaced families, nor has it supported them with alternative livelihoods. In other words, the state's responsibility for the hazardscape in the valley rests at both end of the spectrum – in the production of the material conditions for disasters and the lack of adequate support measures in the aftermath of the disasters.

The impacts of embankments

Spread along the Brahmaputra on the southern bank and the Subansiri on the northern bank in Majuli are miles and miles of earthen embankments. Far from preventing flooding and erosion, these embankments have actually aggravated these processes in several ways. First and foremost, the embankments have divided the island into two separate zones: *inside* and *outside*. The 'inside' zone refers to those areas that are separated from the rivers by embankments – that is, they are located inside embankments. This is the largest portion of the island, home to the majority of the population, all the *sattras*, the government offices, and the island's commercial centers. In other words, this is *mainland Majuli*. The 'outside' zone, on the other hand, refers to all the areas that fall outside of embankments, thus they are completely exposed to the rivers. This zone consists of all the 34 *chaporis* as well as many villages that are adjacent to the mainland but located outside of embankments nonetheless. All three of my research villages are largely in the 'outside' zone, although a handful of families in the three villages lived 'inside'. By dividing the island into such separate zones, the embankments produce a distinct spatiality of vulnerability within the island, thereby deepening further the existing societal inequities.

Although the embankments have created a sense of safety in the 'inside' zone, it is a false sense of safety. In reality, neither of the two zones are safe from flooding and erosion. The

frequency of flooding in the ‘inside’ zone may have reduced to some extent due to the embankments, but flood events in this zone have now become much more disastrous. Because the embankments have confined the course of the river, during monsoon season the water level in the river now rises much higher than it did before causing enormous pressure on the banks and resulting in frequent embankment breaching (cf. Colten 2005). This has disastrous impacts on the island particularly in the ‘inside’ zone. Unlike the regular monsoonal flooding, embankment breaching causes catastrophic flooding since it is unpredictable and all too sudden event. In 2012, for example, the island was devastated by a series of flood events caused mainly by the breaching of embankments in various locations on the island. As a result, more than 23,000 hectares of agricultural lands were inundated with an additional 450 hectares buried under silt. Three hundred homes were completely washed away in the mainland, and many hundreds more were partially damaged (Circle Office, Kamalabari, 2013).

The agrarian livelihoods in the ‘inside’ zone have also become much more vulnerable. Earlier, floodwater used to revitalize the soil on the island by depositing *polosh* (alluvium) on an annual basis. But once the embankments came up, this process of natural revitalization of the soil came to an abrupt end in the ‘inside’ areas leading to the decline of agricultural productivity, thus forcing the farmers to apply chemical fertilizers and pesticides in their fields. Mrigen Kutum, a resident of the Sumoimari village, explained the impacts of the embankments as thus:

We had our best times here before the *mathauris* (embankments) were built. There was no scarcity of food or fish. But after the embankments were built, there is neither water nor fish flowing into our *beels* and *pukhuris* [the wetlands]. The embankments have also destroyed our agriculture since the lands do not get sufficient and timely water any more. [...] Moreover, with the breaching of embankments, floods started to wreak havoc, which was not the case earlier. Before, the water used to come in gracefully, distribute evenly across the island, and dry up sooner.²⁸

²⁸ Author interview with Mrigen Kutum, February 27, 2013. Translation mine.

Kutum's statement captured well the multifarious nature of the damages that the embankments caused to the rural population in the island. Not only have the embankments threatened the agricultural base on the island, they have also posed challenges to other spheres of livelihood. By severing the links between the mainland and the rivers, the embankments have caused significant depletion of the wetlands and water bodies in general in the island. This has directly impacted the fishing communities in Majuli and a large section of this community is increasingly becoming wage-laborer now.²⁹ Kutum also narrated at length his experience of growing up in Majuli prior to the construction of embankments and how everything used to be plentiful on the island. He lamented that the strong social networks that his family shared both within and outside the village died down slowly as more and more families were displaced by flooding and erosion and dispersed across the island and outside.

For the 'outside' zone, the embankments have produced a condition of *permanent flooding*. Since floodwater cannot easily enter the mainland anymore due to the obstructive embankments, the 'outside' zone experiences flooding more regularly and for longer durations. As the water level in the Brahmaputra rises with the onset of the monsoon season, these areas are submerged, and the water does not recede from there for months. For the families living in stilt houses in the 'outside' zone (i.e. those belonging to the Mising and the Kumar communities), there is stagnant water beneath their floor (*saang*) for weeks to months. And for those who do not live in stilt houses, their houses are frequently submerged, in multiple waves within a year. During the monsoon season such families generally move to the embankments for weeks along with their cattle. At the same time, the agricultural lands of these families remain flooded for a good part of the year, thus pushing these people into a state of food insecurity. However, this

²⁹ This issue is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

condition is now considered *natural* part of the island's landscape. As a result, the government does not recognize this type of flooding as calamity, thereby depriving this population of flood-relief and compensation.

Hemanta Das, a resident of Dakhinpat village, said the following with regards to flood hazards in the areas outside of embankments:

We are victims of the embankments in multiple ways. First, by keeping us outside the embankments, we have been subjected to permanent floods. On top of it, we are left with these deep ponds in front of our houses, which were dug for the purpose of building embankments. So, the land that used to be our homestead, allowing a small kitchen garden, is now a useless, deep pond. Just as the monsoon sets in, these ponds get filled, creating a deep drain between our houses and the embankment. We can't even get on to the road because of this drain, and it is more dangerous for the kids. Basically, we are squeezed between the river and a drain.³⁰

As highlighted by Das, the embankments have produced a whole range of precarities for the population living in the 'outside' zone. The crisis of land is perhaps their foremost concern.

Sandwiched between the river and the embankment, this section of the society owns very little land, and whatever they own is highly vulnerable to flooding and erosion. This is the case with all three of the villages I researched. Those living in the *chaporis* have relatively better access to land due to the low population density in the *chaporis*, but as discussed earlier, the *chaporis* are, by nature, temporary places. In short, the embankments have contributed in to turning the Majuli landscape into a hazardscape. Yet, in its attempt to pursue embankments even more aggressively, in 2013, the Majuli division of the Water Resources Department submitted a proposal worth 420.47 crores (about US\$ 70 million) to the Central Water Commission (CWC), New Delhi for the construction of embankments along the entire northern bank of the island, and is currently awaiting approval from the CWC. On the question of embankment, a senior official in the Water Resources Department said the following:

³⁰ Author interview with Hemanta Das, November 12, 2013. Translation mine.

“The Assamese civilization as we know it today actually owes a lot to embankments and the Flood Control Department. The 1950 earthquake changed the configuration of the Brahmaputra, causing massive inundation and destruction. It was only our embankments that have protected the land and the Assamese civilization. [...] In the end, the embankments seem to be the best way forward for flood control.”³¹

But the embankments are not the only infrastructures contributing to the crises in Majuli. Over the years, government agencies have built a range of other infrastructures in Majuli, such as check-bunds, boulder spurs, and concrete porcupines, among others, for the purpose of flood and erosion control. However, far from being effective in preventing disasters, some of these infrastructures have instead worsened the situation on the island. The embankments and the boulder spurs together have confined the courses of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri. The result, of course, is that these rivers constantly shift their courses, thereby worsening the crises of erosion and flooding. As for the boulder spurs, some people in my research villages referred to these infrastructures as “*mrityubaan*” (weapon of death), indicating the potential danger that these structures posed to the nearby villages in case any of these were to be toppled.³² An instance of such toppling occurred in Salmora during the 2012 flood, which instantly washed away a number of households located close to the spur. The local population was equally critical of the concrete porcupines, which they believed were not at all effective in preventing erosion. Salmora resident Dulal Bora, for example, made mockery of these infrastructures through a parody:

*“Porcupine, porcupine
Kona hahok patan daan...”*
(Porcupine, porcupine, giving fake rice to the blind ducks...)]³³

³¹ Interview dated March 20, 2013.

³² Author interview with Badan Dutta, February 16, 2013.

³³ Author interview with Dulal Bora, February 23, 2013. Translation mine.

Meanwhile, the displacement of families in the riverside areas continues unabated. Each year, a sizeable number of them out-migrate to different parts of Assam. But the role of the state in rehabilitating these families has been inadequate. Of the thousands of families that have out-migrated from the island in the past several decades, only a handful of them have received land from the government.³⁴ Even for those that have received land, it is too little for them to do anything other than build a small house.³⁵ And for the hundreds of families experiencing repeated displacement and relocations within their villages, there is hardly any compensation from the government.

While the above discussion focused mainly on Majuli, this is illustrative of most places in the Brahmaputra valley. Rohmoria, which is in the upstream region, faces similar challenges. However, in the case of Rohmoria, the role of the state has been slightly different mainly due to the presence of a strong social movement, an issue that I address in greater detail in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Overall, the processes of flooding and riverbank erosion have ravaged the entire Brahmaputra valley. As demonstrated above, the state has played a vital role in the production of this hazardscape – first, by unleashing massive techno-engineering interventions in the Brahmaputra waterscape, thereby turning hydraulic processes into natural calamities, and second, by not attending to the needs and challenges faced by a large section of the local population affected by the relentless processes of flooding, riverbank erosion, displacement, and

³⁴ Based on information received from the Circle Office, Majuli, 2013.

³⁵ In Dogar Chuck, for instance, each family was allotted half a bigha (about 0.2 acre) land by the government, which is too little for a rural family to do anything other than building a small house. I had observed a similar situation in Rohmoria. During a focus group discussion in Natun Khagori Majjan village in Rohmoria (September 13, 2013), which is a relocated village after erosion, the group informed me that each family in the village was allotted 1 *bigha* (about 0.4 acre) of land by the state. This is double the size of land allotted to a Dogar Chuk family, this too is very little for agricultural purposes, keeping aside the question of land quality altogether. Thus, the rehabilitated families are immediately de-peasantized, and they have to find other avenues of livelihoods. Many end up becoming wage-laborers.

loss of livelihoods. The following section throws light on why the Indian state has acted the above discussed ways.

Accumulation through Infrastructures

The attempt to control and harness river systems, and nature more generally, has been a global endeavor, rooted mainly in the idea of “progress”. Driven by the imperative of capital accumulation (Harvey 2001; Jessop 1990), the capitalist state constantly strives towards enrolling non-human nature into the circulation process (Smith 2008 [1984]), through, among other things, “production of infrastructure, [...] and scientific and intellectual practices that make bio-physical reality economically legible and accessible” (Parenti 2015: 830). Thus, Parenti (2015) puts forward the notion of “environment making state”. This theoretic of the “environment making state” helps us understand the relentless transformations of the river systems by the state through the construction of a massive hydraulic infrastructure. In his classic text, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*, geographer Craig Colten (2005) shows how the disastrous geography of New Orleans has been an outcome of centuries of human manipulation of the Mississippi river through the construction of an extensive network of levees and canals. Colten further shows how such infrastructures have enabled capital accumulation by certain classes, thereby re-producing the unevenness of the New Orleans geography. The relations between the capitalist economic system and the production of the uneven geography of disasters in New Orleans has been further pointed out by other scholars in the context of the devastations wrought by Hurricane Katrina (Bakker 2005; Braun and McCarthy 2005; Smith 2006). Similarly, Richard White’s (1995) *The Organic Machine* that looks at the role of technology and capitalist political economy in the transformations of the

Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest further situates the production of hazardous geography within capitalist political economy.

Rohan D'Souza's (2006) political economic analysis of colonial flood control and irrigation measures in the Mahanadi delta in eastern India also foregrounds the relations between river infrastructures and capitalist political economy. D'Souza (2006: 120) shows how flood control measures such as embankments, canals, and dams were deeply rooted in the ideology of colonial capitalism, which was "to [bind] the delta into the commodity-form in hitherto unusual ways." D'Souza (2006: 215-216) specifically shows that at the heart of the colonial flood control measures lies the idea of *separating the fields from the river* so as to increase the unit of production and ensure a permanent inflow of revenue, even though that meant, in the longer run, that the Orissa delta was radically transformed "from being a flood-dependent agrarian regime into a flood-vulnerable landscape."

Although capitalist economic relations were yet to be established, the pre-colonial era construction of flood control measures such as embankments were still driven primarily by the consideration of revenue generation by the Ahom state (Guha 1967). The embankments had enabled the Ahom state's efforts towards reclaiming the fertile lands in the Brahmaputra floodplains so that wet-rice cultivation could be expanded, thereby generating more revenues (ibid). The British Raj, on the other hand, brought capitalist relations center stage by shaping nature-society relations (cf. Watts 1983a). Much like D'Souza's (2006) analysis of the colonial flood control measures in the Mahanadi delta, in Assam, too, colonial capitalism came to govern the flood and erosion control measures in the Brahmaputra floodplains starting in the late-19th – early-20th century. For the British, the "reclamation" of the riverine tracts in the Brahmaputra floodplains was one of the first steps in expanding its sources of revenue in Assam (Saikia 2013).

Lamenting that vast tracts of land in the valley was lying “waste” that needed to be reclaimed and harnessed, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam, Henry Cotton (1897), said the following:

[T]he millions of acres of cultivable [*sic*] land now lying waste represent millions of rupees which might be dug out of the soil, but are now allowed to lie useless like the talent wrapped in a napkin (cited in Saikia 2013: 11).

The colonial administration thus pursued massive land reclamation mission in the Brahmaputra valley with the main objective of increasing agricultural output, meaning more revenue. The increased demand for land suitable for jute cultivation, a crop ranked second only to cotton in economic value in the late-19th century colonial economy, gave the colonial land reclamation policy a special push (Saikia 2013). The colonial administration thus radically transformed the Brahmaputra floodplains through the processes of massive floodplains reclamation. In the process, not only did these geographies become much more vulnerable to flooding but flood itself acquired a new meaning in these landscapes (Saikia 2013). Flood-induced damages became much more visible once jute fields, a critical component of the colonial economy, were destroyed. This led to increased pressure on the state to take up measures to protect the floodplains from flood hazards. In addition to jute, tea was another commodity that provided the necessary lubricant for the colonial capitalist machine to run smoothly. Within a century, the British turned Assam into one of the largest tea growing regions in the world. Controlling flood and erosion, then, became highly necessary to protect the burgeoning tea industry, a major source of revenue for the colonial administration. It was in this context of the colonial regime’s insatiable appetite for revenue that river infrastructures like embankments, canals, and dams gained salience in the Brahmaputra valley, heralding a process of drastic transformation of the valley in the longer run.

The postcolonial state carried on the colonial legacy of large-scale cultivation of jute and tea in the Brahmaputra valley by continuing the process of floodplains reclamation. It is important to note here that some places in Upper Assam³⁶ (for example, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, and Sibsagar districts) are rich sources of oil and natural gas reserves. Naturally, for the state, the protection of these places has been of greater significance than many other places that do not possess such valuable resources. Thus when we look carefully at the state's interventions vis-à-vis flood and erosion control we can identify a pattern of geographical bias. It is no wonder, then, that resource-poor places like Majuli, Dhemaji and the *chaporis* in general have continued to be ravaged by flooding and erosion.³⁷

This unevenness in the state's attention to places is seen within Majuli as well. First, the *chaporis* are kept out of any interventions aimed at flood and erosion control. This, I would argue, is rooted in the fact that the *chapori* geographies are temporary and therefore any investment in their protection is considered uneconomical by the state.³⁸ Even though some of the *chaporis* are known for their agricultural prowess (for example, Bhakat chapori), they still do not generate much revenue for the state due to the ambiguity of property rights regime in the *chaporis* and the logistical challenges of revenue collection.³⁹ Thus, unlike the mainland, the *chaporis* are free from flood and erosion control infrastructures such as embankments and spurs.

³⁶ Upper Assam refers to the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, originally comprising of the undivided Sibsagar and the Lakhimpur districts. Compared to Lower Assam, this region is richer in natural resources, such as tea and oil and natural gas. In pre-colonial time, it was the center of the Ahom kingdom.

³⁷ This point is based on my personal observations as well as reflections of a few learned people in Majuli during the course of our several conversations. Fieldwork, 2013.

³⁸ This was also an opinion shared by some of the officials in the Water Resources Department during our informal conversations.

³⁹ The Office *Kanungo* at the local Circle Office explained to me at length the logistical challenges of collecting land revenue at the *chaporis*. One of the alternative means that the government adopts to collect land revenue at *chaporis* is through 'revenue camps', which the *Kanungo* found an arbitrary measure, allowing only a partial collection of revenue.

While the lack of infrastructures like embankments would ideally be a blessing in disguise for the *chaporis*, this is no longer the case. Because of the presence of such infrastructures in mainland Majuli as well as in places on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra, the courses and characteristics of the Brahmaputra have already transformed, which has contributed to the vulnerability of the *chapori* landscapes.

Even within the mainland, the state appears to be biased towards protecting places that are home to the *sattras* and important commercial centers.⁴⁰ The *sattras* play a significant role in the socio-religious life in Assam, which perhaps partly explains the state's priority in protecting these institutions. But more importantly, the *sattras* are also one of the largest landed estates in Assam. From the medieval period until now, these institutions have received huge land grants from the state (Karna 2004) – an issue I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here, the protection of these landed estates in Majuli has gained far more attention from the Assamese state than the protection of many other places within the island that are facing far more severe crisis of flooding and erosion. In this regard, Purna Patir, a local tribal leader, scathingly remarked that this bias on the state's part reflects its “step-motherly attitude” towards the marginalized population, which mostly belongs to lower caste and tribal communities and resides in the *peripheries* of the island.⁴¹ This concern was also raised by a number of other tribal and lower-caste leaders in Majuli, thus emphasizing the point that the priority of the state was to protect the sources of revenue and not the people.

⁴⁰ This was a common complaint raised by several tribal activists in the island, especially the TMPK leaderships (Interview with TMPK activists in Nayabazar, Majuli, July 23, 2011).

⁴¹ Ibid.

The ‘Shadow State’

While accumulation of capital is fundamental to the Indian state’s construction of massive hydraulic infrastructures in Assam, we need to also pay attention to the specific historical-geographical contexts of the postcolony for a more in-depth understanding of the postcolonial state (Akhter 2015). In the South Asian context, the postcolonial state is an “over-developed” state (Alavi 1972), that is, the state apparatus here is marked by a strong “military-bureaucratic oligarchy” (Alavi 1972: 59), while the traditional/native social classes are disempowered. At the same time, as Gupta (2012) points out, far from being a coherent entity, the postcolonial state is a multilayered, translocal entity. Thus, despite its strong bureaucratic apparatus, the postcolonial state is simultaneously marked by arbitrary functioning of the bureaucracy, and the latter is further influenced by various non-state forces working at different scales. Hence, Gupta (2012) calls for attention to a disaggregated analysis of the postcolonial state that takes into account its everydayness and arbitrariness (Gupta 2012).

Barbara Harris-White’s (2003: 77) discussion of the “shadow state” vs. the “official state” in India is instructive here. By putting forward the concept of the “shadow state,” Harris-White argues that the official Indian state has been “hollowed out” and replaced by a “shadow state” that consisted of “vast assemblage of brokers, advisers, political workers, crooks and contractors” (cited in Corbridge et al. 2005: 4). Thus, by considering Harris-White’s and Gupta’s analyses together, we can argue that the postcolonial Indian state requires a nuanced analysis, one that pays careful attention to the everydayness of the state, the role of various non-state actors, and phenomena like cronyism and corruption. Corruption, in fact, is believed to be widespread among the Water Resources Department and the Brahmaputra Board in Majuli. For instance, in 2010, a General Manager of the Brahmaputra Board was arrested by the Central

Bureau of Investigation of the Government of India on charges of bribery and was sent to two years of rigorous imprisonment (Zee News 2010). During my fieldwork, I also came across several new items in local dailies (e.g. *The Assam Tribune*, *The Sentinel*, *Pratidin*, and *Dainik Janambhumi*) about the Brahmaputra Board's corrupt practices. Whether or not these allegations were well founded, they had certainly helped erode people's trust in these agencies. The common public in Majuli has lost confidence in the government agencies' ability to protect the island and its population from flooding and erosion. In other words, the government agencies are faced with a "legitimation crisis" (Habermas 1975) in Majuli. Thus, people not only made mockery of the state, they also resorted to various forms of resistance against the state. Below, I present a case from my field to further illustrate the ways in which cronyism has come to be a dominant factor in Majuli in shaping the functioning of the state.

Kai was a contractor from Majuli, but he was not like any other contractor. Because of his proximity to a big political leader within the ruling regime, Kai was highly influential in Majuli. His mansion-like home in Majuli often functioned like the headquarters of the state Water Resources Department (WRD). Thus, when I visited Kai's home for lunch one winter afternoon during my fieldwork, the house was filled with several local contractors, engineers belonging to both WRD and the Public Works Department (PWD), and some local political elites with allegiance to the ruling party. I also found out that some bureaucrats and contractors had slept over at Kai's the previous night, which was apparently not an unusual practice, but quite telling nonetheless of the cozy relationship that the contractors, engineers, and politicians in the island shared. Kai's mother prepared a sumptuous meal with sticky rice, fish and pork dishes, and home-brewed rice beer (*apong*). Soon after lunch, Kai, the WRD engineers and a few of the contractors sat down with their files and maps to prepare what turned out to be WRD's annual work-plan for Majuli for the coming year. Within the next couple of hours, the work-plan was developed, with the contractors present there assured, of course, of the lion's share of the work. There were procedures that these contractors would be required to fulfill in due course, but there were also ample ways through which these contractors could circumvent those requirements. "Everything becomes a cakewalk as long as we have the blessings of the political leader and hence the bureaucrats", a local contractor told me on a different occasion.

A few months later, the southeastern corner of the island witnessed massive public agitation against WRD. This area was severely destroyed by the 2012 flood, since an embankment was breached in several locations near this area, and the current agitation was concerning WRD's work in repairing this embankment. Closely following the

events, I found out that this was one of the projects finalized that day at Kai's home. Given the large scale of the work, it was allotted jointly to a group of contractors, but their work was progressing so slow that the local communities were worried about another catastrophe in the upcoming monsoon. So, they took to the streets. Coming under such public pressure, the WRD high command instructed the contractors to complete the work as quickly as possible. However, such speedy completion would require constant on-the-ground monitoring, not possible in this case as most of the contractors involved were residing in Guwahati. Besides, the embankment repairing work in Majuli was perhaps least of their priority, as some of these contractors were executing far bigger projects elsewhere. So, a few of them "sub-contracted" the work to other contractors, and as I found out, the latter had sub-contracted it further. Though eventually completed, given the project's last minute execution involving inexperienced contractors, the risk of further breaching of the embankment, and hence another disaster, was renewed.⁴²

The above incident gives us a sense of the "shadow state" at work in the governance of the flood- and erosion-affected geography in Majuli. It shows how non-state actors such as the contractors and their cronies were able to forge alliances with state functionaries, in this case engineers and politicians. It is through such relations between the state and the non-state actors that the geography of hazards in Majuli is (re)produced. This incident highlights how specific class relations are maintained in the governance of hazards in Majuli, while simultaneously showing the arbitrariness of the governance processes as evidenced by the *process* of work-plan preparation and work allocation. Furthermore, even though the above river infrastructure project helped political leaders, powerful contractors, and engineers in Majuli maintain their shared class interests, the execution of the project was accomplished only through a process of arbitrary sub-contracting of the work.

In Majuli, the specific role of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an armed rebel group, in influencing the state as well as other non-state actors, has given the question of the non-state actors new meaning. Fighting for Assam's sovereignty from Indian nation-state, this rebel outfit used to take up various social reform activities in its early phase, and was,

⁴² This case is based on my field notes from fieldwork in Majuli, 2013.

therefore, feared by corrupt government officials, politicians, and contractors. This is not a place to discuss the political history of ULFA,⁴³ but suffice it to say that over the years, there has been a transformation of ULFA as an organization and its influence on the society due to a host of factors, including internal conflicts in the movement, shifting ties between the Indian government and the neighboring countries that had previously provided base for this rebel group, and, above all, brutal state repression.⁴⁴ In the case of Majuli, the key turning point for ULFA and its influence was the murder of social activist Sanjoy Ghose in the island in 1997 (see Chapter 5 for more discussion on this). Ghose and his team of volunteers and development professionals began working in Majuli in 1996 for the protection and development of the island. But no sooner had he made any significant intervention in Majuli than the local power centers felt threatened by his radical politics.⁴⁵ Hence, they spread the rumor that Ghose was working as a covert agent of the central government trying to destabilize ULFA. In a tragic turn of events, Ghose was abducted by ULFA in July 1997 and it was speculated that he was killed soon after. His body has never been found.

The implication of the Sanjoy Ghose tragedy for Majuli has been long lasting. First, it nipped in the bud any potential for radical activism on the island as activists and organizations were now too scared to offend the local power centers. This gave a free hand to corrupt

⁴³ For a detail historical account of ULFA, see Mahanta (2013). Journalist Rajeev Bhattacharya's (2014) *Rendezvous with Rebels* is a more recent account of the movement, based on the author's personal interaction with the rebels.

⁴⁴ For example, the Operation *Bajrang* and the Operation Rhino were two massive military operations that the Indian state launched in the 1990s to demolish ULFA. Not only did these operations break the backbone of the movement, but they were also infamous for the atrocities they unleashed in the society at large. Besides these two operations, the state has been also using a variety of other tactics (e.g. violent suppression, and divide and rule techniques) to suppress the movement, and it has been more or less successful.

⁴⁵ See the compilation of Sanjoy Ghose's writings (Ghose 1998) to get a sense of some of his work in Majuli and his politics.

politicians, bureaucrats, and contractors, and the cronies. Thus, flood and erosion control projects became steady sources of income for all these different actors even as the island continued to be ravaged by these disasters year after year. Second, for an organization that was already on the decline, both ideologically and organizationally in Majuli, the Sanjoy Ghose incident led to the erosion of ULFA's last remaining popular base. So, in a desperate attempt to retain its presence on the island, the local ULFA unit began aligning with forces that it had previously opposed, receiving "percentages" from them in return while maintaining its influence in the island.⁴⁶ In sum, ULFA has caused multiple damages to the island, including in the sphere of environmental governance.

Bureaucratic arbitrariness

Bureaucracy plays a peculiar role in the postcolonial context. It is a particularly powerful entity in the postcolonial states, as Alavi (1972) observed long ago. At the same time, however, the postcolonial state also carries the legacies of "dependencies" (Glassman and Samatar 1997), which means that it suffers from the lack of adequate resources and capacities to function. Yet, the state has to find ways to deliver on its responsibilities. Then, as discussed above, there are nexuses between bureaucrats and various non-state actors at different levels, each influencing the other one. All of this creates a situation where the bureaucracy is both all-powerful and highly vulnerable at the same time. One of the implications of this is the arbitrary everyday functioning of the bureaucracy in these societies. In Majuli, for instance, this arbitrariness of the bureaucracy

⁴⁶ During my fieldwork in Majuli, I heard about a strong network through which ULFA managed to collect money ("percentages") from government officials and contractors. I was also informed by some local contractors how a local ULFA leader's brother received favors from the engineers and contractors in the Water Resources Department, and in return, their safety was ensured.

was evident at various levels, from the planning stage of a project to its execution. Below, I present my fieldnotes to elucidate this phenomenon of bureaucratic arbitrariness.

Field Notes: August 27, 2013

Haren Kakoti, a middle-ranking officer at the Circle Office in Majuli, is a sincere, hardworking man. Unlike some of his colleagues, he does not take repeated *saah-tamul* (tea & betel-nut) break at work and is usually the last one to leave office. He has been very helpful to me in my fieldwork in Majuli. Whenever I had requested him for information, he always had a document ready for me, *handwritten*.

This afternoon in Majuli was particularly sweltering, and the power outage during the daytime made it miserable to stay inside Kakoti's office that had barely any ventilation. But it did not seem to matter to him. So he continued to look for records and prepare a document for me containing land related information about a few *chaporis*. I thanked him repeatedly for his support to which he replied: "This is part of my job. In fact, by asking for this information, you are helping us, too, since we found a reason to update some of these records." But he quickly added: "you should know, however, that not all of this information is accurate. And I am telling you this because you are one of our own from Majuli and you should know the truth." This last part of the statement perplexed me, and I asked him what he meant by that. So he replied: "Actually, we hardly have any well-maintained record at our level about land in the *chaporis*. The old records were in complete shambles, and many documents were damaged by floods. Besides, we do not have any authentic map of the island in our office or in the Sub-Divisional office. Don't even ask me about maps. How many visits can one make to the Land Revenue Office in Guwahati to procure maps? It is expensive, time-consuming, and you may still not get what you want. So, sometimes we just estimate some figure and enter those into our records."

I asked him: "So is this information completely based on 'guesswork' then?" Kakoti clarified: "We do have some idea about the area, and that helps us make these estimations. For example, based on our general understanding about landholding in the island, we can guess that when a family is displaced due to erosion, it has possibly lost a *bigha* of land. Hence, we report that the family qualifies for compensation worth 1 *bigha* of land, *with a little plus or minus*, of course." I needed some additional information about a few *chaporis*. Again, Kakoti updated his record instantly, in the same manner as above, and provided me the information. Again, he had provided explanations like the following: "There is severe erosion going on in that *chaporis*; so I can safely say that one-third of the villages there are being eroded"; "As per my record, there are 200 families in this *chaporis*; hence, we can consider the population there as 1200-1500". The power was not back yet, and Kakoti's room was getting unbearable. I thanked Kakoti and retired for the day.

This incident was eye-opening for me. I certainly did not have any doubt about Kakoti's sincerity and hard work, which I had witnessed during the course of my fieldwork. I also realized that in the case of the above incident, Kakoti was merely trying to maintain a database since it was he

who had to periodically provide such information to his superiors within the revenue administration. And in the absence of other more authentic sources of information about the *chaporis*, Kakoti tried to make best use of his local knowledge to prepare a database. However, this incident also left me quite uncomfortable since I knew that data of such kind, based on part fact and part guesswork, would eventually feed into the planning processes, thereby playing a decisive role in people's lives and livelihoods. For Haren Kakoti or other officials within the state apparatus such decisions may not matter much. It is probably part of their everyday job, and it might very well give them a sense of accomplishment, because by producing such databases, they are able to help certain projects move forward and provide benefits to the rural population. But such arbitrary decisions might make a difference of life and death for many. For example, in the above instance, Kakoti quickly decided, without any assessment on the ground, that one-third of the villages in a particular *chapori* were eroded that year. This raises important concerns about inclusion and exclusion. In such cases, if and when Kakoti has to prepare any list of erosion-affected families for potential benefits from the state, how will he identify the deserving families? How will the existing power structure in society shape such processes? In short, arbitrary government action even at the lowest level may have important implications for people's lives. And such arbitrariness of bureaucratic action appears to be routine practice in a place like Majuli as I witnessed in numerous occasions during my fieldwork, which has tremendous influence on the functioning of the postcolonial state.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a political ecological account of the hazardous geographies in the Brahmaputra valley produced through the twin processes of flooding and riverbank erosion. I

have situated the hazardscape in the valley within its larger biophysical context, while paying special attention to the question of the state, that is, how and why the Indian state contributed to the (re-)production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. In examining the state carefully, I have found that in the realm of environmental governance, and river governance in particular, the role of the Indian state largely reflects, and is founded upon, the global metanarrative of “progress,” which is largely about the human conquest of nature. In this process of conquering nature, infrastructures have played a particularly important role. In the Indian context, the legacy of expansion of infrastructures to bring the river systems under control goes back to the colonial era, a project that the postcolonial state has fervently continued as this chapter has demonstrated. One of the key motivating factors behind such “high modernist” (Scott 1998) infrastructural projects is the accumulation of capital. As such, through the construction of embankments, canals, spurs, dams, and other such measures, the capitalist Indian state has enabled accumulation of capital by the ruling elites. However, such infrastructures, ostensibly aimed at controlling flooding and erosion, have turned these hydrological processes disastrous, thereby deepening the vulnerability of a large section of the population in the Brahmaputra valley.

Drawing on postcolonial scholarship on the state, I have also argued for a historically-geographically specific examination of the state, one that can better account for the functioning of the postcolonial Indian state. To do so, I engaged with the concept of the “shadow state” to highlight how a range of different actors, both state and non-state actors, work together at different scales, often through unofficial arrangements, thereby shaping the functioning of the state. In other words, I have argued that while the accumulation of capital may be a vital factor in determining the role of the state vis-à-vis flood and erosion, the postcolonial state requires a far

more nuanced analysis, one that pays attention to factors such as cronyism, corruption, everyday state, and arbitrary bureaucratic actions.

There is abundant research globally on the disastrous socio-ecological implications of large-scale hydraulic infrastructures such as levees (or embankments) and dams. Despite such overwhelming evidence of catastrophic effects of large river infrastructures, there seems to be no end to the Indian state's obsession with large hydraulic infrastructures. On the contrary, such infrastructures have gained salience in recent years in the policy parlance of the Indian state. Thus, as I have mentioned above, there is an unprecedented push for hydropower dams in the Brahmaputra valley. In Majuli, too, the Water Resources Department has proposed further expansion of embankments all along the northern bank of the island, although the proposal currently awaits approval from the competent authorities in the state.

With the BJP-ruled government coming to power at the center in 2014, the controversial river-linking project has once again resurfaced in the policy arena. Known for its obsession with grand projects,⁴⁷ the current government is steadily moving forward with this project. Purportedly aimed at improving water availability in regions that currently suffer from water scarcity, this project has come under severe criticism from scholars and environmental activists both within and outside India. Many have pointed out that such a project is environmentally unsustainable, and it will only intensify ecological catastrophes in India and its downstream region in the longer run (Bandyopadhyay and Perveen 2003; Islam 2006; Thakkar 2003; Koshy and Bansal 2016). For Bangladesh, this project poses combined risks of agrarian crisis, water

⁴⁷ The BJP government seems to be particularly fond of grand projects, irrespective of their economic and ecological sustainability. One example that highlights this tendency is the party's resolve, as expressed in its election manifesto in the Assam assembly election, 2016, to build three large bridges over the Brahmaputra, connecting Majuli with the rest of Assam, even in the absence of necessary scientific research on the viability of such projects (Baruah 2016). There are more examples of such nature that the current regime finds itself preoccupied with.

shortage, and massive human displacement (Ahmed 2012; Islam 2006; Sultana 2004). Sultana (2004) further highlighted the gender implications of such a project for downstream Bangladesh. She (2004: 302) argued that this project would result in India's substantial withdrawal of water to Bangladesh (it is important to note here that Bangladesh shares as many as 54 rivers with India), worsening the "gender, water and poverty linkages," ultimately leading to "greater feminization of poverty" in Bangladesh. For the Brahmaputra valley, too, this project can prove to be catastrophic in the longer run. Currently a water abundant region, it is feared that the Brahmaputra valley may potentially face water shortage once the river-linking project is executed. Moreover, being a highly seismic-prone area, any large infrastructural project in the valley always comes with great risks, an issue that has thus far not gained adequate attention from the policy makers.



Figure 11: A house submerged in floodwater. Salmora, Majuli. August, 2013.



Figure 12: A tubewell under floodwater. Majuli, August 2013.



Figure 13: Riverbank erosion. Lahorighat, October 2013.



Figure 14: Riverbank erosion. Salmora, Majuli, December 2012.



Figure 15: Sandbags as flood protection measure. June 2013.



Figure 16: Earthen embankments at Rohmorja. September 2013.



Figure 17: Porcupines. Dakhinpat, Majuli. March 2013.



Figure 18: Boulder spur. Salmora, Majuli, October 2013.

Chapter 3

Livelihoods Crisis

Introduction

Once an avid fisherman, Paban Das from Dakhinpat Kaivarta village switched to goat trading more than two decades ago, as the fishery sector in Majuli started to break down. Goat trading, however, is a backbreaking job. It involves going on a bicycle to far-flung villages within and outside the island three days a week to procure goats, and then taking these goats to Jorhat town, across the Brahmaputra, on other three days of the week to sell. Sometimes a person may carry up to six adult goats on his bicycle all day long, which is exhausting. The summer months are particularly challenging for an activity of such strenuous, outdoor nature. No wonder that Paban Das was still recovering from diarrhea and fever when I visited him one late summer afternoon. Das explained that his illness was due to the strenuous nature of his job: “Even in this heat, I have to cycle for more than ten hours a day, with my cycle loaded with goats. Besides, every day when I am on my job, I have no choice but to eat and drink wherever they are available and cheap. Sometimes, when we are too thirsty and there are no villages around, we even drink water straight from a pond. Illness, diarrhea, exhaustion are common to us.”⁴⁸

Traditionally a fishing community, the Kaivarta families in Dakhinpat no longer find fishing to be economically viable, for reasons I will elaborate later. Hence, in the late-1980s, Paban Das and a few others started goat trading as an alternative source of livelihood, which soon gained popularity in the village. Das explained to me that in the early years of goat trading,

⁴⁸ Author interview with Paban Das, August 2, 2013.

they used to procure goats from nearby villages, but the situation has changed drastically now with almost every other family in the village involved in goat trading. Now, the traders have to travel as far as fifty-sixty kilometers a day to procure goats. In his early 60s now, Paban Das is perhaps too old for such a backbreaking job. Goat trading is not enormously profitable; it just helps a family get by. “*Amar bakosh udong*” (our boxes are empty) – thus described Das the economic condition of his family. But as the sole breadwinner of the family, and without alternative sources of livelihood, Das has no choice. And the same is the story with hundreds of other families in the village. Hence, over the years, more and more families in the village have joined this profession, practically turning Dakhinpat into a “*Sagoli Beparir Gaon*” (the village of the goat traders).

As I was chatting with Paban Das and his wife, a few of their neighbors came by and joined us in the conversation. One of them was Gabbar Singh Das, a young man in his late 20s who was making a living out of selling scrap metals. Like the goat traders, Gabbar also goes around the island on his bicycle procuring scrap metals from households and workshops, which he then sells to a middleman who takes it to the market in Jorhat. Since Majuli hardly has any industry or factory, scrap metals are not abundant in the island. Hence, Gabbar Singh has to diversify his sources of income. “I do anything that comes my way to make a living”, said Gabbar Singh. “There have been days,” he continued, “when I went out to procure scrap metal but came back home with goats, and sometimes both. Then there are days when I go fishing in the morning so that I can take a few kilos of fish to sell while on my way to procure scrap metals.”

The above instances from Dakhinpat village highlight the ongoing processes of rural livelihoods crisis in Majuli. Traditionally, agriculture and fishing were two key constituents of

the rural economy in Majuli. In addition, livestock, pottery, and handicraft also played an important role in rural livelihoods in the island. Some of these livelihood practices were specific to certain communities. For example, although subsistence fishing was practiced by all communities, commercial fishing was restricted to people belonging to the lower rungs in caste hierarchy. Pottery was a craft exclusive to the Kumar community. Livestock rearing was common across all communities, but the Misings dominated this sector. Many Mising families inhabited the *chaporis*, which were rich in fodder. Agriculture, on the other hand, was a popular form of livelihood across communities, although landholding depended on various socio-historical factors, as I will discuss later. This chapter highlights how rural livelihood in the island is in deep crisis today. Although my focus in this chapter is predominantly Majuli, the Majuli case illustrates the overall livelihood crisis facing the Brahmaputra valley floodplains, given the broad similarities in the processes of ecological and economic transformation that the valley as a whole is undergoing.

I situate my theoretical analyses broadly within the framework of *political ecology of livelihood*, which is about “[understanding] local livelihood decisions and their sustainability through locally-specific materializations of translocal economic, political, and environmental processes and structures” (Carr 2015: 336). Political ecological approach to livelihoods is an attempt to rescue livelihood studies from the dominant paradigm of “narrow economism” and instead pays attention to broader questions of political economy across scales, power relations, entitlement, the role of social networks, and historical-geographical trajectories of development processes (Bebbington 1999; Carr 2013, 2015; Haan and Zoomers 2005; King 2011; Scoones 2009; Sen 1997).

In what follows, I will discuss the crises facing rural livelihoods in Majuli under four broad themes: *the question of land, depleting water resources, technologies and market, and labor crisis*. These are closely interlinked themes. As an island surrounded by rivers, there is already an absolute limit to the land and water resources in Majuli. The processes of flooding and erosion have posed further challenge to these resources both in terms of deterioration of their quality and an overall shrinking. Some of the new agrarian technologies adopted by the island's peasantry in recent years, as a way of dealing with the agrarian crisis, have actually worsened the resource condition further, thereby affecting not only agriculture but also fishing and other related livelihood practices. The shortage of labor, resulting out of increased out-migration of the island's youths and a discontinuation of migrant laborers, has posed further challenge to the traditional forms of livelihood in Majuli. Additionally, the access to market by the rural producers in Majuli is limited primarily due to the isolated nature of Majuli's geography, especially that of the *chaporis*, and the lack of adequate transportation services. This has further contributed to the vulnerability of the rural population in Majuli.

Then I proceed to discuss the question of livelihoods diversification by the rural communities in Majuli. Focusing on some of the new forms of livelihoods in the island, such as goat trading, timber sawing, wage labor, and migration, I demonstrate (a) the ingenuity of the disaster-affected population in Majuli, and (b) the depth of the livelihoods crisis in the island, which has forced people to move away from their traditional livelihoods and venture into the unknown and highly precarious terrains. The concluding section summarizes the larger arguments made in the chapter and calls attention for better role of the state and relevant non-state actors.

The question of land

Land continues to play a pivotal role in rural livelihoods. Not only is land an “economic resource”, thereby supporting livelihood needs of families, but it is also a “political resource” that defines power relations among individuals, families and communities under established systems of governance (IFAD 2008: 5). Land ownership thus grants a person or a family certain social status and political power, which they can then use for economic gains (Moreda 2012). In this sense, land acts as “collateral”, thereby influencing people’s access to financial services and their capacity to take advantage of the markets (IFAD 2008). In the context of rural livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa, Jayne et al. (2006) highlighted that the limited and unequal access to land has been among the principal challenges facing smallholders. While the question of “access” is important (Ribot and Peluso 2003), as far as land is concerned, even more critical is the question of land tenure. Tenure security is one of the main factors influencing rural livelihoods, as it provides some sort of stability of food security and income in an otherwise seasonal and relatively unremunerative rural labor markets (IFAD 2008).

Tania Li talks about the “material emplacement” (2014: 600) of land, that is, the fact that land stays in place and cannot be removed. It is this characteristic, she notes, that shapes people’s association with and rights over land in distinct ways. The question of land has also preoccupied political ecologists (Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) and agrarian studies scholarship for a long time. This vast and diverse body of scholarship has foregrounded the questions of land and its governance by situating these within the broader political economic contexts. Recent scholarship within agrarian studies has further highlighted the continued relevance of the peasantry and agrarian livelihoods, even though the forms and configurations of agrarian relations may be changing (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 2010b; McMichael 2008; van der

Ploeg 2010; see also the burgeoning scholarship on *land grab*). Overall, land, and by extension agriculture, remains a critical component of rural livelihood systems. However, Ellis and Biggs (2001: 445) called attention for a “new paradigm of rural development”, one that combines agriculture with a host of other actual and potential rural and non-rural activities. Similar concerns have been raised by other scholars as well (Bebbington 1999; Rigg 2006).

Nonetheless, as far as the question of rural livelihood is concerned, land continues to be a critical component. In the context of Majuli, land held utmost significance, as the rural transformation in the island was deeply rooted in processes of the loss of land (riverbank erosion), which also placed land on the top of the demands by the rural families. Hence, whether it was about rural livelihoods or politics more broadly in the island, the question of land was at the center of it all.

Landholdings in Majuli are quite small, however. With an average landholding ranging in 1 *bigha* (0.4 acre) to 10 *bigha* (4 acres) per family (Nath 2009), the peasantry in the island was much more land-starved compared to its national counterpart. In addition to the shortage of landholding in absolute terms, the distribution of land is also highly skewed in the island, and that makes the situation worse. As discussed in the previous chapters, Majuli is the nerve-center of Vaishnavite *sattras*. Since the medieval period, these institutions have enjoyed constant royal patronage, especially in the form of land grants. In the pre-British era, the Ahom kings granted huge *lakhiraj* estates – that is, revenue-free estates – to religious institutions, which was comprised of three types: *Devottar* land – lands donated to temples and such institutions; *Dharmottar* lands – land dedicated to religious purposes; and *Brahmottar* lands – land granted to priests and other such learned people (Karna 2004: 20). The same system was continued by the British, and later by the postcolonial state. The estates granted to the *sattras* belonged to the *Devottar* category, and they are huge. Some of the largest recipients of such revenue-free estates

have been Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur, Kamalabari, and Bengenaati *sattras* (Nath 2009). As historian Manorama Sharma (1990) pointed out, at the time of the British occupation, Garamur *sattra* and Auniati *sattra* owned about eleven thousand acres and twenty-one thousand acres of land respectively (cited in Karna 2004: 66), which went up subsequently. By the end of the twentieth century, Auniati *sattra* alone possessed more than forty thousand acres of such revenue-free land in and outside Majuli (Nath 2009: 118). While the above-mentioned are some of the largest *sattras* in the island, the island is home to dozens of smaller *sattras* as well, and most of them have been beneficiaries of land grants.

On the other hand, a vast majority of the tribal and lower caste communities in the island owned meagre amount of land, while some did not own any land at all. There was thus a vast difference in landholding between the *sattras* and the common citizens in Majuli. Not only did the major *sattras* own large swathes of prime agricultural lands within the island but they also owned such estates outside Majuli. While the *sattras* secured such large estates as revenue-free estates, they had, on the other hand, developed an elaborate management structure to reap benefits from these lands. Some of these lands were directly managed by the *bhakats* (the devotees who reside within a *sattra* complex), for the purposes of farming and/or livestock rearing, the income from which went to the treasury of the respective *sattra*. A large portion of the *Devottar* land was given to local villagers for farming purposes. The villagers used these lands as tenants and in return they paid revenue to the *sattras*, however little (Karna 2004: 30). What united the concerns of both the smallholders and the *sattras*, however, was the lack of the “assurance” factor (Moreda’s 2012: 22) in land tenure security. “Assurance” in this case referred to the certainty of exerting rights over land (Moreda 2012: 22), which was missing in Majuli due to the processes of flooding and erosion. Thus, despite unequal landholding, there was, in some

ways, a shared vulnerability in the island as far as the question of tenural security of land was concerned.

Caste relations further shaped the land ownership regime in the island. Traditionally, the tribal communities in the island, the Misings in particular, had a more nomadic lifestyle – they kept moving from one place to another along the riverbanks, clearing jungles and practicing shifting cultivation (Nath 2009: 117-118). As a result, these communities did not own enough agricultural land nor did they master the sophistications of agricultural practices. Thus, compared to the high caste communities in the island, the tribal population remained much more marginalized in terms of their agrarian economy. The Kaivartas and other lower caste communities also owned very little land compared to the high caste section of the society. Therefore, sharecropping was widely prevalent in the island, with the tribal and the lower caste people often being the tenant farmers.⁴⁹

In Majuli, the land question was also influenced by location, since it was an important determinant of the quality of soil. With a predominance of *da* or low-lying land, which was fertile in nature, the mainland was much more suitable for agriculture, especially for paddy, than the areas located outside of embankments. The *chaporis* lands were particularly unsuitable for agriculture, since they were mostly sandy, and it took a long period (up to a decade or more) for the *chaporis* lands to become suitable for agricultural purposes.⁵⁰ Besides, the *chaporis* were temporary in nature, hence the state as well as individual farmers generally refrained from major

⁴⁹ For a detail understanding of the elaborate sharecropping mechanisms in Assam, see Karna (2004).

⁵⁰ However, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, Bhakat Chapori in Majuli is well-known for agriculture. One of the reasons for this is that this *chaporis* has been around for a long time now; hence, its soil has received enough alluvium through annual flooding and has become suitable for agriculture. Another reason behind Bhakat Chapori's agricultural prowess is that unlike most other *chaporis*, the population in this *chaporis* largely belonged to Caste-Hindu communities and not tribal communities. Hence, this population already possessed agricultural skills, which excelled further in Bhakat chapori due to its fertile soil and other natural conditions.

investment in land development activity in the *chaporis*. As mentioned earlier, the population that lived in the *chaporis* were already highly marginalized, since most of them were originally displaced from elsewhere, a majority of them belonged to socially marginalized communities, and these areas were much more susceptible to flooding and erosion than the mainland. The lack of suitable land for agriculture further marginalized these people, thus reinforcing the existing socio-economic inequalities in the island.

Above all, the constant process of riverbank erosion has led to an overall shrinking of the island, with massive loss of agricultural land. Thus, the question of land remained pivotal to the vulnerability of the agrarian communities in Majuli, which was further imbricated in, and reinforced by, the existing social inequalities.

The “materiality” of soil and livelihood implications

The question of nature’s “materiality” has found considerable attention within political ecology scholarship. Scholars have noted the importance of looking into nature’s material processes in examining a variety of issues, including environmental conflicts and popular resistance (Bridge 2000; Perreault 2006), the material economy (Bridge 2009), commodification of nature (Bakker 2003; Prudham 2009), and resource governance more broadly (Bridge and Perreault 2008; Huber 2009; Prudham 2004). The question of the materiality of soil plays an important role in rural livelihoods in Majuli. As highlighted above, depending upon location, the soil properties in Majuli changed vastly, which influenced soil productivity and, hence, the agrarian economy. The materiality of soil has particular relevance to pottery, the mainstay of livelihoods for a large Kumar community in the island. Let me first present a brief description of the pottery craft.

Pottery is an age-old craft in Assam, dating back to the 5th-6th century AD (Government of Assam 1999: 438). Kumars are one of the two traditional potter communities in Assam⁵¹ (Barua 1951), with a population of about 15 lakhs spreading across all the districts of the state (Kumarjyoti 2008). In Majuli, the Kumar population was concentrated in the southeastern corner of the island, adjacent to the main channel of the Brahmaputra. Of the 5000 Kumar population in the island (i.e. over 600 families), the largest section resided in Salmora (Government of Assam 2013b), and pottery was their primary source of livelihood. The Kumars in Majuli deployed a unique pottery technique: instead of using a potter's wheel, the Majuli Kumars used a more traditional practice of beating the clay by hand to give it proper shape. The few tools that they used in this process were also made out of clay at home. The entire occupation was based on family labor, supported further by informal arrangements at the community level. The actual act of making pots, along with drying and baking them, was done by the women members of the households. The menfolk, on the other hand, took care of other important activities, such as digging up the clay, collecting firewood, preparing the furnace, and selling the products. Largely operating on a barter system, the trading involved months-long boat expeditions on the Brahmaputra, twice a year, usually carried out by smaller groups of four to five men in each boat. The average income of a potter family in Salmora ranged from Rs. 60,000 (about \$900) to Rs. 150,000 (about \$2300)⁵² per year, including both cash and kind, although this was contingent upon flood and erosion situation in a particular year.⁵³

⁵¹ In addition to the local Kumar and Hira potters, after independence, Assam has witnessed influx of other potter communities from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and erstwhile East Bengal (Medhi 2003). Most of these communities settled in the Lower Assam area, and the Barak Valley (ibid).

⁵² Based on household survey conducted by author in 40 Kumar families in the village.

⁵³ The pottery economy of the Kumar families in Salmora is predominantly based on a barter system. Because the Kumar families hardly have any agricultural land, they prefer to exchange their potteries for various kinds of food grains and other goods with use-values for them.

The biggest challenge facing the Kumar population on the island was the increasing loss of the clayey soil, locally called ‘Kumar-*maati*’ (*maati* means soil, and it is also used interchangeably for land in Assamese). The glutinous clay required for pottery is obtained from clay pits at twenty-five to thirty feet depth. But sources for this clay are extremely limited, located only along riverbanks, which are constantly eroding. Almost every Kumar person that I spoke with during my fieldwork in Salmora complained of the lack of Kumar-*maati* in and around the village, since a large part of the Salmora landscape has disappeared over the years due to riverbank erosion. Today, many potters are forced to use inferior quality soil (a type of soil locally called ‘*lodha-maati*’), which not only gives their products an inferior finish and hence a reduced price, but also renders them much more breakable. Potter families with limited manpower, on the other hand, are forced to purchase clay from other families within the village, which increases the cost of production, thus making pottery an increasingly unviable option for these families. Kondoï Samua, an exceptionally talented artisan in Salmora, has been, for instance, purchasing clay for the past five-six years. Samua exclaimed: “*If the clay continues to disappear at this rate, I will have to give up pottery in a few years. But on what else should I survive on then? Do I just drown myself in the Brahmaputra?*”⁵⁴

To make the situation worse, in recent years, the state administration has been trying to put a ban on the digging of *Kumar-maati* along the riverbanks in Majuli, since according to the administration, this act of removing the clay from the depth of the riverbanks aggravates erosion activities (Rahman 2015). Accordingly, in 2011, a government delegation, comprised of the subdivisional magistrate, senior Brahmaputra Board officials, and local leaders, including a few *satradhikars*, held a large public meeting in Salmora wherein the potter community was not only

⁵⁴ Author interview with Kondoï Samua, March 8, 2013, Salmora.

dissuaded from digging the clayey soil but were indirectly threatened of legal action should they continue pottery.⁵⁵ The potter families in Salmora have tactfully avoided any government action and have continued digging along the banks. Whether this act of the Kumars has contributed to riverbank erosion or not is yet to be examined properly. What is important to note, however, is that the restriction put by the state on digging of the clay has added further to the scarcity of this raw material. Many potter families were afraid of digging as openly as they used to earlier. This fear was also grounded on the fact that the local administration had, at times, contemplated imposing Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code in Salmora (The Telegraph 2011). This section prohibits an assembly of more than ten people in an area, which is a necessity in the case of digging clay for pottery.

Thus, for the Kumar community in Salmora, the crisis consisted not only in erosion per se; rather, it was the loss of specific type of soil – the clay – that threatened their livelihoods most directly and acutely. Thus, the question of “materiality” of nature held particular significance in relation to livelihoods of the Kumars. For this community, *maati* alone was not sufficient; they needed “*Kumar-maati*” (clayey soil) in order to sustain their livelihoods and traditions. Instead, they were losing both *maati* and *Kumar-maati* simultaneously. Hence, there was a growing sense of resentment against the state among the Kumar population in the island, which came across in most of my conversations with potter families in Salmora. One afternoon, I was sitting by the Brahmaputra at Salmora *ghat*, chatting with a group of Kumar men from the village as they loaded two large boats with potteries to set out on their trading expedition next morning. We spoke on a range of issues from local livelihoods to the upcoming national election to rituals and festivals among the Kumars. At some point, one of the men commented: “*Ami*

⁵⁵ This information is based on focus group discussions with groups of potters in two occasions – September 2, 2013 and September 28, 2013.

sarkaror hisabat bahi juwa manuh. Amar kotha kune sinta kore?” (We are excess/surplus people for the government. Who cares about us?). I was not sure if through this simple statement, this man tried to invoke Marx’s (1967 [1867]) notion of “surplus population” or Zizek’s idea of “disposable lives,”⁵⁶ but this statement nonetheless well captured the conditions not just of the Kumars but a large majority of riverside population in Majuli.

Water resources depletion and livelihood challenges

Along with the loss of land, as the above section demonstrated, the water resources in the island have also depleted severely over the years, resulting in many forms of rural crises. The non-substitutable role that water plays in people’s life has been well documented (Sultana and Loftus 2012; Swyngedouw 2007); but in an island geography like Majuli where lifeforms constantly revolved around the interstices of land and water, water played a far more pivotal role than anywhere else. In such geographies, water shaped everything – life, livelihoods, and human imagination. The first and foremost manifestation of water crisis in Majuli was in the area of drinking water. Tube wells, both privately owned and community assets, were the chief source of drinking water in Majuli. But during flood season, tube wells in the island, especially those located in low lying areas, were mostly submerged (see Figure 13, Chapter 2). Rural population, thus, relied heavily on floodwater for drinking purposes, even though some of them were well aware of the highly contaminated nature of floodwaters.⁵⁷ Even after a flood event was over,

⁵⁶ ‘Disposable life’ is Zizek’s series in the ‘Histories of Violence’ project. Here’s the link:

<http://www.historiesofviolence.com/#!/full-lectures/cq5w>

⁵⁷ Many families in Salmora and Sumoimari villages, for instance, told me during my fieldwork that they were aware of the fact that floodwater was highly contaminated. Some of them told me how they would notice dead cattle floating around in the floodwater, yet they had no choice but to use that water for drinking and cooking purposes. This I felt was a gross violation of human rights. But then, rights of these people were violated at every level. Do their lives matter? That is the question.

many communities would continue to drink water from the nearby ponds and streams for months, which were as polluted. This lack of access to drinking water also has specific gender implications for these rural communities, although this is an issue that I do not delve deeper in this dissertation (cf. Sultana 2009, 2010, 2011). Beyond, the shortage of drinking water, the depletion of water resources has had catastrophic impacts on rural livelihoods in the island as a whole, especially on agrarian and fishery-based livelihoods. It is to this question that I turn now.

Contributing more than two percent of the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing livelihoods to a large population belonging to different communities, the fishery sector plays an important role in Assam's economy (Gogoi et al. 2015). In Majuli, the fishery sector played a particularly significant role, given the abundance of water resources in and around the island. In addition to being surrounded by the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri rivers, the island's water resources included over hundred and fifty registered and unregistered *beels* and a large number of ponds, streams, and channels (Barik and Sharma 2006). Besides, various low-lying areas in the island generally transformed into temporary water bodies after the monsoon, holding water for up to three-four months, thus becoming fishery resources for all practical purposes. As per government records, the island possessed more than four hundred fishery resources of diverse kinds (Government of Assam 2013a).

Although commercial fishing in Majuli was restricted to the scheduled caste (SC) and the scheduled tribe (ST) communities (for example, Kaivartas, Misings, Deuris, Kacharis, and Sutias),⁵⁸ subsistence fishing was practiced by most households in Majuli across castes.⁵⁹ Overall, fishing in Majuli has not yet become mechanized, and the scale of fishing operation,

⁵⁸ The SC and ST population combined constitute above 50% of the islands total population, of which the Kaivartas and the Misings constitute the largest share (Misings constitute 43%) (Census of India 2011).

⁵⁹ For details on the caste system, see Srinivas (1970, 1996).

even in the case of commercial fishing, is still not too large. Its market is still limited to Jorhat and the local demand in Majuli. Except for a small group of traders ('*bixoya*') and fishery cooperatives that took large *beels* on lease and supplied large quantity of fish to the Jorhat market, most others fishermen were involved in selling within the island either directly in the local markets and going door-to-door in the nearby villages or through middlemen. Overall, fishing constituted a critical part of the rural economy in Majuli.

Over the years, water resources in the island have undergone transformations, thus impairing the fishery-based livelihoods severely. There are three main factors behind the depletion and disappearance of water bodies in the island, the key sources of livelihoods for many. *First*, because of the incessant process of erosion, land-use practices in the island have changed over the years, resulting in the conversion of fishery resources to other land use practices. Farmers living in low-lying areas have converted the swamps into agricultural fields. Similarly, government agencies were also responsible for converting swamps to roads, embankments, and other such infrastructure, thereby contributing to the shrinkage of the island's fishery resources. *Secondly*, many *beels* and swamps, particularly those located close to the main channel of the Brahmaputra, have gradually disappeared due to the direct impact of flooding and erosion. And *finally*, as highlighted in Chapter 2, the infrastructures created by the state for flood and erosion control have contributed to the transformation of water bodies. Structures such as embankments, check-bunds, and spurs have obstructed natural courses within river systems, thereby severing the connections between the wetlands inside the island and the main channels of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri. Deprived of freshwater, many of these wetlands have completely dried up over the years, and many others are filled with stagnant water, thus being uninhabitable for fish.

Between 1917 and 1972, the number of swamps and wetlands in Majuli has reduced from hundred and twelve to mere fifty (Sarma and Phukan 2004), which has further gone down thereafter. Although the official records at the sub-divisional fishery department showed above four hundred fishery resources in the island, Jagat Hatimata, a senior official in the agency, informed me in an informal conversation that only about three dozens of these are *beels*, which, too, are highly degraded, while many others are private fisheries.⁶⁰ The disappearance of wetlands was widely reported by community members in all my research villages (see table 1 below). Dulal Bora, a Salmora resident, for instance, narrated to me his childhood fishing adventures in *Keturi beel*, located near his village.⁶¹ Today, there is no trace of the Keturi beel, except in public memories and popular folklore. In another instance, Sumoimari resident Jogen Padun presented a graphic description of how the construction of embankments near Sumoimari, and a check-bund in the upstream of the village, in the mid-1980s had led to the slow death of three important water bodies near Sumoimari – Magurmora *beel*, Bor *beel*, and Debi *jaan* – thus depriving many Mising households of their primary sources of livelihoods.⁶²

⁶⁰ Author's telephone conversation with Jagat Hatimata, March 3, 2014. Saikia also noted that some of the wetlands that had now disappeared from the island were of historical significance. For example, Hatimata highlighted that the famous *Rawnapar pukhuri*, which was dug by the Ahom rulers in the early 18th century in the context of Burmese invasion of Assam, no longer exists in Majuli due to various anthropogenic factors.

⁶¹ Bora narrated a story about how, once during his teens, he had caught a *borali* fish (freshwater shark) in Keturi *beel*, so giant that 2-3 elders had to first rescue Bora from the fish by dragging the latter out of Bora's fishing gear, and then carry the fish home on their shoulders. Bora further added that fish of such large size used to be common at Keturi, which was indicative of the good quality of this fishing resource then. (Author interview with Dulal Bora, February 23, 2013).

⁶² Author interview of Jogen Padun, Aug 16, 2013, Sumoimari.

Table 1: List of fully or partially degraded wetlands near the research villages

Village Names	List of Wetlands
Salmora	Moroni <i>beel</i> , Ath-Gharia <i>beel</i> , Senimora <i>jaan</i> , Kamjaan <i>beel</i> , Ga Khajua <i>beel</i> , Keturi <i>beel</i> , and Kasomari <i>beel</i> .
Dakhinpat Kaivarta	Sarala <i>beel</i> , Bor <i>dubi</i> , Rajahua <i>jaan</i> , Moran <i>beel</i> , Bamunor Bari <i>dubi</i> , Jori-tolor <i>dubi</i> , and Bet-mela <i>dubi</i> .
Sumoimari	Magurmora <i>beel</i> , Bor <i>beel</i> , Senimora <i>jaan</i> , Sumoimari <i>jaan</i> , Kereng <i>jaan</i> , Anguni mura <i>jaan</i> , Ghatahola <i>beel</i> , and Kachari boka <i>beel</i> .

(Source: based on author's fieldwork in these three villages)

While many water bodies in the island had disappeared, the existing ones, too, were in highly degraded condition as they stopped receiving adequate amount of freshwater, previously supplied by the floodwaters. Bhaikan Das, a fisherman from Dakhinpat, had the following to say in this regard:

Na-paani [fresh water] is for the fish what Bihu is for us [the Assamese people].⁶³ As soon as *na-paani* flows in during the monsoon season, fish get excited and playful, and they indulge in breeding. Fish do not like to lay eggs in stagnant water. Therefore, sometimes we catch fish with belly full of eggs much after their egg-laying season. This is a sign of the lack of freshwater in the water body, and it is quite distressing.⁶⁴

This phenomenon of freshwater deprivation in the water bodies inland, resulting in declining fish population in these resources, was widely seen all over the island. As a result, the island has started to witness an increased supply of farm-raised fish from places as far as Andhra Pradesh in Southern India. Earlier, such fish varieties were available in Majuli only during the monsoon when fishing in the local water bodies was prohibited by the state because of the breeding season (Barik and Sarma 2006); but now, they are available in the local market, including remote

⁶³ Bihu is Assam's most prominent cultural festival, celebrated by every Assamese person across ethnic-religious lines. It is celebrated three times a year: Bohaag Bihu (mid-April), Maagh Bihu (mid-January), and Kaati Bihu (mid-October). Bohaag Bihu marks the beginning of the Assamese new year, and it is celebrated with great merriment for almost a whole month.

⁶⁴ Author interview with Bhaikan Das, October 1, 2013.

villages, round the year.⁶⁵ Many local varieties of fish, including *Eleng*, *Morothi*, *Bhedengi*, *Chengeli*, *Koroti*, *Gagol*, *Naro*, and *Pithira*, that used to be once abundant in Majuli have now become almost extinct.⁶⁶ This has implications for the local ecology as well as nutritional aspects of the local population.

The most important implications, perhaps, was the rapid growth of private fisheries in the island in recent past. This phenomenon is similar to, if not exactly the same as, what political ecologists have identified as the process of “neoliberalization of nature” (Castree 2008a, 2008b; Heynen and Robbins 2005; Mansfield 2004; McCarthy and Prudham 2004; Robertson 2004). At a more general level, the neoliberalization of nature thesis highlights the processes of *enclosure* and *privatization* of the commons, *marketization/valuation* of nature, and changing role of the state, as *governance* gains salience (Castree 2008a, 2008b; Heynen and Robbins 2005). In Majuli, the proliferation of private fisheries has been largely supported by the state, through a number of government schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Development of Freshwater Aquaculture (FFDA) program, and the World Bank supported Assam Agricultural Competitiveness Project (AACP).⁶⁷ Out of over four hundred fishery resources in Majuli,⁶⁸ about two-thirds were such newly dug private ponds under state-sponsored schemes.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of private fisheries in Majuli did not wholly embody neoliberalization of nature, as these fisheries were not consequences of enclosure of the common

⁶⁵ Upon asked why they liked to purchase these ‘*saloni maas*’, a few villagers in Sumoimari responded that these fish were more affordable than the local ones and they were more easily available, even though they had complained about the taste of these fish.

⁶⁶ This was widely reported by elderly community members that I spoke with across the island. They all lamented the loss of so many of their favorite fish species.

⁶⁷ This information is based on official records obtained from the sub-divisional office of the fishery department at Garamur, Majuli in 2013.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

water resources in the island; rather they were fisheries dug by better off farmers on their private lands, with support from the state. However, this phenomenon of rapid growth of private fisheries marked a departure in the fishing sector in Majuli. Unlike the wetlands, owned by the state and/or communities, these private fisheries were solely driven by profit motive, without any concern for local ecology or the livelihoods of the traditional fishing communities. Thus, these fisheries explicitly brought in capitalist relations to the fishing sector in Majuli. At the same time, other than the initial financial support, the role of the state was limited in the governance of these resources. The private owners were free to decide on the fish species that they wanted to raise, the kind/amount of chemical input they wanted to apply to these ponds, the market for the harvest, and so on. It is also important to note that for the state, these private fisheries functioned as proxies for the wetlands, thereby reducing the responsibility of the state in the restoration of the degraded common water bodies. In other words, there has been a significant shift in the role of the state as far as the fishing sector goes. The state continues to play an important role, but it is mainly to the advantage of privatization and not so much in the interest of protecting the community fishing resources. As such, it can be argued that a process of neoliberalization of the fishery sector, however incipient, has already established itself in Majuli.

The depletion in the water resources has also impacted the agricultural sector in Majuli. Traditionally, agriculture in the island has depended heavily on floodwaters and the numerous wetlands within the island – both as a source of *polosh* (fertile alluvium) and timely irrigation. However, with the changing configurations of the water resources, the farmlands were deprived of these traditional resources. As a result, the peasantry in Majuli has started to rely increasingly on chemical inputs, which further destabilized the agrarian economy, an issue that I take up in the next section.

Technologies, market, and livelihoods

To understand the deepening crises of rural livelihoods in Majuli, we need to also pay attention to the ways in which technologies and market forces have affected different sectors of the local economy. I use the term ‘technology’ here in a broad sense to refer to a mix of inputs, including knowledges, machinery, and chemicals, that the rural population in the island apply to supplement their degraded natural resources. As discussed above, the processes of flooding and erosion, as well as the infrastructures created to address these phenomena, have transformed the land and water resources in the island. Not only has there been a shrinking of land and water resources, but these resources have also qualitatively deteriorated over the years, especially due to the disruption of the natural courses and configurations of the river systems upon which depended the agrarian and the water resources based livelihoods.

As food production in the island has dropped progressively due to the above-mentioned factors, the peasantry took recourse to applying high doses of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to boost agricultural productivity. This phenomenon has particularly picked up in the past two to three decades. When I was growing up in Majuli in the 1980s, there was very little application of chemical inputs in agriculture in the island. In my own village, for instance, farmers were hardly applying chemical inputs. Yet they used to grow diverse locally useful crops, such as different local varieties of paddy, mustard, sugarcane, pulses, and vegetables. But this has changed tremendously now: farmers today rely heavily on chemical fertilizers and pesticides instead of organic manure, tractors have to come to play a dominant role, and irrigation infrastructures are now much more visible in the countryside than they were earlier. The state, too, has played an important role in promoting these changes. The agriculture department of the state government has regularly supplied farmers with seeds of hybrid varieties of paddy, which are supposed to be

high-yielding in nature. These hybrid crops are highly water-intensive. Hence, farmers are required to invest in irrigation infrastructure. Moreover, these crops also come with clear instructions from the agriculture department for the application of high doses of fertilizers and pesticides.⁶⁹ The heavy use of chemicals has led to a decline in the natural fertility of soil in the island, which means that farmers now have to depend unfailingly on chemical inputs for each crop. This has put an additional economic burden on an already marginalized population. Furthermore, many farmers had informed me about the advent of newer types of pests, while many others had mentioned that the hybrid crops introduced by the government agency were so tasteless that they hardly served the purpose of local consumption, and farmers had to still buy their own food from the market.⁷⁰

The agrarian transformation has its impact on other sectors of livelihoods as well. For instance, the fertilizers and pesticides in the fields have directly affected the water bodies in the island, hence, the fishery-based livelihoods. Each monsoon, the chemicals from the agricultural fields found their way into the *beels*, streams and the river systems in the island through rain and floodwaters. As a result, the water bodies in the island have been contaminated, leading to disastrous phenomena such as large-scale death of fish eggs, and occasional fish epidemic. Ranjit Hazarika, a veteran fisherman from Dakhinpat, narrated to me the devastating impacts of an island-wide fish epidemic in the early-1990s. For months following this epidemic, as Hazarika explained, there was fish shortage in Majuli, which had particularly adverse impacts on poor families who could not afford meat or the fish coming from outside. Moreover, this epidemic had permanently altered the traditional livelihoods of many erstwhile fishing families. As they were out of job for months, all of a sudden, these families had to look for alternative livelihoods,

⁶⁹ Information based on focus group discussion with Bhakat chapori farmers, September 22, 2013.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

which was mainly wage-labor. Later, they were later unable to regain their traditional skills as well as the resources, thus becoming wage-laborer for good.⁷¹ In discussing about the increased contamination of water in the island's wetlands and the river systems in recent years, Hazarika also blamed the newly proliferating private fisheries, which, as he explained, apply heavy doses of chemical inputs and those make it to the island's larger water systems too.

The lack of access to market, rooted mainly in the remoteness of many places in the island and an inadequate transportation service, further constrained the rural producers in Majuli. This has particularly affected the potter community in Salmora. As mentioned earlier, the potters from Salmora travel on boats to different parts of the state to sell their products. But such a system of trading is highly time-consuming and laborious. Besides, while on the boat, these traders also have to deal with unpredictable hazards such as storms and cyclones. Hence, a popular demand among the potters in Salmora has been for the state to establish permanent markets either within Majuli or elsewhere. But this has not yet materialized.⁷² There are more factors that have contributed to the lack of adequate market for pottery. In addition to trading in far off places via waterways, earlier, the potters from Majuli used to cater to a reasonably large market within the island.⁷³ The Mising community in Majuli, for example, had high demand for '*koloh*' (a large jug, containing up to 10-12 liters) earlier, which they used for brewing/storing '*apong*' (rice beer). There was also a general demand island-wide for '*koloh*' and '*tekeli*' (a smaller version of a '*koloh*') for the purpose of storing milk and yogurt, as there used to be a decent livestock-based economy in the *chaporis*. However, with the gradual disappearance of the pasturelands in the island, livestock rearing has become peripheral to the rural economy, and the

⁷¹ Author conversation with Ranjit Hazarika, September 23, 2013.

⁷² Author interview with Dulal Bora, Salmora, February 23, 2013.

⁷³ Focus group discussions with a group of potter families in Salmora, September 2 and September 28, 2013.

demand for pottery has consequently gone down.⁷⁴ The increased availability of cheaper alternatives has further affected the pottery market in Assam. The *gaonbura* of Salmora referred to this phenomenon as “Made in China” factor, that is, the availability of cheap plastic wares in the market that have come to replace pottery.⁷⁵

The lack of access to market has particularly challenged the *chaporis*-dwellers. As highlighted in the previous chapter, one of the defining characteristics of the *chaporis* landscapes is their geographical isolation. Located in the middle of the river, these small islets lack connectivity with mainland Majuli by road; the waterways are highly inefficient; and road networks within the *chaporis* are poor. Thus, the farmers in the *chaporis* have limited access to market to sell their agricultural outputs. Bhakat *chaporis*, for instance, is well known in Assam for its agricultural prowess, especially for the cultivation of sugarcane, mustard, and a variety of vegetables. However, due to the lack of access to market, the farmers in Bhakat *chaporis* have to often sell their produce locally at meager prices. Sometimes, their crops are simply rotten in the field or at home-storages due to the lack of buyers.⁷⁶ Thus, the peasantry in the *chaporis* face a distinct kind of challenge rooted mainly in their geographical isolation.

⁷⁴ Pasturelands were once common in most villages in the island, and they were mostly commons (i.e. CPR). I remember the common sight of hundreds of cattle grazing every day in our village commons. In the *chaporis*, it was more of a common sight until recently. However, because of the rapid loss of the island’s landmass to riverbank erosion and flood damages, there have been significant land-use changes, often at the cost of common lands such as the pasturelands or the forestlands. The latter has in fact become rare in Majuli.

⁷⁵ Author interview with Salmora *gaonbura*, January 8, 2013.

⁷⁶ Information based on focus group discussion conducted by author with Bhakat *chaporis* farmers, September 22, 2013.

The labor crisis and livelihood implications

While shortage of labor has affected many sectors of rural livelihoods in Majuli, including agriculture, it has manifested itself most prominently in the fishery sector. As mentioned earlier, fishing in Majuli has not yet been mechanized; instead, it remains highly labor-intensive.

Although subsistence fishing and small-scale commercial fishing depend largely on family labor, commercial fishing (whether medium or large scale) requires sizeable labor population with specific skill sets. Up until mid- to late-1980s, most of the laborers in the fishery sector were migrant laborers from the state of Bihar. The Bihari laborers were quite sought after in this sector because of their perceived hardworking and skilled nature in fishing. However, after the Assam Movement (1979-1985), the political economy of labor migration from Bihar has drastically changed. Led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), the Assam Movement began as an agitation against illegal infiltration of Bangladeshi population into Assam, which soon evolved into a full-fledged xenophobia against all "outsiders", including non-Assamese Indian communities.⁷⁷ In some cases, the movement turned violent, leaving behind dark chapters like the "Nellie massacre"⁷⁸ in the annals of Assam's political history. Afraid of the safety of their lives, many Bihari laborers had left Assam immediately, never to return, and their migration pattern to Assam has since drastically changed. While migration to cities and large towns still continues, in rural areas, Bihari laborers are hardly seen today. Perhaps they felt much more unsafe in the countryside due to the greater visibility in these places otherwise dominated by ethnic Assamese communities.

⁷⁷ For a detail discussion on the Assam movement, see Hussain (1993).

⁷⁸ On February 18, 1983, in a place called Nellie in Morigaon district in central Assam, more than 2000 (although the unofficial figure ran much higher) Bengali speaking Muslims were brutally slaughtered by supporters of the Assam movement. Nellie remains one of the bloodiest episodes of the Assam movement. To date, however, the perpetrators have not been identified or punished, thus reflecting the Assamese state's complacency with violence against the so-called Bangladeshis.

Majuli, an entirely rural area, has thus stopped receiving Bihari laborer entirely,⁷⁹ which left the fishery sector in the hands of the local Kaivarta and Mising laborers who are considered less skilled than their Bihari counterparts.⁸⁰ Whether the local laborers are inferior to their Bihari counterparts in skill is difficult to establish, but it is widely believed to be the case in the island. Jiban Das, an ex-chairman of *Dakhinpat Borbeel Fishery Cooperative Society*⁸¹ and now a *gaonbura*, explained the labor crisis thus:

Up until 1983, there used to be plenty of Bihari laborers coming in who stayed here for 4-5 months a year. They were so hard working and adept in fishing that not a single fish could escape their nets. Even in the bone-chilling winter nights, they would dive down to the bottom of a *beel* and catch fish all night. Our fishery cooperative was making good profit then. But once the Bihari laborers stopped coming, the fish harvest declined drastically. The local laborers are not half as hardworking or skilled. There is also increased water contamination that have further contributed to the decline in fish population.⁸²

Thus, Jiban Das was rather unequivocal about the key role that the Bihari migrant laborers had once played in the fishery sector in Majuli and the damages that this sector has suffered after the loss of this labor force. Das' opinion was also shared by a few other members of the fishery cooperative at Dakhinpat. Similarly, a few entrepreneurial farmers at Bhakat chapori reminisced the important role that Bihari laborers once played in the farming sector. They further

⁷⁹ Growing up in Majuli during the early years of the Assam movement, I have fond memories of interacting with Bihari migrant laborers in my village who used to come annually to work in timber sawing, earth digging, fishing, and occasionally farming. As kids, we used to be excited with the arrival of the laborers since they looked different, spoke a different language, and sometimes we could share their food, which was new to us. But today, not a single batch of such migrant laborers is seen in the island.

⁸⁰ It is commonly believed in Majuli that the local laborers are not as skilled as the Bihari migrants, hence the decline in fish harvest in the island today. During my fieldwork, many fishery contractors in the island shared this opinion with me.

⁸¹ The Dakhinpat Borbeel Fishery Cooperative Society was constituted in 1977, with a membership of 31, each member paying a share of Rs. 11. Today, the membership has increased to more than 50, and the society bids for Borbeel and other local *beels* such as the Magurmari *beel*. The profit they make is shared between the members, and sometimes it is also used for community activities. This information was obtained from some of the members of the fishery cooperative during my fieldwork.

⁸² Author conversation with Jiban Das, September 27, 2013.

emphasized the shortage of labor as a key challenge facing the agricultural sector in the island today.

In recent years, there has been growing youth out-migration from Majuli to various cities around the country in search of jobs. This is symptomatic of the crisis facing the rural economy in the country, and globally, at large. In rural India, there is growing distress among the farmers, as the state is increasingly moving away from a farmer-centric rural development approach, and is instead focusing on capital accumulation in the rural sector, privatization of rural resources (for example, land grabs through Special Economic Zones, and large infrastructural projects), and rampant promotion of cash crops (a key factor behind the growing farmers' suicide phenomenon, for instance) (see, among others, Banaji 2016; Das 2007; Fairbairn et al. 2014; Gidwani 2008). The rural livelihoods crisis in the Brahmaputra valley has to be situated within this larger phenomenon of rural transformation, while taking into account various localized processes (cf. Carr 2015). Overall, the younger generation in Majuli is increasingly growing disenchanted with the traditional livelihood practices in the rural sector, and they are migrating to cities all over the country in search of employment. This has added further to the shortage of labor in the rural livelihood sector.

Livelihood diversification: solution or further crisis?

As the crisis in rural livelihoods continues to deepen, especially in the absence of supporting role of the state (and non-governmental organizations), the communities in many vulnerable places in the valley have strived for different alternatives to diversify their livelihoods. Ellis (2000: 15) defines livelihood diversification as “the process by which rural households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and to improve their

standard of living” (Moreda 2012: 40). Despite the lack of comprehensive work on this subject, livelihoods diversification is widely recognized as a vital economic strategy in rural economies (Barrett et al. 2000; Belaineh 2002; Ellis 2000). In the context of Eastern Highlands in Ethiopia, Belaineh (2002) described diversification as an important part of “survival” among the rural population. Fairbairn et al.’s (2014) notion of “hybrid livelihoods” evokes a similar idea, although with a particular focus on rural-urban livelihood convergence.

Diversification of livelihoods has emerged as an important survival strategy among the flood- and erosion-affected communities in Majuli as well. I highlighted this at the beginning of this chapter. The Kaivarta community in Dakhinpat, whose traditional source of livelihoods was primarily fishing, has diversified by embracing goat trading as an alternative. Goat trading emerged as an alternative in this village in the late-1980s when the protracted crisis in the fishing sector reached a critical stage, especially with the island-wide fish epidemic of the late-1980s – early-1990s. It was at that moment that a few fishermen in Dakhinpat decided to experiment with goat trading as an alternative source of livelihood. They chose goat trading over other options because as fish traders previously, they were somewhat acquainted with goat trading too.⁸³ While visiting the fish and meat market in Jorhat town regularly to sell fish, these fish traders in Dakhinpat had built some connections with meat contractors and butchers in the market, and had also realized the high demand for goat meat in the Jorhat market. Jorhat is a district headquarters, and it is also one of the large cities in Assam, with diverse economic activities, including tourism and a large tea industry. The demand for meat is thus always high in the Jorhat market. The Kaivarta men from Dakhinpat smelled the business opportunity well. Initially, only a handful of families in Dakhinpat were involved in this trade, but today, it is the most dominant source of

⁸³ This information is based on discussions with a number of goat traders in Dakhinpat during the course of my fieldwork in the village in 2013.

livelihoods in the village. Indeed, Dakhinpat Kaivarta village is popularly referred as the '*Sagoli Beparir Gaon*' (the village of goat traders) in Majuli.

As noted earlier, goat trading for the petty traders is a backbreaking profession. Since these traders are not goat-herder themselves, they have to cycle ten to twelve hours a day to far-flung villages within and outside Majuli for procuring goats. And they do that three days a week, round the year, regardless of the weather. Despite such hardworking nature of the job, the income from goat trading is meager. It also varies widely depending on the number of goats a trader procures on a trip, and the rate at which he manages to sell them in the market. At an average, a trader earns a profit of about Rs. 5000-8000 (\$80-120) per month, which is insufficient to maintain a family, especially because most Kaivarta families in Dakhinpat do not own any land, and they have to purchase everything from the market.⁸⁴ Also, since there is hardly any savings in this job, they cannot afford to miss even a single day's of work, unless seriously ill. Goat trading is thus a highly precarious job, and it only supports a hand-to-mouth survival. Yet, in the absence of other alternatives, the erstwhile fishermen in Dakhinpat find goat trading to be their life saver. A few other new sources of livelihood adopted by the Kaivarta men in Dakhinpat included scrap metals trading (as discussed in the beginning), carpentry, masonry, and daily wage labor within and outside Majuli. The important point to note here is that none of these alternative forms of livelihoods was traditional to the Kaivarta community, which meant that they neither possessed the necessary skills nor the resources to thrive in these new livelihood practices. Instead, with such diversification of livelihoods, their precarity deepened further.

Diversification of livelihoods has become common among most communities in Majuli, since the livelihood crisis has affected them all, albeit in different degrees. For the Misings, the

⁸⁴ Based on household survey conducted by author in 43 households in the village in 2013.

largest community in Majuli, the traditional sources of livelihoods were mainly fishing and livestock rearing. In addition, some of them had also practiced agriculture, mainly as sharecroppers.⁸⁵ As these traditional livelihood practices are now destabilized, a large majority of the Mising population has turned to wage-labor. Today, the labor force in Majuli, across different sectors, is mostly comprised of the Mising population. Besides, there has been an increased outmigration of Mising youth from Majuli to different urban centers in the country. And in the absence of any specific skill sets, most of these Mising men find themselves absorbed in low-paid, highly exploitative jobs in the cities.

A new source of livelihood that has gained popularity among the Mising men in Majuli in the past one or two decades is timber-sawing (*kath phala*). There is a steady demand for timber in Majuli for a variety of purposes, including the construction of wooden bridges, boat-making, the flooring of the stilt houses that are popular among the Misings and Kumars. Although there are a few sawmills in the island, sawing at home is the most widely prevalent practice. Much like the fishery sector, up until the mid-1980s, timber sawing in Majuli was almost exclusively in the hands of migrant Bihari laborers. However, once the inflow of the Bihari laborers came to an end, the increasingly impoverished Mising population slowly began occupying that space, eventually turning sawing into an exclusively Mising profession in the island. In Sumoimari village, for example, about sixty percent of households had at least one of its male members engaged in timber sawing.⁸⁶ Compared to some of the other alternative livelihoods now popular among the rural population in Majuli, sawing was much more profitable. Jibakanta Mili, a village leader from Sumoimari, explained the economy of this profession thus:

⁸⁵ See Karna (2004: 23-24) for a detail discussion on various types of sharecropping (*adhi* system) in Assam.

⁸⁶ Based on information provided by the village headman of Sumoimari during my conversation with him on Sep 23, 2013.

There is good money in the sawing profession. The going rate for sawing one cubic feet of timber is Rs. 120 in Majuli. Since two persons can saw about 10-15 cubic feet a day, the daily income for one person can be Rs. 600-900, which is quite a handsome amount for the living standard in Majuli.⁸⁷

However, it is not as attractive a profession as Jibakanta explains. Sawing is a highly strenuous work that demands great deal of muscular power. Belonging to poor families, the Mising laborers, on the other hand, are deprived of the necessary nutrition in their diet. Besides, high intake of *apong* (home-brewed rice beer) by Mising men has a heavy bearing on their health. A strenuous job like sawing can be, then, highly debilitating for these men, risking their health further in the longer run. Another problem associated with sawing is that it is not an individual act; it always requires two persons. Thus, if either of the partners is sick or unable to go to work for some reason, the other one is out of work as well. Finally, there is the shortage of timber in Majuli, emanating from the processes of flooding and erosion. As a result, the Mising families in the island, like all others, have found themselves constantly in search of new sources of livelihood. Some of the popular alternatives among the Misings included illegal selling of *phatika* and *apong* (both home-made liquor); skill-based professions such as carpentry, masonry, and plumbing; and an increasing trend toward moving out.

Out-migration, both short and long distances, has been, in fact, a steadily growing source of livelihoods for the rural population in Majuli as a whole. Kothari (2002) notes that migration is a significant livelihood strategy for poor households. However, she also emphasizes that the role of migration in moving out of poverty is largely determined by the social, cultural, political, geographical and economic circumstances experienced by the poor. This is illustrative of the situation in Majuli, too. In Majuli, migration to nearby towns such as Jorhat, Sibsagar, and

⁸⁷ Author interview with Jibakanta Mili, August 30, 2013.

Lakhimpur in search of work has existed for a while. In recent years, however, a growing section of the island's youths are migrating to distant cities (for example, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad) in search of employment. But many of these youths from Majuli do not possess specific skills and they also lack fluency in Hindi or English; hence, they are highly vulnerable in the job market in these new destinations. Large-scale outmigration of the youth has implications for the society as a whole. It means a gradual erosion of the traditional livelihoods and crafts practiced by different communities, and a breakup of family and social ties. It also causes shortage of family labor, which can be particularly challenging for families during the time of flood and erosion when there is a greater need for labor at home. In short, out-migration for job opportunities, despite being a popular alternative among the youth, remains highly precarious in itself, and it also fails to address the broader livelihood challenges facing the island.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a political ecological account of rural livelihood transformation in Majuli by looking into the changing natural resources regime at the local level and situating this within the broader processes of political economy, power relations across scales, and historical-geographical inequalities. On the one hand, land and water resources in the island are steadily depleting due to the processes of flooding and riverbank erosion; on the other hand, through the construction of large hydraulic infrastructures, the state has actively contributed to further deterioration of the livelihood base in the island. To make matters worse, the state has not paid adequate attention to protecting the traditional sources of livelihood, nor has it done enough to promote sustainable income generating activities in the countryside. If anything, the increasingly neoliberalizing Indian state has scaled up hydraulic infrastructures in recent years (for example,

the promotion of hydropower dams in Arunachal Pradesh, that is, within a short distance from Majuli), thereby re-producing socio-ecological vulnerabilities in Majuli and other places in the valley. The case of Majuli is, in fact, illustrative of the livelihood crises affecting the entire Brahmaputra valley floodplains. Whether it is in Rohmoria in the upstream region or Lahorighat in the downstream, the livelihood vulnerabilities faced by the rural communities in the valley are of similar nature.

With the traditional sources of livelihoods being in disarray, depeasantization in the valley intensifies, wage-labor becomes an ever more dominant source of livelihoods, and more and more young people out-migrate from the countryside in the valley to faraway cities in search of employment opportunities. In Majuli, even though the rural population has tried to diversify their livelihoods by adopting new practices, their precarity has only continually deepened with the loss of their natural resources base. As the state pursues its hydraulic interventions to address flood and erosion, it must pay careful attention to the question of rural livelihoods. Not only does the state need to re-think about its flood and erosion control measures, since these measures in their current form are only exacerbating the livelihoods crisis, but it also needs to actively work towards protecting the natural resources in the countryside, upon which depend the traditional rural economy of the Brahmaputra valley.



Figure 19: Paddy fields. Kamalabari, Majuli, August 2013.



Figure 20: A fisherman using a cast net to fish. Sumoimari, Majuli, August 2013.



Figure 21: A fisherwoman using a traditional equipment (*saloni*) for fishing. Majuli, November 2013.



Figure 22: A Kumar woman at Salmora doing pottery. March 2013.



Figure 23: Kumar men at Salmora preparing for their pottery trade. February 2013.



Figure 24: Goat traders in Dakhinpat ferrying goats to the market. November 2013.

Chapter 4

Geographies of Resistance

Introduction

Peasant resistance and movements are not new phenomena in India (Guha 1999; Sarkar 2002). In the context of colonial India, subaltern historian Ranajit Guha (1999: 1) commented that “the historiography of peasant insurgency in colonial India is as old as colonialism itself.” In the postcolonial period as well, peasant resistance and movements of different forms have occupied an important space in the socio-political landscape of the country (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). The Chipko movement in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in the 1970s, the Appiko movement in the Western Ghats in Karnataka in the 1980s for the protection of forest commons, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) of the 1990s (and still ongoing) against large dams, and the ongoing anti-dam struggles, however sporadic, in the northeastern states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are but a few of the influential social movements in the country’s recent history. The history of the Assamese peasantry is also a history of resistance, as Arupjyoti Saikia (2014) has masterfully depicted in his influential *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. Saikia shows how, throughout the colonial period, the Assamese peasantry tried to resist exploitative colonial practices by deploying a variety of protest measures. Peasant resistance in Assam has continued in the postcolonial period as well. More recently, the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a peasant movement that began in the early 2000s under the dynamic leadership of Akhil Gogoi, has been instrumental in organizing a number of protest activities across the state on various issues concerning the rights of local farmers. On a range of

issues, including questions of land rights, rehabilitation of landless farmers, and large dams, KMSS has been able to mobilize the Assamese peasantry as a unified force, thereby putting constant pressure on the state and re-centering the question of the peasantry in Assam's political landscape.

Given such a legacy of peasant politics across the state, my dissertation endeavors to examine the processes of resistance and movements among the disaster-affected communities in Majuli and Rohmoria. I have sought to understand if and how the local communities in the two places have mobilized themselves for ensuring better protection of their respective places from flood and erosion. About the peasant movement in Rohmoria, local scholars have written a few articles here and there, although without much critical analysis (Lahiri 2008; Lahiri and Borgohain 2011; Borgohain n.d.). But as far as the peasantry in Majuli goes, there are no accounts whatsoever about any form of activism by the flood and erosion affected peasantry in the island. I was thus curious to gain a deeper understanding of the politics of resistance in these two places, for I assumed that a peasantry with such an extreme level of vulnerability and dispossession has to take recourse through some forms of resistance. In exploring the question of resistance in the two places, I have found that the communities in both places have resorted to a wide range of resistance practices, from overt militant activism to everyday forms of resistance. Indeed, Rohmoria and Majuli also presented two very different landscapes of peasant activism. Thus, my research also focused on critically examining the factors that may have shaped the peasant politics in the two places differently. Finally, I tried to understand the role of peasant resistances and movements in influencing the state and thus the processes of environmental governance in the Brahmaputra valley.

This chapter and the next one are a continuum. In this chapter, I mainly lay out the diverse geography of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria. Hence, this chapter is more descriptive in nature, whereas in Chapter 5, I critically assess the factors contributing to the different geographies of resistance in the two places and the different ways in which they have shaped the functioning of the state in the two places. My key objective in this chapter is to demonstrate that the peasantry in the Brahmaputra valley is not merely the victim of disasters; rather, it is a politically active constituency, and it has deployed a variety of means to wield influence over the state for more effective environmental governance processes. In other words, this chapter highlights the political agency of communities in hazardscape, thereby reinforcing the idea that a hazardscape is not only about vulnerabilities but that it also produces opportunities for struggles for social justice and equity (Mustafa 2005). The chapter is divided into two broad sections: the first one focuses on the resistance in Majuli, and the second section takes up the resistance question in the context of Rohmoria. Each of these sections is then further divided into multiple small sections that focus on different forms of resistance in the respective places. The concluding section highlights some of the important factors that may have shaped the politics of resistance in the two places in distinct ways. I delve deeper into that question more fully in Chapter 5.

The many forms of popular struggles in Majuli

Andolans, boycotts, and occupation

Three months into my fieldwork, in mid-February 2013, I heard about an upcoming public meeting at the Auniati sattra meeting hall organized by *Majuli Suraksha Samannaya Mancha* (hereafter MSSM), a coalition of roughly two dozen activist/cultural organizations in Majuli. MSSM came into being in 2006 under the initiative of a group of *sattradhikars* (heads of *sattras*)

and local community leaders who envisaged a collective voice for the protection of the island from flood and erosion. MSSM was conceived as a platform for this collective voice. On the day of the scheduled meeting, February 18, I arrived at the venue a bit early so I could introduce myself to the MSSM members and have a casual conversation with them. The meeting began at noon and went on for over three hours. There were only 20 to 25 participants, which included a few *satradhikars*, representatives of a handful of member organizations (e.g. AASU, AJYCP, and KMSS), local intellectuals, reporters of local dailies, and ordinary citizens. I did not have any prior information about the agenda of the meeting, but I assumed it to be on the question of protection of Majuli and, perhaps, for developing strategies to ensure greater accountability of the state, as that was a concern I had heard repeatedly from communities and activists alike in Majuli. However, the meeting's agenda turned out to be very different from what I assumed. It was to discuss why MSSM was not able to gain '*aastha*' (public trust) in Majuli and how to overcome that crisis. Thus, I was made aware early on that MSSM, an umbrella of several activist and cultural organizations in Majuli supposedly fighting together for the protection of Majuli, actually lacked a sufficient popular base in the island.

Over the course of the next three hours, several people spoke, reflecting on ways that would help MSSM win public trust in the island. Some speakers, including the *satradhikar* of Auniati *sattra*, pointed out that the lack of public trust in MSSM was to do with the latter's failure, thus far, in ensuring appropriate protection measures by the state. Other speakers linked the lack of public trust in MSSM to internal crises within the coalition, that is, the lack of consistency in its campaigns, irregular meetings and discussions, and failure to reach out to different member organizations, particularly the tribal organizations. The representatives of AASU and AJYCP emphasized the need for greater '*jana chetana*' (public awareness) and '*gana*

jagaran' (mass mobilization) in Majuli that could make MSSM much more effective. The *satradhikars*, on the other hand, publicly criticized the AASU and AJYCP activists for a recent protest event that they had organized against the visit of a high-powered Parliamentary Committee of the Government of India to the island. This committee was comprised of the Water Resources minister of the central government and his state counterpart, the Member of Parliament (MP) of the local constituency, and the Chair of the Brahmaputra Board. On this occasion, the local AASU and AJYCP activists gathered at Kamalabari *ghat*, the port of arrival for the Parliamentary Committee, and waved black flags at the committee, sending a message of boycotting the committee's visit to the island. This gesture, according to the *satradhikars*, was too "uncivil" for Majuli. The Auniati *satradhikar* remarked:

Majuli is the land of the *sattras*, and the people of the island are known to be *xohisnu* (tolerant). Such extreme form of protest should be our last resort. We should stay away from such acts in future and adopt more peaceful (*shantipurna*) means of protesting.

That Majuli, being the land of the *sattras*, is a '*xohisnu*' and '*shantipurna*' place has come to play an important role in the dominant discourse in the island, and is often cited by the local leadership as the reason why there has not been a large-scale mass movement in the island.⁸⁸

After three hours of deliberation, the participants did not arrive at any substantial decision. Instead, another meeting was scheduled for March 2nd, to be held in Kamalabari, since Kamalabari is the commercial hub of the island and it was expected that more people would participate in the meeting in an accessible venue like Kamalabari. However, this meeting did not take place, and over the course of my yearlong fieldwork in Majuli, MSSM did not meet again.

⁸⁸ In the several meetings that I had with different *satradhikars*, they always made it a point to emphasize that being a land of the *sattras*, Majuli ought to remain a "peaceful" place, by which they basically meant that there was no place for any *andolan* (movement) in the island. They argued that solution to the crises in Majuli would come *only* through dialogue with the state, and not through activism.

A few weeks later, I had a meeting with a group of TMPK (All Mising Students' Union) activists at Nayabazar in eastern Majuli. I asked the TMPK activists why there was no representation of the organization in the MSSM meeting at Auniati. Without mincing any words, the TMPK activists explained their position thus:

We were active in MSSM earlier, but we realized soon that the organization is upper caste dominated and it has a bias towards the Garamur-Kamalabari region, i.e. the bastion of the *sattras*. You may notice that the Brahmaputra Board's interventions are also concentrated in the Garamur-Kamalabari region whereas there is hardly any intervention in the northeastern portion of the island, a predominantly Mising area. Such is the level of casteism that a few years ago, when some of us from TMPK went to deliver an invitation letter for a rally to one of the *sattradhikars*, he refused to take the letter from our hand. We had to drop the letter on the ground. How can we think of a mass movement in the island if a section of the population, which is also the largest section, is treated like "untouchables" by our own leadership?⁸⁹

But the TMPK activists' critique of MSSM was not limited to caste politics alone. During this conversation, the activists also highlighted that the "vocabulary of protest," to borrow Guha and Martinez-Alier's (1997: 11-13) term, adopted by MSSM has been highly ineffective. These activists strongly believed that given the urgency of the crises of flooding and erosion in Majuli, what was required was a sustained mass movement, and that MSSM as an umbrella organization of activist groups in the island was failing to do so. The necessity of a different "vocabulary of protest" in the island was raised by many others as well, including community members in my study villages and activists belonging to different student unions and community-based organizations.

To understand why the member organizations of MSSM were not able to organize a mass movement in the island on their own, we need to closely look at the broader goals of these organizations. For organizations such as AASU, AJYCP, TMPK, and KMSS, their primary goals are not directly related to the crises in Majuli. These are statewide organizations with much

⁸⁹ Conversation with TMPK members in Nayabazar, Majuli, March 20, 2013.

broader goals, and the issue of flooding and erosion in Majuli is of secondary, if not peripheral, concern for them. The genesis of AASU goes back to a series of pre-independence and early post-independence student activism, which focused mainly on “*Bhasa Andolan*” (i.e. the movement to re-claim Assamese as the official language in the state, replacing Bengali), although the organization itself came into being in the 1960s.⁹⁰ This student body rose to particular prominence during the 1970s-1980s *Assam Movement*, aimed at expelling “illegal immigrants” from Assam, mainly the Bangladeshi immigrants (Hussain 1993). Although over the years AASU has become an important voice on various socio-political issues in Assam, the organization is still identified mainly with the issue of Bangladeshi infiltration and the protection of the Assamese identity. Thus, despite its involvement in the cause of protection of Majuli, the latter has never become a central agenda for this organization.

AJYCP emerged as an offshoot of AASU in the late 1970s, with a focus on “full autonomy” for Assam.⁹¹ Thus, for AJYCP, too, the crisis in Majuli is not its primary concern. The same is the case with TMPK. Formed in 1978, TMPK’s roots also go back to the pre-independence era when mobilizations of Mising students took place in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. TMPK emerged as a movement demanding autonomy of the Mising tribe under the provision of the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Today, after the demand for autonomy has been achieved, TMPK continues to be a voice of the Mising population across the state on various socio-political issues concerning the community. It is thus clear that the issue of flooding and erosion in Majuli is not central to any of these organizations. Instead, these organizations are tied together by their broader concern for “identity politics”. Even though these

⁹⁰ For more details about AASU, see the organization’s website: www.aasu.org.in

⁹¹ By “full autonomy” for Assam, AJYCP demands a sixth schedule type of an arrangement for the entire state of Assam, which I find not only impossible to achieve, but extremely unrealistic.

organizations have led a number of protest activities in Majuli over the years, including public rallies, sit-ins, boycotts, and petitions, these initiatives have been neither consistent nor concerted. KMSS's larger vision, perhaps, comes closest to the challenges facing the peasantry in Majuli. But this organization is relatively new and its social base in Majuli is still quite weak. Thus, even for KMSS, the issue of Majuli has not gained enough salience in its political agenda.

Thus, overall, Majuli has yet to experience a sustained mass movement for the cause of the protection of the island's landmass and the livelihoods of its rural population. In discussing about conditions that can trigger social movements, Guha (2010 [1989]) noted the importance of the "material structure" of society and the "forms of domination" as important conditions for social movement. Bebbington et al. (2008) highlighted, in similar vein, the role of "accumulation dynamics" behind different manifestations of social movements. More generally, social movements scholarship has also drawn on the Gramscian (1971) notion of "revolutionary consciousness" of the masses in examining processes that may enable or prevent mass movements. As mentioned above, I will take up the question of factors that may have contributed to the distinct geographies of resistances in Majuli and Rohmoria in Chapter 5. For now, however, my focus is to lay out the varied landscapes of resistance in the two places. In Majuli, as the above discussion shows, the existing social organizations and their leaderships have failed to organize a large-scale, island-wide social movement. Nonetheless, there have been sporadic acts of militant activism in the island, often taking place spontaneously and without any leadership as such. Below, I discuss a few such instances.

Election Boycott by Salmora village

The most recent act of spontaneous mobilization in the island was the boycott of the 2014 Parliamentary election by the village community at Salmora. This election was one of the most memorable events in the recent history of the country, given the unprecedented role of the media in this election, the surge of the Hindu right wing (the Bharatiya Janata Party), and a record 66.38% voter turnout, “the highest ever turnout in India’s national election history [beating] the previous record of 64.01 set in 1984” (Al Jazeera, May 12, 2014). The whole nation was gripped by an election frenzy.

Against such a nationwide tide, the people of Salmora village in Majuli had decided to boycott the election, as they felt they were being failed by the successive governments.⁹² To this end, an ‘election boycott committee’ was formed in the village, which organized a series of meetings in different hamlets and put up banners and posters at different places in the village declaring Salmora as a ‘*Nirbachan Barjita Anchal*’ (Election Prohibited Area) (see Figure 27 below).

⁹² After the devastating 2012 flood, which also accelerated the process of erosion in the village, a *Committee for the Rehabilitation of Flood and Riverbank Erosion affected Families in Salmora* was constituted, and the committee met the governor of Assam as well as the SDO (Civil), Majuli. It submitted a petition with a specific demand of speedy rehabilitation of 511 families in Salmora that had suffered from erosion in recent past. The committee regularly followed up with the local and the district administration on this issue, albeit with no luck. Thus, there was an accumulation of frustration among the Salmora people, ultimately resulting in the election boycott.



Figure 25: *Election Prohibited Area* banner at Salmora. (Photo: author, 2014).

Election campaigns were strictly prohibited within the boundary of the village, and a decision was taken not to allow any political candidates to enter the village till the election was over. The state tried hard to dissuade the community from boycotting the election. First, there were several government delegations that visited the village and addressed large gatherings trying to convince them to vote. Then they encouraged the villagers to choose the “NOTA” (none of the above) option, introduced for the first time, instead of abstaining from voting altogether. But the villagers realized this to be a trick and they rejected the “NOTA” option vehemently. In one instance, police forces came and removed all the posters and banners from the village and threatened government employees with dire consequences if they boycotted the election. But the community at Salmora remained resolute in their decision and sent a strong message to the state by successfully boycotting the election.

Militant activism by the Sumoimari community

In July 2013, a group of villagers in Sumoimari set fire to thousands of bags at the Brahmaputra Board's worksite in the village and called for non-cooperation with the Board's work going forward unless the Board functioned in more accountable ways. The bags burned were bags that the Brahmaputra Board had procured for the purpose of bank revetment in Sumoimari. As per the original plan of the Board, as the villagers knew, the contractor was supposed to use 'geo-bags,' believed to be seepage- and erosion-resistant. Instead, one evening, the contractor quietly brought in thousands of ordinary bags, which were laid at the bank the next morning. These ordinary bags came to the notice of some villagers, who then spread the news in the village. Being irked by this mischief, the next morning, the villagers got together at the worksite and set fire to about fifteen thousand such bags. The local AASU activists also came to the venue and mobilized protest activities against the Board. The whole incident was widely covered by the local media. The Board was forced to stop work at the site immediately until the contractor procured geo-bags for this project.

In an earlier instance, in the mid-1990s, a large group of families from Sumoimari occupied forestland in Nambor-Doigrung Wildlife Sanctuary in Golaghat district to resettle themselves. Repeatedly displaced due to flooding and erosion, and having not received governmental support for rehabilitation, a few dozen families from the village went and occupied plots of land inside the wildlife sanctuary and began cultivating various crops. They had also filed a petition in the Guwahati high court seeking a "stay order" on their potential eviction by the state forest department. A series of unforeseen events soon overwhelmed the community, however. Attacks from wild elephants came too frequently, with devastations to their crops and

houses. Diseases like malaria, typhoid, jaundice, and diarrhea were so widespread there that within two years of occupation, eight young men, all in their 20s and early 30s, died while many others fell seriously ill.

On top of all, the forest department soon launched a massive eviction drive in the reserve, forcing all the families to return to Majuli. Reflecting on this experience, Jibeshwar Mili commented that it was not a complete failure even though they had to return to Sumoimari:

After all, a year after we returned from Nambor-Doigrung, the government rehabilitated thirty families from the village in Panikheti, Golaghat with 2 *bigha* lands to each family, which, I believe, was partly in response to our occupation of the forestland and the demand for resettlement.⁹³

Some of these acts of militant activism have had significant impacts – both symbolically and materially. However, they have mostly remained limited to specific places and time. In other words, these are “situated struggles” (Moore 2005), yet to be adequately scaled up. The impacts of such forms of activism have therefore remained limited. At the same time, the local population in the island has also resorted to various everyday forms of resistance, as the following section highlights.

Everyday resistances in Majuli

James Scott’s (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* has influenced peasant studies immensely. Through an in-depth ethnographic study of smallholders and landless laborers in a Malaysian village, Scott argued that “peasant rebellions, let alone peasant ‘revolutions,’ are far and few between”, and that whenever they occur, however rarely, they are “nearly always crushed unceremoniously” (1985: 29). Scott therefore called for attention to *everyday resistance*, that is,

⁹³ Author interview with Jibeshwar Mili, September 23, 2013, Sumoimari.

the “prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rent and interest from them” (1985: 29). Such *everyday resistance*, according to Scott (1985: 29), consists of:

[T]he ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no co-ordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does ‘between revolts’ to defend its interests as best it can.

Scott’s idea of everyday resistance has been deployed by other scholars in different contexts, and it has also been a subject of wide criticism (Adas 1986; Haynes and Prakash 1991; Li 2007; Mitchell 1990; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986; Wolford 2010). Haynes and Prakash (1991: 10-11), for example, argued that in putting forward the idea of “everyday resistance,” Scott does not question “the assumption of the autonomous subject, which is as pervasive [in his concept] as in work stressing more confrontational forms of resistance.” They challenge Scott’s idea of “the ability of the subordinate to penetrate the ruling-class ideology and achieve a consciousness free from determination from above.” In similar vein, Timothy Mitchell (1990: 548) critiques Scott for invoking the figure of a “rational peasant,” as well as arguing that Scott’s conceptualizations of the different forms of domination are “excluded from the analysis of power and resistance.” Mitchell (1990) critiques Scott for distinguishing between “behavior” and “consciousness,” between “body” and “mind,” which, Mitchell believes, are false distinctions. These scholars have also critiqued Scott’s engagement with the Gramscian notion of “hegemony,” which they believe is too narrow an interpretation of what Gramsci originally meant by hegemony (Haynes and Prakash 1991; Mitchell 1990). Critiquing Scott’s insistence that hegemony can exist only when the ruling ideology determines all consciousness, these scholars instead point out that “conflict

may be constantly present within any given hegemony, and ‘contradictory consciousnesses’ may coexist” (Haynes and Prakash 1991: 11).

My engagement with Scott’s theoretic of ‘everyday resistance’ is therefore a contingent one. I pay careful attention to the above criticism of the notion of ‘everyday resistance’ even as I demonstrate that the peasantry in Majuli has deployed various forms of everyday resistance to challenge the hegemony of the ruling elites. As discussed above, Majuli lacked a sustained mass movement. Hence, for the peasantry in the island, devastated as they are by years of flooding and erosion, everyday forms of resistance have become an important way of expressing their discontent with the state, even though we have to be careful not to romanticize these acts of resistance, since the impacts of such resistances are limited. As Eric Hobsbawm (1973) reminded us, the peasantry deploys such resistances by mainly “working the system ... to their minimum disadvantage,” and not to overhaul the system (Scott 1985: xv).

In Majuli, badmouthing government officials, contractors, and local political elites is a common practice of the rural population. Village residents in my research villages would often refer to government officials and contractors as “*ghosh-khor*” (corrupt), “*akamanya*” (inefficient), and “*jodha-murkho*” (stupid). They would also point out how they believed that the engineers, contractors, and politicians were working hand-in-glove in misappropriating public funds that were meant to be spent on the governance of hazards. Village residents also frequently badmouthed the *sattradhikars* in the riverside villages in Majuli. Even though the *sattradhikars* were generally revered in the island because of their socio-religious role, many in the riverside villages explained the *sattras* as embodiment of casteist and feudal power relations. A schoolteacher at Salmora criticized the role of the *sattras* in the following words:

All the major *sattras* in Majuli have huge plots of land outside the island. So, even if the whole island disappears, the *sattras* are safe. But what about us? Has any of the *sattras*

offered to rehabilitate at least a few of the displaced families in the huge land that they own outside? Instead, each time there is major erosion, the *satradhikars* would remind us of Majuli's cultural heritage and thereby dissuade us from out-migrating, as if the burden of preserving Majuli's cultural heritage lies solely on us.⁹⁴

Another person in the same village had the following to say about the *sattras*:

Ataitkoi dangor Harir kotha, tatokoi dangor sawul kotha ' [God may be supreme, but more supreme is the question of bread]. So, the *sattras* must rethink their responsibilities and focus on the real issues that concern the citizens. *Paal-naam, bhaona, bhagawat-path*, and other such festivals will be meaningful only as long as the island is protected and people have a livelihood.⁹⁵

There were also various instances of pilfering, sabotaging, and non-compliances by the flood- and erosion-affected communities in the island. For instance, pilfering of materials from the construction sites, such as boulder spurs and RCC porcupines, was commonplace.⁹⁶ Furthermore, when it came to working on the Brahmaputra Board's projects, non-compliance was a common practice. Sometimes workers would spend a good amount of time of their work-day chatting, and some other times they would simply do a shoddy job. In Sumoimari, for instance, non-compliance was so evident in a Brahmaputra Board worksite at one point that the agency had to constitute a '*Tadaraki Samiti*' (monitoring committee) of village leaders to ensure compliance, although the committee was hardly successful.

While economic considerations – that is, the opportunity to make a few easy bucks through pilfering or non-compliance – are one of the factors influencing such acts, they cannot be explained merely through economic reasoning. Instead, I would argue that extra-economic considerations have been far more central to these acts. In essence, these are acts of everyday resistance by the most downtrodden families in Sumoimari. It is through such acts that they have

⁹⁴ Interview with Dulal Bora, February 23, 2013, Salmora.

⁹⁵ Interview with Hemkanta Dutta, March 3, 2013, Salmora.

⁹⁶ This issue was, in fact, one of the major discussion points in the MSSM meeting in Auniati sattra in February 2013 that I discussed in the beginning of this chapter.

expressed their frustration with the government agencies that have failed to protect them from flood and erosion. If an economic consideration alone was to motivate such acts, they would have been far more rampant vis-à-vis any sort of projects in the riverside villages. But that was not the case. Instead, such acts of pilfering and non-compliance were specific to the projects pertaining to flood and erosion control, thus reflecting the communities' grievances against the government agencies handling these disasters.

The acts of non-compliance were seen on various occasions in the riverside villages in Majuli. In Salmora, for instance, the Kumar families expressed their non-compliance with the state by continuing to dig clayey soil along the riverbank against the state's directive. As discussed in Chapter 3, in recent years, the state administration has tried to stop the potters in Salmora from digging clay along riverbanks. However, the families in Salmora hardly paid any heed to this call, and have maintained their traditional craft. On this issue, Salmora's *gaonbura* raised a pertinent question. He asked: "If Salmora's erosion is because we dig clay for our pottery, what was behind the complete disappearance of the Ahatguri *mouza* in lower Majuli that did not have any Kumar population, hence no pottery?"⁹⁷ This was the general sentiment of all the potter families in the village. They were all aware of the government's position on the question of digging of clay along the riverbanks. But they ignored the government's call to halt digging and have carried on in their craft.

Petitions as protest

Petitions are one of the most easily accessible means through which the humble subjects of the state have historically voiced their concerns to the authorities (van Voss 2002). In Assam, too,

⁹⁷ Interview with Salmora *gaonbura*, January 8, 2013.

there has been a long tradition of petition-writing by the peasants and the downtrodden populations in general. Saikia (2014: 75) discusses at length how, throughout the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, “the peasants’ world of politics came to be expressed through [...] petitions” in Assam. By noting that “volumes of petitions [were] submitted to [the] rulers” during this period, Saikia (2014: 74) shows the “[Assamese] peasants’ continuous engagement with their rulers, articulation of their grievances, protests against arbitrary land policies, and demands for the redressal of their grievances.”

In Majuli, too, particularly in the postcolonial period, volumes of petitions were submitted by local communities and activist groups to the state administration at different levels.⁹⁸ The majority of these petitions were written to the sub-divisional magistrate (SDO-Civil), the chief of the civil administration in the island. In addition, petitions were also written to other authorities, such as the District Commissioner, the Chief Minister of the state, the Governor of Assam, the Chairman of the Central Water Commission, and, occasionally, the Prime Minister of India. The contents of these petitions ranged from broad grievances concerning the island’s protection and development to specific issues such as breaching of an embankment in a particular location or the rehabilitation of families in a particular village.

The content and the tone of petitions also depended on the petitioner (see Annexure 1 for a sample petition). For instance, while petitions coming from student unions (i.e. AASU, AJYCP, etc.) have often contained threats of militant activisms (e.g. road blockade, sit-ins, boycotts, etc.) if the authorities failed to fulfill the demands, petitions coming from the MSSM,

⁹⁸ For example, at the office of the sub-divisional magistrate in Garamur, Majuli, I was shown the ‘petitions file’ by the officer in-charge, which contained dozens of petitions written by various organizations, political parties, and village communities. Similarly, in the offices of some of the activist organizations in Majuli, I also saw files containing copies of numerous petitions that they had submitted to the government over the years.

on the other hand, were much more conformist. This was largely indicative of the statist approaches of the *sattradhikars* who happened to be at the helm of MSSM. In either case, however, petitions have not been very effective in influencing the processes of environmental governance in Majuli. For the state, the petitions did not seem to mean much. They remain buried in the dusty files in dingy government offices, perhaps only to be revisited when a researcher like me wanted to look at some of those.⁹⁹ Given the oppressive colonial regime and the resultant challenges of public mobilization, petitions might have been a very important means of resistance for the colonial peasantry (cf. Saikia 2014), but the same is not the case in the postcolonial period. Hence, the continued dominance of petitions in Majuli only reflects the obsolete nature of popular protest in Majuli.

Rituals as resistance

In his influential work on rituals and resistance in South India, Nicholas Dirks (1991) highlights the “subversiveness” (235) of rituals or spiritualism and calls for “situating ritual practice and ideology in a world of hegemony and struggle” (219). In essence, Dirks argues that the role of rituals lies beyond their perceived, or overt, religious and cultural roles. Rituals, according to him, “constitute an important site of resistance” (1991: 219). In most societies, religious beliefs and rituals are central to everyday lives of people (Holloway and Valins 2002); they are central to the construction of people’s identities, their practices, and thereby their political lives (Holloway and Valins 2002). This is particularly the case in Majuli. Being the hub of the *sattras*,

⁹⁹ I had obtained copies of petitions from the office of the SDO (Civil) in Majuli. They were indeed buried amidst hundreds of dusty files, which made it quite an experience to unearth those petitions. Thanks to one of the clerks in the office, who happened to be from my neighboring village, for going out of his way to help me find these documents. As I followed up during the course of my fieldwork the question of whether or not the demands made in these petitions were fulfilled, I had found out however that the answer was an overwhelming ‘No’.

as discussed in Chapter 1, the social landscape of Majuli is dominated by a variety of *Neo-Vaishnavite* rituals, and most people in the island are devout followers of these rituals. For the local communities in the island, these rituals perform several roles: they are a vital part of the island's cultural landscape, they provide solace to communities in times of disaster and crisis, and they are also an important form of social resistance in the island.

As the nerve-center of the *sattras*, the canvas of *Neo-Vaishnavite* rituals in Majuli is large. It consists of a whole array of rituals comprised of devotional songs and prayers (e.g. *Borgeet*, *Naam-Kirtan*, *Bhagawat Path*, *Akhanda-Bhagawat*, *Paal-Naam*, etc.), plays based on religious texts (e.g. *Bhaona*, *Ankiya-Naat*, *Raas-leela*, etc.), and worshipping and feasts (*Puja*, *Bhoj*, and *Bhog*). These rituals are integral part of the *sattras* as well as the villages in Majuli in general. Each village in Majuli, regardless of caste divisions, has a *namgharh*¹⁰⁰ that functions as the venue for many of these rituals. Most of these rituals are observed annually, while some others, such as *Naam-Kirtan* or *Puja*, are observed at any point of the year depending upon specific situations.

In Majuli, some of these rituals are particularly practiced to worship the Brahmaputra, thus reflecting a process of “sacralization” (Baviskar 1995: 161) of the river. The Brahmaputra is a sacred river. It is not only essential for the livelihoods of millions of people in Assam, but the river is also revered and worshipped by many communities. It is also one of the few male rivers in the country (Brahmaputra means the ‘son of Lord Brahma’), which further connotes that it possesses special force and fury. It is not docile. Indeed, the Brahmaputra is referred to as the ‘Mighty Brahmaputra.’ The river thus occupies a special place in the popular imagination in

¹⁰⁰ One of the legacies of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* tradition, a *naamghar* plays multiple roles in each Assamese village. It functions as a temple, thereby as a venue for various religious/spiritual activities; a community hall, hosting various socio-political events; a stage for plays and other cultural events, and so on.

Assamese society. People in Majuli observe various rituals as a form of prayer to the mighty Brahmaputra so that they are protected from flooding and erosion. But at the same time, these are also forms of protest against the state, even though unintentionally at times. Through such rituals, the local communities in the island have proclaimed the failure of the state to protect its citizens, hence their recourse to worshipping the river god. Below, I discuss two such rituals to illustrate this point.

Puja and the offering of 'bhog'

Bhog, a kind of rice pudding, has a sacred role in the context of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* tradition. In Majuli, the offering of *bhog* to the Brahmaputra has a long tradition, but there is a specific backstory related to Dakhinpat *sattra*. Established in 1662, this *sattra*, like all other *sattras* in Majuli, was a victim of flood and erosion in its first two hundred years. But since its rehabilitation in the current location in 1870, it has never been affected by erosion again. The legend has it that after moving to the current location, the then *satradhikar* of Dakhinpat had performed a *puja* on the bank of the Brahmaputra and offered *bhog* to the river praying for the protection of the *sattra*, a practice continued by the subsequent *satradhikars* of Dakhinpat *sattra*, which, it is widely believed in Majuli, is the key reason behind the protection of this *sattra*. While there are geomorphological explanations to the relative safety of the Dakhinpat area (see Sarma and Phukan 2004 for this), the popular belief behind the miraculous protection of the *sattra* is to do with the magical power of *bhog* offered by the Dakhinpat *satradhikar*. There is a general faith in divine power of the *satradhikars* in Majuli.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ It is important to note in this context that in the highly *Neo-Vaishnavite* landscape of Majuli, the *satradhikars* are almost deified. So, against the common use of the title 'Sri' (an equivalent of 'Mr.')

to address Hindu men in the Indian subcontinent, 'Sri Sri' is used for the *satradhikars*, thus denoting their

Hence, whenever any place in the island experiences large-scale erosion, it is common for a prominent *satradhikar* to perform puja near the erosion site and offer *bhog* to the river. The Dakhinpat *sattradhikar* plays an even more significant role in such rituals, given the special deification that he enjoys in the island. This *sattradhikar* has, at times, gone around to different places in the island, performing the *puja* rituals for the protection of these places. Whether such rituals have worked or not is a different story, but they do occupy a special place in the spiritual imagination of the local population who therefore continue to observe these rituals.

The second example of ‘rituals as resistance’ that I would like to discuss here is an event observed by the village community in Salmora in April, 2013. It was a five-day long program, comprised of, among other things, non-stop *Bhagawat path* (reading the Srimad Bhagawat Gita, Sankardeva’s version of the Hindu sacred text Gita), two *bhaonas*, and a puja at the end. The whole event was extremely elaborate. Salmora is a large village, with more than six hundred households, as described in Chapter 1. All the households in the village, including families that had recently migrated to places outside of Majuli, had participated in this event. Salmora looked completely a different place during this period: everyone wore their finest dress; guests poured in from all over the island and outside; every household in the village had a *toran*¹⁰² in front of it, with *diya* (oil lamp made of clay with a cotton wick dipped in mustard oil or ghee) and *dhoop* (incense) lit up around it; and the sound of prayers at the *naamghar* reverberating the village landscape constantly. Below I present my field notes on the last day of this event to provide a sense of this extremely elaborate event.

more-than-human being. Furthermore, the common people in the island address the *satradhikars* as ‘*Prabhu Ishwar*’ (literally, the God).

¹⁰² A toran is a makeshift gate made of banana trees decorated with mango leaves, often as part of auspicious occasion.

Fieldnotes, April 28, 2013, Salmora

It was a hot and humid day, but thousands of people, from Salmora and elsewhere, gathered at the *naamghar* reading the *Bhagawat* together and praying. *Jalpan* (light refreshment) was served to guests from outside. The men wore *dhoti*, *gamosa*, and *seleng-chador* – attire considered auspicious for such occasion – and the women wore *chador-mekhelas*, traditional Assamese wear. At about 4 in the afternoon, *Bhagawat-path* was brought to a closure with the *deka-satradhikar*¹⁰³ of Auniati *sattra* offering *ashirwad* (blessing) to the community. Thereafter, they have proceeded to the final phase of the program.¹⁰⁴ Once the *Bhagawat-path* ceremony ended, a group of elderly men from the village walked around the *naamghar*, chanting prayers and playing *khol-taal* (traditional Assamese instruments), with the *bor-pathek* (the chief devotee in a village) carrying the *Bhagawat* on his head. Meanwhile, in one corner of the *naamghar*, a *puja* was conducted by the *Deka-satradhikar* of Auniati *sattra* who also prepared the *bhog* to be offered to the Brahmaputra. Once the *puja* was over, a village leader made an announcement that everyone from the village would now pick up a fistful of soil from the *puja-bedi* and march together to the river to offer it the soil. This act of offering soil to the river was to pray for no more soil erosion in the village.

The sun was still very strong, but everyone lined up outside the *naamghar* after collecting soil from the *puja-bedi* to march down to the river. Leading the crowd was a group of men who played *gayan-bayan*,¹⁰⁵ followed by the *patheks* and a few other village leaders who carried the *bhog* and the *xorai*,¹⁰⁶ who were then followed by thousands of other villagers. After walking for about 20-25 minutes, they arrived at the river where they spent more than an hour in knee-deep water performing the rituals. As they offered *bhog*, *xorai*, and soil to the river, *gayan-bayan* continued at the background, the elderly women chanted ‘*uruli*’ together (a sound made by women by rolling their tongue), and everyone else chanted – “*Jai Mahabahu Brahmaputra! Jai Salmora!*” (Long live the mighty Brahmaputra! Long live the Salmora!).

The above event signifies two things. First, it reflects the local peoples’ devotion to and the ‘sacralization’ of the Brahmaputra river, and hence such submission to the river. Second, this was also a political act (cf. Dirks 1991). These rituals expressed the community’s lack of

¹⁰³ *Deka-satradhikar* refers to the junior *satradhikar* of a *sattra*. Their role is like that of a trainee who will eventually become the *satradhikar*.

¹⁰⁴ Dirks’ (1991: 236) observation about certain aspects of rituals being “invented anew” holds true in the case of Salmora as well. The last day of the event, for example, as the program was happening, I noticed that a group of village leaders/elders got together in one corner of the *naamghar* to decide upon – rather, invent – the next phase of their ritual. While a *puja* and offering *bhog* to the river were part of the original plan, it seems that this group of men added a new element to the ritual, that is, the offering of soil from the *puja-bedi* (altar) to the river. I have observed them coming up with this idea during the course of their small group discussion, which was later followed by everyone. This might have, then, become a part of this ritual in case of its future observance.

¹⁰⁵ *Gayan-bayan* is a particular kind of musical performance using *khol* (an Assamese drum), *taal* (cymbal), and a specific kind of song and dance.

¹⁰⁶ *Xorai* in this context refers to a sacred offering kept on a kind of a vase made of bell-metal or copper.

confidence in the role of the state. It is important to keep in mind that the construction of boulder spurs in Salmora by the Brahmaputra Board was still ongoing while this five-day long event was taking place in the village. Government officials and contractors present in the worksites in the village witnessed this 'Bhagawat path' event. They even witnessed how thousands of villagers walked into the river, just next to one of the boulder spurs, and offered prayers for the protection of the village. This was thus an act of subversion on the part of the Salmora community. Through the performance of these rituals, they had sent a clear message about their lack of trust in the current interventions by the state, thus demanding, perhaps, a different role of the state.

Whether or not the forms of resistance in Majuli have been successful in influencing the state, the discussion above shows that the transcript of resistance in Majuli is a diverse one. The people in the island have resorted to a wide variety of forms of protest, sometimes led by political organizations while other times emerging in more spontaneous ways. Nonetheless, what is still missing in the island is a mass movement, a phenomenon that has played out differently in Rohmorria. The following section focuses on Rohmorria.

Rohmorria: a case of a mass movement

Despite a wide array of resistance practices, as discussed above, the struggle in the island has remained largely moderate, and whatever acts of boycott and other forms of militant activism took place, they remained mostly isolated instances. The island lacked a sustained, large-scale mass movement. Similar to Majuli, the peasantry in Rohmorria also took recourse to various *everyday forms of resistance*, particularly acts such as badmouthing about the state actors and

politicians, foot-dragging, and non-compliances, among others (Scott 1985).¹⁰⁷ However, unlike Majuli, the Rohmoría peasantry has also been organized under a remarkably well-coordinated mass movement. Led by strong and charismatic leadership, the Rohmoría struggle has been a long-lasting one, with widespread popular support from across social categories. For the purpose of our understanding, I have classified the history of the Rohmoría movement into two phases: the *moderate phase* and the *radical phase*.

The moderate phase

The Rohmoría struggle dates back to the late 1970s. As the erosion activities in the area took an unprecedented turn by 1975, with the main channel of the Brahmaputra moving drastically southward, eroding massive landmasses, the communities in Rohmoría felt it urgent to mobilize and put pressure on the state for effective protection of their place (Borgohain, n.d.). Thus, in 1979, an amorphous group called the ‘Rohmoría, Lahoal, Rongpara, Bokdung Baan Pratirodh Samity’ (RLRBBPS) was formed to represent the concerns of the local communities in the region. The key tactics of this group included writing petitions, sending delegations to meet with concerned officials and ministers, and holding occasional community meetings. For the next five years, this group submitted several petitions to the government demanding effective protection of the area, actions which did not result in much success. The state responded to these petitions by sending local level officials to pay a few visits to the area and offering “election time assurances” through political candidates and parties (Lahiri and Borgohain 2011: 33). As Biplob Gogoi, the most prominent leader of the Rohmoría struggle, commented:

¹⁰⁷ This information is based on my several encounters with Rohmoría residents during interviews, focus groups, and informal conversations in August-September 2013.

We realized early on the limitations of moderate tactics. The state does not listen to such moderate voices. It has to be *forced* to act. Moderate activities can at the most find some newspaper headlines, but nothing more.¹⁰⁸

The moderate phase of activism in Rohmoria did not last long. The frustration of the peasantry grew faster, as they realized that the state was hardly paying heed to the dozens of petitions that they had submitted. Nor did the politicians keep any of the election promises that they made. Meanwhile, more and more areas along the riverbanks had succumbed to erosion, and thousands of families lost their farmlands and homes. The peasantry in the riverside villages was getting restless for a lasting solution to their problem. Under such circumstances, the presence of a group of dedicated and experienced activists in the area worked as a perfect opportunity for mobilizing the masses. These activists, most notably Biplob Gogoi, made best use of this growing anger among local communities, and tried to channel that anger into something creative – *a movement*. Thus, by 1985, the Rohmoria struggle entered its second phase, a phase marked by remarkable creativity and radical activism.

The radical phase

This phase of the struggle can be divided into two parts: the first one (roughly 1985-1997) can be called the *consolidation phase*, and the period thereafter is the actual *radical phase*. The consolidation phase was an important phase in the struggle, since this phase marked a departure from the initial moderate phase of the struggle, and it also helped prepare the ground for a more radical turn in the movement. This phase was mainly characterized by village meetings, informal conversations between community members and activists, critical thinking and brainstorming by

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with Biplob Gogoi, September 12, 2013.

local activist leaders on how to strategize for a mass movement, and localized attempts to build a critical mass of dedicated activists who could commit to a long-lasting movement.

The consolidation phase culminated in an unprecedentedly large public meeting in 1997, which led to the formation of a group called the '*Rohmorja Khahaniya-O-Baan Pratirodh Samiti*' (Rohmorja Erosion and Flood Prevention Group). One of the first things that this group did was to construct a few wooden spurs to check erosion. This initiative drew massive public support: people came in waves from fifteen nearby villages and three tea gardens to participate in this voluntary work, logs and bamboos came free-flowing, and the project was completed after four months of voluntary work. All in all, six spurs were constructed by the community without any external support. Reflecting on this experience, one of the activists commented:

The spurs did not last long; they were washed away within a few years, but the social impact of this initiative was enormous. It brought the community together. Since people contributed their blood and sweat to this initiative, it helped deepening their sense of ownership of the place.¹⁰⁹

The leaderships of the movement took advantage of this growing sense of solidarity among the masses and initiated the next stage of activities. Soon after the construction of the spurs, a twenty-member group, consisting of both men and women, was constituted for the purpose of mass mobilization. The functioning of this group was highly innovative, involving village-to-village meetings, night stays in villages for more intensive discussions with key leaders in each village, and conducting a series of political workshops in different places in the Rohmorja region.¹¹⁰

Emboldened by the massive popular support that the above measures generated, thenceforth, the Rohmorja movement unleashed a whole range of mass-based activities. Between

¹⁰⁹ Conversation with Girin Phukan, September 13, 2013.

¹¹⁰ This information is based on interviews with Ranjan Gogoi, September 12-13, 2013.

1999 and 2008, a series of rallies and processions were organized both at Rohmoria and at the district headquarter in Dibrugarh (Lahiri 2008). These rallies were generally attended by hundreds of people, sometimes thousands. One such rally organized at Dibrugarh, for instance, was so large that some people in Rohmoria described it to me “the biggest rally in Assam since the Assam Andolan of the early 1980s.”¹¹¹ While participation of women was generally very high in the Rohmoria movement, as Biplob Gogoi recounted, the presence of women in this Dibrugarh rally was historic. Such a large participation of women also helped safeguard the male participants from police brutality, since the women formed human chains around the men, thus protecting them from the reach of the police and the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force). In another instance, there was a weeklong motorcycle rally aimed at mobilizing the riverside communities across Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district. The activists in the movement highlighted this as a “milestone” in building the constituency of the movement at the regional level.¹¹² There were also a number of ‘cycle rallies,’ ‘torchlight rallies’ (*Mashal Julus*), and ‘road blockades’ both within Rohmoria and its surrounding towns (Lahiri 2008). In one such instance in 2007, activists from the movement had blocked the National Highway (NH 37) at a location near the Chabua Airforce Base, triggering violent repression by police and CRPF. Nonetheless, they were able to maintain the blockade of the highway for more than an hour.

¹¹¹ Information based on focus group discussion in Natun Khagori Maijan village, Rohmoria, September 13, 2013.

¹¹² Meeting with a group of activists (including ex-leaders and current leaders of the movement) in Rohmoria, October 20, 2013.

Oil Blockade

The oil blockade is undoubtedly the most significant of all the activities in the Rohmoría movement. It is important to highlight in this context that several places on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra in Upper Assam have been well known for their oilfields, especially the Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia districts. Digboi, also known as the Oil City of Assam, located in Tinsukia district, was in fact where the first oil well in Asia was drilled. Besides ceaseless extraction of oil and natural gas from the existing fields, there is also a constant search for newer sources in the entire Sibsagar-Tinsukia belt. Rohmoría was not spared such operations either, even though the government continued to ignore the challenges facing the local population in the area. In 1998, the Oil India Limited (OIL), a public sector company, discovered a large oilfield in a place called Khagorijan within the Rohmoría area, and it started drilling immediately. The leadership in the Rohmoría struggle realized the political and economic significance of the discovery of oil in their area. For them, the discovery of the oilfield came as a “political opportunity” (Tarrow 1994) for more innovative resistance practices. Within a year’s time, in 1999, the movement leaderships decided to institute a complete ban on oil drilling in Rohmoría until the government ensured protection of Rohmoría from riverbank erosion. They deployed the ‘oil blockade’ as a bargaining strategy with the state, and it continues until today.

Biplob Gogoi described the actual execution of the oil blockade program in the following words:

We have executed an oil blockade by prohibiting both drilling in Rohmoría and the transportation of oil from the Khagorijan oil well. In other words, we have strictly prohibited the entry of OIL’s trucks and tankers to the area. Initially, we had to put great effort to implement the blockade, since it was a bold step, and unprecedented for this region. We literally had to keep strict vigil day and night, putting our lives at risk. But eventually the movement grew so strong that even if we placed a small bamboo pole horizontally on a street in the Rohmoría area, the OIL vehicles wouldn’t go past that point. The mass-base of the movement scared OIL and the government in general.¹¹³

¹¹³ Author interview with Biplob Gogoi, Rohmoría, August 17, 2013.

Another activist of the movement added:

We have had a few rounds of discussions with OIL officials wherein we clarified to them that we had nothing against OIL, and that the blockade was instead aimed at sending a strong message to the state. It hurt the government economically. Keep in mind that the OIL was incurring a loss of at least 10 lakhs rupees [roughly 15,000 USD] per day because of the blockade.¹¹⁴

The blockade was briefly lifted a few times, as the OIL agreed to fulfill some of the key demands made by the movement. As one of the activists informed me, the movement was able to ensure a total contribution of about 3 crore rupees (i.e. about half a million USD) from the OIL, in the form of cash and materials together. Other than these brief periods of lifting, the blockade has remained active until today and the Rohmoria movement prides itself on this.

The oil blockade, and the movement in general, has not been without impediments, however. The state has deployed various tactics to threaten the leaderships and break the movement. For instance, it was a common practice for high-ranking police officers to visit Biplob Gogoi at his residence, interrogate him, and try to persuade him to compromise with the state. Gogoi, who worked as a Gram Sevak (secretary at Gram Panchayat) for a living, was transferred several times to far-off places so as to distance him from the movement. However, each time, the local communities stood with Gogoi and protested against such “punishment transfers.”¹¹⁵ There were also instances of brutal crackdown of the movement by police and CRPF. In one of the public rallies, police ‘lathi charge’ (beating) injured hundreds of participants. Despite such regressive measures by the state, the movement remained committed to its cause, its leadership undeterred, and the ‘oil blockade’ still remains effective.

¹¹⁴ Author interview with Girin Phukan, Rohmoria, August 17, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Such transfers are popularly known in India as “punishment transfers” or “Punishment postings,” a common tactic used by the state against its opponents.

Collaborations

The activists in Rohmoria have continuously adopted new and innovative tactics to retain the growing mass support for the movement and put constant pressure on the state. To this end, the movement leadership has built strong collaboration with like-minded organizations, individuals, and research institutions. The collaboration with Dibrugarh University was one such initiative, which benefitted the movement enormously. Scholars in the Center for Studies in Geography and the Department of Applied Geology at Dibrugarh University carried out important research on Rohmoria's erosion crisis, which was useful for policy-makers and it also helped the local activists to become better informed about the scientific aspects of the issue.¹¹⁶ Additionally, there were seminars and workshops at Dibrugarh University specifically on the question of Rohmoria's erosion crisis, wherein activists from the field also participated and shared their grassroots experiences. Such initiatives helped the Rohmoria movement gain greater legitimacy as well as publicity.

Biplob Gogoi (2013) further noted that the collaboration with Dibrugarh University benefitted the movement politically. He explained that since some of the scholars at Dibrugarh University originally belonged to the Rohmoria area, they had a personal commitment to the place. These scholars brought in new ideas and organizational tactics, thus enriching the movement politically. "At the heart of the strength of the Rohmoria struggle," Gogoi commented, "lied the confluence of people with progressive thinking. And the University was one of the vital constituents of this confluence."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ for example, work of S.K. Lahiri, and J.N. Sarma.

¹¹⁷ Author interview with Biplob Gogoi, September 13, 2013.

The initiative for effective collaborations across scales was indeed a hallmark of the Rohmoriamovement. At the local level, the movement's strength has been in bringing together people of multiple ethnic groups such as Ahoms, Motoks, Kalitas, Kaivartas, Sutias, and the tea-tribes. It has also drawn support from the labor unions in the nearby tea gardens. At a more regional level, a '*Dibrugarh-Tinsukia Samiti*' was constituted, which helped expand the movement's influence across Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts. Additionally, the movement also established collaboration with the '*Dibrugarh Vikash Mancha*' (Dibrugarh Development Forum).

The Rohmoriam activists' initiative towards building state-wide alliances was also impressive. These activists forged alliances with state-level organizations such as KMSS, AASU, AJYCP, and All Assam Tai Students' Association (AATSA), and carried out some joint campaigns. Furthermore, in 2001, an Assam level organization called '*Sadau Asom Baan-Khahoniya Pratirodh Sangram Mancha*' (All Assam Revolutionary Front for Flood and Erosion Prevention) was formed. As an attempt to strengthening this state-level organization, a group of activists from Rohmoriam visited flood and erosion affected places around the state, including Majuli, Dhola, Lahorighat, Sadiya, and Dhubri, and held series of meetings with the local activists and organizations in these places. These visits also helped the Rohmoriam activists gain a deeper understanding of the issues of flooding and erosion in the Brahmaputra valley as a whole. Activists also organized a large public meeting in Golaghat district, which brought in activists and general public from all over the state, and the idea of a statewide movement on the question of flood and erosion gained further momentum. Meanwhile, *Burooz* (spur), a quarterly mouthpiece of the '*Sadau Asom Baan-Khahoniya Pratirodh Sangram Mancha*,' was brought out, which further helped spread awareness about the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape, the role of the state, and importance of a radical movement. Although *Burooz* did not last for very long, it was a

rare initiative in Assam and it helped enrich the statewide network of activists that the Rohmorias were trying to build. The state-wide alliances and networks brought together activists and organizations that were “bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck and Sikkink 1999: 89). This helped the Rohmorias struggle gain greater legitimacy, more innovative ideas, and a larger statewide influence. Such initiatives also gave salience to the issue of riverbank erosion at a larger level and helped bolster various local level struggles on the same issue.

Conclusion: why such vast differences between the two places?

This chapter laid out the diverse geographies of resistance and social movements in the Brahmaputra valley. It showed how the flood and erosion affected people in Majuli and Rohmorias have not remained mere victims of these disasters; rather, they have deployed various ways to put pressure on the state for more effective management of disasters, and environmental governance more broadly. At the same time, the chapter also demonstrated that the forms and practices of resistance in Majuli and Rohmorias are also marked by stark differences. In Majuli, while the landscape of resistance is quite diverse, it has broadly remained moderate in nature. The local population in the island has resorted to a whole range of *everyday resistances*, while the activist organizations have largely focused on writing petitions. Overall, the island has not yet experienced a sustained mass movement on the question of flooding and erosion. Rohmorias, on the other hand, has been a place with a strong, decades-long mass movement – one that has also tried to establish a statewide network of organizations to fight together for the protection of the vulnerable geographies in the Brahmaputra valley and safeguard the interests of the peasantry.

What, then, are the factors that have led to such vast differences between these two places in their forms and practices of resistance even though the nature of the crises facing both places is the same? This has to do with multiple factors, shaped by the historical-geographical specificities of the two places. As my discussion indicated, in the case of the Rohmoria movement, leadership has had a distinct role to play. This was not the case in Majuli, which lacked strong and charismatic leadership, while the existing leaderships in the island failed to garner mass support. The political landscape of the two places also needs to be situated within their different geographical contexts, one being a relatively isolated island in the middle of the Brahmaputra while the other one is characterized by oilfields, tea plantations, and proximity to prominent cities in the state. Similarly, Majuli's unique feature as the 'land of the *sattras*,' hence its image as a '*xohismu*' (tolerant) and '*shantipurna*' (peaceful) place, may help us understand why there has never been a mass movement or any form of concerted radical activism in the island despite the progressive deepening of its crises of flood and erosion. These are additional factors that have shaped the geographies of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria in distinct ways. The question of what might have led to different forms of resistance in the two places will be dealt in greater detail in the following chapter. It will also investigate how, based on these different forms of resistance, the state has functioned differently in the two places.



Figure 26: Rituals at Salmora *namghar*, Majuli. April 2013.



Figure 27: The Salmora community marching to the Brahmaputra to make offerings. April 2013.



Figure 18: The Salmora community praying and making offerings to the river. April 2013.



Figure 29: Worshipping the river by lighting *diya* on its bank. Salmora, April 2013.

Chapter 5

Resistance and the State

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the varied landscape of resistance by the flood- and erosion-affected rural communities in the Brahmaputra valley. I showed how the communities belonging to two places in the valley – Majuli and Rohmoria – have adopted very different forms of resistance in order to pressure the state for more effective environmental governance. This chapter expands this issue further by examining, *first*, the key factors shaping the different geographies of resistance in these two places, and *second*, the ways in which the state is impacted and re-shaped by the specific forms of resistance from below. The latter complements the argument that I made in Chapter 2, thus attempting to enhance state theorization. In Chapter 2, I discussed the role of the Indian state in the production of hazardous geographies in the Brahmaputra valley, motivated primarily by the capitalist state's imperative for accumulation, which is further influenced by forces specific to the postcolonial context. This chapter approaches the state question from the opposite end, that is, the ways in which the state, too, is influenced and potentially re-shaped by communities, through popular movements. Thus, while this chapter mainly examines the socio-geographical conditions that give rise to varied forms of social movements, together with Chapter 2, this chapter also helps advance the theorization of the postcolonial state.

The first part of the chapter juxtaposes the two geographies of resistance – Majuli and Rohmoria – and critically examines the factors that have contributed to the variance between the

two geographies in the ways they have experienced social mobilization. In examining this, I pay special attention to the role of *place* – that is, the material attributes of the two places and how these have impacted their socio-political processes. Foregrounding the questions of *location* and *resource*, I demonstrate how “geography makes possible or impossible certain forms of resistance” (Pile 1997: 2). In addressing this question, I draw, among others, on the burgeoning literature on ‘island studies.’ The island studies scholarship has, however, hardly focused on river islands, and the issues that this scholarship is preoccupied with are about geopolitics, economic disadvantages of these geographies, tourism, and, more recently, climate change (Baldacchino 2007; McElroy and Lucas 2014; Mountz 2015; Poirine 2014; Royle 2001; Steinberg 2005). Nonetheless, this scholarship’s broad engagement with the question of “place,” more specifically, the insularity of islands – both physical and socially constructed – is useful in explaining the case of social struggles in Majuli river island.

The question of *leadership* is another central part of analysis in understanding the making of the two geographies of resistance. Finally, in the context of Majuli, I highlight how the prioritization of the *cultural* over the political has adversely impacted the process of social movements in Majuli, which is not the case in Rohmoria. I have attributed these three factors as being crucial behind the varied landscape of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria. The second part of the chapter focuses on how these different forms of resistance have, in turn, influenced differently the processes of environmental governance and the state more broadly. Thereby, I also argue that a sustained mass movement is the best way forward for ensuring greater accountability of the Indian state vis-à-vis the governance of flood and erosion processes in the Brahmaputra valley.

Place Matters

The importance of “place” in geography needs no further elaboration. More than half a century ago, Carl Sauer famously wrote “the facts of geography are place facts” (Sauer and Leighly 1963: 321). For many geographers, “place and the differences between places are the very stuff of geography, the raw materials that give the discipline its warrant” (Gregory et al. 2009: 539). As Cresswell (2004: 1) points out, human geography, on an intuitive level, is considered as “the study of places.” Place has been thus theorized by geographers for a long time, from various vantage points, which also shape the meanings that place denotes. While some early geographers approached place as a subjectively sensed and experienced phenomenon (Tuan 1977; Relph 1976), others have focused on aspects such as ‘location,’ ‘locale,’ and ‘sense of place’ in theorizing place (Agnew 1987). Still others have conceptualized place as something that is never ‘finished’ but always ‘becoming’ (Pred 1984 cited in Cresswell 2004: 35). Through the theoretic of ‘global sense of place,’ Doreen Massey (1991) promulgated the idea that global interconnection is a precondition for place or sense of place. For Massey, therefore, place is not about the internal and the local; instead, it is about a place’s multiple connections with other parts of the world. My attempt here is not to survey the geographical scholarship on place. Instead, my key focus here is to demonstrate the relations between place and social movements – indeed their co-productions. The brief overview above is thus to situate my specific focus on place-social movement relations within the broader geographical scholarship on place, and not to revisit the latter.

Resistance is a spatial practice (Routledge 1997; Moore 1998). As Pile (1997: 27) reminds us, at the heart of social movements and resistance lie questions of spatiality, that is, “the politics of lived spaces.” However, Pile cautions us, following Massey, that places are not

“inert, fixed, isotropic back-drop to the real stuff of politics and history” (Pile 1997: 4); instead, places and resistance mutually constitute one another through their constant interactions. Moore (1998: 347), in his analysis of ‘resistance as a spatial practice,’ invokes a similar approach to place, arguing that a textured and deeply historical understanding of resistance is possible only if attention is paid to the “cultural politics of place, the historically sedimented practices that weave contested meanings into the fabric of locality.” Routledge’s (1993) ‘terrains of resistance’ is one of the more explicit frameworks in highlighting the mutual influence that place and resistance have on one another. In the context of social movements in India, Routledge argues that resistance is “grounded in particular places, since place is the arena where social structure and social relations intersect, giving rise to relations of power, domination and resistance” (Routledge 1993: 27). Similar arguments have been also put forward by several other scholars from different disciplines (Escobar 2001; Parajuli 1996, 1997; Scott 2009).

The subject of relations between place(s) and resistance has gained attention from feminist scholars as well. In discussing women’s struggles in the Global South, scholars have noted the “centrality of place” (Gururani 2014) in these struggles, and the ways in which “politics of location” (Mohanty 1987: 74) come to play an important role in shaping women’s struggles. In discussing about women’s participation in social movements in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India, for instance, Gururani (2014: 70-71) noted the relevance of taking into account the mountainous landscape of the state, its location at the borders of Nepal and China, and resource rich ecology, thus recognizing the physical attributes of place. This resonated with Pile’s (1997) call about how geographies make resistance.

This large body of scholarship on the relationship between place and resistance has, however, primarily focused on the socio-cultural production of place and not on the question of

biophysical aspects of places. That places are also embodiment of specific hydro-geological/ecological elements that have important impacts on the cultural politics of place is an issue yet to be studied in depth (cf. Moore 1998). At the same time, place-based resistance is also subject to criticism on the ground of being ‘parochial,’ since place is often associated with the realm of the particular and the local (Escobar 2001; Harvey 1996). In understanding the relations between places and resistance, it is therefore a challenge as to how we can recognize the specificities of a particular place – that is, its dense layering of histories and geographies, to paraphrase Amitav Ghosh (2004) – and yet not being parochial. In what follows, I argue not only that the question of place should be taken seriously in analyzing social movements, but also that the material attributes of a place can be crucial in shaping the politics of resistance.

Location

The fear of being labeled as “environmental determinist” may be a key reason why critical geographers have not paid adequate attention to the question of biophysical properties of place as an important variable in social movement. While an uncritical environmental determinism is problematic, I would argue that due attention should be given to what Ramachandra Guha (2010 [1989]: 6) describes as the “ecological landscape of resistance.” In his masterpiece on the Chipko movement, *The Unquiet Woods*, Guha argues: “[I]n a region so markedly influenced by its ecological setting as the Indian Himalaya, a study of processes of social change would be seriously flawed unless set in the context of simultaneous processes of environmental change” (Guha 2010 [1989]: 6). Hence, by proposing the idea of “ecological landscape of resistance,” Guha calls attention to the material dimensions of places, which, along with other socio-historical processes, can help us gain a comprehensive understanding of social movements. In

the case of the varied forms of resistance in the Brahmaputra valley, the materialities of places have proven to be an important factor.

The distinct locational characteristics of Majuli and Rohmoria, as I will demonstrate later, have contributed in different ways to the processes of resistance in the two places. In the context of economic disadvantages of island territories vis-à-vis the mainland, islands studies scholarship has highlighted the role of geographical isolation of these places. Armstrong and Read (2006), for instance, explained that the remoteness from global markets in North America, Europe, and Asia has been a key factor behind the economic challenges of the small Pacific states. Similarly, McElroy and Medek (2012) showed how the relative disadvantages of the Pacific islands in the world markets compared to the Caribbean archipelago is rooted in the greater remoteness of the former. The “handicap of distance” (McElroy and Lucas 2014: 364) is thus a recurring theme in the islands studies literature. While this literature’s deployment of the concept of distance or remoteness is specific to the economic disadvantages of islands, this can be also applied in examining political processes in island territories. In this regard, Mountz’s (2015: 641) point about “islands [being] not so different from everywhere else,” and Steinberg’s (2005: 254) notion of the “social construction” of island-mainland dualism is important to note. More generally, as Gururani (2014: 70) has noted, all places, “even remote and distant places, are constituted at the nexus of local and global networks of power and capital” (Gururani 2014: 70). Or, as Massey (1991) has pointed out, places are always in interaction with other places – they are “open and hybrid – a product of interconnecting flows – of routes rather than roots” (Cresswell 2004: 53). Thus, my aim is not to fetishize the uniqueness of island geographies. Nonetheless, in the context of Majuli island, based on both ethnographic fieldwork and my personal experiences of growing up there, I cannot but emphasize the specificities of this island

geography, which is marked by its relative remoteness from the mainland as well as its “perpetually mutating topography” (Ghosh 2004 cited in Fletcher 2011: 3). This has implications for the processes of social mobilization in the island, as I will show shortly. Similarly, my examination of Rohmoria also shows how certain material attributes of the Rohmoria geography have worked in favor of social mobilization in this place. I have thus tried to situate the resistance (and lack thereof) in the Brahmaputra valley within the ecological context of the region.

Surrounded by the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri rivers, and connected only by ferry services with the mainland, Majuli is a relatively isolated place in Assam. This isolation is further deepened by the unique geography of the *chaporis*, over three dozen of which are part of this island. As explained in previous chapters, the *chaporis* are landmasses located in the middle of the river, physically disconnected from other places and characterized by processes of constantly shifting geography. The only mode of connection between the *chaporis* and the rest of the world, including the mainland portion of the island, is through privately owned boats. Some of the *chaporis* are indeed so disconnected from the island’s main landmass (i.e. the official headquarter of the island) that travelling to the latter takes an entire day.¹¹⁸ Within the mainland, too, roads and other communication networks are poor, and they become even more dismal during the monsoon season. Equally poor are the telephone and internet networks in Majuli, thus posing further barrier to people’s access to information. Internet is almost non-existent in the island, and a large majority of the villages also lacks access to telephone networks, a fact that is

¹¹⁸ For example, the *chaporis* located in the westernmost edge of the island (figure 1, chapter 1) are far closer to Golaghat district than to the headquarter of Majuli. To go to Majuli’s headquarter, people from these *chaporis* have to travel via Golaghat and Jorhat, which means that returning on a same day is practically impossible for them.

slowly changing due to the popularity of cellphones in recent years.¹¹⁹ In a nutshell, the island geography of Majuli suffers from a huge lack of connectivity with the rest of the world.

In the case of Majuli, the geographical constraints describe above limit the scope of resistance measures in the island. One of the common tactics deployed by social movements in India is the “road blockade.” It is a highly effective tactic since a road blockade directly disrupts trade and commerce, thereby putting economic constraints on the state. Hence, a road blockade rarely goes ignored; the state usually pays immediate attention to road blockade. In the case of Majuli, the potential for a road blockade that can have an impact on the state hardly arises, since as an island, Majuli is not part of any state or national highway network. Even when communities have carried out occasional road blockades within the island, the state has mostly ignored such protests. In this regard, I had asked several community members in my study villages what they thought about ‘water blockades,’ which would disrupt the ferry services between Majuli and the outside, as an alternative to road blockades. But the community members did not see such a measure to be helpful since they felt that a ‘water blockade’ would directly hurt the island’s local population, and would not affect the state so much. For Majuli, the ferry service is its lifeline. It is the only mode of transport between the island and the outside, and the local people rely on it heavily for a variety of purposes, such as trade and commerce with the outside, accessing medical facilities, and receiving tourists to the island. Hence, community members in the island believed a measure such as a water blockade would harm them instead of helping them.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter 1 on the challenges of internet services in Majuli. I have discussed this issue in relation to my fieldwork experience in Majuli.

Bijoy Dutta, a local college professor and political leader, highlighted another aspect of Majuli's location that may have shaped the landscape of resistance in the island. Dutta commented:

The island geography of Majuli constrains us in sustaining an *andolan* [movement]. Bounded by rivers, the people in the island cannot commute to outside on a daily basis for work, and within the island, job opportunities are limited. A sizeable population in the island therefore works with the Brahmaputra Board, the Water Resources Department, and the Public Works Department on 'muster roll' [daily wage labor], and many others depend on these agencies as contractors, and suppliers of materials and transportation. So, while we may shout 'Brahmaputra Board Go Back!' out of emotion at Kamalabari [the island's main commercial center], we know well that we cannot sustain a boycott, since the local livelihoods are at stake.¹²⁰

Dutta's observation seems quite apt to me. Employment opportunities within Majuli are limited. There are no industries in the island, except for a few small brick-kiln factories. The agrarian economy in the island is progressively dwindling due to the impacts of flooding and erosion, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Hence, there is an increased reliance on wage-labor by the local population. Furthermore, because people cannot commute on a daily basis to Jorhat town or other places outside the island that may offer greater opportunities for labor, government agencies like the Brahmaputra Board or the Water Resources Department remain the key providers of wage-labor within the island.¹²¹ This makes it hard for many in the communities to challenge these agencies beyond a certain point, since that would put their own livelihoods at risk.

There is an additional dimension to this issue that needs to be stated in this context.

Whether it is the Brahmaputra Board, the Water Resources Department, or any other government

¹²⁰ Author interview with Bijoy Dutta, Nov 13, 2013, Kamalabari, Majuli.

¹²¹ Being an island, one has to always take a ferry to travel outside of Majuli. These ferry rides can be as short as 25 minutes one way, but as long as 2 hours too, depending upon the port (*ghat*) of entry and the season. Besides, the ferry services are not very frequent. Travelling in and out of the island is thus an arduous task altogether.

agency, the employees of these agencies all reside within the island, either in government quarters or rented accommodations, since daily commute from outside is not an option. This creates peculiar sort of relationship between these government officials – that is, the faces of the state at the local level – and local residents in the island. The government officials are often invited to local social events, including weddings, programs at schools and colleges, and community festivals such as *Bhaona-Xobah* and *Raas-Lila*. They also often make donations to such events as well as to the local branches of AASU, AJYCP and TMPK. Sometimes, some of these officials are also tenants at local resident's homes/guest houses.

There are, thus, multiple layers to the relations between government officials and the local residents in Majuli. It is not surprising, then, that the latter sometimes find it hard to revolt against the state, since the state comes to them through the government officials at the local level, some of whom they interact with on a daily basis. As Corbridge et al. (2005: 29) rightly pointed out: “the citizenry sees the state not just in terms of flows of power, money, commodities or information, but also in terms of the circulation into their domains of the men and women who represent (or who can be made to represent) the state.” For the citizenry in Majuli, it is this particular aspect of *seeing the state* – a state that is too close to them – that limits their ability to stand against it. The proximity to the state brings in various issues, such as issues of mutual dependency between local residents and the government officials, informal financial transactions between the two, the awkwardness of challenging someone that one sees on a daily basis closer home, and so on, which weaken, if not rule out, the ability of the local communities to fight against the state.

In contrast to Majuli, location has proved to be an advantage for social movements in Rohmoria. Rohmoria is *not* an island, and it is located close to Dibrugarh, the *Tea City* of India.

There are dozens of tea gardens in and around Dibrugarh, many of which date back to the British era, and the city is the hub of businesses related to the tea industry. It also houses important offices, such as the *Regional Office of the Tea Board of India*, the *Directorate of Development of Small Tea Growers*, and the Zone I of the *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association*. Similarly, Dibrugarh and its neighboring towns are also well-known for oil and natural gas resources, and the city houses important offices of the Oil India Limited (OIL) and the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) – both public sector companies. Dibrugarh's economic significance for the Indian state is thus vital. At the same time, the city is also highly important for the Indian state from a strategic point of view, since it is the easternmost major city in the country, located close to the Chinese border. There are thus important military outposts in this area, including an Air Force base in the neighboring Chabua town. Due to such economic and strategic significance, Dibrugarh and its neighboring places command particular attention from the state. Put simply, the state cannot afford to ignore Dibrugarh the same way that it ignores Majuli. Located barely five miles away from Dibrugarh city, which is also the headquarters of Dibrugarh district, Rohmoría thus enjoys a locational advantage that benefits the movement in several ways.

First, the Rohmoría movement enjoyed greater visibility due to its proximity to major commercial and administrative centers. Unlike in Majuli river island, activities in Rohmoría did not go unnoticed by the media and the state. These activities could not be ignored, as they were taking place in the backyard of the state. Second, due to its locational advantage, as described above, the Rohmoría movement has been able to carry out measures that have wielded enough pressure to force the state to act. One such measure was the *road blockade*. The Rohmoría activists have found road blockades to be particularly effective, since by blocking the national highway (NH 37) that passes through the Rohmoría area, these activists were able to disrupt

important economic activities, including the tea and the oil sector that are pivotal to the state's economy. These blockades also affected border control activities, including the smooth functioning of the nearby air force base. Hence, a 2007 blockade of the national highway (discussed in the previous chapter) caused massive uproar, triggering violent repression by the state. Another effective tactic that the Rohmoria activists have adopted was to call for 'Dibrugarh Bandh' (Dibrugarh shutdown), which, again, was possible due to Rohmoria's geographical proximity to Dibrugarh town. For the state, a measure like this – shutdown of the district headquarters – was not something to be ignored. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the state had on several occasions used force to suppress the movement, especially on occasions like the implementation of a road blockade or a *bandh*. Nonetheless, even such state repression gave more visibility to the Rohmoria movement. Location has thus been an important factor in shaping the landscapes of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria.

Resource

The counterintuitive claim that natural resources, far from being a blessing, are a development curse has gained significant scholarly attention (Humphreys et al. 2007; Ross 1999; Sachs and Warner 1995; Watts 2004; Wright and Czelutsa 2002). The 'resource curse' thesis promulgates the idea that resource rich nations are often worse off in sustainable economic growth compared to resource poor nations – in other words, it highlights the paradox of poor people amid resource abundance (Bridge 2009: 1236). Whether resource abundance is a curse or not, it certainly opens up spaces for place-based social resistance. Places, as Harvey (1996) has rightly pointed out, have become much significant under the condition of flexible accumulation, with places becoming a form of 'flexible capital.' This is more so the case when a place is endowed with

valuable resources, which make it much more attractive to the state and to capital. However, this can potentially lead to socio-ecological crises, inherent as they are in a capitalist economy, causing social discontent and resistance (Harvey 2006 [1982]). Furthermore, the availability of valuable resources in a place can also open up opportunities for social movement activists to organize resistance activities around these resources, as is the case in Rohmoría.

The abundance of oilfields in and around Rohmoría has played an important role in shaping the resistance movement there. Rohmoría is not only closely located to some of the large oilfields in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts, but as discussed in the previous chapter, in 1998, an oilfield was discovered in Rohmoría and the Oil Indian Limited (OIL) immediately started drilling there. Even as Rohmoría became a much more valuable place for the government due to the newly found wealth in this area, for the Rohmoría activists, this discovery had opened up spaces for tactical diversity in their movement. “Oil blockade” was identified as an effective means to put pressure on the state. Hence, no sooner had oil drilling begun in Rohmoría than the movement activists called for a total oil blockade, that is to say a full stop to both drilling and transportation of oil from Rohmoría. The blockade has prevailed to date, except for a few occasions when it was briefly lifted in return for contribution made by the OIL in the form of cash and materials for erosion control measures.

Not only has the availability of oil created spaces for new tactics for the Rohmoría movement; it has also helped extend the life of the movement. Today, because erosion is under control, the movement is relatively quiet. Rallies, *bandhs*, boycotts, and road blockades – measures that were defining characteristics of the Rohmoría landscape in the 1990s and the early 2000s – are no longer common. Oil blockade is one of the measures that the activists in Rohmoría are still holding on to. They boast of their success in maintaining the blockade despite

several attempts by the state to end it. For the state, too, the protection of Rohmoria now guarantees potential economic returns, even though there is a blockade on oil extraction currently. Thus, greater attention has been paid to the crisis facing Rohmoria as well as the people's movement.

Majuli, on the other hand, presents us with a different case. If the presence of oil has made Rohmoria too precious a place for the state to ignore, and has armed its activists with new opportunities for social mobilization, the lack of any such resource, on the other hand, has rendered Majuli insignificant for the state and limited the scopes for social mobilization in the island. On the question of resistance, an old resident of Salmora village had something profound to say. He quoted Kalidasa, a 5th century Sanskrit scholar and court poet: "*Anva sinta samatkar*" (the struggle for the daily bread is overwhelming).¹²² By this remark, this man illustrated how the extreme level of poverty and dispossession faced by the erosion-affected people in Salmora and other places along the riverbanks in the island was a key deterrent to their ability to mobilize and fight. This observation echoed what Donald Moore has written about the spaces of resistance by Kaerezians in colonial Zimbabwe. Drawing on bell hooks (1990: 47) who wrote that "when a people no longer had the space to construct homeplace, [they] cannot build a meaningful community of resistance," Moore (1997: 96) highlighted the challenges for resistance by people that are extremely dispossessed. This dispossession partly explains the lack of a strong mass movement in Majuli. With a large population in the island losing their homespaces constantly due to erosion and having to live like refugees along embankments and rivers, a sustained movement appears difficult. Furthermore, with a predominantly subsistence agriculture-based economy, the island's economic relevance for the state seems inconsequential. Hence, not only

¹²² Author interview with the Salmora resident, February 16, 2013, Majuli.

has the state not paid enough attention to Majuli's protection, the dissenting voices coming out of the island have also often gone unheard.

The question of resource is thus an important consideration as far as social movement in the Brahmaputra valley is concerned. The oilfields in Rohmoria have played a decisive role in shaping the course and effectiveness of the Rohmoria movement. It has opened up scopes for diverse and innovative resistance tactics, while also drawing attention from the state. On the other hand, in the absence of valuable natural resources, Majuli has not only failed to gain adequate state attention, but the scope for diversity in the forms of resistance in the island was also much more limited. The material attributes of the two geographies of Majuli and Rohmoria have thus played an important role in shaping the forms of resistance in the two places. To paraphrase Marx, for the people of Rohmoria and Majuli, these are conditions not of their own choosing, but they help shape the histories of these places. However, there are more factors to consider in this realm, as I demonstrate in the following section.

Leadership

One of the most critical aspects of social movements is leadership. Leaders have been a vital part of social movements around the world (Guha 2010 [1989]; Guha and Matinez-Alier 1997; Watts 2004; Nixon 2013). Leaders “inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognize opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes” (Morris and Staggenborg 2004: 171). In the case of Majuli and Rohmoria as well, the leadership question has proven to be a decisive factor. While the Rohmoria movement has benefitted from a strong, dedicated leadership base, the lack of leadership has been one of the key limitations of the struggle in Majuli. Let me focus on the case of Rohmoria first.

The charismatic leadership of Biplob Gogoi

“Learn to shout, if you don’t want to die” – this was the message that Biplob Gogoi, one of the key leaders of the Rohmoriamovement, told repeatedly to the people in Rohmoriamregion.

Although several individuals have helped shape the Rohmoriamovement in their different capacities, Gogoi’s role in the struggle has been especially indispensable. For Gogoi, mass movement was not optional; it was *the* way to force the government to work. As he commented:

We have to force the state to act. They don’t understand the moderate language. The government listened to us because we took to the streets and carried out the “economic blockade” activity. Moderate means, on the other hand, can make it to occasional newspaper headlines, but nothing more.¹²³

During my fieldwork in Rohmoriam, I had long hours of conversation with Gogoi – by the Brahmaputra, in his living room under the dimly lit lamp late at night, and on motorcycle rides along the riverbanks. Gogoi, a man in his early 40s with a diminutive stature, is highly charismatic and articulate, and his enthusiasm for mass movement is absolutely contagious. During our conversations, Gogoi spoke at length about the tactics adopted by the Rohmoriamovement, the impacts that the movement has had on the environmental governance processes, and the challenges facing the movement today. He also shed light on ways to keep a movement alive. He explained:

A movement starts with ideas. There has to be constant flow of new ideas to sustain mass mobilization. It is hard to mobilize people for a long time around the same issue, especially in the absence of new ideas and activities. When there is no impending crisis, new ideas and tactics become even more important since people tend to be complacent in such times. ... The leaderships of a movement need to be theoretically sound. They should be able to look outside, draw on similar movements elsewhere, and generate “critical thinking” in people.¹²⁴

¹²³ Author interview with Biplob Gogoi, September 12, 2013, Rohmoriam.

¹²⁴ Author interview with Biplob Gogoi, September 12, 2013, Rohmoriam.

As evident from the above statement, Biplob Gogoi was not only highly committed to the Rohmoriam struggle, he was also an astute strategist. Under his tenure as the Secretary of the core committee of the movement for three terms (each two-year terms), the Rohmoriam movement took up a range of innovative activities, built networks with like-minded movements across the state, and solidified itself as a mass social movement. When the government came down heavily on the protesters in several of the rallies during those years, Gogoi carefully maneuvered tactics to avoid the such crackdowns. One such incident took place in 1999. As the news of a mass rally in Dibrugarh reached the district administration, the latter deployed a troop of about 200 police and CRPF to prevent the rally from happening. However, midway through the march to Dibrugarh, the protesters had changed their course and reached the venue through an interior path that meandered through tea gardens, of which the police and the CRPF had no clue. By the time the police and the CRPF reached the venue, it was too late and they were far outnumbered by the public. Furthermore, the womenfolk surrounded the men at the protest venue to prevent police beating, since beating women protesters is not a common practice.¹²⁵ Biplob Gogoi was the key architect of this meticulously planned event that rendered the police forces helpless and drew the attention of the state.¹²⁶

For Gogoi, activism began early on in life. As he explained to me, growing up in a tea garden in the Rohmoriam area, he became aware of exploitation and class relations at an early age. The colonial legacy of class oppression in the tea gardens, through the system of *coolie*, has been well documented (Behal and van der Linden 2006; Sarma 2011; Verma 2011). For Gogoi, the tea garden upbringing was thus a laboratory of sorts in understanding class relations, exploitation, and the value of mass mobilization. Gogoi can be thus described as an “organic intellectual”

¹²⁵ Focus group discussion, Natun Khagori Maijan Gaon, Rohmoriam, Oct 13, 2013.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

(Gramsci 1971) whose consciousness was a product of his social background of tea garden upbringing. Later on, as an undergraduate student in Kanoi College, one of the prominent government colleges in Upper Assam, Gogoi got involved with the college student union, which helped deepen his conviction in unions and mass movements in general. It was around that time that erosion became quite severe in Rohmoria, especially with the drastic southward move of the Brahmaputra near Rohmoria in 1983-84, which led to unprecedented erosion. For student leader Biplob Gogoi, this was a critical juncture in his radical politics. In 1985, he got actively involved in the Rohmoria issue, playing a key role in popular mobilization across villages affected by erosion. Ever since then, Gogoi's involvement in the movement has progressively deepened and he continues to be one of the key strategists of the movement.

That Gogoi is a visionary leader is also evidenced by his strong focus on cultivating second-rung leadership within the Rohmoria movement. Thus, when the public at large insisted on Gogoi's continuation as the Secretary for the fourth consecutive term, Gogoi declined that offer immediately since he was keener on building the next rung of leadership. Mrinal Dutta, a younger fellow in his mid-30s, was conferred with the position of Secretary of the core committee. Dutta lacked Biplob Gogoi's charisma, which is indeed unmatched, but Gogoi and a few other senior leaders are still active in the movement as advisers, thus providing necessary guidance to the new generation of leaderships. Although the movement at its current phase is not as active as before, for reasons such as relative respite from erosion, outmigration of a large population from the area, and a weaker leadership base,¹²⁷ its presence in the Rohmoria landscape is unmistakable nonetheless. Thus, the oil blockade program still continues and the

¹²⁷ These factors were highlighted by Biplob Gogoi and a few other activists during an informal conversation that we had on September 13, 2013 in Rohmoria.

communities in the area remain ever vigilant of government activities vis-à-vis erosion control.¹²⁸

Gogoi's team

While Gogoi's role has been indeed pivotal, several other actors have been also quite instrumental in this movement. Notable among them are women activists and a few local intellectuals. Women have not only participated in large numbers in all the protest activities of the Rohmoría struggle but they have also been at the forefront in various occasions (for more on women's distinct role in social movements in India in general, see Guha 2010 [1989]; Gururani 2014; Omvedt 1993; Shiva 1999, among others). In a large public rally in 1999, for example, a number of women speakers addressed the crowd by microphone, which was a first time experience for many (Lahiri 2008). The role of the Kaivarta women, belonging to a few villages along the riverbanks, was especially significant in the movement. The Kaivartas are traditionally fishing communities, thus relying heavily on the river and inhabiting places along the river. The Kaivarta families were thus particularly vulnerable to erosion – their livelihoods were directly threatened and their houses were the first ones to be washed away since they lived just along the riverbanks. Several activists that I spoke with in Rohmoría explained to me that this distinct “material relation” that the Kaivarta people shared with the river and the riverfront areas was a key factor behind their special involvement in the movement.¹²⁹ Biplob Gogoi made special mention of the leadership role of one Kaivarta woman, popularly known as the “bandit queen” of

¹²⁸ For example, during a conversation with Girin Phukan (Sep 20, 2013, Rohmoría) another key leader of the Rohmoría movement, had pointed out how strictly the villagers were keeping a watch on an ongoing Asian Development Bank (ADB) supported project in the village. Phukan further mentioned that a Water Resources Department proposal of 70 crores for Rohmoría was pending in New Delhi and that in case of a rejection of the proposal, the community would not hesitate “to make some noise again”.

¹²⁹ Discussion with a group of activists in Rohmoría on September 20, 2013.

Rohmoriam, who was feared by the cops and the CRPF.¹³⁰ This woman, as Gogoi mentioned, was brave, articulate, and always on the frontline of any protest activity. Women members thus played an important leadership role in the Rohmoriam movement.

Local intellectuals, especially a group of professors and research scholars at Dibrugarh University, have also played a critical role in strengthening the Rohmoriam movement. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the Center for Studies in Geography and the Department of Applied Geology at Dibrugarh University had hosted a number of seminars and workshops on the Rohmoriam issue; scholars from these departments had conducted studies on Rohmoriam and published; and some of them had also played a mentoring role in the movement at different points. Thus, even though Biplob Gogoi's leadership role in the movement remained unmatched, the Rohmoriam struggle was in fact benefitting from a range of different leaderships, each one making distinct contributions to the movement. Borrowing Biplob Gogoi's words, "confluence of progressive thinking" has thus been at the heart of the Rohmoriam movement – thinking that has come from various actors including organic intellectuals like Girin Phukan, Mrinal Dutta, and Gogoi himself; university professors and researchers; and community members, both men and women. Their 'progressive thinking,' and the on-the-ground translation of some of this thinking, has helped shape the Rohmoriam movement over the past few decades. Additionally, the Rohmoriam activists were successful in forging networks with like-minded organizations across the state. For example, there were collaborations between the Rohmoriam movement and KMSS, a statewide peasant movement, and activists from the latter had held large public rallies in the Rohmoriam area. Similarly, a group of activists from Rohmoriam had visited other places in the state facing similar crisis – e.g. Majuli, Lahorighat, Palashbari, and Dhubri – to establish a state-level

¹³⁰ This reference was to Phoolan Devi, a former dreaded dacoit turned politician in India. *Bandit Queen* was a biopic about her, focused specifically on her underground years.

movement of flood- and erosion-affected people, which unfortunately did not take off (Lahiri 2008). In a nutshell, strong and charismatic local leadership, especially that of Biplob Gogoi, has played a significant role in the Rohmoriamovement. Let me now look at the question of leadership in Majuli.

The crisis of leadership in Majuli

Unlike in Rohmoriamovement, one of the key limitations of the resistance movement in Majuli has been the lack of leaderships even though a sizeable section of the local population believed that mass movement could potentially transform environmental governance processes in the island. During my fieldwork in the island, I came across several individuals who had believed strongly in the necessity of an island-wide mass movement in Majuli. A group of TMPK activists, for instance, expressed their strong desire to organize such a movement in Majuli, which they thought was the only hope for the island.¹³¹ In another instance, a group of village leaders in Sumoimari village presented to me their elaborate plan on how to organize a mass movement across the island.¹³² They had a meticulously thought-out plan for a movement that they thought could start at a village level and could be then scaled up to the island as a whole. However, apart from small-scale localized acts of resistance, as discussed in the previous chapter, Majuli is yet to witness a mass upheaval, a large-scale island-wide movement. This failure can be attributed, among other factors, to the lack of effective leadership in the island. There are a range of different actors in Majuli playing leadership role in the socio-political affairs of the island, but they have all failed to build a sustained mass movement in the island. This failure of the leadership in mass mobilization is partly due to their own opportunistic politics and lack of revolutionary

¹³¹ Focus group discussion with TMPK activists in Nayabazar, Majuli, August 19, 2013.

¹³² Focus group discussion at Sumoimari village, Majuli, March 5, 2013.

commitment, and partly because of specific socio-historical conditions in Majuli, as discussed below.

The Sattradhikars

Generally, the *sattradhikars* are at the helm of socio-political affairs in the island. Being disciples of some *sattra* or another, the local population reveres the *sattradhikars* as spiritual gurus, and the latter have often been the *de facto* spokespersons for the island. It was under the initiative of the *sattradhikars* that the ‘*Majuli Suraksha Samannaya Mancha*’ (MSSM) was organized, and a group of *sattradhikars* together held the position of ‘*Sabhapati Mandali*’ (group of presidents) of MSSM in its early stage. Even now, they occupy the position of ‘*Margdarshak Mandali*’ (advisory group) in MSSM. With the *sattardhikars* leading this coalition of activist organizations, it is then hard to expect this organization to be radical. After all, the *sattradhikars* are spiritual gurus, whose priorities are not to organize a political movement, and it has never been so. Instead, their primary function is to govern the *sattras*, perform various socio-religious rituals as required within the *Neo-Vaishnavite* tradition, and expand *Neo-Vaishnavism*. The *sattradhikars* take enormous pride in Majuli being ‘*Etaka Mahantar Sthan*’ (meaning the *land of the saints*, an unofficial designation that island had earned for being the nerve-center of the *sattras*)¹³³, which also implies, according to them, that the inhabitants of the island ought to be ‘*xohisnu*’ (tolerant), without engaging in any kind of conflict, protests, or other such acts of defiance. They strongly believe, and have often commented, that any form of protest other than

¹³³ Until about the 1970s, there were as many as 64 *sattras* in Majuli. That number has now been reduced to half due to erosion and hence the gradual relocation of many *sattras* to places outside of Majuli. A special moment in Assam’s history, the “*Manikanchan Milan*”, that is, the first intellectual exchange between Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, two most prominent saints of *Neo-Vaishnavism*, in fact took place in Dhuwahaat-Belaguri *sattra* in Majuli. Thus, Majuli occupies a distinct place in *Neo-Vaishnavism*.

petitions and dialogue with the government, practices that are already fetishized in Majuli, would blemish the reputation of this ‘land of the saints.’

But there is an additional factor that has influenced the *sattradhikars*’ opposition to any form of movement in the island, and that is the historical dependency of the *sattras* on the state. There is indeed a ‘patron-client’ sort of a relationship between the state and the *sattras*. As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, since the pre-colonial era, the *sattras* in Majuli have received huge swathes of land grants from the state in different places within Assam. In addition, the *sattras* continue to receive financial support from the state for various cultural activities and infrastructural developments on the *sattra* campuses. As historian Dambarudhar Nath (2009) shows, this relationship of state patronage of the *sattras* has a long history. Nath (2009) shows how during the 18th century ‘Moamariya rebellion’ in Assam, which was a rebellion of lower-caste communities – the Moamariyas – against the ruling Ahom state, the *sattras* in Majuli largely favored the state. They remained a bastion of “Brahmanical Vaishnavism” (as opposed to ‘Liberal Vaishnavism’ that the Moamariyas espoused), thereby enjoying patronage of the Ahom state (Nath 2009). Again, during the independence movement, the *sattradhikars* in Majuli were largely in favor of the British. With the exception of the Garamur *sattra sattradhikar*, all other *sattradhikars* had “welcomed the British rule and impressed upon the Company Government to retain their old landed properties granted by the Ahom kings, [...] supported every act of the Company including their campaign against the neighbouring hill tribes, [and] offered boats and other amenities to support the British forces in their campaign against the hill tribes” (Nath 2009: 267). Thus, the mutual support between the state and the *sattras* has deep historical roots, which explains why the *sattradhikars* in Majuli would not want to allow, let alone lead, a mass movement in the island. Naturally, in the 2013 MSSM meeting that I had attended (discussed in

the previous chapter) the *sattradhikars* were highly critical of the AASU and AJYCP activists for boycotting the visit of a Parliamentary Committee team to Majuli. For the *sattradhikars*, such an act was “uncivil” for the ‘land of the saints.’

Divisions among the *sattradhikars* have further challenged their abilities to build a mass movement, since they do not find common ground on many important issues concerning the island. As a ‘*bhakat*’ (devotee) of one of the *sattras* had commented:

It is extremely hard to come to an agreement on important issues because of the differences between the *sattradhikars*. If one of them looks north, the other one looks south, often due to their ego problem. With so much division within us, how can we possibly mobilize the masses belonging to different castes, classes, and communities?¹³⁴

Indeed, it was this internal rivalry between the *sattradhikars* that led to their withdrawal from participating in a sit-in in Dispur, the capital of Assam, that MSSM was organizing in 2011. Although a few *sattradhikars* were in favor of this sit-in, many others opposed it and had approached the *Sattra Mahasabha*, the state-level apex body of the *sattras*, to intervene. Accordingly, the *Mahasabha* urged the *sattradhikars* to stay away from such an act of protest, which they believed would spoil the reputation of these institutions.¹³⁵ Once the *sattradhikars* backed out, the MSSM leadership called off the sit-in. The role of the *sattradhikars* in the socio-political processes in Majuli has been thus paradoxical. On the one hand, they are almost indispensable to the various socio-cultural practices that are the defining characteristics of Majuli; but on the other hand, it is the conformist attitude of the *sattradhikars*, resulting from their dependence on state patronage, that has plagued the possibility of any radical mass movement in Majuli. Ironically, the *sattras* and the local population in Majuli are also tied together, by and large, by a patron-client relationship, since a large section of the population

¹³⁴ Informal conversation with a *bhakat* in one of the prominent *sattras* in Majuli. July 25, 2013.

¹³⁵ Based on conversation with Jayanta Kakoti, Majuli, April 23, 2013.

depends on the *sattras* for land as well as spiritual guidance. Hence, despite the failure of the *sattradhikars* in organizing a mass movement in the island, there is no strong public opposition to their leadership role in the socio-political affairs in the island. The lack of social movement in Majuli has to be thus understood in the context of such complex ‘patron-client’ relationships at different levels.

Beyond the Sattradhikars

Besides the *sattradhikars*, there are also a handful of other influential individuals in Majuli who have played leadership roles in various socio-political affairs in the island, including political mobilization for better governance of flooding and erosion. Some of these so-called leaders are activists in different student unions, often with allegiances to different political parties (for example, AASU’s political allegiance lies with *Asom Gana Parishad*, a regional party, and TMPK’s with *Gana Shakti Party*, a party representing the Mising community).¹³⁶ Some others are either directly associated with political parties or active in the socio-cultural life in the island. However, these leaders have not been able to unshackle themselves from the forces of cronyism, opportunism, and caste-biases. In Chapter 2, I highlighted how state and non-state actors in the island have often forged clandestine relationships in order to continue and mutually benefit from the processes of capital accumulation. Many of the local leaders, too, are embedded in such relationships, which grossly limit their abilities to stand against the ruling elites. They are too closely tied up with the state. Some of these leaders, for instance, enjoy political and economic

¹³⁶ It is important to highlight here that the student union leaders in Assam need not always refer to students. Some of the leaders, for instance, are middle aged and strongly involved in party politics. Although they are called “students’ union”, sometimes they are far more active in broader political issues than issues concerning students and/or education.

influences by being part of some or other ‘committees’ constituted by the government. Similarly, donations from government officials and contractors have played an important role in sustaining the local units of organizations that some of these leaders belong/head.

Hence, these local leaders restrain from challenging the state beyond a point, even though they have often spoken about the necessity of a mass movement in public forums. In the 2013 MSSM meeting in Auniati, for instance, several leaders called for such a movement, a call that none of them followed up on later. On the contrary, soon after this meeting, when I met with a few leaders to follow up on their course of action, I already observed a change in their stance vis-à-vis the Brahmaputra Board. The fiery speeches delivered in the meeting seemed to have dampened rather fast. Neither was there any follow-up action by these leaders for mass mobilization nor did they speak with the same amount of anger against the state.

The clandestine relations between the local leaders and the state is one explanation for the weak and inconsistent political mobilization by the former. Another possible explanation could be the lack of experience of these leaderships in social movements. Whatever the explanation, the fact is that the local leaderships have not really taken any initiative in mobilizing a mass movement in Majuli. On the contrary, some of their actions have alienated the local communities, thereby further eroding the potential for mass mobilization in the island. For instance, the Kumar population in Salmora has lost faith in the MSSM leadership as well as the *sattradhikars* since these leaders held the same position as the state on the question of pottery. They have actively argued that the Kumar community should stop digging the clayey soil along the riverbanks, which they believed was contributing to erosion (discussed in Chapter 3). This has led to grave anger among the Kumars who no longer trust this leadership.

The ability of the above leadership to organize a mass movement is further limited by caste-based social discrimination that prevails in the island. While caste relations may not be as rigid in northeast India as they are in most other parts of the country, they are not absent either. In Majuli, although some of the local leaders are from lower-caste and tribal communities (for example, the TMPK leaderships), overall, there is a dominance of the high-castes in local leaderships, who, it is believed, tend to be less sensitive to the concerns of the tribal and the lower caste communities.¹³⁷ The local TMPK leadership, for example, complained to me about how the *sattradhikars*, always hailing from high castes, had treated them like “untouchables” on several occasions.¹³⁸ In another instance, one of the local leaders referred to the Mising people as ‘*patit-muta*’ (one who pees in bed) – that is, a highly derogatory expression referring to the fact that the Mising peoples lived in ‘*saang ghar*’ (stilt house) and hence the assumption that they would pee from their bed.¹³⁹ There were several such instances of caste biases that I came across in the island during the course of fieldwork. Perhaps it was because of such deep-rooted biases and social discrimination that the predominantly high-caste dominated leaderships in the island have failed to mobilize those belonging to lower caste and tribal communities, which is the largest section of the island’s population.

On the other hand, the Mising leadership across the state have been much more preoccupied with the *identity politics*, focused on the struggle for a Mising Autonomous Council.¹⁴⁰ Hence, questions of flooding and erosion have not gained center stage in the political calculus of these leaderships in recent decades, even though the Mising community is one of the

¹³⁷ This was a commonly held perception among the tribal and lower caste communities in the island, as I discovered during the course of my fieldwork.

¹³⁸ Focus group discussion with TMPK activists in Nayabazar, Majuli, August 19, 2013.

¹³⁹ Author interview with an influential public figure in Majuli, August 13, 2013.

¹⁴⁰ For a detail understanding of the Mising Autonomous Council, see: www.macassam.nic.in

worst victims of flooding and erosion in Assam since they mostly live in riverside areas and the *chaporis*. Compared to the high-caste leadership mentioned above, the Mising leadership in Majuli is much more active and has a wider support base within the Mising community. But their main focus is on the question of identity and not flood and erosion (see Chapter 4 for more detail on the question of identity politics among the Misings).¹⁴¹ Overall, the lack of a mass movement in Majuli for better governance of flooding and erosion can be thus partly explained as a failure of the local leadership.

The legacy of a murder

In Chapter 2, I mentioned about the tragic murder of social worker/activist Sanjoy Ghose in Majuli in 1997. Ghose, well-known in the country for his work on social empowerment of rural communities in the western Indian state of Rajasthan, came to Majuli in 1996 as part of the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development, North East (AVARD-NE). Ghose and his team of dedicated workers started working on some of the pressing issues of the island, including flood and erosion, health, and rural livelihoods. Within a short span of time, Ghose gained enormous popularity in the island, effectively mobilizing a large section of the island's downtrodden both for voluntary work and building public pressure for greater accountability from the state (Ghose 1998). For Majuli, such an initiative was unprecedented, and the local

¹⁴¹ During my fieldwork in Majuli, in 2013, there was MAC election in the state. Accordingly, a great deal of political activities was going on in all the Mising villages in Majuli as candidates belonging to different political parties were campaigning day and night in the Mising villages, making various promises to the communities. The election took place as per schedule; some leaders from Majuli got elected to the council; smaller leaders have now become bigger leaders and vice versa; the council has been functioning; but the challenges faced by the ordinary Mising population, most of whom live near the river, remained unchanged.

ruling elites felt threatened by Ghose. In July 1997, in broad daylight, Ghose was abducted by ULFA from a place near the administrative headquarter of the island and was killed. While the actual trail of events leading up to Ghose's murder still remain unclear, speculations abound in Majuli that the local elites misinformed ULFA about Ghose being an agent of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), a central intelligence agency of the government of India, which finally led to the tragedy.

The murder of Sanjoy Ghose left a lasting impact on Majuli. Not only had AVARD-NE packed up from the island immediately after this incident, but it had also created an image of Majuli being a "dangerous" place for radical activism. This incident laid bare the nexus between the local ruling elites in the island and militant organization like ULFA, and highlighted the danger involved in engaging in activities that the ruling elites considered threatening to their interests. Thus, after the Sanjoy Ghose tragedy, there has been a vacuum in radical leadership in Majuli. The fact that a mass movement has not yet taken off in Majuli, despite widespread public discontent with the state, thus needs to be situated within the context of the Sanjoy Ghose tragedy, among others. Such tragedies do not necessarily always obstruct a movement, as has been seen in different other contexts (Hecht and Cockburn 1990; Watts 2004). But that is more likely after a movement has already solidified its roots and found enough space in the popular imagination, which was not yet the case with Sanjoy Ghose's initiative in Majuli. So, Ghose's murder dealt a deathblow to an incipient radical project in the island.

The fetishization of cultural heritage and its implications

Majuli is not only one of the largest river islands in Asia, but it is also well known for its rich cultural landscape. As discussed in Chapter 1, Majuli is the nerve-center of the *sattras*, and Neo-

Vaishnavism more broadly. Some of the *sattras* on the island, most notably Samaguri *sattra*, boast of a rich tradition of ‘*mukha-shilpa*’ (mask-making craft), using locally available materials like bamboo, cane and clay.¹⁴² Included in the repertoire are also the unique pottery craft in Salmora, one that does not use potter’s wheel; the boat-making craft of the Kumars; and the traditional handloom textile of the Mising and other tribal communities in the island. Hence, in recent years, there has been a concerted effort by various civil society groups and the government for popularizing the island’s cultural heritage. However, this effort towards celebrating the cultural heritage of the island has taken precedence over any attempt by the local leadership to ensure the protection of the island. Cultural heritage has been fetishized.

In discussing ‘rituals as resistance’ in the previous chapter, I highlighted how rural communities in Majuli have at times deployed certain socio-cultural practices of the neo-Vaishnavite tradition as forms of everyday resistance. In such cases, the cultural practices have acted as *healer* in the time of crises. However, the over-emphasis of the cultural heritage, especially spearheaded by the local leadership and the state, seems to have come to haunt the island. The local activists, intellectuals, *sattradhikars*, and alike are now too preoccupied with the celebration of a whole range of events, backed up by the state. Let me now present a closer examination of how the fetishization of the cultural has impacted the scopes for social movement in Majuli.

¹⁴² So famous is Majuli’s ‘*mukha shilpa*’ that some of the artists (Hemchandra Goswami, for instance) have participated in various national and international exhibitions. Besides, Samaguri *sattra* in Majuli is also well-known for its *mukha*-based *bhaona* (play), where the actors wear masks designed specifically for the character that they play.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

For over a decade now, the Indian government has been trying to get Majuli recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹⁴³ Since the recognition is yet to be accomplished, there have been a series of activities that the state and the local cultural institutions have been organizing in Majuli in recent years in order to popularize and gain greater recognition of the unique cultural heritage of the island.

In 2006, the Assam government passed the Majuli Cultural Landscape Region Act, thereby creating a legal framework for the conservation of the island's cultural heritage. Accordingly, a Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority (MCLMA) was constituted, which was entrusted with the task of "creation of local, regional and international awareness about significance of Majuli Cultural Region" through various cultural activities.¹⁴⁴ The MCLMA has since organized a range of cultural events showcasing the island's heritage and placing "culture" at the center of Majuli's identity. Some of these events are not new to Majuli, but they are now re-fashioned, celebrated in a much grander scale, and with increased frequency. Some other events are entirely new inventions, chiefly aimed at popularizing and showcasing Majuli's heritage.

Majuli Mahotsav (Majuli Festival) is one such new event that the island has been celebrating annually for almost a decade now. This three- to four-day long event draws a large number of tourists, both domestic and international, and it exhibits the cultural heritage of the

¹⁴³ The UNESCO World Heritage Committee's 28th session at Suzhou, China in 2004 shortlisted the island for the World Heritage Site 'Tentative List' (The Hindu, March 14, 2011). Following this, in 2006, the Archeological Survey of India (ASI), a leading government organization for the protection of the archaeological researches and cultural heritage of the country, had submitted a dossier to UNESCO, nominating Majuli for the 'World Heritage Site' status. The dossier was rejected on technical grounds, and the ASI was asked to resubmit it.

¹⁴⁴ This information was obtained from www.majulilandscape.gov.in, accessed on July 31, 2014.

island through different forms of dance, music, drama, and food, among others. A similar event is the *Majuli Tribal Festival*, which showcases the socio-cultural diversity of the island's tribal communities. *Asom Bhaona Samaroh*, a state-level *bhaona* competition organized under the auspices of Auniati *Sattra*, is another new extravaganza in the island that brings in participants from across the state, and the local population flocks to this event in thousands. More recently, Dakhinpat *Sattra* has started to host a state level *Adhyatmik Yuva Sanmilan* (Spiritual Youth Festival), which, too, draws youth from different parts of Assam to participate in a series of spiritual activities in the *sattra* over a few days.¹⁴⁵ In addition, MCLMA and the prominent *sattras* have also organized various TV programs to showcase the cultural richness of the island. One such program – *Heritage Majuli* – was conducted during the course of my fieldwork. It was a live coverage Doordarshan, India's public service broadcaster, of some of the iconic dance and music forms that are special to Majuli. Thus, the island has witnessed a flurry of cultural events in recent years, all of which are aimed at gaining the recognition of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These year-round events are funded by the state and executed by the *sattras* and other local cultural institutions in the island.

For the common masses in the island, however, the 'World Heritage' designation is a non-issue. In fact, this is what a community member in Dakhinpat village had to say about this:

Our daily struggle is to protect our home, our land, our *sawul-kotha* [livelihoods].¹⁴⁶ But for our leaders, it seems the struggle is about gaining some outside recognition of Majuli's cultural diversity. What diversity will be left once the whole island is eroded and all of us are displaced?¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ I talked about divisions between the *sattras* earlier. The fact that Auniati *sattra* hosts the *Asom Bhaona Samaroh* and Dakhinpat *sattra* soon starts hosting *Adhyatmik Yuva Sanmilan* is perhaps less of a coincidence and more of an indication of the competition between the two *sattras*. It needs to be kept in mind that hosting such grand events involves reputation as well as financial support from the state, which might have been important considerations for these *sattras*.

¹⁴⁶ *Sawul* is the Assamese word for rice (*Chawal* in Hindi). 'Sawul kotha' here refers to food or livelihood more generally.

¹⁴⁷ Author interview with Damodar Medhi, Dakhinpat, June 21, 2013.

This was the dominant sentiment among most villagers I spoke with during my fieldwork. Many of them did not know anything about the ‘World Heritage Site’ issue and many others simply did not care. For them, the key issue at stake was the protection of the island and securing their livelihoods. On the other hand, as the UNESCO World Heritage question gains prominence in Majuli, the issue of flood and erosion is increasingly de-centered from the local political agenda. This seems counter-intuitive, since the ‘Heritage Site’ recognition would mean nothing if the landmass is not secured. At the very least, the demand for the protection of the island and its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site should go hand in hand. But as I learned from several local leaders in Majuli during my fieldwork, they believe that once the UNESCO recognition comes through, the government would be bound to protect the island. Hence, they believed this shift in agenda to be beneficial for the island in the long run, or so they claimed. However, given the monetary gains that the ‘World Heritage’ status promises (whether in the form of ongoing and future cultural celebrations or grants for the development of the *sattras* and other such institutions), one cannot rule out vested interest of the local elites in this switching of agenda.

With the current political climate in the country, namely, the rise of the BJP, a Hindu right-wing party, one can foresee an amplification of this cultural focus in Majuli in the coming years.¹⁴⁸ And the *sattras* are likely to enable such an environment. After all, the *sattras*, and Neo-Vaishnavism more generally, are still within the larger fold of Hinduism. Besides, in the past, there have been also instances of some prominent *sattradhikars* from Majuli participating in

¹⁴⁸ The BJP has formed government at the center in 2014 with full majority, which was unprecedented in India. Also unprecedented was the formation of a BJP government in Assam after the 2016 Assam assembly election. Overall, of late, this Hindu nationalist party has been in its ascendance across the country with many states now being ruled by BJP governments.

national level meeting of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, an apex body of the Hindu-rights.¹⁴⁹

Hence, with the current regime holding on to power for long, Majuli might evolve into a strong bastion of the Hindu cultural practices, with state support, and the phenomenon of cultural fetishization might find much more firm ground. Already, in her 2015 visit to the island, the Union Water Resources Minister described Majuli as “one of the holiest places in the world” and stated that Majuli should be declared as a “spiritual tourist destination” (Firstpost, Feb 9, 2015).

Meanwhile at the village level, the observation of year-round rituals, such as *Bhaona*, *Xobah*, *Bhagawat-Path*, *Ekadaaxi*, *Gupinir Naam-Kirtan*, *Paalnam*, to name a few, continues regardless of the flood and erosion inflicted devastations. For instance, even after massive devastations caused by the 2012 flood, the village community at Sonowal Kachari village observed some of the above-mentioned rituals, including daily ‘*naam kirtan*’ in the *naamghar*.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, despite incessant erosion of the landmass and annual displacement and out-migration of many families, the village community at Salmora continued to maintain ten *naamghars* in the village, belonging to ten different *khels*, each one observing their routine rituals, thus reflecting the deep devotion that the rural population in Majuli has for the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural practices. Indeed, in April 2013, a 5-days long event was organized at Salmora, bringing together thousands of people from within and outside the village. Families that have migrated from Salmora to various parts of Assam in the recent past have also come and participated in this affair (discussed at length in Chapter 4). As I sat through this event, I kept thinking about what might happen if such a large gathering were to meet outside the District Commissioner’s office or the Assam Secretariat instead and demand for better protection of the island. But the

¹⁴⁹ This information is based on my interview with a prominent *sattradhikar* in Majuli. He had, in fact, boasted of the fact that he was part of such a noble gathering at the national level.

¹⁵⁰ This information is based on my field observation.

population in Majuli seems to have become “devotional subjects” (cf. Agrawal’s (2005) notion of the “environmental subjects”), whose social life is highly dominated by *Sattriya* rituals. In a way, there is a ‘double burden’ syndrome facing the common masses in the island: they have to survive the flooding and erosion crises on their own, and they still have to observe a whole range of *Sattriya* rituals that are defining characteristics of Majuli.

While the Neo-Vaishnavite rituals may have acted as spaces of everyday resistance and, at times, healer for the disaster-weary population in the riverside villages, they have also de-centered, I would argue, the focus of the local leaderships. Instead of mobilizing a mass movement on the question of the protection of the island from flooding and erosion, issue of ‘cultural heritage’ seems to have become the dominant discourse in Majuli. Many at the village level may not be concerned about the heritage status of the island, but they, too, find themselves preoccupied with the observation of cultural rituals. On the other hand, the increased migration of youth to faraway cities in search of work has added to the leadership vacuum in the rural areas, thus further limiting the potential for radical activism in the island.

Overall, the above discussion shows that despite having experienced similar environmental challenges, the communities in Majuli and Rohmoria have resorted to vastly different means of activism to pressure the state for better protection of their respective places. In other words, the social histories of the two places are quite different. How does the state then respond to the crises in these two places, given that the pressure tactics adopted by people in the two places are so different? It is to this question that I turn now.

Social movements and the state

In Chapter 2, I showed how the Indian state has been instrumental in the (re-)production of hazardous geographies in the Brahmaputra valley. I have explained that the state does so primarily through the construction of various hydraulic infrastructures, which allow for capital accumulation by the state. Besides this, I have also situated the Indian state within the context of postcolonial specificities, thus viewing the role of the state through the processes of corruption, cronyism, bureaucracy and so on. This and the previous chapters help us understand the state question from a different perspective. In Chapter 4 and 5, I have presented a detailed account of the various forms of resistance and social movements in Majuli and Rohmoria. In the remaining portion of the chapter, I will try to show how these differences in the forms of resistance between Majuli and Rohmoria have shaped the role of the state differently vis-à-vis the hazardscape in the two places. Thus, this section advances our understanding the state by showing how the state, too, is shaped by local political processes.

The state is never a static, unitary entity; it is a social relation (Harvey 2001). The relationship between the state and class interests remain ambiguous, since, on the one hand, it is largely representative of and dominated by the ruling class, but on the other hand, it also has to receive “general allegiance of the subordinate classes” (Harvey 2001: 277). There is an “unstable equilibria” (Gramsci 1971: 182) that characterizes the relations between the state and different classes, since the state has to continuously balance between the hegemony of the ruling class as well as the interests of the subordinate classes. Put differently, the functioning of the state depends largely on the “dialectic of class forces” (Das 2007: 430). In the context of India, the role of the subordinate classes, the *political society* more broadly, in influencing the state and its policies has been well documented (Chatterjee 2004; Corbridge et al. 2005; Das 2007). Das

(2007: 410) has particularly noted that the actions of both capital and the state are influenced by the “struggles ... by peasants and workers.” These struggles, in turn, are shaped by “multiple sightings” (Corbridge et al. 2005) of the state by these subordinate classes. The forms of these struggles may be different depending upon specific contexts, but these struggles play a critical role in influencing the functioning of the state. To paraphrase Das (2007: 409), ‘out of sight’ might quite literally mean ‘out of mind’ as far as the state’s role vis-à-vis the interests of the subaltern groups is concerned; hence, activism from below becomes necessary so as to capture the state’s attention and not be relegated to ‘out of sight.’

This theoretical analysis helps us understand the role of the Indian state vis-à-vis the hazardscape in Majuli and Rohmoria. As discussed above, the people of Majuli have not been able to organize a sustained mass movement; instead, they have adopted a range of other means such as everyday forms of resistance, petitions, and sporadic acts of militant activism to ensure effective governance of flooding and erosion. In contrast, Rohmoria has witnessed decades long mass mobilization against the state, including a sustained oil blockade program against the Oil India Limited, a powerful public sector enterprise. This has resulted in the state addressing the crises in the two places in quite different ways.

The attention given by the state to the crises in Rohmoria and Majuli has been disproportionate. Over the years, a host of high-ranking public officials and political leaders had visited Rohmoria for better understanding of the challenges facing the region. These visits have provided a sense of security to the local communities in Rohmoria. During the first term of the *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP) party government in Assam (1985-1990), which was the first time a regional party had ruled in the state, the then Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta had visited Rohmoria and offered half-*bigha* (about .15 acres) land each to the erosion-affected families in

Rohmoria. It was a meager amount, but it reflected nonetheless the strong ground that the Rohmoria movement was beginning to gain. Hence came this rare gesture by the Chief Minister of the state.¹⁵¹ But the Rohmoria activists were hardly appeased by this gesture. Instead, they kept the pressure on by keeping the people united and conveying to them that the land offered by the Chief Minister was a “political gimmick” and not a solution to the erosion crisis. Thus, even though the people accepted the land offered by the government, they continued to rally around their leaders and the movement progressed apace.

Over the years, several high-profile officials, ministers, and other influential personalities have visited Rohmoria to gain an on-the-ground understanding of the crises facing this place. One such visit was by the President of the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* (Assam Literary Society) who attended a large public gathering in Rohmoria in 2005 and extended full support of the *sabha* to the Rohmoria movement. Then there was a visit by a three-member team of ‘Specially Empowered Technical Expert Committee,’ formed by the central government especially for Rohmoria. This committee was also accompanied by top-level Brahmaputra Board officials. And in 2006, the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, visited Rohmoria to survey the crises faced by the local communities and had a conversation with the leaders of the movement.

The same has not been the case in Majuli, even though the crisis facing the island is far more serious.¹⁵² It is worth remembering here that Majuli is much larger, both geographically and population wise, than Rohmoria: it is a sub-division with three *mouzas*,¹⁵³ whereas Rohmoria is just one *mouza*; and population of the island is accordingly much larger than that of Rohmoria.

¹⁵¹ Author interview with Ranjan Gogoi, October 13, 2013, Rohmoria.

¹⁵² In Rohmoria, 38 revenue villages have been fully eroded by now, along with a PWD road, 10 schools and 6 tea estates (Borgohain, n.d.). In contrast, more than double the number of villages have been fully eroded in Majuli so far, along with many schools, roads and so on.

¹⁵³ Although the island has been recognized as a district in September 2016, it was a sub-division during the time of my research.

Yet, as the above visits of state representatives indicate, Rohmoria has received far greater attention from the state than Majuli. These visits in and of themselves did not mean much, but they meant a great deal symbolically: these visits, especially the one by the Prime Minister, gave people hope that the government was taking the Rohmoria issue seriously and that something would be done. Moreover, they helped boost the confidence of the activists, since such high-profile visits were also reflective of the effectiveness of the movement. The activists felt that their struggle was recognized at the national level. This boosted their morale and the activists built up the pressure on the state further.

Beyond these visits, the state's interventions in Rohmoria have been also different from Majuli and other places in the valley facing similar crisis. The total budget for the Brahmaputra Board's 'Protection of Majuli Island from Floods and Erosion' scheme is 183.27 crores,¹⁵⁴ whereas the Board's budget for the protection of Rohmoria is 344 crores,¹⁵⁵ despite significant difference in size between the two places. It's another matter whether the activities carried out by the state (by the Brahmaputra Board and the Water Resources Department) have prevented or actually contributed to erosion and the damages associated with it, but the huge difference between the two places in terms of budget allocation speaks volume about the impact that the Rohmoria movement might have had on the state.

Besides the disproportionate budget allocation, the execution of flood- and erosion-control projects has also differed vastly between the two places. As discussed in Chapter 2, in Majuli, the Brahmaputra Board has not only lagged far behind in executing its projects, but it has

¹⁵⁴ Based on information available on the Brahmaputra Board website: www.brahmaputraboard.gov.in, accessed on July 2, 2013. (A crore equals ten million India rupees).

¹⁵⁵ Based on information available on the website of the Ministry of Development of the Northeastern Region: www.mdoner.gov.in, accessed on February 15, 2014.

also compromised with technical designs of certain infrastructures. The activities proposed under Phase II and Phase III of the Board's scheme for Majuli were to be completed by March 2012, but these activities remain incomplete to date.¹⁵⁶ Also, as I write this chapter, a local newspaper in Assam reports that one of the four boulder spurs that the Board has constructed in Majuli so far has been partially eroded by the ongoing flood in the island, resulting in havoc in the neighboring villages (Amar Asom, June 5, 2016). This particular spur was completed in 2014, soon after the completion of my fieldwork in Majuli. The fact that the structure is already damaged within two years of its construction reflects the poor quality of work, which further highlights the inadequate attention that Majuli has received from the state. In contrast, the Board has been relatively more efficient in Rohmoria, which can be largely attributed to the presence of a strong social movement. The movement has been successful in building public awareness in Rohmoria about various government projects, and it has also cultivated a culture of public vigilance of government projects, instances of which were discussed above. Hence, the Board has completed its work in Rohmoria in a timely manner, far more efficiently than it has done in Majuli.

Furthermore, as some of the activists in Rohmoria informed me, although the Board never solicited any public participation in its work, the leaderships of the movement and local intellectuals had provided their critical inputs to the Board from time to time.¹⁵⁷ This was certainly not the case in Majuli. In terms of the rehabilitation of displaced families, too, the Rohmoria families have received better support from the state than those in Majuli. A large number of the displaced families in Rohmoria, if not all, have received small plots of land in different parts of Upper Assam as part of compensation from the state, even though the

¹⁵⁶ Based on information available in the Brahmaputra Board's website: www.brahmaputraboard.gov.in

¹⁵⁷ Author interview with Mantu Dutta, October 20, 2013, Rohmoria.

livelihoods of these families still remain precarious. For instance, many of these families are experiencing such extreme dispossession that the women members have become tea laborers, a job which they have never done before and which is commonly a domain of various ‘tea tribes’ that the British had brought in from other parts of the country. For the male members of these families, wage-labor seems to have become the most dominant form of livelihood (Borgohain n.d.). But the important point to note is that a sizeable section of the displaced population in Rohmoria has received land, however meager, from the state. This has not been the case in Majuli. In the case of Majuli, only a handful of erosion-affected families have received land from the government, during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, there has been no rehabilitation of any displaced family in Majuli, even though each year, dozens of families lose their land and homes. Indeed, close to 10,000 families are currently homeless in Majuli, families who are living along embankments in makeshift arrangements without any legal ownership of land (Circle Office, Majuli, 2013).

The analysis above shows that the Indian state has responded quite differently to the crises of flooding and erosion in Majuli and Rohmoria. Several factors may have contributed to this difference, but one of the factors certainly is the different forms of resistance between the two geographies. This difference in resistance practices also illustrates the role of the state vis-à-vis flooding and erosion in the Brahmaputra valley as a whole. As I explained in Chapter 1, Majuli and Rohmoria are but two of the several places in the valley devastated by flooding and erosion. Each year, these disasters cause massive damages to lives and livelihoods in the state, displacing millions of people, killing many, and eroding progressively the traditional sources of livelihoods. Already, more than 7% of the total landmass in the valley has been eroded over the past six decades (Phukan et al. 2012). In an area where livelihoods are predominantly agrarian,

such large-scale erosion of landmass has huge socio-economic implications. Yet, the overall role of the state vis-à-vis the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape has been grossly inadequate. So neglected is the phenomenon of riverbank erosion that it has not even found a place as a disaster in the National Policy on Disaster Management, 2009 (Government of India 2009). This policy remains preoccupied with catastrophic events (e.g. earthquake, cyclone, flood, etc.), missing ‘slow disasters’ like riverbank erosion entirely. For more than a decade now, AASU has been demanding that Assam’s chronic problem of flood and erosion be declared “National Calamity” so as to gain due attention from the center. Whether or not such a recognition alone would result in any amelioration of the hazards condition is another issue, but the government has not even responded positively to this demand yet.¹⁵⁸

Given this context, if the Rohmoria case can teach us one thing, it is the role of social movements in drawing the state’s attention and holding it accountable to the public. Rohmoria’s struggle with flood and erosion has not been resolved yet, but compared to most other places in the valley facing similar crises, including Majuli, Rohmoria has gained much more attention, resources, and overall support from the state. At the very least, Rohmoria has not remained ‘out of sight, out of mind’ (Das 2007). And the credit for this goes largely to the strong, sustained mass movement in the Rohmoria landscape.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed two issues – the key factors behind the varied geographies of resistance in the Brahmaputra valley, and the ways in which the state is influenced and re-shaped by social movements and resistance. In critically examining the distinct geographies of resistance

¹⁵⁸ Author interview with the central Adviser of AASU, August 10, 2013, Guwahati.

in Majuli and Rohmoria, I have, first, foregrounded the question of “place.” I have demonstrated how the material attributes of a place as well as people’s sense of belonging to it are crucial factor to consider in analyzing resistance. After all, resistance takes *place* (Pile 1997). In the case of Rohmoria, its geographical characteristics have opened up spaces for mass mobilization, whereas Majuli lacked such spaces due to its geographical constraints. Then I presented an in-depth analysis of the role of leadership in social movements. Once again, the question of leadership has unfolded differently in Majuli and Rohmoria, thus contributing to different experiences of resistance in the two places. A significant portion of the chapter also focused on the issue of Majuli’s cultural fetishization, which, I have argued, has worked against the possibility of a mass social movement in the island. Overall, I have highlighted a number of factors that have contributed to a varied landscape of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria.

The second part of the chapter focused on the question of the state – specifically, how the role of the Indian state vis-à-vis the hazardscape in the Brahmaputra valley has been influenced by, among others, the specific forms of activism from below. I have demonstrated that in the case of Rohmoria, the Indian state has acted in a much more accountable way compared to its role in Majuli, largely to do with the presence of a strong, sustained movement in Rohmoria, which was missing in the case of Majuli. While factors such as the availability of oil in Rohmoria may also have influenced the role of the state vis-à-vis protection of this place, the Rohmoria movement is certainly a major factor impacting the functioning of the state. This chapter added a new dimension to our understanding of the state. It has proven that not only does the state wield enormous influence on communities by (re)shaping their local environment, but the state itself is impacted by local socio-political processes. Hence, for a more effective and democratic governance of flooding and erosion in the Brahmaputra valley, this chapter calls for

attention to a sustained mass movement so that the phenomenon of hazardscape in the Brahmaputra valley can be prevented.



Figure 30: Dakhinpat *sattri* main gate. Dakhinpat, Majuli, February 2013.



Figure 31: *Raas-leela* festival in Majuli. November 2013.



Figure 32: A scene from the *Heritage Majuli* event, 2013.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have presented a political ecological analysis of the transformation of the Brahmaputra valley landscape due to the processes of flooding and erosion. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and historical data, I have shown how places in the valley, like Majuli and Rohmoria, have gone through irreversible transformations over the years, manifested in the shrinking of these geographies, large-scale displacement and outmigration of rural population from these areas, and an overall breakdown of their agrarian economy. As I discussed in detail in previous chapters, over the years, for a large number of families in the valley, displacement and the loss of livelihoods have come to define their everyday existence. While biophysical nature has been an important factor in shaping the vulnerability of these geographies, at the heart of the crises lies, however, the role of the state. In particular, I have shown how the flood and erosion control measures undertaken by the Water Resources Department of the Assam government and the Brahmaputra Board of the central government have not just failed, but they have actually contributed to the production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. I have also presented an in-depth analysis of the varied landscape of resistance and movements in the valley – processes that have not only reflected the growing popular discontent with the state, but impacted the functioning of the state at various levels. To best summarize the political ecology of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape, let me now turn to the three key arguments that I have made in this dissertation.

Hazardscape and the state

This dissertation foregrounds the role of the state in the production of hazards and hazardous geographies in the Brahmaputra valley. Historically, flood and erosion were not calamities for the local communities in the valley. They were part of the “hydrological cycle” and the rural communities in the valley co-inhabited with these processes, devising flood-dependent agrarian livelihoods. However, treating these processes as “calamities,” the colonial policies vis-à-vis flood and erosion focused heavily on the construction of massive hydraulic infrastructures. Hence came a series of techno-engineering measures, such as embankments, spurs, and many others in the Brahmaputra floodplains. These attempts also reflected the broader global tendencies towards *controlling* and *harnessing* natural processes, and nature itself, through infrastructures so as to accelerate the process of capital accumulation. Flood control measures, for instance, were specifically aimed at separating the river from the fields so as to promote cash crops in the floodplains. However, in the longer run, such interventions interfered with the natural course and configuration of the riverscape, thereby turning the hydrological processes disastrous.

The postcolonial Assamese state perpetuated the colonial approaches to flood and erosion. Hence, hydraulic infrastructures proliferated in the valley within a short span of the post-independence era. As I have shown in this dissertation, the geographical distribution pattern of these infrastructures in the valley further demonstrated how capital accumulation is a key consideration for the state in its flood and erosion control initiatives. As such, the protection of places that possessed valuable resources have been prioritized while places with less significance for capital are often left unattended. Overall, this has produced a distinct spatiality of hazards and vulnerability in the valley, which further overlaid with the existing societal inequalities based on

caste, class, gender, location, and other axes. On the other hand, as my dissertation highlights in the case of Majuli, a powerful section of the society continues to accrue economic gains from such infrastructural projects by involving themselves in the planning and/or execution of these projects. In a nutshell, the hydraulic infrastructures in the valley have, then, not only aggravated the crises of flooding and erosion, they have also contributed to deepening the societal inequalities.

It is important to note here that infrastructures alone do not fully explain the role of the state in the (re)production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. Infrastructures have certainly reconfigured the hydraulic regime of the Brahmaputra river, thereby intensifying the processes of flooding and erosion and causing large-scale displacement of people in the valley. But what happens to these displaced families? As I have highlighted in this dissertation, except for a small section of the displaced families in the valley, the large majority has not received any compensation from the state. As a result, many of them continue to live in precarious places such as on embankments and roads like refugees, practicing wage-labor for their living. The state is thus doubly responsible for the hazardscape in the Brahmaputra valley: *first*, by producing disastrous geographies through hydraulic infrastructures, and *second*, by perpetuating vulnerability of these disaster-affected people by not providing them adequate rehabilitation.

In examining the role of the state in the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape, my dissertation puts into conversation Marxist and postcolonial theorizations of the state. I have argued that what lies behind the massive hydraulic infrastructures for flood and erosion control is the capitalist state's imperative of accumulation. However, I have also acknowledged the historical-geographical specificities of the postcolonial state, thus paying careful attention to the phenomena of the 'shadow state,' the role of various non-state actors, bureaucratic arbitrariness,

and the functioning of the everyday state. In the end, a question still remains as to whether, and to what end, common people matter for the state.

Rural livelihood transformation

My second argument in this dissertation was that environmental disasters are not simply one-time catastrophes; instead, by altering the natural resources base, disasters radically transform the traditional sources of livelihoods and destabilize rural economy. I have explained the livelihood implications of flooding and erosion by drawing on a political ecology framework. As such, I have paid attention to the deterioration of the natural resources in the valley and impacts thereof on rural livelihoods. At the same time, I have also situated the question of livelihoods within the broader political economic processes. Thus, I took into account, among others, the overall agrarian transformation in the country, the phenomenon of increased depeasantization, and the changing role of the state.

In both Majuli and Rohmoria, the traditional rural livelihoods are in deep crisis, as the land and water resources in these places have continually depleted. As a result, agriculture, fishing, pottery, livestock-rearing, and all other traditional livelihoods have gone through irreversible transformations over the years. This has forced many rural families to turn to wage-labor for their primary source of livelihoods. In the absence of adequate resource and government support, these rural families have also turned to a variety of non-traditional forms of livelihood, including goat trading, scrap metal trading, timber sawing, carpentry, masonry, and tea garden laborer. But these new sources of livelihood are highly precarious, as discussed in detail in this dissertation, thus deepening the overall vulnerability of the rural population. Furthermore, the adoption of such new forms of livelihood also meant disruption of the

traditional social relations in the rural families, and a breakdown of the socio-cultural fabric of these societies. I have also shown that some of the ongoing and proposed hydraulic interventions by the Indian state will have far-reaching consequences, potentially destabilizing the entire Brahmaputra-Ganges region, including Bangladesh. By foregrounding the question of natural resources, I have not tried to essentialize rural livelihoods as being natural resources based alone; instead, I believe that a robust rural economy depends heavily on diverse sources of income, including natural resources, other income-generating activities, and service sector. However, the foundation of a healthy rural economy lies in a stable natural resources base, and it is the erosion of this foundation that has led to the current livelihoods crisis in the Brahmaputra valley. Hence, this dissertation calls for attention to the stabilization of the land and water resources in the valley.

Resistance and social movements

The final argument that I made in this dissertation concerns social movements and resistance among the disaster-affected communities in the valley. I have argued that hazardscapes are not simply geographies of hazards and vulnerabilities, but they also allow opportunities for social movements, and that it is through such movements that local communities can potentially influence the functioning of the state. In navigating their respective geographies of hazards, the local communities in Majuli and Rohmoria took recourse to various forms of resistance to wield influence on the state and to ensure that the state paid due attention to the protection of these geographies.

The forms of resistance in Majuli and Rohmoria varied widely. While everyday forms of resistance have largely defined the struggle in Majuli, in Rohmoria, the peasantry was able to

mobilize a sustained mass movement. I have critically examined the important factors that have contributed to the differences in the forms of activism between these two places. In doing so, I have foregrounded, among others, the questions of materialities of place, leadership, and specific socio-historical experiences of the people in these geographies.

I have also argued that, depending upon the forms and forces of a resistance, the role of the state changes. In other words, not only does the state shape the socio-environmental processes in a place, but the state itself is shaped and re-shaped by politics from below. Hence, the role of the Indian state vis-à-vis the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape has changed from place to place, as witnessed in the case of Majuli and Rohmoria, depending upon the ways and intensity in which the local communities in these places exerted pressure on the state. As my dissertation showed, despite being a smaller place with less severe crisis of erosion compared to Majuli, Rohmoria was able to receive far greater attention from the state, and it has not been suffering from flooding and erosion in recent years. On the other hand, for the population in Majuli, flooding and erosion continue to be as grave a crisis as ever, with dozens of families still out-migrating from the island each year. I have therefore argued in this dissertation for a *necessity* of mass movement in the Brahmaputra valley if the valley has to be protected from the calamitous processes of flood and erosion.

Moving on

While this dissertation engaged critically with the political ecological processes of hazardscape in the Brahmaputra valley, there are issues still remain to be addressed. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the impact of climate change on the overall transformations of the Brahmaputra valley landscape cannot be ignored. The melting of the glaciers in the Himalayas and the changing

monsoonal patterns in the region are alarming phenomena, which will potentially reconfigure the Brahmaputra valley landscape further and worsen the flooding and erosion crises. Climate change also poses the risk of new forms of environmental hazards and vulnerability in the valley. That said, it is important to recognize that the current socio-ecological crisis in Assam wrought by flooding and erosion is not entirely driven by climate change. Instead, the accumulation imperative of the capitalist state, advanced particularly through hydraulic infrastructures, lies at the heart of the production of the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape. An over-emphasis on climate change, then, risks glossing over this critical factor. Therefore, I have focused predominantly on the question of the state in this dissertation, an issue that has thus far not received adequate attention from scholars. However, in future research on examining the Brahmaputra valley hazardscape in greater depth and breadth, I also plan to address the inescapable question of climate change.

Another phenomenon of major concern is the Indian government's plan to build hundreds of large dams in the state of Arunachal Pradesh for the purpose of hydroelectric power. These dams in the upstream portion of the Brahmaputra river will impact the course and configuration of the river, potentially producing more uncertainties and risk for the valley portion in the downstream areas. Given the seismic sensitivity of the Eastern Himalayan region, these dams can lead to catastrophes of unimaginable scale in the entire region. I briefly mentioned the issue of dam in Chapter 2 without paying enough attention to it. This is another issue that I would like to examine more carefully in future research, since the spectre of catastrophe looms large in the Brahmaputra valley once these proposed mega dams become reality.

As I write this conclusion, in September 2016, the Assam government has declared Majuli as the newest district in Assam, previously a sub-division of Jorhat district. This

development may have important future implications for the socio-environmental issues in the island. Being a district now, Majuli will likely receive more funds and other resources for its development, and gain greater attention from the state. Besides, with the district headquarter located within the island, the population in Majuli will now have better access to government agencies and programs. This should help address the problem of “remoteness” of the island that I have highlighted earlier. Thus, one can hope that the crises faced by the island will be better addressed in the near future. However, the designation as a district may also lead to greater bureaucratization in the governance of environmental-developmental processes, thereby perpetuating the disconnect between the state and the people. Furthermore, there are examples of other districts in Assam (e.g. Dhemaji and Morigaon) where the recognition of district status did not really lessen the sufferings from flooding, erosion, and underdevelopment. In other words, the new designation as a district promises greater opportunities for Majuli, but does not guarantee them. In the end, people will have to still mobilize themselves as a collective and demand for better governance of their natural resources and protection of their places. In this regard, people in the valley can learn a great deal from the Rohmoriam movement. As Rohmoriam activist Biplob Gogoi rightly said: “Learn how to shout, if you don’t want to die.”

Annexure 1: A petition to the state by AJYCP (Source: Sub-Divisional Office, Majuli)

॥ জয় আই অসম ॥ ☎ : 03775-27319

অসম জাতীয়তাবাদী যুব-ছাত্র পরিষদ
ASOM JATIYATABADI YUBA-CHATRA PARISHAD
 মাজুলী জিলা সমিতি : কমলাবাৰী, মাজুলী, যোৰহাট ।
 MAJULI DISTRICT COMMITTEE :: KAMALABARI, MAJULI, JORHAT
 মূখ্য কাৰ্য্যালয় : মানিক ভৱন, কমলাবাৰী ।

প্রসঙ্গ : দিনাংক :

To,
 The Chairman,
 Central Water Commission,
 New Delhi.

Date – 02/02/2009

Sub.- Memorandum

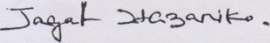
Sir,

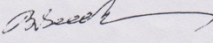
At the outset; we offer our sincere respect to you on behalf of all the people of Majuli. With due respect we would like to inform you that the Brahmaputra Board has been working and implementing its scheme in Majuli for geographical protection since 2004. But regretfully enough we have to inform you that the process of implementation of the various schemes is not beyond doubt and the erosion on the island continues. So, for the greater interest of the geographical protection of Majuli, we hereby sincerely offer some demands for your kind consideration and immediate execution. The demands are –

1. The process of recommended boulder spur should be implemented instantly.
2. The entire Majuli should be included on the master-plane of the Brahmaputra Board.
3. A divisional office of the Brahmaputra Board should be established immediately on Majuli.
4. Importance should be given on the effective and timely implementation of all the action plane of the Brahmaputra Board.
5. A high level enquiry should be initiated from your end about the doubtful implementation of the total schemes of the Brahmaputra Board.

We hope, you will consider our demands favourably.

Sincerely Yours,


 (Sri Jagat Hazarika)
 President


 (Sri Biren Sarmah)
 General Secretary

Assam Jatiyatabadi Juba Chatra Porishad,
 Majuli District Committee.

আমাৰ দাবী : পূৰ্ণ স্বায়ত্ত্ব শাসন আৰু দ্বি-নাগৰিকত্ব প্ৰদান ■

Annexure 2: List of agencies (government and non-government) consulted

Government agencies/resources

- The Brahmaputra Board (local offices and headquarter)
- The Water Resources Department (divisional office in Majuli)
- The Ministry of Water Resources and the Welfare of Plain Tribes & Backward Classes, Assam
- The Fishery Department, Garamur, Majuli
- The Agriculture Department, Garamur, Majuli
- The Char-Anchal Development Agency, Garamur, Majuli
- The Block Development Office, Kamalabari, Majuli
- The Circle Office, Kamalabari, Majuli
- The SDO (Civil) Office, Garamur, Majuli
- The Assam State Assembly Library, Guwahati, Assam
- Gram Panchayat representatives of Salmora, Dakhinpat, and Rawnapar panchayats
- Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi

Activist/social organizations (non-governmental)

- AASU (local units and headquarter)
- AJYCP (local units in Majuli)
- TMPK (local units in Majuli)
- KMSS (local unit in Majuli)
- MSSM, Majuli
- Rohmoriamovement activists
- The Sattradhikars of Auniati, Bengenati, Bhogpur, Dakhinpat, and Samaguri sattras in Majuli

Annexure 3: Detail breakdown of interviewees and survey respondents

Total Interviewees (Majuli and Rohmoriam combined): 81

1. Village Residents: 51
Male: 38
Female: 13
2. Satradhikars: 5 (all male)
3. Contractors: 4 (all male)
4. Government Officials: 9
Male: 8
Female: 1
5. Activists and Political Leaders: 12 (all male)

Focus Groups: 15

Majuli: 10
Rohmoriam: 5

Note: In most of the focus groups, 50% participants were female.

Household Surveys in Majuli: 107

Dakhinpat: 43
Salmora: 40
Sumoimari: 24

Note: since the surveys were conducted in home spaces, more than one member of a family participated in these surveys. Usually, the participants included male and female members of a household.

Annexure 4: Questionnaires for Interviews, Focus Groups, and Household Survey

(i) Questionnaire for semi-structured interviews with village residents

Date:

Interviewee's name:

Sex:

Age:

Level of education:

Village/panchayat/district/:

Position in household:

Family Size:

Interviewed by:

Personal introductions:

- Brief description of my research objectives/questions and the objectives of the interview
- Declaration of the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview and seek consent.

1. Basic information:

1.1 The location:

1.1.1 Where is your house located in the village (please point it on the village map)

1.1.2 How far are your house and your village located from the river?

1.1.3 How far is your house located from the nearest embankment and/or spur and/or dyke?

1.2 House type: (a) pukka _____ (b) kachcha _____ (c) half wall _____ (d) stilt house (pukka/ kachcha/ half wall) _____

1.3 Landholding: (a) homestead _____ (b) arable land _____ (c) village commons _____

1.4 How much of the arable land is irrigated? _____. The sources of irrigation

1.5 Tenure type: (a) owner cultivator _____ (b) absentee owner _____
 (c) share-cropper _____ (d) landless labor _____

1.6 Type of crops cultivated and amount produced:

1.7 Other sources of income: craft _____ fishing _____
 shop _____ service _____ remittance _____
 wage labor _____

1.8 Average annual income:

2. Flood and riverbank erosion: impacts, causes, and coping

2.1 Could you give me an overview of how floods and riverbank erosion have affected your family and your village/community over the years?

2.2 More concretely, how have you been affected by these disasters economically (i.e. in terms of agriculture, livestock, and income-expenditure), socio-culturally, politically, and in terms of your overall spirit?

2.3 What have been some of the worst years of flood and erosion for your family/village? Could you please narrate those experiences to me in detail?

2.4 How have you survived these worst years of disasters? What specific measures have your family and your community taken to adjust/adapt? More generally, what are some of the coping mechanisms that your family and your community have developed over the years to live with disasters?

2.5 Have you or any one in your family purchased land or been offered land by the government outside Majuli? Please provide details.

2.6 What do you think are the causes of floods and riverbank erosion in Majuli, and in Assam more generally?

2.7 What do you think are the causes behind the vulnerability of your family and your village/community to floods and erosion?

3. Role of government and nongovernment agencies

3.1 What measures have the government agencies (i.e. the E&D department and/or the Brahmaputra Board) taken for the prevention/management of floods and erosion in your village/area? Could you please name/explain some past and/or ongoing government projects in this regard?

3.2 Have these projects/measures been effective? How? If not, why?

3.3 Do you think the government has increased yours and Majuli's vulnerability to floods and riverbank erosion? If yes, how so? Also, how could the government, then, better address your vulnerability?

3.4 Do you think the embankments, the spurs, and other such technical measures undertaken by the state are appropriate measures to prevent or control floods and erosion? Explain.

3.5 Have you ever participated in any of the government projects related to either flood and riverbank management or "development" in general? If yes, in what capacities (i.e. as

labor or in planning or decision-making processes)? Has your participation been asked for?

3.6 How have you been able to make use of the panchayat in order to participate in government projects and decisions? What are its challenges?

3.7 Has there been any involvement of NGOs or other voluntary organizations (including influential people and out-migrants from Majuli) in flood and erosion management in your village/area? If so, please provide the details.

4. Social mobilizations and resistances

4.1 Could you explain some, if any, of the activities undertaken by social/political organizations (e.g. AASU, TMPK, AJYCP, KMSS, MSSM, the Satras, any village or panchayat level committee, and any others) for better protection and development of your village and the island as a whole?

4.2 In case of any such mobilizations, what are the specific tactics and instances of such mobilizations?

4.3 Have these measures been effective in pressurizing the government for better action or in bringing in some changes to your life and to the area in general?

4.4 What are the challenges to such mobilizations?

4.5 Have you participated in any such mobilizations? Please explain.

5. General

5.1 Are you better off or worse off today than 10 years ago? Could you please elaborate?

5.2 What future plans do you have for yourself and your family?

5.3 If you are asked to recommend a few important measures that could ameliorate the crises, what would be those recommendations?

(ii) Questionnaire for semi-structured interviews with government and nongovernment officials

1. Basic Information

- 1.1 What is the role of your agency in the management of flood and riverbank erosion? What is the overall mission of your agency?
- 1.2 In managing floods and riverbank erosion, what is the scale of operation of your agency: village/panchayat level, sub-divisional level, statewide, nationwide, or system wide? Is it an appropriate scale of operation?
- 1.3 What are your roles and responsibilities within the organization?
- 1.4 Could you please explain to me the systems of project planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation in your department?

2. Views on flood management

- 2.1 What are the causes behind Majuli's vulnerability to floods? How does this vulnerability vary geographically within the island and why?
- 2.2 What is your agency's understanding of flood mitigation?
- 2.3 What have been some of the efforts by your agency – i.e. past, ongoing, and future projects – to prevent and control floods? Have they been effective, or what are the prospects of their effectiveness? Please explain.
- 2.4 In my field, many scholars consider flood as a 'political hazard' or an 'unnatural disaster' rather than a 'natural disaster'. What is your take on this?
- 2.5 Many scholars, across the world, have argued that levees, embankments, and other such measures have actually intensified flood hazard instead of mitigating it? How would you view this argument?
- 2.6 In social science, we often talk about the concept of "vulnerability" to flood hazard? Are you aware of this concept? If so, could you explain your understanding of it?

3. Views on riverbank erosion and its management

- 3.1 What is the understanding of your agency on riverbank erosion and its management? In other words, what, according to your agency, are the causes of riverbank erosion and how can this phenomenon be controlled?

- 3.2 Are there connections between flood [control] and riverbank erosion? If so, what are those?
- 3.3 Some argue that riverbank erosion in the Brahmaputra Valley is a “natural” phenomenon driven by the specific geo-morphological characteristics of the Brahmaputra River, whereas many others would theorize it as a ‘political-ecological’ phenomenon, i.e. a mix of both political-economic and biophysical processes. What are your views on these different arguments?
- 3.4 Many villagers and intellectuals alike in the island have told me that the erosion problem is caused mainly due to the increased shallowness of the river. Hence, the only solution to the erosion problem, they argue, is to dig up the river. Some of them even attribute this shallowness to the embankments in the island. What are your views on this issue?
- 3.5 What are the efforts by your agency – including past, ongoing, and future projects – to prevent riverbank erosion in Majuli? Have they been successful, and/or what are the prospects of their success in near future? Please explain.

4. Collaborations: with other agencies and the public

- 4.1 How often do you find yourself giving a call to another government agency for help, information, and/or coordination to carry out your responsibilities? Is that typical of your agency?
- 4.2 Are there institutional mechanisms for inter-departmental or inter-organizational collaborations on issues of floods and riverbank erosion in Majuli? If so, what are those and how effectively are they used?
- 4.3 In carrying out your responsibilities, have you ever consulted or collaborated with the local village communities, the panchayat, and any local NGO/CBO? Please provide specific examples.

5. Social dimensions of your work

- 5.1 How do you take into account issues of social divisions, based on class, caste, gender, and religion, in carrying out your responsibilities?

5.2 Do you think the local population, their organizations, and the local leaderships are playing adequate role in mitigating floods and riverbank erosion? If not, could you elaborate?

5.3 What are your views on social movements? Do you think they have a role to play in preventing or ameliorating the crises facing Majuli?

6. Views on professional satisfaction

6.1 Are you satisfied with your job? If you had a choice of a posting, what would be your preferred department, position, and place of posting? Why?

6.2 What are the prospects for career advancement in your agency? Compare it with other similar agencies.

6.3 How often do you participate in any skill development or refresher programs? List some, if any, that you have attended in last 10 years. How have these helped you in better performing your responsibilities or in your career advancement?

6.4 What are the prospects for any overseas training (including exposure visit) in your organization? Have you been part of any? If so, explain.

6.5 What are some of the major challenges your agency faces in carrying out its responsibilities? Do such challenges exist – or are they more or less – in other agencies involved in similar activities?

6.6 If you have the authority to change something in your agency (i.e. from the organizational mission to the implementation level), what would be those?

7. Any other comment:

(iii) Questionnaire for semi-structured interview with the local MLA (member of legislative assembly) in Majuli

1. What are some of the key measures taken by the state and/or the central governments to resolve the crises of flood and riverbank erosion in Assam? Are they adequate given the scale of the problem? If not, what else need to be done and how?
2. The Brahmaputra Board is primarily responsible for the management of riverbank erosion in Majuli, but there have been a lot of charges (ranging from the agency's incompetencies to corruption) against the Board. What's your opinion on these charges? And how have you, as the cabinet minister of water resources of the state, tried to facilitate a smoother, more efficient, and more sincere functioning of the Board?
3. Based on my fieldwork, I observe that there is a lack of collaboration and coordination between government agencies, e.g. between the WRD and the BB, which deters the larger agenda of all of us. Have you been able to do something for a more collaborative relationship across departments concerning the water resources of the state?
4. Related to the above, how have you as an elected leader of a constituency tried to accommodate local participation in the development projects and the disaster management projects in Majuli?
5. Several important personalities, including yourself, had criticized the central government for not recognizing the problem of flood and erosion in Assam as a 'national disaster'. How would such a recognition help resolve these disasters?
6. How about the failure to set up the NEWRA? What are some of its implications?
7. There have not been adequate measures from the state vis-à-vis resettlement of the flood and erosion affected families. In fact, some people in Majuli accuse you of not taking this issue seriously (due to your fear of losing vote banks), and some others accuse the satradhikars and the local leaders of not lobbying for this (due to their fear of not gaining the cultural heritage status for Majuli). How do you respond to this?
8. What is your view on the dams in the upstream of the Brahmaputra and the supposed threats these dams pose to the downstream areas including Majuli? Have you been able to do anything about it?
9. As the minister of water resources, have you had the opportunity to see any successful model of water resources management in others parts of the world, so that you could replicate some of those models?
10. Perhaps no resident of Majuli would disagree that the ferry service connecting Majuli with Jorhat (and with Lakhimpur, too) is traumatizing, at best. Have you or do you plan to do anything to improve this service?

11. What have been your most significant achievements in Majuli as the elected leader of the island, and in Assam as the cabinet minister of water resources of the state?
12. And what have been the biggest challenges you have faced in performing your job and/or fulfilling your commitments?
13. What future vision do you have for Majuli and how do you plan to accomplish that?

(iv) Questionnaire for semi-structured interview with the satradhikars

1. Basic Information

- 1.1 Could you please describe the current profile of your satra: its area, the number of bhakats, the number of disciples and their geographic spread, and the branches of your satra, etc.?
- 1.2 Is there any historical landmark or unique characteristic of your satra that you would like to highlight?
- 1.3 What is the economy of the satra institutions, and your satra in particular?

2. Floods and riverbank erosion

- 2.1 Could you give me an overview of how floods and riverbank erosion have, over the years, affected your satra and its surrounding areas?
- 2.2 What have been the geographic, economic, and socio-cultural implications of the effects of floods and riverbank erosion in the island?
- 2.3 More specifically, what have been some of the worst years of flood and erosion for your satra? Could you elaborate on those experiences? How have you survived those years?
- 2.4 What, according to you, are the causes of floods and riverbank erosion in Majuli?
- 2.5 Some villagers attribute the crises in Majuli to the power of “Nature”, especially the extraordinary (supernatural?) power of the Brahmaputra, which, therefore, is beyond human capacity to control. What is your take on this?
- 2.6 What are the causes behind your satra’s vulnerability to these disasters?
- 2.7 Could you describe the steps adopted by you and your satra to cope with such disasters? Do you have land outside Majuli for your satra? How did you acquire that land? Is that branch already functioning? Was that move driven primarily by the problem of erosion in Majuli or by religious purposes?

3. Role of the government and nongovernment agencies

- 3.1 Do you think the role of the government in preventing flood and riverbank erosion in Majuli and in your area has been adequate? Please explain your position.
- 3.2 Many scholars argue, and a number of villagers that I’ve talked to in Majuli also agree, that engineering measures such as embankments, spurs, etc. have actually worsened the problems of flood and riverbank erosion. Do you agree? Please explain.

- 3.3 Unlike in many other parts of India, there isn't much, if at all, involvement of NGOs in Majuli? Do you think Majuli is missing out a lot because of that? Please explain.
- 3.4 Could you please describe how the satras, and yours in particular, have tried to influence the government's role in and the overall politics of the management of flood and riverbank erosion in Majuli?
- 3.5 Some people I met in the island have criticized the satras for the latter's inadequate role in advocating the cause of Majuli and insufficient support to the flood and riverbank erosion victims. How would you like to respond to such criticisms?

4. Popular resistances

- 4.1 Why do you think there isn't a mass movement in the island and in Assam around the issue of flood and riverbank erosion?
- 4.2 Do you see any role for such a movement? If so, could you tell me what have the satras done to generate such a movement?

5. General issues

- 5.1 The satras were originally set up as institutions of socio-cultural reforms, and they had played a significant role in Assam on that regard. However, now that you find yourself preoccupied with the riverbank erosion crises, how does that affect the socio-cultural role of the satras and, hence, the socio-cultural aspects of Assam?
- 5.2 If you are to recommend a few important measures for the protection and the betterment of Majuli, what would be those?
- 5.3 Any other comment:

(v) Questionnaire for semi-structured interview with contractors in WRD/BB projects

Date & Time:

Interviewee's name:

Designation/Specialization:

Interviewed by:

Personal Introductions

- Brief description of my research objectives/questions and the objectives of the interview
- Declaration of the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview and seek consent.

General Information

1. Could you please describe the projects you have completed in Majuli thus far under the E&D (Water Resources) department, the Brahmaputra Board, the DRDA, or any other relevant department: the type of work, location, budget, year, and department?
2. Were those projects effective enough in meeting their objectives, and how?
3. What are your ongoing projects in the island? Please present the details.
4. What have been your overall professional experiences (or qualifications) of working on this issues (and under the above departments)?
5. Could you describe the mechanisms of your project implementation, i.e. the following in particular?
 - Timetable
 - Sourcing of materials, machineries, and labor
 - Mechanisms for quality control
 - Coordination with the department and its officials, engineers, etc.
 - Your own role

Flood and riverbank erosion

6. What are your views on the issue of flood and riverbank erosion in Majuli, especially about the following?
 - What causes these disasters
 - The geographical, socio-economic, and cultural implications of the disasters
 - How to control/prevent flood and riverbank erosion

7. How do you think your projects have contributed and will contribute to protecting Majuli from flood and erosion?
8. Many in the island say that the contractors (hand in hand with the politicians and the government officials) have actually worsened, if not created, the crises in Majuli? How would you respond to this argument/allegation?
9. Are you affected, too, by floods and erosion in Majuli? How? Please explain.
10. Do you have land and/or house outside Majuli? If so, do you plan to move there in near future?
11. What are some of the challenges you've faced in implementing the above projects?
12. If you get a chance to implement any of your projects again, would you do that any differently? Why and how?

(vi) Questionnaire for focus-group interviews with community members

Date: No. of male participants:
 Group size: No. of female participants:
 Group type:
 Name of the village/agency:

Personal introductions:

- Brief description of my research objectives/questions and the objectives of the interview
- Declaration of the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview and seek consent

1. Effects and causes of vulnerability to floods and riverbank erosion

1.1 Could you explain how floods and riverbank erosion have impacted you economically, geographically, politically, and socio-culturally (including, if your community in Majuli is undergoing distinct socio-cultural transformations due to the disasters than the same community living outside of Majuli) – both at a personal level and at the level of your community/suburi/village?

1.2 Are the effects of flood and riverbank erosion gendered? How so?

1.3 What are some of the causes of the ongoing floods and riverbank erosion crises in Majuli? Have these disasters and their effects intensified or subsided? What makes you more vulnerable to these disasters than some other communities and places within the island?

2. Views on the role of government and nongovernment organizations

2.1 Please explain some of the government measures for flood and riverbank management in your area and what have been, if any, the benefits of such measures?

2.2 Do you think the above measures are sufficient (or appropriate) to redress your crises? Please explain.

2.3 At what *scale* do you think the government has been unsuccessful, or the government could do more to benefit you – local level, sub-divisional level, district and state level, or national level? Why do you find that an appropriate scale of operation?

2.4 Have nongovernment organizations, such as the satras, AASU, AJYCP, TMPK, KMSS, and the like, played any role in putting pressure on the government for more effective action? Could you describe some such roles?

3. Views on community initiatives in flood and erosion management

- 3.1 Some people say that part of the problem in Majuli is the lack of initiatives at the community level, i.e. in terms of voluntary action, adequate participation in the panchayat, vigilance in government projects, and the lack of local leaderships and organizations. Do you agree?
- 3.2 If you do not agree with the above, could you discuss some of the initiatives you have taken in this regard? What have been the results of those initiatives?
- 3.3 Are there instances of separate women's initiatives in your community, e.g. role of SHGs, women leaderships, women's role in the panchayat, and women-specific coping mechanisms?

4. Views on resistances and social movements

- 4.1 How about social movements ('andolan')? Has there been any? Is there a need for social movements, and do you think they can make a difference? What are the challenges to such activism?
- 4.2 If not mass social movements, have you still resorted to any form of resistance? Please explain.

5. General comments and recommendations

(vii) Questionnaire for focus group discussion with potters in Salmora

Introduction session & a brief presentation of my research and the purpose of this meeting –

1. Could you please explain to me the current status of pottery in the village?
 - No. of families involved in pottery
 - No. of families involved in pottery trade
 - Are these families generally solely dependent on pottery for livelihoods or they have other sources too?
 - Since how long have these families (and you in particular) been practicing pottery?
 - Have anyone of you participated in any pottery related events, e.g. exhibitions, mela, or any such promotional event?
2. Could you list the type of products made in Salmora?
3. Please map out a ‘seasonality chart’ of various activities involved in pottery and pottery trade. Also highlight changes in it in the event of flood and erosion.
4. As potters, what are some of the challenges you are facing? (E.g. lack of soil, firewood, market, training, capital, etc.)
5. How have floods and bank erosion contributed to your challenges?
6. Have you participated in any training program? If so, please provide details. What aspects of pottery would you like to get some trainings on?
7. Please map out the trading routes of pottery and their changes over the years, if any.
8. What are some of your institutional and social mechanisms for trading? What type of negotiations do you have to make? What are some of the challenges in trading?
9. Many people – including government officials – believe that the pottery industry is an important factor behind the exceptional rate of erosion in Salmora. Do you agree? Please explain your position.
10. Are there any association/union representing the interest of the potters at the district/state/national level that you are part of? Is there a need for such bodies?

(viii) Questionnaire for household surveys

Name:

Date:

Profession:

Sex:

Age:

GENERAL PROFILE

1. Family size _____
2. No. of male members _____; No. of female members _____ in the household.
3. Age of the youngest person _____ & the oldest person _____ in the household.
4. The most educated person in the family _____ & the years of his/her education _____.
5. Location of the house:
 Distance from the river _____
 Inside or outside of the embankment _____
 Distance from the embankment/spur _____
6. House type:
 (a) pukka (b) kachcha (c) half-wall (d) stilt house: pukka/ kachcha/ half-wall
7. Roof type: (a) tin (b) thatched (c) RCC (d) other materials: _____
8. Are you a beneficiary of Indira Awas Yojna?
 (a) Yes (b) No
 Please provide details: _____

9. Household assets:

Name of assets/access	Yes	No	Details
Electricity			
Solar light			
LPG connection			
Boat			
Car			
Motorcycle			
Bicycle			
TV			
Refrigerator			
Radio			
Tubewell			
Latrine			

10. Landholding (in Bigha):

(a) Homestead _____ (b) Agricultural _____

11. Tenure type:

(a) Owner cultivator (b) Absentee owner (c) Share cropper (d) Landless laborer

12. Type of crops generally cultivated: _____

13. Crop-wise average production in a year/season: _____

14. The purpose of cultivation:

(a) subsistence (b) commercial (c) both

15. In case of b or c, type of crops sold and the income earned annually:

16. Type and sources of seeds:

- (a) Local _____
 (b) Hybrid _____
 (c) Sources (for both local and/or hybrid) _____

17. Irrigation:

- (a) Yes (b) No (c) If Yes, the sources of irrigation and the crops irrigated

18. Do you use: (a) organic manure and biocides (b) chemical fertilizers and pesticides (c) both?

19. In case of using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, what all do you use and how much do they cost? _____

20. Do you have a kitchen garden? If so, please mention the following:

- (a) Type of vegetables grown: _____

 (b) For household consumption or for the market: _____
 (c) If for the market, the average annual income from kitchen garden: _____

21. Livestock (type and number):

- (a) cow _____ (b) bull _____ (c) buffalo _____ (d) goat _____ (e) pig _____
 (f) horse _____ (g) chicken _____ (h) duck _____ (i) pigeon _____
 (j) others _____

22. Average annual income from livestock: Rs. _____

23. How much firewood is consumed per day in the family (excluding the firewood required for pottery)? Kg. _____

24. Where do you get the firewood from? _____

25. Who collects firewood, where from, how often, and how much time is spent in each collection? _____

26. In case of purchasing firewood, what is the average monthly cost of firewood?

Rs. _____

27. Sources of income: (a) agriculture (b) livestock (c) service

(d) shop (e) small-business (f) remittance (g) fishing

(h) pottery (i) weaving (j) boat-making (k) other crafts

(l) wage labor

The Details: _____

28. Average annual income: Rs. _____

FLOOD RELATED ISSUES

29. Major floods experienced: Yrs. _____

30. Year-wise flood damages (including the 2012 flood):

Other details of damages: _____

31. Have the effects of floods been different for the men and the women in your family? If yes, how? Explain.

32. Causes of flooding: (a) Location: by a river _____, outside of an embankment _____ (b) Breaching of embankment/spur
 (c) Breaching of dams in upstream region (d) Lack of adequate flood protection
 (e) Excessive rain (f) Failure of authorities (g) Any other

33. Why do you think you are vulnerable to floods?

- (a) Due to the specific location of our house
- (b) Because we are poor
- (c) Because we are powerless
- (d) Failure of the government agencies, local politicians, and contractors
- (e) It is our luck
- (f) Flood is “natural”, so it’s no one’s fault.

34. Flood reliefs (please provide year-wise details, if possible):

(a) Government agencies: _____

(b) NGO/voluntary organizations: _____

(c) Relatives/friends/community: _____

(d) Religious institutions (including the Satras): _____

(e) None:

35. How have you coped during and after these flood events? Provide specific examples:

36. Are you covered under any flood insurance program? (a) Yes (b) No

Details: _____

RIVERBANK EROSION RELATED ISSUES

37. Years of major riverbank erosion: _____

38. Damages suffered due to riverbank erosion (please provide year-wise details):

Other details (including loss of socio-cultural ties): _____

39. Have the effects of riverbank erosion been different for the men and the women in your family? If yes, how? Please explain.

40. Has anyone from your family out-migrated from Majuli?

(a) Yes (b) No

(c) If yes, details of the migrants: _____

(d) Years of migration: _____

(e) Self-purchased land or government rehabilitation: _____

(f) Migrants' occupation in the new place: _____

41. Have you purchased any land outside Majuli?

(a) Yes (b) No (c) If Yes, where and when: _____

42. Causes of riverbank erosion:

(a) The shallowness of the Brahmaputra

(b) Developmental activities and deforestation in the upstream areas

(c) Lack of adequate measures from the government agencies

(d) Due to the embankments

(e) Due to the spurs and such measures

(f) Lack of popular mobilizations to pressurize the government

(g) Natural processes

(h) God's will

(i) Any other reason: _____

43. Causes of your vulnerability to riverbank erosion:

- (a) Location of the house/village
- (b) Because we are poor
- (c) Because we are powerless
- (d) Failure of the government agencies, politicians, and the contractors
- (e) Our own fault: we haven't prepared well/ we haven't mobilized/ we've been wicked
- (f) God's will
- (g) Riverbank erosion is a natural process; hence, our vulnerability is natural, too.

44. Has the government helped you in rehabilitation?

- (a) Yes. The details: _____

- (b) No

45. What have been your own coping mechanisms?

- (a) Purchased land outside Majuli: _____
- (b) Out-migration of family members: _____
- (c) Relocating within Majuli (at own cost or governmental support): _____

- (d) Change of crops: _____

- (e) Increased use of fertilizers, pesticides, and other such productivity enhancing inputs: _____

- (f) Change of land-use: _____

- (g) Adopting new occupation: _____
- (h) Seek assistance from the government: _____

- (i) Seeking assistance from the nongovernment organizations and social networks:

(j) Any other measures: _____

OTHER LIVELIHOOD RELATED ISSUES

46. Have you been a beneficiary of any government scheme? If yes, please provide details:

47. Please rank and explain your preferred livelihood options.

Rank	Livelihood Choices	Justifications
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

48. Pottery:

(a) Is your family involved in pottery?

Yes No

If yes, how many members are involved in it and in what ways?

(b) How many hours a day at an average does your family spend in pottery?

(c) Where do you get the firewood for pottery from?

(d) Average annual cost involved in pottery? _____

(e) Average annual income from pottery? _____

(f) Where and how do you sell your products?

- (g) What supports have you received from the government for strengthening pottery?
- (h) Have you received any NGO support for strengthening pottery? Please provide details.
- (i) What are your major challenges in maintaining pottery?
- i.
 - ii.
 - iii.
 - iv.
- (j) Would you like to continue pottery in near future? Or, what are your future plans with regards to pottery?

49. Boat craft:

- (a) Is your family involved in the boat-making business?
- Yes No
- (b) If yes, please provide the details of how many members are involved in it and how regularly:
- (c) Average annual income from boat-making: _____
- (d) What supports have you received from the government for strengthening the boat craft?
- (e) Have you been supported by any NGO in the boat craft? Please describe.
- (f) Challenges facing your family's involvement in the boat craft:
- i.
 - ii.
 - iii.

(g) What future plan do you have for the boat craft?

50. Weaving:

(a) Is anyone in your family involved in weaving?

Yes No

(b) If yes, it is for:

(a) household use (b) commercial purpose (c) both

(c) Average annual income from weaving: _____

(d) What supports have you received from the government for strengthening weaving?

(e) Have you been supported by any NGO in weaving? Please describe.

(f) Challenges you currently face in the weaving craft:

i.

ii.

iii.

(g) Future plans vis-à-vis weaving:

51. Fishing:

(a) Is fishing a source of occupation in your family?

Yes No

(b) Where do you go fishing? Is there any restriction in fishing there?

(c) What type of fishes do you usually catch?

(d) Please mention your fishing mechanisms:

(e) How many kgs of fish, at an average, do you sell per day? _____

(f) How do you sell the fishes?

- i. By going house to house locally
- ii. Take it to the nearby market
- iii. To some middlemen
- iv. Any other means:

(g) Average annual income from fishing: _____

(h) Challenges you face in fishing:

- i.
- ii.
- iii.

52. Has your social network played any role in supporting your livelihoods during and after disasters? If so, please explain how.

53. What are currently the major livelihoods challenges before you?

- (a)
- (b)
- (c)
- (d)
- (e)

GENERAL:

54. What all public venues (e.g. panchayat meetings, village meetings, meetings called by any organization, meetings called by the Brahmaputra Board/Water Resources department/other department, visit by MLA/MP/government official) have you attended in last 5 years to discuss about flood and riverbank erosion related issues?

55. Could you mention some instances of your own action aimed at challenging the state or the local authorities? Do you think they were effective?

56. Have you witnessed changes in any beel, jaan, suti, or other such water bodies around you? If so, please name the resources and describe their transformations.

57. Which one of the following would be your preference and why?

(a) To move out of Majuli

(b) To stay on in Majuli, if better protection measures and livelihoods are assured.

Reason: _____

58. If you have to make ONE demand from the government for the betterment of you and your family, what would be that?

Surveyor's note:

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