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Displacement and Dispossession on the Banks of Brahmaputra: A Gendered Reading

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Abstract: The Bengali Muslims in Assam who live in the river islands are marginalized on multiple fronts. Not only do they face geographic isolation, the social stigma that is attached to their identity worsens the scenario. While the entire community suffers from socio-economic deprivation, women of this community are the worst sufferers. To understand their double marginalization there is a need to look at their condition separately. Often forced out of homes, they bear the brunt of such conflict induced, calamity induced displacement. Loss of home and hearth translates to loss of identity for women as well. This paper tries to make sense of the precarious condition that life on the margins put women through.

Keywords: women, displacement, erosion, Char, Bengali Muslims.

Introduction

The state of Assam occupies an area of 78,523 sq. km. It is physically divided into hills and plains. In mainstream archaic definitions the profile of char areas or hinterlands are rarely included. Chars are river islands that dot the river Brahmaputra. They are formed by silt deposits after floods which are a yearly affair in this part of the country. Because of certain government policies, going back to the

British colonial rule, like the Inner Line Permit—these areas were earmarked for the settling down of Muslims of East Bengal origin. Their forefathers were encouraged to come to this sparsely populated state of Assam by the British. They in turn have transformed the agriculture of the state. After six decades of independence, the char areas continue to be underdeveloped. The Chars of Dhubri doubly suffer because of being in close proximity to the Bangladesh border. The geopolitics of the region makes it a strategically crucial area for securitization. But at the same time their developmental aspect is often overlooked.

Background

The Muslim peasants of East Bengal origin changed the agricultural scenario of Assam. They introduced the cultivation of cash crops like jute. But these immigrants along with changing the agrarian scenario also changed the demographic profile of the region. The erstwhile scantily populated state now had a much higher density of population. In the beginning the Assamese middle class of the Brahmaputra valley welcomed this migration as it ensured availability of cheap labour. But slowly the attitude of the locals towards immigrants changed. The local inhabitants fearing minoritization wanted some kind of safeguard mechanism to ensure their cultural dominance. Keeping such concerns in mind the British government introduced the Line System in 1916 which was implemented in 1920 (Kar 2013, 01-03). This demarcated certain areas for settlement of the immigrants and tried to check their indiscriminate settlement in the state. The aim was to segregate the indigenous population from the immigrants by making interaction minimal. The Line System tried to ensure that the immigrants did not work for the local population and the immigrants did not buy lands of indigenous people. This was to ensure geographic segregation and stop the land from passing from the hands of the local people to the immigrants. But the Assamese population did often use the cheap labour of these immigrants and there was breach of the Line System. The immigrants also saw some economic wellbeing, and the scarcity of land along with newer immigrants compelled them to buy lands from the indigenous people and hence made homes in areas earmarked for the local population.

However, this System did lead to the concentration of these immigrants in certain areas like the Char or riverine islands of districts like Dhubri, Barpeta etc. These chars are sometimes temporary and flooded on a yearly basis. Char areas at present have 4.6% of land but has a higher density of population. Rafiul Rahman points out that 9.37% population of Assam live in these char areas. These people face a large array of problems which is discussed in the next section.

The problems of Char dwellers

The Char dwellers are often forced to migrate to other parts of the state due to massive land erosion and frequent flooding of their homes. But in their new habitats they are seen as fresh spate of possible illegal immigrants. They are victimized by excluding them from many economic enterprises. Locals have time and again tried to deny them jobs. This victimization is across the riverbanks of Brahmaputra. Rohmorja, which is an area in Dibrugarh, also reports a similar case of soil erosion. Following the earthquake of 1950 significant areas of Assam's riverbanks have been affected. What worsened the condition of the people displaced by land erosion were technologically loaded solutions which failed to deliver (Phukon 2013). These char areas suffer from locational disadvantages. They are separated from mainland areas. To look into the development deprivation of these areas, the government of Assam started Char Areas Development Plan in 1983. Following it a Char Areas Development Authority was formed in 1996. Despite this the development scenario continues to be bleak. Surveys show a large number of people in these areas are below poverty line. The literacy rate is also low.

The char areas in Districts like Dhubri have a double disadvantage. While they are far from the mainland, they are in close proximity to border areas. The health and education facilities continue to be bad. Primary health centres and schools are not available in these areas. However these areas are of strategic importance. As mentioned earlier, the state is present as a securitizing and policing agent but not as a developmental agent. The question of these people within the discourse of policy is essentially about illegal migration but not so much about the persistent development deficit. Scholars have always lamented that the

Northeast is often treated as a land frontier and the char areas is a clear manifestation of such attitude. The paradigm continues to be that of securitization. Only a paradigmatic shift can enable us to talk about the development of the area and the people living there in.

The IDP Question

The Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs comprise of a large group of socially excluded people. Although their plight is similar to refugees, they are worst of as they are often left out of the Rehabilitation Packages of the government. In the entire Northeast there has been internal displacement on a large scale. Samir Kumar Das, in his *Blisters on their Feet* (2008), talks about the ordeal of internally displaced people of the region. Internally Displaced Persons in Assam are categorized in three groups –conflict induced, development induced and natural disasters induced.

River basins are densely populated and it leads to large scale internal displacement in case of floods and river erosions. The char dwellers displaced by floods and land erosion belong to the third category. Not much reporting is done on these people. As a result no authentic documentation is also available on the number of people who are displaced in this way. And in Assam the question of IDPs is complicated because it is intrinsically linked to the question of illegal immigrants. Forced to migrate to nearby places, these people face accusation of being illegal immigrants. The IDPs in other parts of India does not bear the brunt of a negative image. Their appearance in mainland town following erosion is seen as a fresh spate of immigration. This is mainly because these people belong to the cultural stock of Muslims of East Bengal origin.

The political elite add a political overtone to a humanitarian crisis. Line System introduced in 1916 and implemented from 1920 separated the indigenous people from crowded migrant bustees. Small enclave and ghettoes came up in the riverine districts of Assam. Monirul Hussain (2008), and Hussain and P. Phanjoubam (2007) point out that displaced persons who are rendered homeless due to river erosion cannot go back as their homes are already part of the extended river bed. A large number of people is displaced because of floods and river

erosion but there is not enough data on this phenomenon. Anindita Dasgupta talks about the plight that these char dwellers face. Most of the IDPs from the Char areas of Assam are Muslims of East Bengal Origin, a community that is commonly suspected of being fresh illegal immigrants. While this community accepted Assamese and was taken in the fold as Na Axamiya or Neo-Assamese, there was no move to address the development deficit or the stigmatisation that this Community faced.

Displacement and Women

While the persisting underdevelopment, systemic exclusion, frequent displacement effects the live of char dwellers, its impact is manifold on the lives of women. There is a need to take a gendered look at this process of dispossession. Erosion which has led to a loss of habitat impacts women in multiple ways. Home has a different connotation for women. In a society marked by a gendered division of space, home is often attributed as a woman's own personal arena. If spaces are gendered, home is a women's space. The loss of home to the mighty river impacts women in a different way. Women see the destruction of something they build with their hands. This brings a feeling of rootlessness – a sense of losing one's belonging.

Taking a closer look on the lives of women in chars, few important issues come up. A visit to some of the chars that dot the river Brahmaputra on the fringes of Dhubri brings out the hardships that the inhabitants suffer from. Banshipur is a mere 3 km from the town of Dhubri. A permanent char which has not been submerged for the last 15 years, it houses close to 250 families. There is no electricity. The char has only two schools, one primary level and one middle level. The sole mode of communication is by boat. For higher education, while the boys can travel to schools in Dhubri, the girls bounded by the limitation of mobility often give up their studies.

These families have lost all their land due to erosion. Their lives are marked by frequent displacement. As a result earning a steady livelihood becomes difficult. Hard working people have seen their agricultural land being submerged in floods. Very few such people have government jobs. Others devoid of any help from the government for

rehabilitation are on their own. Hordes of men move to cities like Guwahati looking for jobs. These people often from the cultural stock of Muslims of East Bengal origin are harassed in cities as fresh immigrants. While the men of the houses are away, the responsibility of looking after the homes fall on the women. Devoid of the opportunity of higher education, women apart from looking after their homes also try to manage an extra income. They make incense sticks for a neighboring local company.

Many women from the Char have also travelled to distant places like Mumbai, Lucknow in search of job. Apart from being left with the responsibility of looking after families, women in the Chars are also vulnerable on a number of other fronts. The Char has no hospital or Primary Health Centre. Any kind of medical emergency needs to be sorted out at Dhubri hospital. There is a high risk of maternal mortality as travelling during night by a boat is a difficult affair. The Char is just a few kilometers from the Indo-Bangladesh border. This proximity also creates a lot of trouble as the char dwellers are under a constant surveillance of the Border Security Force.

A similar condition was seen in Baladobachar which is just a km. away from Phulbari of Meghalaya. This char houses the inhabitants of South Salmara which has been completely lost due to erosion. Living in constant fear of further erosion, the inhabitants live a difficult life. Houses made of tin despite the heat gives one an idea about the temporary nature of their habitats. Boats carrying people more than its capacity often run the risk of being upturned. While communal harmony prevails in the char, development deficit is the biggest problem for all. Many lament the loss of ancestral land and a touch with kith and kin. Women face similar problems of limited mobility. Basic necessities are missing in these areas. Women are denied higher education as there are no schools in the char.

Women D Voters

Women also bear the brunt of being denoted as ‘D’ voters. People whose citizenship are not concerned and are suspected as illegal immigrants are often termed as ‘D’ Voters or Doubtful Voters. Studies show many innocent Muslim men and women have been clubbed as D

Voters and put into detention camps. Razia Begum from the village Borpayek II of Nellie is one such woman. Her father Hari Aabdar Munchi was a British employee. While her children are not denoted as D voters, she is denoted as such and not allowed to vote. Many women have been forced to live in detention camps. This has led to breakdown of many families. In another instance, Sazida Khatun, a mother of 5 children including an 8 month old child was declared a foreigner in 2012. She produced her birth certificate and school certificate but was still declared a foreigner. While her family has lived in the same village for four decades, still he citizenship claims were dismissed. She was separated from her breast feeding baby. This issue got highlighted because of the gross violation of human rights that it pertained.

Detention camps are gendered spaces that women have to negotiate on a daily basis. Children are often put into these camps if their mothers are declared as foreigners. Both women and children are then treated like criminals. They are denied basic rights. The inhabitants are left outside the ambit of normal livelihood.

IDPs and Immigrants

Internal displacement induced by natural calamities is often left unaccounted. Estimates say that around 3 million people were displaced by floods and river erosion. But while development induced displacement and conflict induced displacement are accounted for, there is a tendency to overlook internal displacement caused by river erosion and floods. Status reports on riverbank erosion in the state of Assam records the plight of these people. They cannot go back to their land as it becomes a part of the sea. People often lose everything. The rate of erosion is 8500 hectares per year. The river is widening at an alarming rate and the number of villages lost to this erosion is 4521(Phukan et al. 2012). The worst affected is the district of Dhubri. These people whose lives have no permanency are left with dislocated, ruptured and fragmented memories. Forced to move to other areas of the state, these people are often thought of as illegal immigrants from a neighboring country. Lack of proper documentation of these char dwellers worsens the scenario.

In Assam, where an important axis of sub-nationalist politics has been the question of the rights of indigenous population, citizens view each other through the exclusivist prism of ‘indigenous’ and ‘foreigners’ (Chakraborty 2012, 23). People in these char areas are extremely poor. Land ownership is dubious. Land mafias who are called ‘matabbars’ or ‘dewanis’ grab new land the moment they are not flooded. As these lands are owned by none, there is no proper document to support anyone’s ownership. Level of disguised unemployment is also high. But when these people migrate for better opportunities, things worsen for them. The discourse conveniently remains trapped within the contours of ‘cultural exclusivism’. People belonging to a particular cultural background are often targeted and stigmatized. While issues of deprivation, dominance and discord affecting the life and livelihood of the masses are swept under the carpet.

Negative image and social exclusion

Constant migration to the Northeast led to a number of militant uprisings. Most ethnic groups see this migration as a threat to their unique cultural entity. The rights of indigenous communities became important for the militant groups. In Assam, groups like United Liberation Front of Assam took it on themselves to save Assam from outsiders. But despite having 1971 as the cut-off date as agreed to the Assam Accord in 1985, Muslims who came from East Bengal before this date were harassed. The descendants of immigrants also were at the receiving end. Flood induced displacement leads to a high level of internal migration. Their appearance in mainland towns followed by erosion is seen as a spate of fresh migration. Because of the larger question of illegal immigration, the char dwellers suffer from a negative image. As opposed to IDPs in other parts of the country, they suffer from a stigmatization of being illegal immigrants or Bangladeshis.

The systemic exclusion of these people is not checked by the state either. The larger politics of sub-nationalism portrays any social welfare policy for these people as mere appeasement policy for minorities. State initiatives are often cautious in this regard. These people are often kept in such a situation that while they are denied basic rights of citizenship, they are often kept as a vote bank. These people fearing further

victimization often do not speak out against such treatment. Another issue that victimizes these people is the question of ‘D’ voters or ‘Doubtful’ voters. Doubtful voters are those whose citizenship is under suspicion. Some indigenous groups believe that a large number of illegal immigrants got their names registered in the voters’ list. But there have been great anomalies in listing people as D voters. One member of a family is shown as doubtful while others are not. This often leads to harassment of genuine citizens.

IMDT and its aftermath

The Assam Movement which started in 1979 and ended in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord wanted a solution to the immigration issue. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act passed in 1983 was to ensure deportation of illegal immigrants. This Act which puts the onus of proving one’s illegality on the complainant was heavily criticized. It was in place only in Assam as opposed to Foreigners’ Act which was in force in other places. Under this Act very few people were deported. According to the Assamese mainstream, this Act did not serve its purpose. And in 2005 in a response to a court case of Sarbanand Sonowal, it was scrapped by the Supreme Court. But this was seen as leading to the possible victimization of poor Muslims who don’t have proper documents in support of their citizenship. Their identity continues to be contentious and migration from one place to another just worsens the scenario for them. They are always under the compulsion of proving their nationality. Mobility which is an economic compulsion worsens their condition. People who are awaiting their trials are housed in prison like detention camps. The ‘D’ Voter phenomenon has actually disenfranchised a large number of women. In a meeting in Hailakandi, a civil rights activist expressed his concern about the decline in the number of female voters.

Conclusion

The problem of women in the chars of Dhubri cannot be seen in isolation. While all char dwellers face problems like lack of basic amenities, difficult livelihood, women’s condition is worsened because of their gender. Shifting homes frequently and forced to migrate often

psychologically takes a toll on women. As scholars point out refugee camps are also gendered spaces which women have to negotiate on a day to day basis. Losing home means losing a sense of belonging for women. Without a home, the identity of the homemaker becomes ambiguous. The responsibility of setting up a new home is also mainly on women. All these deprivation on multiple levels compounds the problem for women.

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