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The sorrow of Majuli

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Fleeing the river: Displaced people in Majuli island. Photo: Ritu Raj Konwar

River Brahmaputra has eaten more than half of Asia's largest riverine island Majuli over the last 60 years. With land disappearing, there is progressive loss of the traditional means of livelihood of its people, leading to their displacement. Some lately are migrating even as far away as Andhra Pradesh, finds out Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty after a visit.

Farmer Sridhar Bora stops mid-way as he brings down his axe on a tree log in his front yard and casts a curious glance at the stranger in his village. Walking up the dusty path, he asks me, "Have you come for the meeting?"

Well, no. I have come to see your village, I say. "Not much is left of our village," he answers before ushering me in to his thatched roof house. In typical Assamese tradition of welcoming a guest, Bora offers me betel nut. I am curious to know the meeting that he thought I had come for. Biting a nut wrapped in betel leaves, he says, "The Sub Divisional Officer (SDO), the SDC and the SDO (Agriculture) are coming to our village for the first time to inspect the scale of erosion that happened five months ago."

Bora's village Padumoni, in Assam's Majuli Island on River Brahmaputra, is barely a 30-minute car ride on a wobbly path from the sub-divisional headquarters, Garamur. Padumoni is in the island's Bhakat Sapori area, accessible in the monsoon months only by boat or a shaky bamboo bridge constructed by villagers. In good times, when this low lying land would be covered by the flood waters of the Brahmaputra beginning every May, it brought joy to the farmers because the waters would leave their land fertile to grow hectares of sugarcane, rice, mustard and black gram. Farmers like Bora have done good business in sugarcane production alone, providing it to huge parts of Assam. No longer. Now, Bora and other villagers of Padumani dread the monsoons. Since 2008, the floods have been bringing to them the Brahmaputra in the form of a killer red river whose fury has already gobbled up hectares of cultivable land, their only source of livelihood.

"In the first two weeks of May this year, 7 bighas of my sugarcane cultivation were taken away by Brahmaputra. Since 2008, I have lost about 20 bighas," says Bora. With not much land left to cultivate, Bora let his two older sons accompany a village boy to Hyderabad in search of jobs a few months ago. "Both are graduates; with no land to till, they wanted to look for jobs there. So many boys from Majuli have already gone to Hyderabad for work. They are yet to send money home though," he says.

Collecting some other farmers, he takes me to show the damage by the river side, barely 100 metres from his house. A few strands of his sugarcane are still hanging from the edges. Bora's neighbour Ganesh Saikia is carrying along a file fat with

letters written to the SDO and the SDC pleading allotment of land to farmers of three villages of Padumoni, one already submerged in the Brahmaputra. "After my land was swept away, I began to grow sugarcane on 3 bighas of land owned by a satra (the Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries founded by the 16th Century reformer Sankardeva in Majuli) nearby." Pleas to the government for new land have not helped.

"The SDAO sent us to the SDC since he deals with land matters. The SDC shooed us away. Till now forget any State Minister, I have not seen even the local MLA visiting us. That MLA has become the State Water Resources Minister now. Sometimes, just before the monsoons we see some engineers here but whatever they do has not been able to stop erosion," he says.

Villagers of Majuli are angry. From the file, Saikia pulls out a paper saying, "We have been paying land tax. Corruption is so rampant here that the clerk at the revenue office refused to take our tax this time unless we also pay for the land which we have lost to the river."

Besides Bhakat Sapori in Lower Majuli, there are 20 saporis (alluvial sand banks created by the river over the years) across the riverine Island, Asia's largest. These sand banks are occupied by farmers who have lost their land to erosion in other parts of Majuli, some since the 70s. Bora and Saikia have been in Bhakat Sapori for over 35 years. Since the last land survey was conducted in Majuli about 40 years ago, Padumoni is still a non-cadastral village along with 32 others. The Government collects from the villagers a penalty tax for the crop grown on such land. Some sand banks have been occupied by the Vaishnava monasteries with the argument that those were their land lost to the river and now resurfaced. Monasteries like Auniati and Bor Alengi have lot of land in Bhakat Sapori, villagers cultivating on it pay them the tax.

Farmers of Bhakat Sapori are non-tribal Assamese. The dominant tribal community in Majuli, the Mishings, are also badly affected by erosion. Rows of Chang Ghars (traditional Mishing dwellings on stilts) on road sides across Majuli announce their plight. Without land, their mainstays — agriculture and pig rearing, are not there. In Sumoimari area in upper Majuli, I see Mishings living by the embankment. "We came here in 2007. Our village was about 6 km away. There are people from 14 villages here," says Arun Payeng. Payeng studied till Class XII before joining his father in agriculture. "We used to grow mustard, peas and bau dhan (a rice variety that can survive in water, typical to Majuli) in 7 bighas. With no land, now I till someone else's land in a nearby village and give half the harvest to the owner," he says. Payeng gets an annual share of about three and a half quintals of rice which translates to Rs. 5000 a year. With a family of four to look after, he often takes loan from the local money lender. His wife accompanies village women going to parts of Assam during the harvest season to work as a labourer. His brother's two sons have left for Hyderabad to become security guards.

The government is well aware of the problems. "As of July this year, an estimated 2009 hectares have been affected by erosion belonging to 7,965 families," says SDAO S.N. Sonar. As per a scheme of the Assam Disaster Management Authority, Sonar will distribute seeds of peas, mustard, potato, and summer paddy to the affected farmers. "Only the pea seeds have arrived so far. If the rest don't come soon, the pea seeds will be of no use," he says.

Not just agriculture, other traditional means of livelihood of the people are also affected by Majuli's shrinking land mass and its uncertain future. Samaguri, the centre for the centuries-old practice of mask and boat making, has been badly affected. So also Salmora, where potters still make wares without the wheel and sell them through the ancient barter system. Well known mask maker Hemchandra Goswami of Samaguri monastery shows pictures of his masks flowing away in the river. "I have been trying to keep the tradition of our monastery alive by teaching a few students but it is an individual effort. Already many have quit because it can't run their kitchen. With Majuli's future bleak, I worry about the survival of this art," he says. Jaya Kakati of Salmora recalls seeing 55 families leaving for Satai in Jorhat district on one single day in 2008. "Last year, there was no erosion here, so we are keeping our fingers crossed," she says.

Unmindful of the river flowing barely 50 metres from her house, she is busy making pots which her husband will take on a boat on the Brahmaputra across Assam to sell. "He will be out for three months and return with rice," she says.

Mishings are also losing their traditional skills like weaving jim (a ribbed quilt), rearing pigs and goats. "With no land to cultivate, we have nothing to feed our animals, so many have sold them. Our boys are now labourers and carpenters. Only one young girl in my area knows how to weave a jim," says Rita Gam. Quite a few houses still have weaving looms but the cost of thread is prohibitive. "We used to have cotton plants at home to make thread. In the whole of Sumoimari now, you will not find more than 10 plants. The river took away everything. We have started buying clothes," says Rita Pegu, a housewife.

Displacement due to erosion is not new to Majuli. A big earthquake in the 1950s led the Brahmaputra to change its course leading to annual erosion thus shrinking Majuli from 1250 sq km then to 514 sq km now. Of its three tehsils in the 50s, one, Ahataguri is lost to the river and yet another, Salmora, is badly affected. The Government helped migrate some people to Jorhat and Golaghat districts in the 60s and the 70s. Lately, the influential monasteries have been the only beneficiary of government land. Individuals who could afford it, have bought land in Jorhat, Golaghat and Lakhimpur districts and those

who can't, have been either on sand banks or living like refugees on the bunds and roadsides with no sanitation facilities.

In Korotipara area of lower Majuli, many families have made the local veterinary hospital and the community centre their home. The local post office is barely 50 metres from the river. "Post a letter from here, next year this post office will be gone," the postman tells me. The distance from his house to his high school was 10 kms. It is now in the middle of Brahmaputra. His daughter is a nurse in the local health centre. "If the river takes away both the post office and the health centre, we will have no means of livelihood," he says. Last year, Korotipara lost its library and the local club. The river stops metres away from its primary school set up in 1913. Resident Bharat Bora says, "With the community centre and its auditorium filled with displaced people, we could not do raas this year." Being the centre for Vaishnava monasteries which prays to Lord Krishna, raas is the main festival in Majuli.

SDO Krishna Barua claims about 5,000 people have been given land by the government so far. But local resident Manoj Bora shows an RTI report which mentions only 500 families of the 9,566 families displaced by erosion since the 1960s have been settled by the government elsewhere." The Assam Government, in 2003, had handed down the responsibility of arresting erosion of Majuli to the Brahmaputra Board set up by the Centre to look into the perennial floods in the North East. Work began in 2005 and since then more than Rs 56 crore has been spent with no concrete result on ground. Red tape, unaccountability and a lackadaisical attitude has only increased misery in Majuli. An example of money being spent without thought by the Board are the porcupines and spurs erected to arrest erosion. They are now in the middle of the river! Unable to meet its deadline, the Board's term has now been extended to 2014.

After years of neglect, the Assam Government is blaming the Board for not doing enough. It has recently applied to the UNESCO to grant heritage status to Majuli. It also ratified the Majuli Cultural Landscape Region Act some time ago to preserve the Island but not much 'preservation' is seen there apart from cosmetic changes like constructing museums and guest houses funded by the ASI and erecting a tourist accommodation. Determined to put both the State Government and the Board on the mat, Manoj Bora has filed a PIL in the Gauhati High Court.

The SDO, delving into the issue of land scarcity in Majuli, has her own theory. "Majuli has lost land over the years but it has regained too in the form of sand banks. The official 514 sq kms quoted as its land mass is therefore contestable. Only a proper survey will bring out the correct figure." When will the survey happen, she can't say. But government figures don't matter to those living on embankments and roadsides of this once flourishing, self-sufficient island. What they need desperately is help.

The writer was in Majuli as part of this year's Inclusive Media fellowship of the Centre for Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi.

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