

Research proposal

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Tentative title: Locating Majidbhita Char of Assam in the shadow of migration and systemic exclusion

Concept note

Majidbhita is a *char* (sand bar along the course of a river) village under Mandia development block in Assam's Barpeta district with 300 families. Majidbhita is located along the river Beki, a tributary of Brahmaputra and like any other char areas in Assam, Majidbhita too faces perennial flood and river erosion displacing thousands every year both temporarily or permanently. In 2020, around 50 families of the char village have lost their houses. Both the banklines of river Beki eroded resulting in the complete erosion of 26 houses during 2020. Along with the natural calamities, a number of residents of Majidbhita faces the risk of statelessness and constant displacement and forced migration.

Ecological and socio political elements:

One of the biggest river of the world, the Brahmaputra is a giant water body crossing several countries, is blessed with almond shaped '*Char*'– the riverine islands. These chars or river islands are the result of complex ecological processes that is formed when the monsoon flood water of rivers carries sand, silt and other suspended particles to give rise to *chars*. Gorky Chakraborty (2012) wrote that the chars in Brahmaputra valley are extremely unstable and can be wiped out by erosion during recurrent floods.

In Assam, char areas extend over 3608 sq km and are distributed across 23 subdivisions of 14 districts, with 2251 villages in 299 *GaonPanchayats* with an estimated population of 25 lakhs.¹ The population density in char area is more than double that of the state average. Char dwellers are hard-working and laborious, and despite having faced extreme natural calamity, they have adapted effectively over the years to adverse situations like floods, erosion, storms etc.

An estimated 2.5 million people live in char or river island areas of Assam which is one tenth of Assam's total population. However they are living on little over four percent of state's total geographical area. Though the fertile land makes agriculture their prime occupation however, the perennial flood and erosion resulted into a vicious cycle of poverty and systemic displacement pushing them into the risk of statelessness and contested citizenship. Most of the char people [about 75%] belong to the Bengal origin Muslim community who apart from the geographical exclusion from the mainland they encounter social discrimination, persecution and violence from state and non-state actors throughout the history.

¹Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03 of Char Areas of Assam conducted by Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam.

Migration of Bengali speaking Muslims during 1900s, by the British rule has given a shape of perennial socio-political issue in Assam resulting spectrum of legislations, executive policies, judicial orders for detection and deportation of ‘illegal immigrants’ since partition of 1947. People from char areas due to their history of migration and subsequent marginalization from socio-economic development [to be discussed in the paper] remains vulnerable and deprived of basic human rights. Dominant narrative Assamese nationalism brands any non-conforming community as ‘outsider’, ‘Other’ [Bohiragoto in Assamese] and is subjected to persecution, censorship, social stigma, prolonged incarceration and subjected them to the risk of statelessness. Displacement due to river erosion and flood add to this misery in char dwellers.

Forced migration and displacement:

River erosion has massively caused internal displacement and forced migration in the char areas. In a Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG)’s study estimated that 30 lakhs people has been displaced by erosion in 50 years and have affected more than 90,700 families spread over 2,534 villages”. The residents of Majidbhita too experienced displacement more than once in their lifetime and continues to face.

As of date the government does not have any effective scheme or program to rehabilitate the flood and erosion induced IDPs in Assam. IDPs either migrate to cities to work a manual labour or take shelter in government land and become vulnerable to be evicted as ‘encroachers’.

According to data provided by the Assam government during the session of the 126-member Legislative Assembly in October 2018, a total 4.27 lakh hectares of land have been lost due to erosion in Assam. Former Minister of Assam Water Resources, KeshabMahanta told the House that an average of 8,000 square km land is eroded by Brahmaputra and its tributaries every year. Though the erosion has rendered lakhs of people homeless but unfortunately the Disaster Management Act – 2005 doesn’t recognize ‘erosion’ as a natural calamity. In 2015, government announced a compensation scheme however only people with *myadipatta* were eligible. Displaced people couldn’t access the benefits. One of the consequence of this is that majority of the young adults engage themselves as migrant labourers and face harassment as ‘Bangladeshi’ in cities specially in Assam. Of late, migration to the South and metros are also popular destinations.

Lack of land rights in char areas due to the history of migration created a floating population and it continues even today. During the British era, though migration to west Assam was allowed but they were denied land ownership. No patta was allotted to the migrants. Moreover, line system were introduced to keep the migrated populated socially excluded from the mainstream. The effect of this treatment is visible even today. The current government is evicting thousands of erosion induced char people taking shelter on government land and created fear psychosis.

Challenges to political and civil rights:

Displacement leads to derogation of citizenship rights and this is proved during the National Register of Citizens [NRC] process in Assam. On August 31, 2019, the NRC authority published the final list of Indian citizens living in Assam. The list excluded

1.9 million people, mostly belonging to marginalized groups like religious and linguistic minorities, tribals, women, children and sexual minorities. These people are now on the verge of losing their citizenship as well as other social security entitlements. NRC has affected millions of people from across communities in Assam. Char areas in Assam mostly inhabited by the Bengali Muslim community are a part of this. The exclusion from NRC and the fear psychosis created by the detention camp has created a mental, physical, emotional and economic distress in the char. NRC process weakened the already economically marginalized population of the Chars and COVID 19 restrictive measure already broken the backbone of char economy. In a situation like this, people of Majidbhita as well as other char areas of Assam are vulnerable and are the risk of statelessness.

Research methodology:

In the above context, the research paper will be a critical narrative on Majidbhita char built upon the data collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions, secondary data and field visits.

Tentative Timeline:

Task	Timeline
Conceptualisation and start of field visits	July-August, 2021
Submission of first drafts by the researcher	October, 2021
Review and finalization	November 2021

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