

On the Run at Home:

The Human Security of Riverbank-erosion related Internally Displaced People of Assam, India¹

Gradual and long-lasting hazards like drought or processes of environmental degradation such as soil erosion tend to act indirectly as stressors on living conditions. Studies on environmental degradation and climate change show a vicious cycle of human insecurity generating vulnerability to environmental change and hazard; the impacts of which undermine livelihoods and capacity to adapt and survive future threats (Blaikie et.al. 2003). Internal migration and displacement are the direct consequences of this vulnerability. The communities displaced within the borders of their country are technically, internally displaced persons [IDPs] and therefore are to be protected and assisted in accordance with the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the prevailing normative framework globally. The UN Guiding Principles for Internal Displacement, 1998 provides a functioning definition. As per the guiding principles, internally displaced persons or IDPs are:

"Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border"

As per the Global Report on Internal Displacement [GRID] for 2018 of Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 18.8 million new displacements associated with disasters in 135 countries were recorded in the year 2017; and as in previous years, those with high disaster risk in South Asia, East Asia and Pacific and the Americas were disproportionately affected. Weather-related hazards triggered majority of the new displacements, with floods accounting for 8.6 million, and storms, mainly tropical cyclones, 7.5 million. 31,000 people a day were recorded to be internally displaced by disasters across Asia in 2017. Hazards such as storms and floods displaced 11.4 million people during the year in total.

In South Asia, the worst-affected countries were India, Bangladesh and Nepal respectively, all of them associated with hazards such as floods and landslides triggered by the monsoon season in the region². The number of newly displaced people in India exceeded 600,000 in 2007³. A decade later, as per GRID 2017 (based on data of 2016), India occupied the third position in this list with 2,400,000 new IDPs. Most of these

¹ This paper is part of my PhD project which is in its early stage. During this period, I would be studying human security and citizenship aspects of river-bank erosion related displaced people in Assam; and I look forward to advice and suggestions

² GRID 2018

³ IDMC 2007

displacements were associated with monsoon floods in Bihar—the fourth largest disaster displacement in the world last year; with more than 1.6 million displacements between mid-July and October⁴. In 2018, new displacements in the country due to disasters stand at 1,346,000⁵ out of 1,424,000 new displacements for the year 2017. 2018 is the twentieth year of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. However, even as of this date, India is not a signatory to this international framework addressing concerns of IDPs from human rights framework.

Problematic: How does the human security of disaster-displaced population get (re)shaped by their acts of citizenship, given India's discourse on disasters?

In Assam, a Northeastern state of India, the Brahmaputra river's bank erosion has wiped out, and continues to wipe out, large areas including human settlements, productive crop land and reserve forest area. Riverbank erosion destroys an annual average of about 8,000 hectares of riparian land along the Brahmaputra (Water Resources Dept.,GoA). In 2014, for example, the northern and eastern parts of India suffered a number of large-scale disasters caused by exceptionally heavy rains, riverine floods and soil erosion. 367,000 people were displaced primarily due to river-bank erosion in 2014 (IDMC, 2015) in Assam. As per the official website of the Assam State Disaster Management Authority [ASDMA], a total landmass eroded since 1954 is approximately 38, 6476 Hectares; which means approximately 7% of the land in the state's 17 riverine districts has been lost due to river erosion in the last 50 years. As per the ASDMA Report of August 2017, the government of Assam was running 276 relief camps where 54,982 people had taken shelter and another 1,200 people were evacuated to safer places. This was caused by the third wave of floods in the year in Assam; and as of 19th August 2017, the number of affected people was 2.2 million in 16 districts of the state of Assam.

Regarding internal displacement and disasters, the Indian state has two regulations that addresses different aspects of the problem – *The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act [LARR] 2013* outlines the process to be followed when land is acquired for a public purpose. This act and its provisions are intended to ensure a participative, informative and transparent process for land acquisition for industrialization, infrastructural development and urbanization⁶. Second is the *Disaster Management Act [DM Act] of 2005*. This act is to provide for the effective management of disasters and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto; provide rehabilitation and reconstruction assistance to the victims of any disaster. This act does not specify the types of disasters it covers nor does it speak explicitly about the effects and situations brought by the disasters, to which the act shall extend⁷. River-bank erosion, as per this Act is not an officially designated disaster.

⁴ GRID 2017

⁵ GRID 2018

⁶ LARR Act 2013

⁷ DM Act 2005

The LARR Act 2013, hence, does not consider internal displacement in relation to disasters; whereas the DM Act 2005 does not include internal displacement and provisions to be made available for the internally displaced people due to disasters. Besides these two legislations, there are no any specific laws addressing issues of internal displacement and disaster response and rehabilitation in the country. However, as stated by the figures above, internal displacement is a reality in the context of disasters in India. Riverbank erosion is not a disaster as per the Act. However as per the Assam State DM Policy (2010), it is a local disaster to the state of Assam. Nonetheless, the State government uses the national DM Act's lack of recognition of RBE as a disaster to not provide RBE effected people with relief and rehabilitation (Baruah 2016). The people displaced in the context of riverbank erosion or 'disaster-displaced citizens' are therefore not identified as 'especially affected groups' or IDPs. This essentially bars these people from accessing any associated entitlements and rights; provided by the state as well as various actors which otherwise would aid in building their resilience level.

Research Question and Methodology:

Riverbank erosion in Assam has the official status of a local disaster as per the State government regulations. But literature reveals the lack of the State Government's willingness to recognize the displaced people and provide them with rights as riverbank erosion displaced population or disaster-affected population. That is, there is a political and policy recognition in Assam of the problem of riverbank erosion; whereas there is a complete absence of any political recognition of the people affected by this problem.

Given that internal displacement in relation to riverbank erosion is an empirical reality in Assam; and that, riverbank erosion is an officially recorded and politically recognized event (geo-physically) but *not* an officially recognized disaster in a national context that has direct implications on the populations affected by riverbank erosion in Assam; my paper attempts to investigate the human security status of the displaced population due to riverbank erosion and the acts of citizenship performed by them - relate and reinforce each other.

The key question that this paper seeks to answer is:

Given the discourses of disaster-displacement in India, what is the human security status of disaster-displaced citizens due to riverbank erosion in Assam and how does that get re-shaped by acts of citizenships on part of the disaster-displaced citizens and vice-versa?

The key conceptual handles that aid in investigating the aforementioned questions are conceptualisation of disaster-displacement within the larger national context of India, with special reference to Assam; and within this background, examining the interplay between the human security of disaster-displaced citizens and their acts of citizenship. The primary methodology of this paper is secondary literature review with a specific focus on policy documents; along with fieldwork experiences of previous research.

Disaster Displacement in Assam: the Context

“Displacement—or the uprooting of people from a home territory—can be temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary, and may be a response to physical, economic (Oliver-Smith 2005), or environmental (Kirschenbaum 1996) danger or harm”. In the recent past, natural hazards have typically resulted in localized and temporary displacement and only rarely in permanent migration (Oliver-Smith 2005).

As a result, literature on displacement of sizeable populations following natural-hazards induced disasters, as well as on the related housing and land (re)development policy implications, is notably scarce. The more detailed available research focuses on relocation and involuntary displacements because of evictions from public housing (Elliot et al. 2004); hunger (Auvinen and Nafziger 1999); disease (Toole 1995); drought (El Tigani 1995; Wilhite and Easterling 2004); civil wars, ethnic cleansing and genocide (Azam et al. 2002; Pedersen 2002); and megadevelopment projects or schemes such as dams and ports (Gellert and Lynch 2003) in the developing world. To a large extent, these population dislocations are driven or triggered by pre-impact conditions of landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, loss of access to common property resources, and community disarticulation (Cernea 1997)⁸. Sapat 2007: 6-7)

Assam has been a breeding ground for internally displaced people for many decades in the Indian sub-continent. It has been both a destination as well as a place of origin for IDPs, tracing its history to pre-independence times under the British colonial regime. Prior to gaining independence in 1947, residents from various states of India like Bihar, Bengal (now West Bengal and Bangladesh), Tamil Nadu etc. were brought to balance population decrease in the state by the colonial rulers; and others to work in the tea gardens as manual labourers; these new populations in turn displacing local, original inhabitants of Assam. Three glaring types of internal displacement in Assam are – conflict displacement (ethnic riots, identity and linguistic-based riots and pogroms; cross border displacement stemming from the partition of India in 1947 and during and post-Bangladesh creation in 1971), development-induced displacement resulting from the construction of a large number of hydro-power projects in the state and lastly, disasters i.e. riverbank erosion, earthquake and flood-related displacements.

Scholars have researched the first two causal factors, namely, conflict and development-induced extensively. Very minimal focus has been received by the people affected by the third type – disaster-related displacement (triggered especially from riverbank erosion). My initial understandings on the subject of internal displacement, with a historical and a geo-political background in Assam has been drawn from the literatures on conflict and development-induced displacement. Works of scholars including Monirul Hussain (Hussain, 2008; Hussain and Phanjoubam, 2007), Walter Fernandes (Fernandes, 1999;

⁸ Sapat et.al., 2007

2004; 2017);, Michael Cernea, Jayeeta Sharma (“Empire’s Garden”) etc. have been immensely instrumental with this regard. That said, the focus of this paper remains the third type and its effects on the people i.e. disaster-related displacement in Assam, within the wider socio-political background of the state.

I use the term disaster displacement here to refer to internal displacement related to disasters triggered by natural hazards, with a special focus on riverbank erosion related internal displacement in Assam. As mentioned earlier, India is not a signatory to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. So this paper would refrain from using the term ‘IDP’ to refer to the study population, even though they are *de facto* internally displaced people.

As noted earlier, internally displaced people in the context of riverbank erosion in Assam do not cross borders and hence are not called refugees. They remain within the borders of India and hence remain ‘citizens’, even if partly only theoretically. The responsibility for their welfare and protection thus remaining with the state of India. Therefore, the internally displaced people in the context of disasters in India and riverbank erosion in Assam, separately and/or together shall be referred as ‘*disaster-displaced citizens*’. A distinction would be made, nonetheless, in terms of referring to those people who are recognized by the government, as the case may be, as IDPs.

Policy Framework for Disaster-displaced citizens in Assam:

One of the main causes of impoverishment of the rural areas of Assam has been the recurrent floods and riverbank erosion. Many of those erosion-distressed people lose not only their homes, means of livelihood and assets but also their previous identity, and they, therefore, often try hard for recognition of an identity, as argued by Das (2007). Through case studies of displacement from North-east India, Das (2008) argues that, ‘displaced’ persons are displaced not simply from their homes or places of habitual residence but from the world of law that establishes the principle of equality for the citizens and treats them at par with each other”, at least within the context of political theory (Das, 2008: 28⁹).

Neither the Constitution of India nor any other law of the land guarantees the right to home or right against displacement as a non-degradable and fundamental right. What Das calls, ‘the death of a legal person’ implies not just the loss of a physical home but also all the rights associated therewith with one’s identity as a legal person. When one loses her home to the river through erosion of the bank, she not only loses her home but also her identity as a political subject with name in the electoral rolls of a particular province or locality or neighbourhood. This absence of their names from electoral rolls leads to the

⁹ Das [Ed.] 2008

apparent disinterest of the State and the political parties in the displaced population and hence their invisibility within political discourses.

To further complicate matters, riverbank erosion does not have the official status of a disaster or 'natural calamity' as per the Disaster Management Act (2005) of India. However, the Act provides powers to respective state governments to recognize and use a part of their funding for local disasters contextual within respective states. Hence, riverbank erosion is recognized as a local disaster by the Assam Disaster Management Policy (2010). The official website of the Assam State Disaster Management Authority [ASDMA] displays data since 1952 regarding loss of eroded landmass due to bank erosion. Contradictory to that, the ASDMA website does not have any database regarding the people displaced due to riverbank erosion in the state, whatsoever. The government of Assam introduced a new policy on riverbank erosion in 2015; that classifies the beneficiaries and eligibility criteria for claiming compensation for land lost due to riverbank erosion in the state; called the *"Chief Minister's Special Scheme for Rehabilitation of Erosion Affected Families in Assam"*. As of now, there are yet to be studies done on examining the effectiveness and implementation of the scheme on the ground.

The State of Assam thus acknowledges the massive existence of the problem of riverbank erosion within its institutional framing of disaster management. That said, people affected by this disaster are not yet compensated at a local government level. Although all local government officials are in the knowhow about the plight of erosion affected people of Majuli, for example, their argument of their inability to provide relief to the erosion effected people is based on a choice to look at national, rather than, state guidelines of disaster management. the Disaster Management Plan (DMP) for the Majuli subdivision states:

"Since it (erosion) is not considered as a natural disaster, no relief is prescribed under State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)/National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) guidelines. (GoA 2014)" [Sahay, 2017: 26]

Disaster-displaced citizens and Politics of Recognition

The author furthers the argument by closely examining the NDRF and SDRF guidelines in order to understand the implication of this clause. He observes that the current guidelines of 2015 on the constitution and administration of the NDRF and SDRF¹⁰, (GoI 2015), specifically list the calamities that need to be covered under the SDRF and NDRF [Clause 3.i: 2]. Both these funds are not for long-term recovery but only for immediate relief to disaster survivors as stated therein. The SDRF can be used only for meeting the expenditure for providing relief to the victims of cyclone, drought, earthquake, fire, flood, tsunami, hailstorm, landslide, avalanche, cloud burst, pest attack, and frost and cold wave.

¹⁰ National Disaster Relief Fund, State Disaster Relief Fund

Continuing in the same vein, the guidelines list exactly the same criteria as qualifying for compensation under the NDRF. Thus, erosion, more specifically, riverbank erosion is not included in the list of natural disasters in India.

At this point, it is worth highlighting that the author chooses to not look at the second sub-clause under the same clause of the Guidelines. Under clause 3. ii., the Guidelines state in no uncertain terms that,

“...a state government may use upto 10% of the funds available under the SDRF for providing immediate relief to the victims of natural disasters that they consider to be ‘disasters’ within the local context of the state and which are not included in the notified list of disasters of the Ministry of Home Affairs, subject to the condition that the state government has listed the state-specific natural disasters and notified clear and transparent norms and guidelines for such disasters with the approval of the State Authority i.e. the State Executive Authority..” [Guidelines on the Constitution and Administration of the SDRF, 2015: 2]

The clause mentioned above leaves the responsibility of dealing with ‘local’ disasters to the respective states while stating clearly later in the clause that any expenditures made beyond the cap permitted shall be borne by the respective state and would be accounted as per other expenditures. The clauses 3. i. and 3. ii. of the guidelines work at two complex levels – at once, they de-categorize riverbank erosion as a nationally recognized ‘natural’ disaster; but at the same time leave the space and responsibility of recognizing of a particular disaster of local context to the respective state, i.e. riverbank erosion and Assam respectively in this case.

Riverbank erosion as argued earlier affects a large number of people in the state; and by shifting the responsibility of recognition, it could be argued that the central government has also shifted the financial burden on the state government wherein a meagre 10% of the budget need to suffice adequately to meet relief needs of such a large erosion-affected population. That said, the State government of Assam chooses to use its own arbitrary interpretation of these guidelines, of whether or not to bring this population within the relief measures, through the ASDMA. The authority hence chooses to cite the first clause; instead of interpreting the second one. It chooses silence over proactive actions. Thus, disaster-displaced citizens fall into the cracks of bureaucracy and state-centre politics, with not just their homes disappearing but they themselves becoming absolutely invisible from the eyes of the law and the State itself.

Articulating this complex, contesting and contiguous context of riverbank erosion in Assam; with an implication of both the (absence of) role of the State and the deep impacts that the disaster leaves on the affected people, Lahiri (2013)¹¹ observes,

“Among natural disasters, riverbank erosion apparently seems to cause less damage than earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides or floods, because it does not claim lives usually....”

“...However, in an agrarian society (like that of Assam), the inevitability of losing a piece of land, the most precious, and often, the only possession of farmers, and the very essence of their existence, has a deep impact: a lingering trail of fear that permeates the psychological fabric of the affected community.” [Lahiri, 2013: 45]

Through conceptualizing disaster-displacement within Assam’s context, I argue that riverbank erosion cannot be wished away as a phenomenon purely resulting from climate change. Nor can it be claimed as a ‘natural’ disaster of an absolute level, as the policy rhetoric has been in Assam. When at the policy-making and implementation levels, that dictate the rules at the ground level for the disaster-displaced citizens, it is viewed and argued as a ‘natural’ disaster, it naturally minimizing the role of the State and its contribution to the making of this disaster through its developmental activities.

Therefore, such varied definitions and recognition or absence of recognition of an event as a disaster has impacts on the people who live with its implications. Public and policy discourses around disasters in India in general, and Assam in particular, have direct and long-lasting consequences on the survivors of such disasters like riverbank erosion. Calling this disaster ‘natural’ has problematic premises and has scope of being contested as argued earlier. Socio-economic dimensions of the effected communities, geo-politics, local vote-bank politics and media – all play crucial roles in such decision-making processes; of declaring or not declaring of a disaster (in Assam). Thus, this complex palette of discursive practices of disasters and disaster-displacement in India would provide the background of this paper.

I aim to look at the how the intricately combined roles of these two factors - a policy-level definition of a disaster and its implications (internal displacement) and the politics involved in the (absence of) owning the responsibility and accountability of a disaster – act together to build the human security and the acts of citizenship performed or not performed by the displaced population.

¹¹ Lahiri 2013

Human (in)security of Disaster-displaced Citizens of Urban Assam

Assam and its issue of floods have been the centre of many sociological, anthropological and political studies such as those of Hazarika & Thakuria (2001), Dutta (2009), Rajkhowa & Saikia (2001) et.al. However, from the perusal of studies available, it was observed that a limited number of studies have been centered on the RBE and floods from the perspective of displacement and the state's perspective, barring a few like Baruah (2016), Borgohain (2007) et.al., although the central focus of these studies has remained flood, with riverbank erosion and displacement only as a peripheral concern or consequence.

The wider scholarship on riverbank erosion and its effects in Assam has two broad-ranging varieties. One variety presents riverbank erosion as a problem post the 1950 earthquake of Assam, examining it in the light of case studies of immediate displacement from different parts of the state. The studies of this variety need not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding of the ethno-religious or socio-political standing of the affected groups (Goaswami and Baruah 2008; Buragohain 1999,1998). The second variety is where scholars have discussed the problems associated with bank erosion, including displacement, within a historical background. They situate the problem and relate it to the processes of population movement and land allotment system brought about by British colonial regime; and how that has been leading to the problems in contemporary times as well¹². This second variety naturally conjoins the problem and the people's social relationships – arguing that majority of the people effected by bank erosion are those who were originally brought from East Bengal (now Bangladesh). The question then becomes of the debate as to 'who is an original land owner'? This consequentially leads to ethnic conflicts among the perceived 'locals' and 'immigrants'. (Jana 2008; Baruah 2016; Goswami and Das, 2008¹³).

The works mentioned above state that urban migration of the erosion affected populations is an increasing phenomenon within Assam. That said, almost all these researches have focused on understanding the affected populations and issues related to their displacement, within their immediate context or places of their origin that have mostly been rural areas. Jana (2008)¹⁴, in his extensive study on five erosion prone districts of Assam, makes four categories of the type of place of migration as destination. Type D in that list consists of number of migrant families to urban or industrial areas. Nonetheless, the focus of his analysis remains with the places of nearby migration where the maximum number of participant families migrated (170 families).

Corroborating the rural-urban migration phenomenon, it is argued that families with even a minimum educational background and socio-economic capital, prefer to migrate to the neighbouring towns and cities for better life and livelihood choices; although her

¹² Das [Ed.], 2008

¹³ Goswami and Das in Das [Ed.], 2008

¹⁴ Jana in Das [Ed.], 2008

focus has remained on the role of the state (Banu Islam in Das [Ed.]2008). Thus incontestably, a focus on migration and forced displacement to a nearby, rural area within the vicinity of the place of origin remains key within the scholarship on riverbank erosion and its effects in the context of Assam, with almost negligible focus on urban centers.

How is displaced people's human security situated in the contemporary debates on disaster displacement in Assam?

Given the increasing trend of rural-urban migration from various erosion-affected places of origin, it is crucial to understand how this process takes place; and move beyond the current focus of studies on riverbank erosion displaced population as aforementioned. Further, there is a clear paucity of research examining the lives of this population in their new urban homes. Do people migrate to urban centres along with their entire family or only a few select members? What factors play a role in this decision-making process? How do the displaced people in urban areas conduct their lives and livelihoods? Do they become assimilated with the numerous migrants from various backgrounds in a city/town or do they distinguish themselves as erosion-affected people and use this relationship to their advantage?

I believe that, to be able to answer some of these questions, we need to travel to our towns and cities; meet, converse and get to know this originally-rural population within the context of their urban homes. What does it mean for them to leave their villages, livestock, paddy fields and travel miles away from their original places of residence? Is this a choice they make for better livelihoods as many rural-urban migration scholars argue or is this their last resort to be alive? How do they maintain their ties with the idea of a physical and figurative space, given that their original homes are in the river now? The essence of my paper surfaces at this juncture; aiming to take the current scholarship on riverbank erosion within Assam ahead.

Citing various lacuna on part of the State, Banu Islam (2008) argues that because the riverbank erosion displaced people lose their names literally from the electoral rolls, the State does not bother to appropriately rehabilitate or even maintain a data bank of the number of displaced people in Assam. Land for land has long been halted as a form of compensation due to the ever-increasing population of the state. Thus, she questions - who can wake up the State from a state of 'deep slumber' when it comes to riverbank erosion related displaced population. This and many such studies inform us a great deal of the macro structure of the problem; investigating the surface of a state-citizen relationship within the political economy of this relation, within a historical context.

However, these studies acutely fall short when we raise questions regarding micro processes and actions ongoing at the ground level – actions taken by and through individual displaced persons or displaced population organized to seek justice and ensure their human security in form of actions that license their role of being an Indian citizen, moving beyond the thin legal definitions that make a citizen. The absence of State

protection and lack of State-enacted rehabilitation of the displaced population has been mentioned by many scholars. But the questions asked in these studies have been trapped to the conventional forms of understanding and investigating riverbank erosion within the discourses of 'natural' disasters, climate change and environmental displacement; with lesser critique on the role of the State and no focus on actions taken by the displaced (rural-urban migrated) population in their new habitation and how that plays a role in ensuring their human security status.

Contextualising Human Security concepts in relation to Disaster displacement of Urban Assam

For the human security concept, different users have had different primary purposes, leading to different interpretations. While introducing the theoretical underpinnings of the concept, Sen (2013) argues that human security can be understood as:

"..the protection and preservation of human 'survival' and 'daily life' (presumably against premature death, avoidable ill-health, the massive handicap of illiteracy etc.) and also the avoidance of various indignities that can shower injury, insult and contempt on our lives (related, for example, to destitution, penury, incarceration, exclusion, or – again – illiteracy or innumeracy)." [Sen, 2013: 17]

Mahbub ul Haq (1999), a key voice of the discourse argues, 'for [the] human security approach human beings are the core elements', not simply individuals' (Gasper, 2013: 28 cited Lama 2010: 4). Forwarding Haq's argument, Gasper (2013) argues that definitions of human beings is that they are not self-enclosed or isolated individuals but complex beings whose individuality arises through relationships. Apart from referring to human beings, 'human' in this concept can also connote both the human species and whatever in human persons and collectivities is considered to be most important, most worthy, most 'human' and at risk, and therefore as requiring to be secured.

The concept of human security thus broadens attention when considering security of what? The 1994 Human Development Report [HDR] returned to a language similar to human security, that was used in the 1940s during planning for a new world order after the cataclysmic crises of 1930–45. This was the language of 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want'. Subsequently often added to these banners including in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, is an even more general partner: *freedom to live in dignity*. The 1994 HDR specified in more detail seven typical major areas of security – economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal physical security, security of community life, and political security – but it also states that these form a partial checklist rather than a definition of human security.

Indian scholars tend to look at human security from the point of view of the individual's security; while using the concept as a policy framework. Amitav Acharya, in his research on human security in India, states that 'by designating the individual, rather than the state, as the referent object of security, human security is emerging as a framework that can serve as a means to evaluate threats, foresee crises, analyse the causes of discord and propose solutions entailing a redistribution of responsibilities' [Pillai, 2016: 43]. Therefore, Pillai (2016) argues that human security identifies the fundamental rights and freedoms for all people with no discernment, aiming to create impartial conditions and opportunities in terms of social, economic, cultural, environmental and political freedoms.

Within the Indian context, it has been argued that, human security and national security need to be mutually reinforcing. The parameters of human security can in fact be used to describe the inter-related threats associated with events beyond the control of people and communities, including economic and financial crises, environmental challenges, water shortage, social tensions as well as, in extreme cases, terrorist attacks, civil wars, genocide and the large-scale displacement of populations. Pillai (2016) observes, '..the attempt to broaden security planning to include human security changes the terms of reference for addressing the security challenges.' Within the policy discourses in India, human security finds space within the frameworks of economic and social discourses.¹⁵

Much of the literature on human security within the Indian context appears to have a top-down approach, focusing primarily on the State's view on human security. That is, the works largely are based on how the state views the concept and the processes through which human security could be operationalised within the broader policy plans and regulations at the implementation level, by the State. All aspects of the concept including environmental, political, community, food, economic and individual security concerns are discussed keeping the 'responsibility-of-the-sovereign-state-of-India-towards-its-people' at the core.

The context of arguing for and against the usage of human security within India has mostly been viewed from the national and regional security perspectives; drawing from empirical work based in different geo-political contexts. But more often than not, in what the scholars call the context of 'conflict' and 'direct or indirect forms of violence' or other forms of structural violence have found more popularity among the researchers. This is true for discussion of human security within the region of Northeast India, keeping the insurgency and other sovereignty-demanding movements and ethnic conflicts at the forefront. Although different kinds of disasters are in abundance in the region, hardly any researcher has tried to examine the human security of disaster effected populations. Thus, although it is agreed by the scholars that massive displacements or disasters could be causes for indirect violence, wherein human security as a policy framework could be used,

¹⁵ Pillay, 2016

there is gross absence of any people-centric research on this in India and specifically within the Northeast of India.

The contextuality of the framework of human security to disasters could be drawn from Amartya Sen's work. He strongly emphasizes that there need not be a massive event to jolt the sense of security in an individual or a people. Different forms of insecurities may seep into people's lives, at a gradual and almost invisible manner, on a day-to-day basis. Such forms of threats need to be looked at not only as the insecurity of a person at an individual level but rather as a conglomeration of factors within the context of failed structural systems. Sen (2013: 24) argues:

".....When the victims remain severely deprived not because of an economic downturn, but because of persistent neglect of social and economic institutions (such as schools, hospitals etc.) on a chronic basis, what is needed is a better understanding of the failure of governance involved in these long-term lacunae, and a greater determination to make provisions for these vital necessities."

In this background, I aim to take the debate of human security within the Indian setting towards a post-disaster displacement context and examine how everyday lives of disaster-displaced citizens in Assam - a Northeast Indian state, are met with various forms of insecurities, with a special focus on political insecurity. The paper thus aims to use the concept of human security, not as a policy analysis or implementation tool, but rather as an analytical tool to investigate the study population keeping the people and their freedom to live with dignity at the core.

Human Security in Lives of Disaster-displaced citizens:

Human security as an analytical concept, in all its forms, and tenets is very crucial and contextual in the case of disaster-displaced citizens. Beginning from personal to community security, from food to health security, and from environmental to political security; every aspect of the lives of disaster-displaced citizens is under threat. Thus, this paper focuses on the 'freedom to live in dignity' of a disaster-displaced citizen, from a political security perspective to investigate their status of human security. The HDR 1994 states that the importance of the "freedom to live in dignity" is not a macro-concept but rather a day to day life experience. Not being able to take part in the socio-economic and political affairs of the country we live in could also imply the infringement or absence of freedom to live in dignity; hence pushing us towards insecurity of various kinds. In Sen's (2013) words:

".....democratic participation can directly enhance security through supporting human dignity. But more importantly, it also helps in securing

the continuation of what he terms as 'daily lives (despite downturns)' and even the security of survival (through the prevention of famines). The need to confront insecurity of daily lives may arise in other ways as well.."

Freedom to live with dignity, an aspect within human security's conceptual framework also ties very closely to the Indian constitution's Article number 21. Article 21 of the Constitution of India, 1950 states, "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law. In the Supreme Court case of *Maneka Gandhi vs. Union of India*, on 25th January 1978, the court held that the right to life embodied in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, is not merely a physical right but it also includes within its ambit, the right to live with human dignity. The judgement states,

"These (Constitutional) fundamental rights represent the basic values cherished by the people of this country since the Vedic times and they are calculated to protect the dignity of the individual and create conditions in which every human being can develop his personality to the fullest extent. They weave a "pattern of guarantees on the basic-structure of human rights" and impose negative obligations on the State not to encroach on individual liberty in its various dimensions."

Therefore, the Article 21 was interpreted by the court to also imply the right to live with human dignity as a primary condition to exercising the right to life.

Amidst the forced mobility from an original place of residence to a neighboring town or city and everything in between, there would be many decisions for a displaced family to make. The need for such decisions would arise both at the start of the move as well as at the end - after reaching and while settling down to a new mode of life in the new city or town. I argue that, throughout this period of displacement from a place of origin to the settlement into a new urban area, is the environment – politically and policy-wise, conducive to ensuring their human security? Democratic participation in the daily functioning of the state would naturally lead to political along with other forms of human security. But how true is this in the context of disaster-displaced citizens, as individuals and as families? How do the disaster-displaced citizens seek and receive support from the state throughout the process of forced displacement from a rural area and a forced emplacement of their lives in a new urban area? Are they able to maintain the basic necessities of life with a freedom to live with dignity?

A disaster-displaced citizen, although displaced in her own country, remains the citizen of that country by the virtue of the law of the land and that, she does not cross any international border as has been argued in the introduction. A citizen, by definition, then is to be viewed as a political subject who has political rights and duties; and to whom the state is accountable and responsible for welfare and safety as the sovereign. So, what does the political security mean to the disaster-displaced citizen?

Political Security of Disaster-displaced citizens – through examining their Acts of Citizenship

An understanding of the idea of political security could imply that citizens of a country are safe within the territories of their own sovereign state. However, in this paper, political security is viewed as an aspect of human security that an individual, a family and a group of people are entitled to by the virtue of being citizens of India; while being ensured of their human rights and opportunities for human development simultaneously. That there exists an environment that is conducive of exercising one's rightful responsibilities and rights as a citizen wherever they live; and wherein the state provides the basic tenets required for ensuring the welfare, safety and security of a disaster-displaced citizen; keeping the context of riverbank erosion related displacement in focus.

Within this context, *political security* here is defined as: The availability of a conducive environment to a disaster-displaced citizen for and the access to the various rights that ensure her human rights and due political participation the daily affairs of the State; as an individual or as a group with her freedom to live in dignity intact.

To examine the same, I argue that it is crucial to closely look at the 'acts of citizenship' that disaster-displaced citizens perform. Theorizing migrant struggles in terms of citizenship, Rygiel (2011) argues that the language of citizenship invokes agency with respect to subjects who are frequently depicted in the popular imagination, media and government policy as being something other than political beings. The lens of citizenship draws attention to the ways in which migrants assert themselves as political subjects by making claims against certain perceived injustices and inequalities. Rights to movement are always related more broadly to issues of social mobility and social justice such as to the ability to access a host of other rights including employment, housing, food, health, schooling, and security. She uses the term *acts of citizenship*, to capture the idea that non-citizen migrants, through their struggles and social movements, making claims to rights, membership and belonging, and to being political subjects; often do so from the margins, both literally and figuratively, as non-citizens and outsiders with gradations of precarious status. *Acts of citizenship* provide a language in which one could discuss the struggles of migrants without reproducing the problematic stereotypes of migrants as either victims or criminals; rather, by emphasizing their subjectivity as political actors instead. Here the notion of "*acts of citizenship*" (Nyers 2006, 2008; Isin/Nielsen 2008) draws attention to the fact that subjectivities like citizen and non-citizen do not just exist as pre-social, settled identities. As Isin (2008: 37) notes,

"...acts produce actors that do not exist before acts"

So while citizenship is most often investigated as a legal and political institution, based on status, rights and duties within a polity (most often the nation state), or as involving practices that lead to distinctions between formal and substantive citizenship; investigating citizenship through *acts*, places the political and political relations at the

centre of the investigation into citizenship. [Rygiels,2011: Page 4] As Isin articulates, “Rather than asking ‘who is the citizen?’ the question becomes ‘what *makes* the citizen?’” (2009: 383).

Disaster-displaced citizens and Acts of Citizenship

In the state of homelessness due to riverbank erosion, when a family is forced to make a decision to leave their original place of residence for a new town or city, there would naturally arise multiple conditions to the way they begin life from scratch. This new effort would manifest in many ways – whether to migrate as a family/one single entity or to send a single or more but not all members, in order to be able to keep their ties with their original homestead, networks and social capital. Secondly, how and where they would live become the pertinent questions once they decide to migrate. The *where* in this paper does not refer only to a new urban area but it also refers to the actual, material being of the ‘*where*’ to live – a house that they could call a home; and the ‘*how*’ would essentially be the means in which they would earn a living and meet all their basic social and economic needs – their access to food, water, education, hygiene and health services. The following section discusses these - the ‘*where*’ and the ‘*how*’ questions by focusing on *acts of citizenship* with urban governance as background.

Elden (2007, 578) argues that, “territory is more than mere land, but a rendering of the emergent concept of ‘space’ as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered, and controlled.”. Harms (2015) argues that, then, territoriality naturally gets tied up with claims of citizenship. Citizenship continues to be a fragile and contested matter and far from uniform in post-colonial states like India. The legitimacy of individuals as citizens of the state and hence their claims onto the state far from certain (see e.g. Randeria 2003; Baviskar 2004; Rao 2010). This stands true for the case of disaster-displaced citizens as well, given that the loss of agricultural and residential land also makes them loose their status as full citizens of the State of India. Hence, investigating acts of citizenship are the need of the hour for disaster-displaced citizens.

Do disaster-displaced Citizens engage in Acts of citizenship?

Rygiel’s work has been based primarily in the Global North where political regimes and approaches to citizenships have been studied with empirical works based in Greece-Turkey border, camps of illegal migrants in France etc. and there has been minimal investigation of this concept within the Global South, especially in the Indian context of disaster-affected populations. That said, this concept could be shedding some foundational light in the context of this paper. Invisibility is a given common among her subjects and the study population here. While discussing the concept, she finds its usefulness in studying many different populations including displaced people; in her

argument as examples of populations who are at the margins in their right to claim citizenships.

In Assam's riverbank erosion context, disaster-displaced citizens, literally and symbolically, are from the fringes of the society in terms of their castes and classes as elaborated in the problematique. They belong to these groups in the places of their origin; and continue to do so in the new urban spaces that they get displaced to¹⁶. Disaster displaced citizens, in more ways than one, are invisible to the state and its welfare institutions given the absence or lack of implementation of any State regulations for their recognition. This could be attributed to the grave lack of a political willingness to recognize and make endeavours to ensure the protection and welfare of this group; for reasons cited earlier in the paper.

What does this politics (absence) of recognition imply to the people themselves? When they get displaced to the cities or towns, how do they identify themselves in these new urban destinations? Do they identify themselves as erosion (disaster)-displaced citizens and claim their rights as disaster-displaced citizens, to state and non-state actors or not? How and what processes do they employ to claim their spaces – physically and figuratively, in the town or city that they get displaced to? Or do they assimilate with the numerous groups of people who travel daily to Assam's urban centres as economic migrants, homeless people, construction or daily wage labourers and become indistinguishable from these groups?

Way Forward: Starting Points

In order to be able to ascertain the kind of citizenship practices engaged with by disaster-displaced citizens, I argue that, there is a need to closely examine the various understandings of citizenship as a concept and practice to this group itself and how then, they view that (right to citizenship or lack of it) as aiding or stripping them off their rights as internally displaced people who nonetheless remain citizens of India in theory and in turn, how does the State views them. These claims need not be made with active confrontations with state/non-state actors or dissident behaviors. Rather, they could be made through performing various acts that come within the practice of citizenship; whether or not the disaster-displaced citizen is a legal and full citizen of the country is not a prior necessity then. Such acts could not be visible to the State but nonetheless occur in between bureaucratic and political spaces that are liminal in nature. However, one cannot claim here that such acts always occur or that they occur at individual or at an organized level.

In the context of riverbank erosion, various acts of citizenship might mostly occur at a household or family level; since the decision to migrate to a city or town is a family rather

¹⁶ Jha and Pushpendra, 2009

than a community-level decision. However, these acts could begin right at the starting point of physical departure from a place of origin until a family settles down in the new city/town and afterwards as well. The human, and more so, political security of disaster-displaced citizens then gets shaped through these acts or absence of these acts. To a greater extent, one could naturally argue that greater political security could also lead to stronger acts of citizenship performed by the disaster-displaced citizens. That is, when the basics of a political subject are met adequately with support from state and non-state actors, her engagement with the State, directly or indirectly, (for example in terms of right to vote, knowing the basic rights and accessing them etc) gets enhanced and vice-versa.

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