

Brahmaputra River and Its Significance to Mising Tribal Women's Socio-Economic Status and Sustainability : A Case Study of Botiamari and Dhapak Village of Majuli District of Assam

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Abstract

Man and nature shares a strong bond with each other since the inception of this world. The nature or the mother earth feeds their children with all the necessary resources that could help men to live a healthy life and reciprocally they also contribute towards its preservation and restoration, although with time this has turned one sided. Amongst the various natural resources- water is one of the most important life source for all living beings of this world, especially for the river dwellers. In Assam, the river Brahmaputra is the lifeline of the tribal people who mostly settle along its various banks, like Mising, Deori, Rabha and Kachari etc. The river Brahmaputra is the main source of their livelihood, culture and tradition. However, with increasing urbanisation, deforestation and other related human exploitative practices has resulted into a man-nature conflict. Both the river and its dwellers have to face various challenges in order to restore peace and harmony and enjoy their respective socio-political rights and opportunities. Therefore, through this article an attempt would be made to understand and analyse the socio-economic and cultural life of the river dwellers, especially Mising tribal women in two villages of the Majuli District of Assam. It focuses on their coping strategies with the changing dynamics of environment specially, dwelling along the river bank of the mighty Brahmaputra. It tries to understand the challenges and uncertainties of the various governmental and legal reforms being undertaken and the means being formulated towards their growth, sustainability and human security.

Keywords: *Mising Tribe, Mising Women, Socio-economic Status, Sustainability and Brahmaputra River.*

Introduction:

In the era of globalisation the world has turned more modernised affecting both men and women differently. Women specially their socio-economic status, educational opportunities, health, political rights are changing with time and region. In this direction, women's empowerment is becoming one of the prime priorities around the world. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) number 5, clearly aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. As such, gender equality by 2030 which is integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development requires urgent action in order to eliminate the root causes of discriminations which still curtail women's rights in both private and public spheres.

In India, the Constitution is the very principal and guardian providing equality to women at all levels and fields. Both the Fundamental rights and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has been instrumental in providing economic empowerment and active participation of women in decision-making at various levels of the administrative hierarchy. In this regard, at the grass roots level of Gram-Panchayat, 33 per cent reservation of seats for women at all tiers of Panchayats have made a significant political change in the life of every Indian women. However, India as a whole is characterised by sharp gender disparities virtually on all frontiers of human societal pursuits. This is because gender roles are socially constructed and it therefore knows no boundaries. As such, in regard to the tribal population in India that constitutes 8.6 per cent of India's population (as per 2011 census), is amongst one of the most disadvantaged due to various contributing factors such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, lack of health care, geographic isolation and lack of access to various welfare services and schemes of the government. The Scheduled tribes of India are further internally differentiated-while 86 percent of ST's belong to Central India and only three percent are found in the North and South India in dispersed groups. In contrast, 11 percent of the ST's live in Northeast India for which it is called as, 'A Land of the Tribes.' From within the tribal population, the tribal women constitute like any other social group about 47 percent of India's tribal population and possess a profound understanding of their ecological habitat. However, despite their role and contribution to their immediate family and society at large the tribal women in India still remain backward and lack awareness about their rights, which act as barriers towards their self-development and socio-economic upliftment.

In the North-eastern state of Assam there are two types of tribal communities-14 hill scheduled tribes and 9 plain scheduled tribes. Amongst the plain tribes, the Bodos are the largest plain tribes of Assam followed by the Misings. According to the census of 2011 the population of the Mising community in Assam is approximately 6, 80,424 with a sex ratio of

967 per thousand. One of the most common features of the plain tribes is that, they dwell in the riverine regions, mostly near the banks of the river Brahmaputra.

The water of the river Brahmaputra is one of the most essential life-source of all the tribal river dwellers. As such, even for the Mising community the river holds great significance. The river not only enables to cultivate, fish and navigate but it becomes an important issue of water management. When water resources become limited it converts to subjects of political issues. As such, mismanagement of water affects the disadvantaged groups the most. However, it is only recently that emphasis has been given as to how management of water is gendered. As per the new notion, a person's gender correlates with their possibility to impact. Therefore, the connection between those who govern water and those that are governed is not made adequately. As such, it is important to recognise that if the perspectives of the 'governed' are not incorporated in the political decision-makings then it would be difficult to ensure environmentally just and sustainable development of the river dwellers.

In this context, while the socio-economic well-being and status of the tribes of Assam is relatively well articulated, learning about the livelihoods and socio-economic status of the Mising women has been accorded far less importance. The knowledge originating from such needs is important too, as these lives often belongs to the more marginalised, i.e., the women as against men, women living in the rural areas as against those in urban areas and so on. There are therefore different linkages, in the way the river impacts lives dealing with people, women especially who are commonly 'voiceless' or do not have the agency to articulate their perspectives in relevant forums. This research study therefore attempts to partially bridge this gap. Through this research article an attempt would be made to examine and understand the various socio-economic challenges and issues faced by the 'Mising women' dwelling along the Brahmaputra river of the Majuli district and how they are managing to keep a balance between their culture and tradition on one hand and attaining their rights and ensuring their social security.

Objective of the Study :

- To understand the present socio-economic status of Mising women living in two villages Botiamari and Dhapak of Majuli district.
- To identify the ecological challenges towards socio-economic development of the women of the Mising tribal community in these two villages.
- To examine the role of Mising women's participation in river management and decision-making in Majuli.

Methodology:

The research study about the gendered roles of the Mising women at Majuli island district is brought down to micro level by taking into account two Mising villages at Majuli, namely- Botiamari and Dhapak village. The research methodology to be applied is descriptive, analytical and qualitative. The villages are located on the banks of the river Brahmaputra because of which they are prone to frequent floods. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes, oral and telephonic interview, official documents about the village under study from its village headman, Disaster Management reports on Majuli district, Economic survey reports on Majuli, Statistical Office (Garamur, Majuli), Block Development Office (Kamalabari, Majuli), Census Reports 2011. A total of 68 household where surveyed in the two villages representing 15 percent of the total population. Secondary source materials include published relevant books, journals and newspaper articles.

The Mising of Majuli District :

Majuli the world's only and largest river island signifies the cultural heritage of Neo-Vaisnavite culture propagated by the great saint and reformer Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhav Deva in the 16th century. Surrounded by the mighty Brahmaputra river on all its sides the island is an abode of serene atmosphere and spirituality. It is spread in an area of about 483 sq km at present (before 1950 it was 1250 sq km) along with a population size of 1, 67,304 approximately. The population of the district comprises of Misings, Deoris, Ahoms, Kacharis, Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas, Koch Rajbongshis, Sonowal Kacharis, Kaibartas, Kumars, Baniyas, potters etc. The Majuli district today comprises of 243 small and large villages, of which 210 are cadastral villages and 33 are non-cadastral villages (villages without revenue maps are mostly resettled or rehabilitated shifted due to flood and erosion in Majuli). Further, because of its peculiar location amidst the active floodplains of the Brahmaputra, the island gets inundated in both severe flood seasons as and also in normal floods.

The Mising population of the Majuli district are Indo-Mongoloid tribe who settled in the plains of Assam and the hills of Arunachal Pradesh during the 13th century A.D. The practice of shifting cultivation was continued among the Misings of Assam even during the British period for which W.W Hunter (1879) classified them as 'Nomadic agriculturist.' They were originally from the hills and belonged to the family of 'Tani People' and known to the outside world as 'Miri.' The meaning of the word 'Mising' as narrated by one of my Mising friend means, 'Man (*mi*) of the water (*asi*).' The Constitution of India had regarded the 'Miris' as a scheduled tribe of Assam. They retained their mythological, linguistic and institutional affinity with the Adis and the Nishis of Arunachal Pradesh.

At present the Misings are scattered in eight districts of Assam namely- Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur. They are also distributed in the Subansiri and East Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Despite vigorous urbanisation and migration in the era of globalisation and modernisation, the Mishing community still inhabit the banks of the river Brahmaputra in Assam. Besides this, their main occupation is fishing, weaving and piggery. Weaving, pottery and mask-making is a traditional activity which is practiced by most communities on the island and predominantly by women.

The Significance of the Brahmaputra River to the Mising Women in Majuli:

The Brahmaputra river named after the son of the Hindu deity Brahma is considered sacred and a source of livelihood and sustenance through various socio-economic and cultural practices by those depending on the river in Majuli island. The Mising women folk are the ones who are most dependent on the river, provides them with basic necessities of daily life-water to drink, wash and food to eat. Economically, the Brahmaputra river provides livelihood opportunities in the form of alluvial cultivable lands, irrigation facilities, fishing grounds, cattle wading, generates tourism and employment as boatmen and ferry services etc. In contemporary times the men and women are equally engaged in all such commercial activities for their sustainable development. As such, women along with men travel across the river for selling their animals, agricultural outputs, milk, honey and other forest and bamboo products, vegetables, traditional dresses and other food items etc.

The Brahmaputra River also holds significance to the Mising women of Majuli because they relate their religion and culture with the river. During the sowing and harvesting season the elderly men and women pray for crop abundance and celebrate traditional festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang and Porag. As narrated by Padmini Mili a resident of Upper Botiamari village, "We offer prayers to the Brahmaputra river every year to appease it, so that it doesn't cause havoc and destroy our crops." Besides this, the river has also been an integral part of their identities. It had guided the women and men during community's migrations. The river had drawn and guided them from the Himalayas to Arunachal Pradesh and finally to Assam and they settled down in Majuli and had been living the rest of their life under the shadow of the Brahmaputra river.

Flood and erosion as ecological challenges towards socio-economic sustainability of the Mising Women :

"We were content and happy in our houses with farms and cattle in our village. But in 2007 the river turned against us and took everything away," Anima Chintey from Botiamari village of Majuli district recalls. With this statement of Anima, one could understand and analyse that the river Brahmaputra which is a source of livelihood for the people had also

proved to be the main reason for their misery. In this regard, it is often reiterated that the genesis of the feminine gender role is linked to the nature of terrain and its demand for women's labour. Diversity of terrain has led to a variety in the gender roles for women and the consequent gender relations. Therefore, below are some of the challenges, especially from two basic factors floods and erosion which the Mising women of Alimur Botiamari, Upper Botiamari and Dhapak Goan of Kamalabari Majuli had been witnessing and trying to cope with it.

Impact of Floods on Women :

The two villages-Botiamari (Alimur Botiamari and Upper Botiamari) and Dhapak together consisted of approximately 645 tribal population out of 1514 tribal population of Kamalabari revenue circle. When questioned about the usage of the river water the 68 households being surveyed, answered that they depend on the river for cleaning, washing and the source of the water to drink is tube well water. However, they also revealed that the tube-well water gets contaminated as flood water enters the tube-wells during the rainy seasons when the Brahmaputra floods their villages. Consequently, around 40 per cent of the women and children suffer from water borne diseases like Cholera and Typhoid.

Recurring floods and erosion have also posed a serious threat to the very existence of the island as well. The enormity of the problem can be gauged from the fact that the island had been reduced to half of its original size due to unabated erosion. During floods which continue for more than a month especially during the rainy season forces the villagers of both Botiamari and Dhapak village to search for alternative sources of livelihoods. They not only lose the vegetables which they grew (crop area affected 2.007 hectares out of 26.09 hectares of the Ujani Majuli district) or poultry that they raised die, but they also have to walk 20 to 30 kms in search of wood and fodder for their pigs and poultry. The schools remained closed or non-functioning during floods and 90 per cent of the villagers are required to take shelter in higher lands/embankments. Amongst them 60 per cent of young Mising women suffer physically when they are undergoing their menstrual cycles. In such places, there is neither any healthcare facility or proper hygiene or sanitation. Consequently, they either fall sick or undergo mental anxiety and irritation.

Migration and Displacement due to Erosion :

Migration and Displacement are two variables which we often notice under various conditions. Both migration and displacement is due to natural disasters or environment induced. As such, the plight of river bank erosion-induced displacements and migrations is more severe than victims of flood. The flood victims can return to their homes once the flood water recedes whereas those, whose homes are eroded away cannot do so as their land forms

part of the river's new or extended bed. The villages of Botiamari and Dhapak had witnessed heavy land erosion since 1980's leading to displacement and migration as their lands are claimed by the mighty Brahmaputra. Rima Payeng who is a resident of Botiamari village and Mayashree Mili who is from Dhapak village narrated how their family once had two '*puras*' of agricultural land but have been reduced to penury as the river had eroded away most of their land. Pallavi Chintey of Botiamara narrated, "We had built our houses as high as possible yet the river floods our homes every year. We commute by '*bhurs*' (locally made banana tree-boat), still the river won't stop following us." With incessant yearly erosion landlessness had increased manifold. Of the surveyed villages 58.8% women have been forced to work as agricultural labourers on others fields and give away half the harvest. Others work as daily wage earners and fish sellers, though these alternative livelihoods are increasingly becoming difficult over the years. In addition to changes in occupational structures, the shrinking size of the island district with every passing year had been putting acute pressure on the existing land to population redistribution. Likewise, economically poor are facing adverse consequences since they cannot afford to move from their existing places which otherwise would be very expensive for them. In this regard, Botiamari village dwellers are slowly relocating themselves within the island living as environmental refugees while others who could afford are buying land and building houses in the neighbouring towns of Jorhat, Teok, Titabor, Mariani.

Poor Communication Facilities:

On the way to the villages of Botiamari and Dhapak one could observe that there are poor communication facilities available to reach those villages situated near the river banks from the main town of Kamalabari and vice versa. This is because the villages still lack concrete roads for communication; instead the roads are *kutchas*- fair weather roads or foot tracks which become completely uncommutable especially during floods and post-flood seasons. This becomes a great source of suffering and results into financial crisis specially for the women of those villages as they are unable to sell their vegetables due to lack of communication to the Sunday markets or even during weekdays. Even the local transport facilities that are available like 'battery rickshaw' or 'magic' either deny to travel in such roads or they charge high prices to carry the passengers to the local markets or drop them back home. Due to such a challenge, the women sometimes have to travel to 10-20 kms on foot to reach the town area markets or even to reach the ghats to catch ferries. Tragically, one of the Mising women age 25 years from Botiamari village had two miscarriages. Her second child died during the floods due to inaccessibility to healthcare facilities as there were no transport facilities as the road was damaged due to floods. Moreover, the access to the

nearest hospital is very difficult in the entire Majuli district, especially during floods. Moreover, while boys have cycles to commute to schools, most girls do not and hence have to drop out of school at a very early age.

Lack of Large Scale Production Facilities and Technical Know-How:

After the flood water subsides the land of the flooded village turns alluvial and fertile. The women of the households engages in fishing and also grows herbal plants which are good for the all-round development of human health like wild turmeric, and herbs like 'huglotipaat', 'bhedailotapaat', betel nut, wood apple, jackfruit, 'amla', 'giloi' etc. There were no source to harness such natural resources and give it a shape of a small or medium sized cottage industry which would be a source of employment for all. Moreover, during the summer season particularly in the post flood season the women catches sizable quantities of fish and crabs. They keep some of it for immediate consumption and preserve the rest by drying them above their kitchen self-called in local language 'Chouka' or 'Meram' for winter months. This again points out that there is enough scope for dry fish business both nationally and internationally if the women are provided modern techniques to start such business. There is a good market of dry fish in the neighbouring states of Assam as well. In addition, the Mising women also rear pigs and poultry not just for domestic consumption but they sell out one or two pigs and poultry for a price of around Rs. 15000-18000 which could again be done at a larger scale if the required resources are made available by the Government. The money which they get selling these food items are used by the women to pay the tuition fees of their children or to purchase books and even household items and thread for weaving. In short, they contribute exclusively towards household income.

Therefore, from the above mentioned factors one could say that environmental and ecological disasters like floods, earthquakes effects women and men differently, because of the differences in their roles and capacities, and vulnerabilities. Therefore, there is a dire need for the tribal women to be heard, and for their invaluable abilities to find wings. In short, it is imperative for the equity lens to be donned and put in action. The stories of the Mising women of Botiamari and Dhapak villages need to find a wider space in the mainstream narrative in order for them to have an adequately high representation at all levels along with opportunities for their voices to emerge during socio-economic and political decision-making.

Role of Mishing women's participation in river management and political decision-making :

There is a great truth in the adage, "When you empower women, you empower a generation and the nation." Women in any society are always looked down in terms of rights and privileges. Moreover, the development programs being male oriented fails to reach the

women folk and contribution made by women to social and economic progress are often ignored. In this sense, even in the Mising community it is seen that women's participation in regard to decision-making towards management of households especially during floods or management of river and other fields for security are far less than usual. The Mising women of Botiamari and Dhapak villages narrated their stories of how they are being debarred in arriving at any decision concerning the village, specially related to river management although they were allowed to attend the meetings. At times even if they wanted to voice themselves but due to lack of awareness and education they remain quiet or hesitant. In this regard, Babita Chinteya 22 years old, resident of the Botiamari village agreed that gender inequality is rampant in their society, as most of the livelihood sustenance activities are done by the women. Their situation worsens post-flood when the management of the entire households falls into their shoulders. She recalls with lot of emotion, "If I had another life, I would like to be a very powerful man like our village 'Satradhikar' and change the plight of the women of this village." Therefore, as narrated by Babita who was one of the many voices of Mising women of Botiamari village, gender inequality exists in the form of lack of political participation in Panchayat meetings. The problems and challenges of flood, the girl child not being encouraged for higher education, lack of healthcare facilities and poor livelihood are some of the prime reasons which still needs permanent solutions. In addition, floods had even compelled them to change their occupations, thereby resulting into increased workload. Sometimes the Mising women even have to suffer a lot in the absence of their husbands, since the male members of their family have to migrate to other places in search of work. Although the Central and State Governments had been introducing many policies and plans towards the development of the tribal community but how far they are implemented or has reached the right hands are still dubious. Many even remain unaware of the provisions and initiatives.

Conclusion :

In conclusion one can say that although the Majuli island consist of the pristine heritage of culture and religion, yet it is characterised by a gender space which is unfavourable for women in many ways. The irony is that the women in the island are aware of this state of nature and would like to respond and act to an external impetus. They want to come together to work in cooperation and manage the river in a way that has not been attempted so far. In this sense, governmental interventions in the form of generating awareness about the socio-economic developmental schemes which also falls under the SDG should be made available through local, ASHA, NGOs, SHG's or *Anganwadi* groups. Besides this, more initiatives should be undertaken to improve the conditions of women, like generating awareness about the regional geography and impact of climate especially during flood time in the Mising

villages. The women during the floods had to face numerous problems owing to damage to their homes and vegetables that they sowed. There is scarcity of hygienic toilets, bathing and washing becomes difficult with the household living in the embankments (or *mothauri*) during the flood time. Therefore, there is dire need to focus primarily on making Mising women's productive work visible, creating a space for their participation in decision-making in regard to management of the river and at the same time creating supportive mechanisms for the entry of Mising women into the public realm like their counterparts from other tribal communities. Only then one could hope to bring a significant shift to the trajectory of India's overall growth 'Sabka Vikas' (everyone's development), when tribal communities with tribal women are placed at the centre of solutions.

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