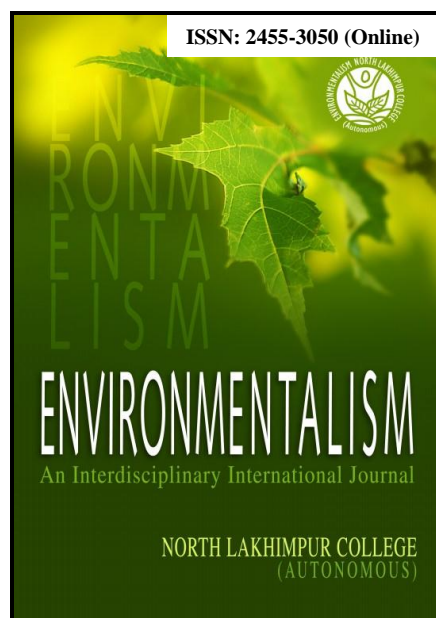


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ENTWINING ENVIRONMENT, PEOPLE AND THE STATE: THINKING OF A RIGHT BASED APPROACH FOR THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN ASSAM

Chuchengfa Gogoi*

Department of Political Science

North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Lakhimpur-787031, Assam, India

Email: gogoi.chucheng@gmail.com

Abstract

Uprootedness, exile and forced displacement, are the conditions which characterize the lives of million people across the globe, yet the rates of such displacement are quiet high in South Asia. It is mainly because of the sophisticated geography. The geography of India has been very much fragile and the Northeast India in particular becomes one of the most earth-quake prone areas. Displacements in Northeast become an alarming issue because of the environmental impediments. These hazards composed of Flood, River Bank erosion, Earth Quake etc. Among them Flood and River bank Erosion is potentially more challenging. Flood damage does not only impediment to the crops but also to the lives, houses and other living and non-living property. Although flood cost material lost to the human being but the major devastation cost by the flood is off course the gross and trembling river bank erosion. River-bank erosion is a natural as well as continuous atmosphere, witness by the State of Assam. River-bank erosion is factually a unique feature of such geographical areas, which are marked by active rivers, which frequently shift their bank-line. Understanding the fact the river bank erosion is not just a problem exclusive to the Assam or India it is indeed a major issue to the whole of south Asia. The present paper will intended to study how flood and river bank erosion have contributed displacement in the state of Assam and also to find out what role shall the state play to mitigate the menace of Internal Displacement caused by these ecological hazards.

Keywords: IDP, Flood, River Bank Erosion, Right to Protect, Right Based Approach

1 Introduction

Nobody can deny the essence of a family life and of a community bonding where one have experienced love and

*Correspondence to: Chuchengfa Gogoi, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Khelmati, Lakhimpur-787031, Assam, (India). E-mail: gogoi.chucheng@gmail.com

emotions in pinnacle, sharing what is being called as social closure or identity in strict terms, derive necessary lineages of homogenous self or what Anderson called as Imagine Community. The growing conflict and ecological mourning's hinders the community life of people and made them carry the brunt of emotional, cultural, social and often economic uprootedness. The paper aims at different sets of facts behind the ongoing Internal Displacement of Persons (IDP) in one of most strategically located periphery of Indian State, known as Assam. The lines stated above therefore become a prologue of the necessity of community life and also the value of group fidelity. Let us not deny what we earn as human being at least at the societal level are the product of the social interaction one confronts in everyday life. But the life here in Assam is not so smooth and a large section of people are left traumatized other than to leave the ancestral property and the community life they shares otherwise. It has been evident that the issues of IDPs are now a days become a daily news item, making the process of democracy and development a shame. Life in North east India in general and Assam in particular is tough and uncomfortable. It is stated that,

“Finally we had to include one case from the North-east because here the displaced have been living for a longer period of time, some around 6 years, also it is in the North East – the densest zone of displacement in the country.” (CRG, 2006:18)

Issue of displacement is not a new issue to the North East India. Rather we noticed large scale displacement throughout the North East with lot of loss of human life which make social life uncomfortable. Illustrating such a grimy picture the paper is not intentional to locate state as the major culprit in this whole debate of displacement and neither regarded state as the lonely source of obstacle for such a social dislocation. There are certainly some other factors which are also responsible for this human misery such as Environmental Induced displacement, Conflict Induced displacement and off-course Development Induced displacement. But somewhere or the other the types of displacement mentioned above we may doubt the involvement of state in generating large scale displacement in the state in two ways, firstly as the facilitator of displacement and secondly for the failure of adoption of adequate programmes meant for handling displacement. The paper, therefore, is not only aimed at finding some solution to the problem it initiated but also focused on the key areas which are responsible for the ongoing rates of IDPs' in Assam and the factors involved.

2 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP): Meanings and Metaphor

Internally Displaced Persons are the most socially vulnerable communities living at the edge of marginalization. They often experience alienation, exclusion and marginalization from the larger society. It is evident that this displaced population at large has been known as risk population as these people lost their actual habitats and normal basic amenities such as food, shelter and medicine which are often denied to them. At a simple instance it is understood that internally displaced people do not go beyond the territory and usually found displaced within the same political boundary of a state. Thereby IDPs' are understood as those group of people who are forcibly extricated within their own countries by different reasons such as violent conflicts, gross violations of human rights and of other traumatic events.

Before an integrated understanding on IDPs' are made one must be clear of the etymological meaning of the term in its substance. According to the U.N. Guiding Principle, IDPs' are those groups of people who 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” (UN Guiding Principle, 2004:6).

The above statement shows the sense that IDP is an involuntary movement within the boundary of the state occurred out of different social emergencies. These social emergencies include armed conflicts, ethnic conflicts, violation of human rights during community conflict and also include natural hazards. It is again evident from the guiding principle, the person other than these involuntary movements' leaves their ancestral property for some economic, social or cultural reasons does not imply to IDP. However, Internal Displacement might occur out of coercive and economic factors in some exceptional cases whereby state has been in the seat of coercion use all possible measures to imply development policies by supplanting the rights of the minorities. One of the widely practiced hysteria by any state following a form of *legitimacy disorder*¹ derives an extra ordinary compulsion of force which renders gross violation of human rights. In such a case it is desirable that the fatalities have been exposed to meet displacement.

Although there have not been any legal status that have meant to recognize these IDPs' a special legal status. In many cases matters related to IDPs' are related to human rights and also of international peace and security. In a more direct manner it is the responsibility of the concerned government to look after the issues and grievances of the displaced persons. International communities in such instances cannot work autonomously to incorporate any policies to resolve a single possibility for the displaced persons, it is only when the concerned state request the international community's they can assists by making sufficient arrangements to the displaced persons. Internationally there have been lots of organizations and also some other research institutions who works for these IDPs' to provide proper rehabilitation and resettlement assistance.

However, the IDPs' and the other citizens of the state might have one single difference (which is in fact big enough) i.e. “forced displacement” and also does treated differently in terms of legal assistances, yet neither the citizens nor the IDPs can violate international and domestic law with impunity. Even the guiding principles declares that **“the persons and IDPs' as responsible for the individual criminal responsibility for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.”** Besides, internal displacement can be broadly categorized into three types²--

1. Conflict induced
2. Natural Disaster, Environment induced, and
3. Human or Development Induced IDPs

¹ By Legitimacy disorder we mean a state of affair where state in the name of legitimacy tries to use its power to extend the level of its legitimacy to decide which it feels to be accurate without realizing what impact it could have been generate over the lives of whom it actually earn the legitimacy. So in a simple meaning this state of power fatigue means state has no sense of what it doing at of what cost, only thing it focused whatever it does is just in its eyes.

Whatever be the cause for displacement, the IDPs' have to bear the brunt by leaving the ancestral property and also the community life and are often forced to live in relief camp. Needless to say that, in some cases their lives are quite similar to that of the refugees. But there appears a thin but sharp distinction between the etymological meaning of the term IDP and Refugee, which certainly deals with the notions of displacement. Although both of them have to face displacement yet at different margins. Refugees are usually found to displace from one country and seek shelter from another host country. Thus the refugees are the international migrants and the IDPs' are displaced within the same nation. Given the fact the state of IDPs' in the north east in general and Assam in particular have been the major source of debate and now a day this is getting a major source of study in social research too. Different reasons of such displacement in Assam are discussed in details under.

3 Environment Induced Displacement: When Nature Knows No Marcy

Uprootedness, exile and forced displacement, are the conditions which characterize the lives of million people across the globe, yet the rates of such displacement are quite high in South Asia. It is mainly because of the sophisticated geography it has. The geography of India has been very much fragile and the North East India in particular becomes one of the most earth quake prone areas. Displacement in North East becomes an alarming issue because of the environmental havocs such as flood, river bank erosion, earth quake etc. Among them Flood and River bank Erosion are more challenging.

3.1 Flood Hazards

In India, the Himalayan Rivers account for nearly 60% of the flood damage of the country. Floods in these rivers occur during monsoon months (May to October). The damages caused by floods are very difficult to estimate. In our country, the estimated value of flood damage, which was Rs. 52 crore in 1952, surprisingly increased to Rs. 5,846 crore in 1998 (Sharma, 2003:8). Flood damage does not only impediment to the crops but also to the lives, houses and other living and nonliving property without involving the social costs. It is estimated that,

“annually on an average 7.56 million ha of land is affected by flood, of which 3.55 million ha is cropped area. Floods have claimed on an average 1595 lives and 94 772 heads of cattle. Annually 1.2 million houses are damaged by floods. The value of damage to crops, houses, and public utilities alone annually accounts for about Rs 1347 crores in our country” (Central Water Commission, 2001:231).

This national average has given us a sense of the state of *flood related damage* in the state of Assam and also shows the intensity of it. The state of Assam witnessed a large scale flood in the Brahmaputra valley almost

²United Nations Guiding Principle on IDP (1998) has identified three sets of IDPs' globally. It has cited as under - “situations of generalized violence” leave open the nature and extent of the violence. Such situations are not considered armed conflict but involve the use of force by government agents to restore public order. Natural disaster is included because in some disasters governments respond by discriminating against or neglecting certain groups of victims on political or ethnic grounds or by violating their rights in other ways. Human-made disasters (nuclear, chemical accidents, etc.) or large-scale development projects (which are not justified by compelling and overriding public interests) are included for the same reason. In other words, persons displaced by for example a large hydroelectric dam would fall under the definition of the UN Guiding Principles if the project cannot be considered of “compelling and overriding public interest”, or if the government does not resettle or compensate those displaced.

every year and the intensity has been increasing day by day. The overflowing water bog downs fields, farms, towns and villages bringing misery to the people of the area. Assam is the severest flood affected state of Brahmaputra basin, which is highly dependent on agriculture. Floods in Assam, characterized by their large magnitude, high frequency and extensive devastations, constitute an awesome natural hazard that repeats itself almost every year and devastates the economy of the state which is overwhelmingly agrarian. The vulnerability of the region can be understood from the following statement. According to the Rashtriya Barh Ayog (1980), *Assam has as much as 9.4% of the country's total flood prone area of 31.5 lakh hectares. Out of the total plain areas of the state, over three quarters are estimated as flood prone. It is mainly because of the main river Brahmaputra and its many smaller tributaries. The Brahmaputra joining with as many as sixty tributaries, out of which forty on its north bank and twenty on its south bank, elongates like a net all over Assam, swelling to the brim during the rainy season.* (Hazarika, March, 2007: 23)

Table 1 has been given to estimate the rates of casualties both living and nonliving in Assam since the year 1953.

Table: 1 Statement Showing Flood Damages of Assam³

Period	Average annual area flooded (million hectares)		Flooded crop as % of total inundated	Average annual population affected	Affected population per ha of flooded area	Average annual damage (million rupees)*	Value of crop lost as % of total damage
	Total	Cropped					
1953–1959	1.13	0.10	8.85	860,000	0.8	58.6	66
1960–1969	0.75	0.16	21.33	1,520,000	2.0	75.7	92
1970–1979	0.87	0.18	20.69	2,000,000	2.3	151.8	89
1980–1988	1.43	0.40	28.05	4,550,000	3.2	1,455.2	96
1999–2005	1.07	0.38	35.65	4,586,000	4.3	7,171.7	34

Note: *Unadjusted for inflation

Table 1 shows that over the years there have been lots of damage done by the flood and the numbers of affected population have increased drastically. It is important to note that the rates of flood affected IDP has been increasing over the years. Although the value of cost of the total crop damaged has been decreased drastically during the 1999 – 2005 era from the earlier decade, but, the average affected persons have increased.

³ Source: Revenue Department and Water Resources Department, Government of Assam (after Goswami, 1998 and after Hazarika, 2007).

In a report published by the Assam Statistical Handbook 2013 it is reported that, in the year 2007 a huge amount of people and crop area have been affected and the number of affected people and the total damage of crops and area in hectare have been although decreased in the subsequent time but led to huge devastation. The information can be understood from the table 2.

Table: 2 Statistics on Damages Caused by the Floods in Assam

Item	2007	2008	2010	2013 (Upto15/10/2013)
1	2	3	4	5
Area affected (in Hectares)	1540146	416000	N.A.	-
No. of Villages affected	10295	3019	3630	1592
Crop area affected (in Hectares)	674671	314000	147038	71213.79
Value of crop lost (Rs. In Lakh)	N.A.	329.00	3678.87	-
Population affected (in 000)	10868	2906	2546	848
Value of Houses damaged (Rs. In Lakh)	N.A.	29335.00	1099.60	-
No. of cattle lost	N.A.	8002	3754	1,81,114
Houses damaged (Fully)	15846	30315	4846	44
Houses damaged (Partially)	N.A.	26235	49638	547
No. of Human Life Lost	134	40	17	NIL

In a recent report published by the Sphere India on 11th September, 2015 on the second phase of Assam Floods in September, 2015 have marked some severe flood related scenario. The report revealed that during this phase around 17,00,000 populations have been directly affected by the flood. The Report also mentioned about the worst hit districts in Assam during the flood with number of affected population are - Barpeta (2,34,578), Darrang (2,29,469), Morigaon (1,64,466) Nalbari (1,25,314) Dibrugarh (1,18,415) and Dhubri (1,01,784) (Sphere India, 2015:4). The report also revealed that during that timeframe out of the total 84 villages which were accessed covering of 11 districts a total of 157 individual household got fully damaged, 2260 individual household got partially damaged (Sphere India, 2015:8). The affected persons as reported also affected by severe health hazards – such as communicable diseases and several other long term health related handicaps.

3.2 River Bank Erosion

It is undeniable to say that the cost of flood is less than that of the river bank erosion. Prof. Husain (Hussain, 2007:8) rightly observed that, *it would be pertinent to point out that the plight of the river-bank erosion induced IDPs are much more severe than that of the victims of flood. The victims of flood at least can go back to their original land once the flood water recedes. However, the river-bank erosion induced ID peasants cannot go back to their land. Because, their land has become a part of river’s new/extended bed.* Although flood cost material lost to the human being but the major devastation cost by the flood is off course the gross and trembling river bank erosion. River-bank erosion is a natural as well as continuous atmosphere, witnessed by the State of Assam. River-bank erosion is factually a unique feature of such geographical areas, which are marked by active rivers, which frequently shift their bank-line. Understanding the fact the river bank erosion is not just a problem exclusive to the Assam or India it is

indeed a major issue to the whole of South Asia. Although Assam has a long erosional history there are very less theoretical and empirical research conducted so far. Technically river-bank erosion is a process of erosion which means naturally brokening of rock and soil loose from the earth's surface at one location and moved to the other; and river-bank erosion is erosion takes place on the bank of a river. Erosion usually claimed as a slow and gradual process which occurs in years by years, although the process of erosion can be speedup by anthropogenic and environmental factors. The erosion or migrations of rivers have been usually happened because of the following factors.

1. Rates of rise and fall of water level in the river.
2. Number and position of major channels active during flood stage.
3. Rate of scour and deposition that occurs during flood.
4. Formation and movement of large bed forms.
5. Cohesion and variability in composition of bank-line.
6. Intensity of bank slumping.
7. Relationship of abandoned river courses to the present day channels.

It is important to mentioned here that many of the nations in South Asia have underwent by this kind of massive migration of river which resulted in human displacement.

Importantly erosion in Brahmaputra Valley has become a major havoc created by the river Brahmaputra. There are certain reasons for such increasing erosion in the river bank of Brahmaputra, such as – the earthquake of the 1950 which influenced the process of bed making which made the river incapable of holding maximum discharge of river water during summer, high moisture content, low proportion of clay and good sorting of the bank materials make them highly susceptible to erosion by the river (Goswami *et al*, 2008:86). Erosion has larger implication in the life of those people who are living in the river bank. In the state of Assam there are certain places which are more vulnerable for the river bank erosion and have contributed largely to the internally displaced Persons in Assam. The places where erosion is acute are - Goalpara, Palasbari – Gumi, Mariahola and Maiahola and Mathola on the south bank and Mathmara, Majuli, Sonarighat, Airingmara, Tezpur and Mukalmua on the north bank (Goswami *et al*, 2008:87). This has unleashed a picture where it seems that erosion have become more acute in those areas which are affected by chronic flooding.

It is estimated that between the year 1912 to 1975, total 1530.10 sq. km. of land had been eroded and between the year 1963-1975 and 1996, 828.20 sq. km been eroded by the river Brahmaputra (Sarma, 2007:46). Again, the rates of displacement generated by this river line erosion is also stunning, estimated cost of the displacement is at least 30 lakhs of the rural agricultural population of the roughly 7% of the eroded land in plains of Assam between the year 1951-2000 (Hussain, 2005).

Apart from the above information the influence of river bank erosion have been immense. It is noticed that erosion in the river banks have been the major issues in generating IDPs in Assam. It is so much so that river bank

erosions have contributed in large scale uprootedness in the both of the side of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Table 3 extends an understanding of the significant erosion reaches in Assam.

Table 3: Significant Erosion Reaches of Assam

Sl.No.	Description	Area in ha.
1.	Rahmoria	298
2.	Nemati (near Jorhat)	328
3.	Majuli	42000
4.	Kareng Chapori/ Arne Chapori/Matmora/ Baligaon etc. (Dhemaji)	10000
5.	Laharighat-Bhurapara-Maisalu (Morigaon District)	15000
6.	Palashbari-Gumi area (Kamrup) including old Palashbari township area	10000
7.	Mukalmua area (Nalbari District)	80000
8.	Bahari-Baghbar area	8000
9.	Goalpara area (Chamari-Hazirghat) including South Salmari township.	40000
10.	Dhuburi Patarmari area	2500

Source: Website on Disaster Management by GOA (2016)

Table 3 shows that huge amount of track have been inundated by the river Brahmaputra. The Mukalmua Area of Nalbari District, Goalpara Area and the Majuli has been the worst suffers. In a recent report published by the National Disaster Management Authority it is assumed that the number of erosion or migration of river Brahmaputra and its tributary have been rapidly increasing in both southern and northern bank of the river. The eroding tendency of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries can be understood from the table 4.

Table 4 stated shows the intensity of the river bank erosion which disturbs the human habitat in Assam. It can be summarized that many areas which have close affinity to the river Brahmaputra have suffered more. It is seen that the areas of Morigaon district, Majuli and Tezpur area have more acute river bank erosion from its earlier years.

4 Environment, IDP and the Responsibility of the State: Thinking of a Right Based Approach

At the end of this paper it tends to answer the following broad based questions, since displacement is a traumatic experience for anyone undergoing it; what is the extent of pain one might talking about? Does displacement has a class perspective? What role state could play to regulate the life of those million people who have lost their socio, cultural and family life? What is the status of the Rehabilitation and Resettlement packages in the state? Whether women, children are more vulnerable in such traumatic events? Does the approach of the government towards the displaced persons is not democratic and imply provisions for social justice? The answer to these questions remains to be further extracted. But to conclude we can just highlight two of the most relevant modules through which we can reduce the vulnerability and the risk of being displaced. Those modules include R2P (Right To Protect) and Right Based Approach.

4.1 R2P

R2P as an approach has been known globally. This module has been basically used by the policy analyst to protect human being from any vulnerable situation such as *Genocide, War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity and*

**Table 4: Satellite Based Estimation and Comparison of Area Eroded
In Brahmaputra during the Period 1990 to 2007-08 and 1997 to 2007-08⁴**

Reach Number	North Bank			South Bank		
	Total Erosion Length(Km)	1990-2007-08 ((in Sq. Km)	1997-2007-08 (in Sq. Km)	Total Erosion Length(Km)	1990-2007-08 ((in Sq. Km)	1997-2007-08 (in Sq. Km)
1)Dhuburi	40.19	124.461	94.129	7.05	194.983	10.791
2)Goalpara	39.5	79.046	40.902	4.85	17.816	5.052
3)Palasbari	54.87	48.668	42.914	14.02	23.006	15.859
4)Guwahati	21.02	7.92	1.654	24.38	5.385	12.079
5)Morigaon-Mongoldoi	6	35.606	2.138	47.91	96.979	103.7
6)Morigaon-Dhing	24.86	29.057	7.275	47.8	10.795	56.72
7)Tezpur	8.58	38.758	4.733	52.95	16.628	44.774
8)Tezpur-Gahpur	8.85	31.187	5.794	44.16	26.098	71.227
9)Majuli-Bessamora	24.69	25.562	12.327	47.17	32.788	28.998
10)Majuli-Sibasagar	16.93	60.657	16.878	54.95	44.018	42.118
11)Dibrugarh	37.86	37.506	43.529	43.89	46.595	6.066
12)U/S-Dibrugarh	70.5	20.376	55.454	57.54	399.529	333.416

Ethnic Cleansing and the main purpose of this module to make the state more responsible to protect the sovereignty which infect is exclusive to the state. Thus major thrust of this approach aptly that sovereignty is not a privilege rather a responsibility. R2P also includes programmes of democratization and focused on the notions of equality and social justice. This module can be utilized for resolving the problems of IDPs' and can be best utilized to generate provisions for the resettlement and rehabilitation of the IDPs'. It is an undeniable fact that the state so far in India in general and Assam in particular have failed to include policies through which proper Resettlement could be arranged and it is noticed that state as such does not come up at the expectation of the victim families. Thus, there is a need to make state more responsive and inclusive in its approach in providing proper resettlement and rehabilitation facilities to the victim families.

4.2 Right Based Approach

Right based approach has been the most popular device that has been globally acclaimed to provide justice for those involunteer movements or in more specific terms forced migration. The main ambition of this model is to provide proper mechanism to the wounded by keeping "justice" in mind. Justice here

⁴National Disaster Management Authority India (May, 2012), *Study of Brahmaputra River Erosion and Its Control*, Page No: 25.

includes recognizing what ought to be one's right to live a life one desires rather deserve. It is a strategic agenda through which local communities are empowered to look after the needs and demands of the locals. It is a kind of dependency aid through which a government has been supposed to increase its capacities to bridging the gap between the stake holders. Usually it can be observed that there are two stakeholders in any contact situations, specially when it comes to beneficiary, these are- the **Right Holders** and the **Duty Bearers**. It is observed from the study that the people who have the right to live a life with dignity but are forced to leave their houses as a matter of involuntary movements are the right holders, whose rights are meaningless if not recognized by the duty bearer, which in our case is the state. Thus state must be responsive and aware of the fact that unless and other the victims or the IDPs' are make concern of their rights and the ways through which they can lead a life of dignity, development will not going to happen. This approach therefore very much stress in one point that whatever the policy or scheme it should have certain programme of action for better compensation and the local should be asked whether they are agreed to the terms and conditions that could be needed for. Thus right based approach have been a vital step through the people could be empowered also can be master their own life.

As a concluding remark it is believed that the problems of IDPs' cannot be confiscated totally from its roots, but, only thing one can do is to reduce the vulnerability and can find a substitute of a better livelihood. The task could be tough but not impossible when the state act with more (political) maturity and act as a custodian of rights to all its citizens. It is believed that everybody has a space in democracy, no matter where one belongs (Indian democracy is also not exception to that), but only thing if it benefits all across the nation.

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