

# Development and displacement: People's narratives in Dhemaji district of Assam, India

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## ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

Displacement from the native land among the tribal people has become quite critical in India. While the process began during the colonial era, during the post-independence period, the tribal land has been taken over in the name of development projects, protection of forest land, and environmental conservation. There is no exception to the tribal communities of Assam. The construction of Bogibeel Bridge over the River Brahmaputra linking Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts in Upper Assam, has caused the acquisition of vast areas of land in the area, belonging mostly to the Mising tribe for whom land is the only source of livelihood. Their troubles are compounded by their primitive mode of agriculture. Though there are provisions for compensation, most of the people do not possess proper land documents (patta), and hence they become unable to take the compensations offered. Even those who have received some cash compensation, it has not been very helpful as they are not adapted to alternative modes of livelihood.

**Key Words:** Mising, Development, Displacement, Land Alienation, Land Acquisition, Bogibeel Bridge, Land Patta.

## Introduction:

The discourse on rights over land and other natural resources of the indigenous peoples has acquired considerable attention in both national and international forums (Xaxa, 1999). The international forums such as International Land Coalition (ILC), United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), International Labour Organisation (ILO), have endeavored to identify the land related issues of the indigenous groups, referred to as Scheduled Tribes (or simply tribes) in India. These forums have recognized the significance of cultural and spiritual values that indigenous peoples' attachment to their land and territories, which go far beyond the monetary or productive valuation (Feiring, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that for ensuring their sustainable development, the pivotal importance of tribal land be acknowledged, validated and safeguarded.

However, in the process of economic globalization, lands and territories of the indigenous tribal groups have been appropriated, grabbed, sold, leased, or simply plundered and polluted by governments, private companies, and powerful individuals. In India too, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (popularly known as the 'Forest Rights Act') was enacted to provide protective mechanisms in favour of forest-dwelling communities, many of which are tribal communities<sup>1</sup>. Despite the promulgation of protective measures, the exploitation and dispossession of tribal people from their lands has not abated. In addition, various development projects such as dams, urbanisation, industrialization, infrastructure, Roads etc. have exacerbated the process and become in major contributors to tribal land alienation (Oskarsson, 2018; Sharma C. K., 2001; Sharma & Borgohain, 2019)

In Assam too, the tribal people of Assam have suffered considerable amount of loss of land and habitat on account of recurrent floods and various development projects of the government in the post-independence period. The fact that many tribal people do not possess land ownership document (*patta*) has contributed majorly to the process of their displacement without any compensation or resettlement (Sharma C. K., 2001). This paper sheds light onto the process of displacement of tribal people (Mising) in the context of the

<sup>1</sup>Forest Rights Act, 2006: Act, Rules and Guidelines. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2014.

Bogibeel bridge construction and other related development activities in the Dhemaji district eastern Assam in northeast India.

### **A Note on the Mising tribe:**

The Mising people are the inhabitants of the riverine areas of the districts of eastern Assam. They are affected by the regular flooding during the rainy season. As result, they have to frequently shift their habitats from time to time in search of higher areas due to flood and erosion leading to their displacement from their habitat and livelihood. The Mising are second largest tribal group of Assam with a population of 6, 79,824 (2011 Census). Traditionally they are found in eight districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, viz., Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Golaghat, and Tinsukia. Some of them are also found in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. They mostly inhabit the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries such as Disang, Subansiri, Dhansiri, and Bharali. After building up such a close affinity with rivers over the centuries, it is not surprising that most of the Mising people are accomplished boatmen and fishermen. Like other tribal groups, agriculture and animal husbandry is the main source of livelihood of the Mising tribe. They are solely dependent on the land which is the only property as well as a livelihood source. Traditionally, farming has been the pre-dominant livelihood option among the Misings. However, many of their habitats have been subject to soil erosion caused by perennial floods and erosion and the inhabitants have been forced to relocate in other areas.

Besides, the introduction of different developmental policies, and changes in the land tenure have also brought about certain changes in the traditional system of resource management of the Misings.

### **The Area of Study**

#### **a. Dhemaji District: An Introduction**

As mentioned, this paper is based on a study in the Dhemaji district. The boundaries of the district are the hilly ranges of Arunachal Pradesh in the north and the east, Lakhimpur district of Assam in the West and the river Brahmaputra in the South. There are numerous rivers and rivulets that flow down from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh in the north to the south causing regular floods in the district. The district is divided into 2 sub-divisions viz., Dhemaji and Jonai, comprising of 5 blocks (Dhemaji, Sissiborgaon, Murkong-selek, Bordoloni, and Machkhowa) and 1150 revenue villages. As per the 2011 census, the district shelters a population of 6, 86,133, which comprises of Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and the general population (70 %, 5.33%, and 24.67% respectively) of the total population. Among the major ST population, the Misings constitute 48%, Bodos 18%, and other tribes 8% respectively. The urban population is only 7.04%, which indicates the predominantly rural character of the district. The average literacy rate of the district is 72.70% of which the male literacy rate is 79.84% while the female literacy rate is 65.21% (census 2011). The district covers an area of 3237 sq. Km and is basically a plain lying at the altitude of 104 meter above the Mean Sea Level.

Many studies hold flood as one of the main causes of displacement in the area (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016). Moreover, flood risk on human lives and livelihood and probability of crop yield or damages are linked to inundation period in the villages. According to the official report, there are 2310<sup>2</sup> landless families within the Sissiborgaon development block, where the villages under study are located, due to flood and erosion alone, but very little developmental activity has been undertaken. In glaring contrast, the area is host to three large, multi-crore infrastructure projects; the Bogibeel rail cum roadbridge, Railway Gauge conversion and the construction of the approach road to the bridge. It is to be noted that the Bogibeel bridge construction over the river Brahmaputra and the other two related projects are undertaken by the Government of India. These development projects and land acquisition for construction of service road, stacking of construction materials, logistics for projects staff, etc. have further exacerbated the displacement of the people who had already been suffering from frequent displacement and livelihood loss due to flood and erosion in the area. The 4.94 km long Bogibeel Bridge which connect the north and the south banks of the Brahmaputra between Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts was projected as a symbol development in the area. While the importance of the bridge can be hardly exaggerated, the people in the area were ignorant of the fact that this project will lead to the loss of their land which was the prime sources of their livelihood. The entire process of land acquisition took place with the hype of development bringing prosperity to the people in the area.

#### **b. Villages under the study**

Since 2004, a large-scale land acquisition drive began in the Kareng and Dambuk villages, inhabited by mainly the Misings, for the construction of the bridge. These two villages come under Sissiborgaon revenue circle and development block of the Dhemaji District. Land acquisition simultaneously began for the construction of the National Highway 52 B from Kulajan Tiniali (New) in the north connecting Bogibeel at Sukhapa Tiniali in Dibrugarh district and the Service Road at old Kulajan Tiniali in Dhemaji district. The acquisition of land was undertaken to cater to the logistical demands of stacking construction materials and building a service road for transportation to the Bogibeel Project site.

<sup>2</sup>Circle Office, Sissiborgaon Revenue circle, Dhemaji

In the backdrop of this, there was a lot of anxiety and apprehension among the local population when the land acquisition for the Bogibeel Bridge began. Large areas of land, more than 140 Bigha (1 Bigha=0.133 hectare), was taken over from 136 households in the vicinity of the construction area. The acquisition of land rendered those families landless. The villages of Dambuk (divided into Kalabari, Amguri, Bhalukaguri) and Kareng share the largest area of land under acquisition. A total of more than 53 Bighas of land in Dambuk and more than 34 Bighas in Kareng were acquired for the projects. Most of the land was either agricultural land or those used for cattle grazing. The land acquisition has disrupted the sources of livelihood of the village community.

In order to build an all-weather motorable road to carry materials and manpower to the project site, a service road was commissioned from Kulajan tiniali via Kebaranga, Dambuk to Kareng village (bridge construction site). As a result, agricultural as well as homestead land amounting more than 140 bighas (**Table 1**) was acquired. This amount is officially recorded. However, the people alleged that much more land than this official amount was acquisitioned for stacking of construction materials. Such land does not come under *patta*, and hence recognised as government land. However, people alleged that these lands were ancestral land of the people from the fringe villages of the project site such as Kulajan Tiniali, Kebaranga, Chitolmari, and Piyang. A total of 136 households were officially identified as project-affected people (PAPs) from villages stretching over an area of 15 km from the old National Highway 52 in the north to the project site.

**Table 1:** Total Land acquired for Bogibeel projects

| Sl. No       | Name of Village    | Total HHs affected | Total Land Area (B-Bigha,K-Katha,L-lessa) |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|---|
| 1            | Kandulijan         | 5                  | 5B-3K-oL                                  |
| 3            | Kulajan            | 9                  | 7B-3K-oL                                  |
| 4            | Bhalukaguri Dambuk | 38                 | 33B-2K-oL                                 |
| 5            | Amguri Dambuk      | 24                 | 23B-3K-oL                                 |
| 6            | Chitolmari-Piyang  | 13                 | 22B-5K-oL                                 |
| 7            | Kebaranga          | 18                 | 11B-4K-oL                                 |
| 8            | Kareng Chapori     | 29                 | 34B-4K-oL                                 |
| <b>Total</b> |                    | <b>136</b>         | <b>140B-4K-15L</b>                        |

**Source:** District Administration, Dhemaji

People affected by land acquisition alleged that initially land was acquired assuring compensation or leased amount to the people. But after the acquisition process was complete, there was no compensation or leased amount. The project authority as well as the district administration stated that land under acquisition was government land, not private land. But they community knew that the acquired land was inherited by them from their ancestors as agricultural land.

Only a few of the household in the two villages, Kareng and Dambuk, where the study was conducted, had arable land and the yield is characteristically low due to the inevitable destruction by floods. Fishing activities are very common and serves as additional livelihood means for cash and consumption. Cattle-rearing was also practised as the area had large grass cover on the bank of the Brahmaputra. People in the villages alleged that the guide bunds constructed to protect the Bogibeel bridge posed as the main causes of inundation in both the villages and it has also adversely affected their fishing activities, which previously helped them earn the day-to-day cash requirement.

It is reported, as a result, that large numbers of people, mostly the youth from the villages affected by the bridge construction migrated to towns and cities in other states like Kerala and Karnataka in south India in search of employment. With little or no education, they could only work as security guards or night watchmen on meagre salaries, most of which was to be remitted back to their dependents in the village. Consequently, the female folk have also been forced to work on meagre wages as daily labourers in the vicinity of their villages with no other skills to substantiate daily sustenance.

### METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION:

The two villages, Kareng and Dambuk, where fieldwork for the study was conducted have a total of 347 households, consisting of 90 and 257 households respectively. Both the villages are located beyond the embankment of the river Brahmaputra. In order to collect the primary data, 120 sample households from both the villages were selected randomly; the selected households include those which have lost land as well as those which have not. Qualitative in nature, the study relies on both primary as well as secondary sources of data. The primary data were collected through extensive fieldwork using tools like in-depth interview schedules, focus group discussion (FGDs), and personal observation. The oral narratives of the villagers are also extensively used in the study. For the secondary data, various sources such as, relevant published/unpublished documents, reports, meeting proceedings, government and non-government records, etc. were used. The major part of the field work was conducted during 2014-2017. However, intermittent engagement with the field has continued which has helped to update the necessary data till 2022 which helped to observe the long term implications of the displacement on the community.

### CAUSES AND PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT:

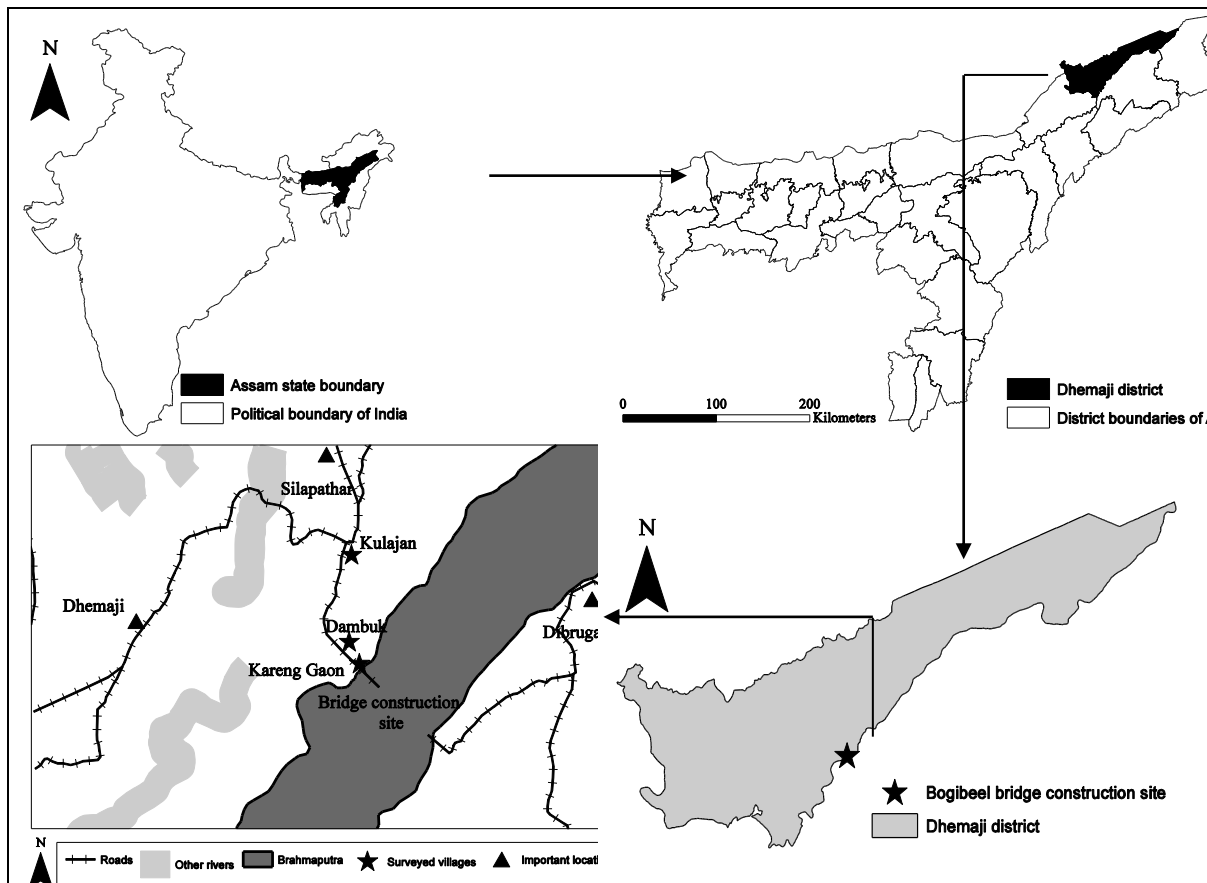
As mentioned, flood and land erosion have been recurrent problems in the study area. The Bogibeel road cum Rail Bridge was projected to considerably improve the communication network between the North and the South banks of the Brahmaputra in general, and between Dhemaji and Dibrugarh in particular. This also was of great importance for the other parts of Arunachal Pradesh in improving the mobility and development of the entire region. However, the infrastructure development projects have posed many problems for the already poor indigenous communities in the project area. The land acquisition for these development projects posed to displace the people of area from their only source of livelihood.

While displacement is defined as the act of dislocation of people from their native places due to various development projects. (Scudder, 1996; De Wet, 2001; Fernandes & Bharali, 2010). The displacement in the study area does not utterly conform to its established definition. People here are not completely uprooted or relocated to another place. Rather, they are compelled to shift their habitation from time to time to safer places within the village. The households that are worst affected by flood and erosion resort to settling on the embankments constructed by the government. Sometimes it is temporary stay, but it was observed that, families who have lost their entire land, settle there permanently. Frequent shifting of habitation and agriculture due to flood and erosion has left the Mising people vulnerable to loss of land and livelihood (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016; Sharma, 2012) district.

All the rivers in the district, as mentioned already, flow from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh in the north before merging in the Brahmaputra River. The National Highways and the railway tracks go as parallel lines dissecting all the rivers. The location and the geomorphological characteristics of the district is such that the narrow plain belt of district lay bordering the hills of the neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh gradually sloping down to the Brahmaputra in the south.

As a result, the rivers flow down creating turbulent pressure that causes breaches on the riverbanks and roads very often. Further, the rivers that flow through the region, constantly alter course, and fill huge tracts of arable land with sand and stones carried from the hills, thus destroying the basic resources of subsistence and alternative livelihood.

These natural activities have worsened the flood situation in the district. There are numbers of embankments which were constructed the last time in the year 1987-88. In 2002, the breach of the Deorighat-Sissikalghar bund of Brahmaputra at Arne Chapori to the east of the Bogibeel caused loss of life and livelihoods. The floods were so devastating that the entire area was submerged and in many places sand depositions occurred.



**Map 1.** Location map of Bogibeel Bridge and the surveyed villages

The Bogibeel bridge construction over the river Brahmaputra is a Central Government Project under the North-eastern Frontier Railway. The bridge project was opened to the people on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018. The Bogibeel project has considerably improved the communication network between the North and the South banks of the Brahmaputra. It was also envisaged that the project would bring about greater development, value and mobility for the remote regions of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

Yet the massive development project has exacerbated the extant problems for the already poor indigenous communities living in their vicinities of the project site. The project has led to the acquisition of vast areas of agricultural land. The Bogibeel project alone has affected as many as 19 villages in the form of land acquisition, thereby being perceived as a curse by the villagers. Vast areas of land have been taken over for construction of service roads, railroads, and stacking of boulders, required for construction activity.

It is to be noted that the Land Acquisition Act 1894 decrees all undocumented land as government land. This has nullified the demands of the local organizations for proper compensation to the people affected by land acquisition at the project sites. This law unfortunately not only favours the government, but ignores the tribal land laws, which recognize ancestral inheritance patterns. At the core of this complex issue lies the loss of the sole means of livelihood of the tribal people. The ignorance of the people pushed them to such a situation. . During the initial phase of land acquisition that took place during 2003-2004 people were told that, they would be compensated for the land acquired. People were assured that, the land under acquisition would be taken under lease. As a result, people handed over their agricultural land for the project. But they were unaware of the fact that only land with individual *patta* would be qualified to be compensated under law.

It is reported, as mentioned above, that as many as 70 people, mostly the youth from the villages affected by the bridge construction migrated to nearby towns and cities in others state like Kerala, Karnataka, Gujarat, etc. in search for livelihood sources. These migrants with very little or no education attainment, they could only work as security guards or night watchmen on meagre salaries, most of which was remitted back to their dependents in the village.

According to one respondent<sup>3</sup> in Kareng village, there have been out migration in almost all the houses in the village. He said,

We are family of five: my wife, two sons and daughter-in-law. Earlier we had lost land due to flood. We can only cultivate *Bao* (dry rice) paddy and Mustard during the dry season. But its production as well as the land area are declining. Further, the project has acquired a part of the remaining land for stacking boulder. In order to meet survival needs, our elder son has migrated to Gujarat. The money remitted helps in meeting education expenses of our younger son and the family's cash requirement.

Further, the growing out migration of the male folks from the villages has put the women in utter difficulty. This is especially true of those with nuclear families. These women have to take care of their kids along with the household chores and also eke out a livelihood. In such situation the wives of the migrants have to live compromising with security, health and related issues. The remittance amount does could not meet daily expenses and such women are also forced to work on meagre wages as daily labourers to meet daily sustenance.

Another respondent<sup>4</sup> stated that the people who migrated earlier act as sub-contractor in getting new migrants from the village. These middlemen siphoned off the wages of the new migrants for which the latter received very less amount. This has led numbers of migrants to return home or opt for other places for work. It is clear that the youths seek better employment avenues in their own areas. They have migrated for better employment but the money they earned have not been sufficient for remittance and sustenance in the migrated cities. Creation of employment that can compensate for the livelihood loss due to development projects would have been a better option for them.

Coming back to the issue of compensation, it is to be pointed out that after the land was acquired the project authority as well as the district administration paid no attention to the affected families. Rather, people were told that those land acquired actually fall under government land which implies no compensation or leased amount to be paid to the affected families.

Faced by such a situation the affected villagers organised themselves in an "Area Development and Service Road Compensation Demand Committee" (ADSRCDC) to fight for their demand. After persistent protests and by the committee, the Dhemaji district authority gave them assurance of compensation and asked the people to be cooperative in execution of the project.

The *gaonburha* of the Amguri lat alleged that the district officials tactfully entrusted the land acquisition process to officers from the Mising community to ease the situation as well as to gain acceptance of the people<sup>5</sup>. People too alleged that a few people from the community itself were involved in the land acquisition, who acted as middlemen, locally called *dadal*. These people betrayed the ignorant villagers.

According to a schoolteacher interviewed, the bridge will give opportunities to the people, but the construction of guide bund was unnecessary. The direct current of the river Brahmaputra that hits the village

<sup>3</sup>Romai Mili Father of a migrant

<sup>4</sup>Ghanashyam Kumbang returnee migrant in Bhalukaguri Dambuk

<sup>5</sup>GaonBurha of the AmguriDambuk Village



should have been protected, which according to him, the present guide bund does not do. It has added more vulnerability of inundation during peak monsoon season)<sup>6</sup>.

The president of ADSRCDC, however, holds different views from that of the schoolteacher. According to him, the project has occupied land which was their only source of livelihood.

The Mising Autonomous Council, an autonomous council under the Government of Assam, established in the year 1995 with its headquarters at Gogamukh, Dhemaji district. The prime objective MAC was self-government of the core and the satellite area demarcated in proportionate to the tribe population in a particular area.

He states that-

There is no proper linkage between MAC, ZilaParishad and Gaon Panchayat for development. The tenders for any development projects are based on political gain. The projects have no benefits for the local people. Even during flood relief, materials are distributed based on the political agenda<sup>7</sup>.

The statement reflects the anguish and skepticism about the development projects undertaken in the study area by the people's representatives. It is observed that these representatives are viewed as middlemen or negotiators between the project authority and the affected villagers. Apart from ADSRCDC, various other local organizations like Takam Mising PorinKébang (TMPK) student's organisation of the Mising community, Mising Mimak Kébang (MMK) Political organisation of the Mising community have demanded proper compensation to the affected people. But the project authority and the district administration pay no heed to those demands and refer to the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 which decrees all undocumented land as government land.

As mentioned above, the people of the villages were unaware and ignorant about land documents. The lack of awareness is reflected in the responses to the question asked about land patta. Most the respondents did not answer to questions related to land document. Some even questioned if having patta will make the land more fertile and give better yield<sup>8</sup>. Further, some of the villagers were of the opinion that nobody can drive them away from their ancestral land.

Already, different factors have already contributed to displacement and land alienation among the Misings. One such factor is the practice of leasing out land as mortgage to fellow affluent members within the community or members from other communities to borrow money in order to address economic needs or crisis situations. Their persistent poor economic conditions, however, do not allow them to repay and as a result they lose the land (Sharma C. K., 2001). The urbanisation of the Mising inhabited areas like Silapathar in Dhemaji district and Dibrugarh town, for example, have pushed many Mising inhabitants of these areas to the other interior areas, mostly riverine and forest areas, where they face persistent threat of either flood or eviction by forest administration (Doley, 1986). The official record of district administration states that, arable lands of 136 households in the study area have been acquired for the projects, but according to the people the amount is much more than the said record.

### **Impacts of land displacement:**

#### **Impact on Land and Livelihood:**

Land is the primary source of livelihood among the tribal communities (D'Souza, 1999). The lifestyle of tribal people revolves around the use of the land and other natural available resources (Mishra, 2007). This symbiotic relationship between tribal people with nature is pertinent in their interactions, belief system, culture and daily practices and rituals, etc. (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016). The traditional knowledge has developed among these people as result of the long-lived experiences with the situation. This traditional knowledge helps them in perceiving and anticipating risks and hazards related to the river. For instance, the flooding is very common in the study area. The lived experiences of flood help them perceive the risk and thereby help them in flood preparedness and mitigation plan for flood damages (ibid).

Besides flood and erosion, another menace that accompanies the floods is the deposition of sand in the flooded areas (Sharma, 2012). The government agencies had been engaged in flood management activities. Mitigation plan for flood damages by Assam Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) are through construction and repair of embankments and dykes prior to the floods and the rescue and food supply during flood and repair and restoration post flood (DDMP, 2011). To make flood risk management participatory and holistic in nature an elaborate plan from all stakeholders is very much required (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016).

The government flood management through distribution relief and rescue operation during floods are alleged to be inappropriate by the villagers. According to a respondent<sup>9</sup> in Kareng village, the distribution of relief materials is influenced by various factors. Sometimes the receiver's affiliation to the political parties and the party in power in the local area become crucial. Moreover, he also alleged that the relief materials like rice, pulses, salt, etc. are siphoned off by some people in charge of distribution of such materials.

<sup>6</sup>View of a schoolteacher in Kareng village.

<sup>7</sup>Gaon Burha (village Headman) of Kareng and Dambuk Lat.

<sup>8</sup>SatraDoley, a resident of Dambuk village

<sup>9</sup>Dibakar Mili

While explaining the precariousness of flood and erosion in the area, a respondent<sup>10</sup> in Kareng village said, Before the flood caused breach in the embankment at Arne Chapori in 1996, all the villagers had sufficient agricultural land. Almost every villager had more than 2-3 bigha of land. The yield was around 15-20 mound (1 mound = 40 Kg) per bigha. But the flood in that year caused massive damages to the agricultural land. The flood water remained for weeks inundating the entire area. After the flood came the erosion that has eroded large area of the village. As a result of sand deposition after flood, the yield had declined to maximum around 8-10 mound per bigha. Another breach in the year 2002 on the same embankment further reduced the crop yields. And due to erosion, the Brahmaputra has come closure to the village making it more vulnerable to frequent flood.

He further said that the Bogibeel bridge project came as an additional factor to cause flood in the village. The construction of the guide bund on the east and west of the bridge for the protection of the bridge and the embankment led to the longevity of the inundation. This also disrupted crop cultivation and yield. The reducing of land caused by acquisition has further contributed to loss of livelihood. It was clearly found that besides flood the land lost due to acquisition for the development project has led to livelihood loss and more risk to flood inundation.

While flood and erosion are regular phenomena in the villages causing various losses every year, their impacts are varied in the two villages due to their geographical location. Kareng is located outside the embankment which has made the village more vulnerable to flood and erosion whereas Dambuk, more precisely Bhalukaguri and Kalabari, are inside of the embankment which make these villages safer in a way from the erosion in large scale. On account of erosion, the homestead land of many families in the Kareng village have been lost.

As a result, these families settled on the embankment permanently. Some of these families are said to have shifted to Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary near Guwahati city, almost 470 kms west. Some of the families have also settled in the forest areas on the hills behind the College of Veterinary Science at Khanapara in Guwahati. These settlements had also faced eviction from the Forest Department from time to time. One such eviction drive took place at a massive scale in November 2017.

Apart from the declining crop yield, the people have had to face the land acquisition for the project that has already been shrinking due to flood. The project affected people have to resort to out migration for livelihood. As a result, out migration of the youth has increased rapidly in recent times. This further impacted the traditional way of village life and also their cultural practices, as the youth are the leading forces in all the cultural festivals.

### **Impact on Cultural practices:**

The relation between cultural practices and natural environment of tribal communities are intricately related to each other. The cultures and festivities are based on the day-to-day uses of the land and livelihood practices. As land is used primarily for agriculture and their culture is also associated with the agricultural practices. The Misings belonging to the greater *Tani* people are said to be descendants of *Abotani*. As mentioned, the Misings were hill dwellers previously and are said to have migrated and settled in riverine areas of the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. (Doley, 1986).

Mising people celebrate their traditional festivals with great fervour. Most of the festivals are connected to their traditional livelihood practices of agriculture. But land loss due flood and subsequent development project in the villages has had consequences for their traditional cultural practices. The gradual shrinking acreage of land and land acquisition for the project related activities have rendered many of the villagers landless which pushed them to different livelihood practices like rickshaw puller, wage labour, menial works, etc, (Sharma C. K., 2012). These people feel dissociated from their traditional festivals.

According to a migrant<sup>11</sup> from the in AmguriDambuk village who is now working outside the village, *Aye-Ayé-Lígang* is most important festival celebrated in the village. But since most of the youths have migrated to distance cities, the villagers cannot celebrate the festival with the same fervour nowadays. It is celebrated just to keep the tradition.

He also said that in the cities to which they have migrated, they do celebrate the festival, even if their number is not too many. However, as all the migrants were engaged in their work on the designated Wednesday on which the festival is to be celebrated, they celebrate the festival usually on a Sunday.

Another important festival in the village was *Po: rag* which traditionally continued for three 3 days. People have to be invited in large number from other villages. The principal attraction of this festival is that all the women folks who are married to other villages are invited as special guest on the occasion. The festival provides a platform for meeting their old friend from the villages. The shrinking of agricultural yields coupled with loss of land on account of erosion as well as land acquisition for the project have had an adverse effect on the celebration of this traditional festival. The popularity of the festivals is diminishing due the gradual decrease in agricultural land and practices. At present days *Po: rag* is celebrated at the convenience of the people in early winter or early spring.

<sup>10</sup>Gomesh Kuli

<sup>11</sup>Dalim Pait

Moreover, the traditional practice of rearing *Eri* for yarn is also seen declining in the villages due to floods and related issues. Earlier one would find almost every household in Mising villages spinning yarn with the traditional spinner. This practice has been in gradual decline in the villages. The weaving of traditional blanket *Gadu* is nowhere to be found in the villages now.

Further, the *MurongUkom* (community Hall) is an importance socio-cultural institution among the Mising tribe. All the social, religious, cultural and customary festivals are celebrated in the *Murong* premises. The non-existence of this institution has led to postponement of the scheduled *Po: rag* in Kareng village. A respondent<sup>12</sup> from the village said,

We had scheduled to organise *Po: rag* during the months of November-December in the year 2016. All was all set including the guest village and the people to be invited. But in the flood of the same year the *Murong* was eordred into the Brahmaputra. As a result, the said events were postponed till the construction of a new *Murong*.

*Dobur*, another festival among the Misings is performed with sacrifice and prayer to get rid of adversities. In village, the youth (*Ya: me*) come together with stick and beat around each house to drive away devil/ demons that might hide in the nook and corner of the house. The households offer chicken, egg, vegetables etc. and are gathered in distant places like agriculture fields to perform the rituals. The celebration of *Dobur* is very much affected in the villages due to the out migration of the village youths.<sup>13</sup>

### Rural out-migration:

During the field work, it was observed that, at least one from all the households affected by the bridge construction has moved out of the village in search of livelihood. Males of age group (16-45) years have migrated to urban centres of other states like Kerala, Karnataka, and so forth. They have been reported to be working as security guards, night watchmen etc. with very little or no education attainment.

In an interview with one respondent stated that the construction of guide bunds and dykes are the reasons for more floods. This has posed threats to agricultural produce. It has damaged the standing crops<sup>14</sup>. He further added that people who work in the construction site as casual labour do not get their wages on time. The contractor delays payment which sometime can even be weeks.

Another respondent<sup>15</sup> said that,

Not everyone is willing to out migrate from the village. But there are very few options available in the village. Agriculture is no more a profiting enterprise. Again, the project has further deprived us from the land. People worked in the project site as wage labourer. But the contractor pays less than the average rate of money. Moreover, people are hesitant to work as labourer in the local villages.

Another reason of out migration is the restriction of fishing activities due to the construction of guide bund that used to serve the cash requirements of everyday expenses. As a result, villagers, mostly male youth opt to out migration in search better livelihood opportunity and future to cities Bengaluru, Chennai etc. (Muktia & Sharma, 2019). The place of migration choice depends on the work choice of the migrants. Migrants opting for manual labour, semi-skilled jobs etc. prefer Gujarat and Kerala as the destination choice. But educated youths in the study area preferred Pune and Bengaluru for migration. An out-migrant says,

Bengaluru and Pune are booming cities for information technology sector. They pay well in comparison to other places and the weather is also suitable. Moreover, there are many people from Assam which make one feel that they not being away from the state.<sup>16</sup>

These migrants do not have professional skills and is paid very less. As a result, the living standard remains very poor. The families in the villages depend on the meagre amount of remittance from the migrants. And the female folks work as daily labourers in the construction site with little wages and having no skills to substantiate daily sustenance.

Development-induced migration is seen rising in the study area since the time the study was undertaken in 2015. The families affected by the projects have at least one member of the family as a migrant. A respondent<sup>17</sup> who is the father of a migrant said,

We lost more than 2 bighas of land due to erosion and sand deposition which led to less yield in the remaining 4 bighas. Only mustard, Pulses (Urad Bean) and *Baoare* suitable for cultivation. The project (Bogibeel bridge) has acquired 2 kathas of my land for stacking boulder, further reducing the yields. In order to meet the necessary survival needs my only son had to out migrate to Kerala leaving behind me and my wife in the village.

### Loss of alternative sources:

<sup>12</sup>Baliram Pegu

<sup>13</sup>Mularam Doley, a senior citizen

<sup>14</sup>Respondent from Dambuk village name not disclosed.

<sup>15</sup>JaganandaMili of Dambuk village

<sup>16</sup>Momin Doley, graduate and works in IT sector in Pune since 2008

<sup>17</sup>Jayanta Pegu, Age around 55 in Kareng Village



The project has also disrupted the other livelihood options in the villages. As a respondent<sup>18</sup> in the Kareng village said,

Flood is a regular occurrence, its natural and we have lived with it since very long. Earlier flood water receded quickly, after which we used to rear cattle in the grassland. There were also varieties of fish available after the floods. But after the Bogibeel project, the guide bund in one side and the embankment on the other side led to the submergence of the villages for long a long period. The project authorities also imposed restrictions on fishing in the area, while the inundation caused hindrances in cattle rearing.

Yet people still continue to fish in those wetlands and the authorities restricts them. This is evident from the responses of fisherman that were of the opinion that the area belonged to them, their grandfathers and great grandfathers. They thus felt that they have an inherent right to fish in those restricted areas<sup>19</sup>. Further, the high-water level makes fishing a difficult as well as a riskier task. Catching fish became difficult as fishes can escape to deep waters. As a result, many have stopped fishing and have restricted their income generation which was earlier an alternative source.

The ferry services had been the livelihood option for many families. There were few government ferry boats and approximately 20-25 private boats ferried passengers daily. Each ferry boat had 5-10 persons engaged from ticket selling to selling tea and snacks on board during the long two-hour journey crossing the Brahmaputra. Kareng Ghat was the only ferry ghat that was functional for all season.

The ghat also served as livelihood option for the petty business establishments like hotels, shops, etc. According to a local respondent, there were 30-35 shops and eateries. The closure of the ghat has led to the loss of livelihoods for those families who ran these shops at the ghat. Thus, approximately more than 200 household income were shattered after the closure of the ferry Ghat.

In an interview with Hemanta<sup>20</sup> (Name Changed) a ferry private boat owner said,

“Bridge will bring new opportunity as well as disadvantages to us. We are left with no options. We have demanded the authority for alternative livelihood options otherwise will go protest.”

The interview was conducted few days before the inauguration on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

From the various responses, one learned that promises were made by authorities to quell protesters. The government authority assured to provide market shed beside the bridge to the affected households. However, the promised market shed is still not built. What exists is temporary sheds near the entrance of the bridge built by the people themselves where they sell their produce. These temporary sheds face official evictions from time to time. Along with the eviction, the temporary market to shifts within the bridge entrance area. In the present day there are two -three ferry boats for provide boat ride to the tourist and picnic goers in the area.

Another respondent<sup>21</sup> who used to be a tea staller in the Karengghat opined that

The bridge has brought better mobility, but the villagers of the area have lost their additional sources of income. The authority could have made alternative arrangements for them too. He is still running the tea stall at the entrance of the bridge. Few resorts and eateries are coming up after the inauguration of the bridge which belong to people from outside the area.

### Impact on Agriculture:

Flood is a regular phenomenon in the study area. Most of the land -homesteads as well as agricultural fields are affected by flood every year. People lose their crops and the soil become unsuitable due to coarse sediment deposition (Sharma C. K., 2012). The people in the area are fully dependent on rainwater for cultivation. The excess water by heavy rainfall creates flood and destroys the paddy fields. According to respondents<sup>22</sup>, earlier they used to grow abundant crops and leafy vegetables in the area but after the project cultivable land have reduced. He stated that,

Before the land were acquired, I used to cultivate paddy and leafy vegetable and mostly mustard for selling in a plot of 4bighas. The yields were somehow sufficient for my family of four members. Out of which 2 bighas was acquired by the project authority stacking boulder and other project materials. Initially I was told that land will be compensated, but later no compensation was received. This has reduced my farmland resulting shortage in survival needs. As a result, I have started working as wage labourer or tenant worker in other's farms.

Paddy is sown in the month of January –February so that it can be harvested before the flood. The crop choices vary from place to place. The low-lying areas, which is more prone to flooding are sowed seeds of specific paddy like *bao* rice that can withstand flooding. The other rice varieties that suitable for wet cultivation are planted during June-August depending on the rainwater. The paddy cultivation is preferably for self-sustenance rather than monetary gain. Cultivation of vegetables, Mustard, Pulses (Urad bean) etc. is substantiated for cash requirement. Besides cattle rearing, pig farming, poultry are very common among the

<sup>18</sup>Numal Medok

<sup>19</sup> Resident of Kareng village

<sup>20</sup>Owner of Private ferry in Kareng village

<sup>21</sup>Karna Mili resident of Dambuk

<sup>22</sup>Romai Mili of Kareng village

villagers. These activities provide them with nutritious food as well as economic support. These animals are also used for various rites and rituals among the villagers. The lack of modern agriculture infrastructure like irrigation etc. has also added to the underutilisation of the lands in the area. The overall situation of poverty have exacerbated due to the inability of the villagers to cope up with the new environment introduced by development projects and of establishing new market economy. The method of intensive cultivation could be an option in the village to substantiate the loss due to displacement and flooding.

### **Human trafficking:**

The flood and related disaster have rendered the indigenous people landless. This has created utter hopelessness among the already marginalised tribal communities across the world (ILO, 1989, No. 169). According to World Resources Institute, 5 million of the 21 million people are affected by floods in India. Floods are unevenly distributed within India. The National Remote Sensing Centre (NSRC) of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) states that, "the most flood-prone areas in India are the Brahmaputra, Ganga and Meghna River basins in the Indo-Gangetic-Brahmaputra plains in North and Northeast India, which carry 60% of the nation's total river flow." (Map 1). Dhemaji is the most adversely affected district in Assam on the Brahmaputra valley as stated in the ASDMA Report date 26<sup>th</sup> July 2016. Around 4 lakhs population and more than 90, 000 ha of land are affected in the district in year 2004 (Table 2). This has caused loss of livelihood to the people, for those, agriculture being the primary occupation.

Development led displacement coupled with natural disasters led the people higher risk of exploitation and prey for human traffickers (Akhta, 2015). The development displacement has led to out-migration of the working male, thereby leaving their families behind. The children and young women fall victim to the surge of human trafficking in recent time. Few questions were raised on the issue of trafficking. Some of the respondents<sup>23</sup> reluctantly answered that some such cases are reported. It was stated that women of the out migrants in the villages are reported to elope with other persons.

There are few reported cases in the field that some married migrants who have migrated leaving behind their wife and children are said to have married to another wife in the places they have migrated to. The wives of those migrants have a miserable life in the villages.

The crime investigation branch of Assam police records lists Lakhimpur and Dhemaji amongst the most vulnerable districts where trafficking is increasing drastically. The situation is highly alarming but many of such cases are not reported to the police.

### **Ecological consequences:**

The area under study is rich in biodiversity. Large numbers of migratory birds arrive during the peak season. The riverine areas including the sand bars of the Brahmaputra River serves a suitable habitat for many of the migratory birds. There are numerous wetlands with variety of fish species. The development intervention and the sand deposition during flooding have cause degradation of these wetlands. This has posed threats to the ecology of the area.

A resident<sup>24</sup> of Kareng village said that before the bridge project came up there were many wetlands and low-lying areas created by the water channels of two local small rivulets, namely, Tangani and the Burisuti. The flood water brought varieties of fish and after it receded people used to catch fish. But the land acquisition and the channel cutting happened in those areas too. Furthermore, the construction of the guide bund has submerged most of those wetlands.

The villages under study were very popular for fish varieties, especially eel. But it was reported that eel catch has drastically declined due to the boulder stacking and longevity of the waterlogging due the said reason. As the wetlands and paddy field with shallow water are the ideal habitats for eel, due to the shrinking of paddy cultivation and acquisition of wetlands, the fish varieties are gradually diminishing in the area. The Bogibeel project has a remarkable impact on the wetlands and beels in the area. Boulders and sand extraction for the construction and stacking the same has further degraded habitat polluting the wetland ecology. Moreover, the contraction of width of the Bogibeel Bridge has impacted the river morphology (Sarma & Talukdar, 2020) causing alarming changes on the riverbank ecology on both side of the river. The aquatic lives are reported to have been impacted due to the constriction of the river in the upstream as well as downstream of the bridge construction site.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The above discussion clearly shows how the Mising tribal community has undergone serious sufferings on account of the construction of the Bogibeel bridge project. Though political organisations raise local community-based issues, many vital issues are side-tracked. The Mising Autonomous Council which is solely responsible for the development of the local people is reported to be mere spectators due to various unknown reasons. National and Regional parties remember these sufferings of the community only at the time of

<sup>23</sup>Elderly person in Dambuk village

<sup>24</sup>Ramen mili

elections and the people too, with little or no knowledge of politics get overwhelmed by the speeches and election manifestoes of their popular leaders. It has been observed that the people are tempted by the few feasting and partying activities with leaders or parties. Whoever may be the party in power, the sufferings of the people remain the same. It does not mean that developmental initiatives should not be undertaken by the state; but the development at the cause of land and livelihood of the people without proper compensation and rehabilitation is not justified. Although development has its own vested interest and network, it benefits a large number of people. Nevertheless, there is also much evidence of marginalization and victimization of the local communities in the name of the development projects (Feiring, 2013)(Banerjee, 2011; Fernandes, 2003). Here the development authority or the state should adopt an inclusive approach, where all the stakeholders are taken into account in all aspects of the project. The authority should also sort out the pros and cons of the projects and take up proper solutions in mitigating these issues. Such an approach will lead to participation and responsibility of all the stakeholders and eventually ownership feelings and thereby benefit will be shared minimising the conflicts between the development authority and the affected communities.

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