Research Article

Erosion of Land and Citizenship: A Case of Chars of Assam, India

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Abstract

This article, based on my doctoral ethnographic fieldwork, will look at the chars in western Assam, India. It will examine how continuous erosion and increasingly devastating floods are directly contributing to the citizenship crisis of the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers by making them landless and forcing them to migrate to nearby grazing reserves or cities where they provide cheap labour and keep the capitalist economy running while their own socio-economic and political rights remain precarious. Through the tropes of embankment politics and eviction and politics of the majoritarian state, this article shows how Muslim bodies are devalued. This article argues how a historically migratory community has been systematically turned landless, deskilled and made politically precarious by the majoritarian state using environmental factors wherein old histories and memories of migration of char-dwellers have been systematically destroyed to be replaced by new ones.

Keywords

Chars, environmental migration, citizenship, devaluation, Assam

Introduction

It was almost monsoons when I accompanied Abdul da to the char to meet his father. A little over nine months had passed since I started my doctoral fieldwork in the chars of Baghbar revenue circle and by then I was a familiar sight there and often char-dwellers invited me to their house for tea, lunch and conversations. I met Abdul da on my first day of fieldwork on a ferry which we both took to travel to the char. He was a schoolteacher in the char and was also conducting NRC[1] duties and was curious about my visit. We started conversations and within

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a matter of an hour I learnt a lot about the chars in the circle, the people living there, the twin issues of flood and erosion that have been plaguing the char-dwellers more than the majoritarian state's project of NRC. Soon, Abdul da became one of my key informants during my research and we would often hang out together, at his home with his family. Abdul da mentioned that his current house was set up after his family shifted for the eighteenth time. For most char-dwellers, this is very common as the river continues to erode land and the floods submerge large parts of char-land. Hence, houses in chars are made of tin-sheets and wooden pillars that can be quickly dismantled and carried over to be set up in a new place. Families migrate to either some other parts of the char or to nearby chars. However, the number of shiftings have dramatically increased for char-dwellers as the frequency of floods and erosion has become rampant and more violent. Char-dwellers now cannot predict their next shifting and often lose everything in sudden floods and erosion and are forced to migrate with no belongings to far-off areas.

I wanted to meet Abdul da's father, an 80-something year old man and the eldest in the char, to understand the history of the chars in that area and also the change in their migration patterns. As we reached the char and got down from our boat, I could visibly see how the Brahmaputra was actively devouring land to the point that the river was almost at the courtyard of Abdul da's house giving me the impression that probably it was almost time for Abdul da and his family to make another shifting.

On asking Abdul da's father about the history of the area, he instead started talking about the river,

> The river earlier was further to the south. It was narrow but very deep. Have you seen the river now? So wide and no depth at all and it is almost at the mouth of the Pahar. The Pahar cannot be eroded, so people just go and settle there but how many people can the Pahar even accommodate? The river has gotten very greedy, eating up more land and creating more chars on its way. All these places, including this char, were not chars earlier. But now us, Bengali Muslims, have no more land to go to. We either go to the Pahar or many have migrated to Guwahati or even as far away as Kerala, Andhra [Pradesh], Kashmir … Eh! These young people have gone everywhere. This is our history now.

The reference of the river in his recollection of the char-dwellers' history is important. In my later months, I will come to encounter how the river's activities, its mood, change of course, depth, width, volume, etc., will be recalled every time I ask charuas about the history of the chars or generally about their lives. A large chunk of the char-dwellers' history is a history of migration. From the time of them migrating from then East Bengal to the char-lands of Assam to present times, they migrate from the chars to the nearby stable ecologies like the Pahar or grazing grounds and finally to the urban areas, it is a continued story of generational migration. The river, its activities and changes have in fact played a big role in facilitating that history. If in colonial times, the river had enabled their movement to the chars and played a decisive role in their settling in these ecologies; in the post-colonial times, the river is forcing them to move out of the chars and migrate elsewhere. And it is to this second kind of migration that this article will turn its attention towards.

Most char-dwellers facing violent floods and rampant erosion than before are forced to migrate to the nearby government grazing lands or to the fringes of National Parks. Many lose documents and eventually fall out of voters lists and on being seen in government grazing lands or National Parks, the majoritarian state frames them as 'illegal Bangladeshis/immigrants'. They are then violently evicted and are forced to migrate to urban areas where they provide cheap labour for the continued reproduction of the urban economy. This article will argue that the majoritarian state uses the environment to continuously create landless and politically precarious minorities who then go on to provide cheap labour to run the urban economy.

And to do this, I first look at how the migration of Bengali Muslims from the chars to the nearby Baghbar Pahar has changed demographics and inflamed ethnic and religious tensions in the area and how the state's building of embankments has contributed to char-dwellers' violent migration memories. Next, I go on to talk about eviction politics and how the state using 'anti-immigrant' discourses is continually creating landless Bengali Muslims. Finally, I understand how the majoritarian state uses environmental factors in producing devalued Muslim bodies.

But then what are chars? Chars are river-islands that are extremely unstable in nature and are created because of the activities of tropical rivers—they can get submerged during heavy floods and then re-emerge, often after few years. In Assam, chars are mostly inhabited by Bengali Muslims whose ancestors were encouraged to migrate from then East Bengal to bring them under permanent cultivation and settlement. Bengali Muslim char-dwellers by introducing the cultivation of jute contributed immensely to the revenue collection of the British, as chars in Assam got connected to global jute markets. However, Bengali Muslim char-dwellers continue to face discrimination and violence by the post-colonial majoritarian state and Assamese society as they get framed as 'illegal immigrants, taking away land and destroying culture of Assamese people'. The 'anti-immigrant' Assam Movement of the 1980s along with the recently conducted NRC project of the state are products of such xenophobia and islamophobia.

The arguments in this article are drawn from my two-year long doctoral fieldwork in the chars of Baghbar revenue circle in Barpeta District of western Assam. Though I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork in several chars of Baghbar circle, my research was focused in Ramapara Pam char and Baghbar Hill and involved talking to Bengali Muslim char-dwellers, Assamese Hindu and Bengali Hindu char-dwellers along with government officers in various state departments.

Migration, Embankments and Ethno-religious Tensions: A Case of the Pahar

The Baghbar Hill or Pahar as it is widely known as stands out as a geographical form even from a distance. Standing massively tall among a sea of low-lying areas, the Pahar according to local people is supposed to be volcanic in nature, for at its highest point, the Pahar has a deep crater, that now acts as a big storage point of fresh water.

As recalled correctly by Abdul da's father, the Brahmaputra indeed was towards the south, closer to present-day Goalpara and this change of direction of the river is believed to be caused by the 1950 earthquake which had a magnitude of 8.9 in the Richter scale. The Pahar and its surrounding areas were largely inhabited by caste Hindus like Kalitas and tribals such as Bodos and Kacharis. Even within the surrounding areas of the Pahar, Bengali Muslims lived not as an entire village but as scattered families. It was only in the chars nearby such as Dolapathar, Sapuri and Moamari that Bengali Muslims largely resided. However, with growing floods, or as the char-dwellers say, during the 'over-flood' of 1970s, 1988, 2004 and 2015, more and more Bengali Muslim families who lost their land and houses to the river shifted to the Pahar. Most such families shifted from the chars to the Pahar a little before and during 1971. At present, the caste Hindu and tribal population are reduced to around 50–60 households and they all live together in one part of the Pahar, while the rest is now predominantly inhabited by Bengali Muslims. This has caused growing and continued ethno-religious tension which in the context of the present Hindutva regime in both India and Assam has only expanded.

Such violent, sudden and frequent migrations of char-dwellers have been contributed both by the river's characteristics and the state's rampant building of embankments in areas criss-crossed by the river and its tributaries.

The Brahmaputra's discharge per unit area along with its erosion rate is one of the highest in the world (Sarma & Acharjee, 2018; Saikia et al., 2019), leading to it carrying a high volume of sediment load. Besides, its riverbed had raised significantly after the 1950 earthquake. All these factors have contributed to the decreasing depth of the river and its increasing width. Since 1996, the mean width of the river has more than doubled (Sarma & Acharjee, 2018) indicating more destructive floods, erosion of banks, loss of lands and greater migration of communities living close to the riverbank. Sarma and Acharjee (2018) show that the increasing braiding pattern in rivers like the Brahmaputra is a result of excessive discharge combined with its irregular bed-load movement, meaning that the river is carrying more land/soil/vegetation than is estimated. The irregular bedload is a result of the high erosion rate which is accelerated due to the reduction in forest cover in the upstream of a river. The high discharge of the river with the given current increases the erosion rate.

Over the years, the char-dwellers' memories regarding flood and migration have changed due to the violent nature of the Brahmaputra which has only been aggravated by the rampant building of water-tight embankments in char areas.

Embankment and Violent Migration

The building of embankments in Assam was present during pre-colonial times too. During the Ahom rule, historians have noted how the need to protect agricultural fields from flooding led them to construct bunds/alis which were made of organic materials such as mud, tall grasses and were largely voluntarily constructed by the peasants themselves (Saikia, 2020). However, the British wanted to construct embankments through strict land-water separation. Hence, they were more

focused on building 'water-tight' permanent embankments. Such embankments prevented the silt from being deposited in the fields and instead increased the riverbed, leading to widening of the river and causing more frequent, unexpected and violent flooding experiences (Dewan, 2021, pp. 21–22).

The post-colonial state continued with the colonial practice of building water-tight, permanent embankments. The construction or even repair of an embankment is highly centralised. Thus, just like the colonial times, embankments in post-independent Assam, particularly in char-lands, are constructed without any real involvement of the local people. The Bahari to Baghbar embankment that was built in 1954–1959 and still stands today was a massive project that encompasses several char villages in both Baghbar and Chenga districts. However, char-dwellers informed me how the embankment was built by displacing people in several villages and in areas which they believed are not suitable for building embankments. In one of my group discussions with char-dwellers surrounding their experiences of floods, an older woman mentioned that the embankment has brought in more destruction than protection into their lives. She said,

> Earlier, the floods were not sudden. Now, all of a sudden, at night our homes are submerged—in an instant. The embankment has been built in such an area which has caused obstruction to the natural flow of the river and hence, it builds pressure on other parts of the river where it floods villages with a ferocity that we have not experienced before.

Such geomorphological knowledge of the char-dwellers along with their extensive memories of past floods are never used by the state in its designing and implementation of embankment projects. Thus, it is no surprise that the embankment was breached on several occasions. An official at the Guwahati office of the Water Resources Department (the department responsible for building bunds) claimed that at present, the embankment that protects 122 villages in three blocks, mostly containing char villages, is in serious threat of another breach. The bank erosion has only increased since last few years, threatening a huge area of about 22,561.85 hac of fertile agricultural land.

Despite this, the repair and celebration of embankments have not stopped. The local MLA of Baghbar announced how immediate measures to repair the Bahari-Baghbar embankment were approved with a funding of ₹2.3 crores. This repair work of embankments is leading to enormous spendings with no end in sight since almost every year the floods become violent, particularly in water dominant ecologies like char-land regions. Such violent floods quickly cause breaches in embankments and hence, they require more repair and ultimately further funding. This vicious cycle of construction and destruction is only helping the corrupt network of engineers, politicians and contractors, while char-dwellers suffer more and more violent floods and migrations.

Ethno-religious Tensions

The state's singular focus on centralised construction and repair of embankments in char-lands to 'control' the floods have led to greater destruction and violent

migrations for char-dwellers. The frequent migrations to interior areas of 'mainland' Assam have inflamed 'anti-Muslim' and 'anti-immigrant' hatred in Assam. This is clearly evident in the case of the Pahar. With increasing migration of Bengali Muslims from the nearby chars, the Pahar now has charua Muslims in majority and this demographic shift has strengthened the ethno-religious tensions between the Muslim and the non-Muslim minority population in the area. Though Baghbar has been otherwise celebrated by the locals as a space that has never seen any ethno-religious violence, the everyday, covert presence of tensions came out rather well in my fieldwork. For example, when the women from the Hindu suba (neighbourhood) would complain about lack of attention from Muslim ASHA workers or when caste Hindu Assamese men would admit not eating in Muslim owned shops in the market.

Such ethno-religious tensions have been aggravated by the right-wing state's use of 'preservation of satra land' as a trope to frame Bengali Muslims as 'invading immigrants' and 'saving the Assamese community and the Hindus'. Satras are Vaishnavite temples that were established by Vaishnavite religious scholars Sankardeva and Madhabdeva and their disciples in Assam. The right-wing BJP government while criticising the previous Congress governments of harbouring 'illegal immigrants' in Assam made the satras a site of proving this point, wherein the idea of freeing them from 'Bangladeshi' encroachers was an important highlighter of their poll manifesto. In July 2019, the Assam Government amended the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 to empower Deputy Commissioners in a district to engage in the eviction of 'illegal' encroachments of satra lands. And then, in 2020, the same right-wing government passed the Assam Heritage (Tangible) Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Maintenance Act that in the name of 'protection' and 'preservation' of heritage sites were right-wing statist tools to harass the minority by framing them as encroachers and ultimately to evict them.

Baghbar Pahar has an age-old Vaishnavite satra that the locals claim was established by Madhabdev himself. The satra has been shifted several times by the locals due to erosion and floods and in light of the current statist politics has found itself becoming a new anchorage point for forwarding the narratives of the caste Hindus in the area. 'We are here because of the satra. If we leave, they will completely destroy everything. We will leave behind no legacy, not even Gurujona's [Madhabdev's]. So, though we get no opportunity here regarding anything, we have decided to stay behind'. My key informant was asserting on behalf of everyone present. In 2020, when the right-wing state announced that around 160 satras and devalayas (Hindu shrines) in Assam would receive annual state funding of ₹2 lakhs, the satra in the Pahar was on top of that list. Both the Hindu state and the minority Hindu population in Baghbar are using each other for their own gains. While the latter gets protection, assurance, funding and visibility from the former, the state too is using Baghbar's minority Hindu population's history and their challenges to further its own agenda of 'anti-Muslim' and 'anti-immigrant' hatred in Assam.

This, however, has further complicated the relationship of the minority Hindu population with the Bengali Muslims who have been displaced due to flood and

erosion. In the next section, I look at the right-wing state's politics of eviction and how such politics has created freshly displaced landless Muslim bodies, preparing them for cheap labour provision to the urban economy and thoroughly devalued in the process.

Eviction and Devaluation of Muslim Bodies

Politics of Eviction

In January 2020, while on my way to the ghat to catch the ferry to the chars, I noticed a huge crowd gathered at the Pahar main chowk. As a few of them saw my car, they approached me and told me that the district administration had suddenly released a notification of eviction to all residents in the Pahar whose houses or other structures were built on 'khas' or government land. There were already signs of chaos and I had to assure them that the notification did not mean immediate eviction and they should approach the Circle Office in Mandia to clarify the matter and put up their arguments. Days later when I had visited one of my key informants in the Hindu suba of the Pahar, I brought up the issue of eviction notices and he chuckled. His reaction confused me and hence I could not help but ask if he knew why the administration had suddenly served notices to families who had lived on those lands for years. In reality, most lands in the Pahar belong to the government. In fact, the interior or upland areas of the Pahar all belong to the state's Forest Department. As my contact in the Forest Department of Barpeta noted, there was a time when Baghbar Pahar used to be home to many indigenous varieties of trees, birds, insects and animals. Tigers were also seen to be roaming around in the interior and thicker areas of the forests in the Pahar. With the incoming of the displaced char-dwellers and as parts of these forests were cleared, tigers and other animals along with many varieties of plants diminished. The Bengali Muslims have been living in the Pahar for years. Some parts of their lands are government/khas, some are in temporary ownership and a few pockets of land are 'miyadi patta' or on permanent individual ownership. Even households in the Hindu suba live on such mixed bag of ownership of lands. As people often must push back into the interior parts of the Pahar, some pockets of their land falling on 'khas' or government land are not uncommon. In fact, it becomes necessary. The land on which the house of my key informant in the Hindu suba stands is an example of that. 'Bhargabi, see here—my kitchen [which stood outside] had to be shifted along with my bathrooms. So, they now are on "khas" land. But my main house is still on miyadi patta land. This is the scenario everywhere here'. Thus, his chuckling on my question regarding eviction notices made me curious.

'In a way, we only alerted the administration'. I was shocked to this response of his. Is he not going to be affected too? After all, parts of his own household are on 'khas' land too.

> Over the past few years, we have seen increasing felling of trees. The Pahar is a rich source of valuable 'segun' trees and of big stones that have high commercial value. These people, they employ labourers and fell these trees and break the bigger stones

> and sell all these products in the market. They have no sense of environmental concern; all they know is the smell of money. Leave it to them, they will sell everything that this Pahar has and destroy it. So, we alerted the administration and hence, these notices. This is not for anything but to create fear and stop this 'gundagiri' (hooliganism). To stop this destruction and protect the environment. I heard a few families who were new and had taken shelter in the interior parts of the Pahar left the very next night of receiving the notices. Guess, our efforts were not all waste!

And he continued chuckling. What struck out for me was his repeated underlining that this harassment was needed to 'protect the environment', framing the Bengali Muslims as those that 'destroy the environment'. This is largely used by caste Hindu Assamese nationalists to promote 'anti-Muslim' and 'anti-immigrant' policies and sentiments. As most charua Bengali Muslims get displaced due to violent and frequent floods and erosion, they have no option but to migrate.

Most migrate to nearby grazing reserves or squat on the fringes of national parks out of compulsion. There, the majoritarian state (including the media) frames them as 'illegal Bangladeshis', 'poachers' who are environmental waste producers destroying wildlife and the environment and are violently evicted. In September 2021, the right-wing state in Assam carried out a massive and violent eviction drive in Gorukhuti grazing reserve wherein around 1,500 Bengali Muslims were evicted. The eviction drive led to the killing of two civilian Bengali Muslims who were protesting against the drive and became targets of brutal police firing. Such deaths are not mourned by the majoritarian state or society but are justified and in fact celebrated in the name of protecting the environment and Assamese culture and resources.

Such narratives become particularly interesting since the state has allowed an oil refinery to construct a massive golf course in the animal corridor of Kaziranga National Park, while poor tribals and migrant charua Bengali Muslims get violently evicted and killed (Borbora, 2017).

These evictions make the charua Bengali Muslims once again landless and homeless who are then forced to migrate to urban areas like Guwahati and provide cheap labour to run the urban capitalist economy. This landlessness that is systemically produced for the Bengali Muslim char-dweller at various stages by the majoritarian state leads to the creation of a devalued Muslim body.

Devaluation of Muslim Bodies

Devaluation of Bengali Muslims begins when the upper-caste Assamese Hindu dominant state renders them landless. As we saw, landlessness is actively engendered by the state. First, when Bengali Muslims in chars increasingly lose their lands due to violent and frequent floods and erosion, the state is complicit and actively enabling it by its rampant building and repairment of embankments that have only fastened that process. And second, when the displaced migrants squat or temporarily live in the nearby grazing or other government lands, the state unleashes on them violent eviction drives and makes them once again landless/homeless.

This devaluation of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers is supported by land laws and policies that contribute to making them landless and stripping them of any support from the state. Colonial land laws that governed the char areas and are still being followed by the post-colonial state continue making Bengali Muslims economically pauperised without they being able to reap any benefits from their land. One such law is the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation Act (BADA), 1825, which still guides the current char-land land laws in spirit.[2] BADA was meant to help the British solve land conflicts in the char areas when a new piece of land arose due to alluvion and when an earlier piece of land re-emerged back that was lost due to diluvion.

> The right to property is not affected only because that property has been submerged under water, and the owner is deemed to be in "constructive possession" of the land during the time of its submergence and can be claimed back when it reappears out of water.… For this, however, the owner must continue to pay rent for the diluviated land.… Thus, the key to establishing land rights in the court of law remained the payment of rent, even on diluviated land. (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014, p. 21)

It emerged in my fieldwork that while vast areas of lands that char-dwellers owned were physically unavailable to them for usage of any kind since they were submerged, the charuas continued paying revenue for such lands so that they could continue claiming their ownership over them. Meaning, while the state went on enjoying taxes from them, the Bengali Muslims in very tangible terms continued to be landless.

The discrimination comes out starkly when the state introduced a new Land Policy in 2019 that gave land security and rights to 'indigenous' landless cultivators, excluding Bengali Muslims who the state does not consider 'indigenous'. Even after living in Assam for decades, the Bengali Muslims are not considered indigenous by the majoritarian state and society alike. The state's Land Policy, 2019, that provides government land for ordinary cultivation in rural areas to 'indigenous' cultivators 'who have been rendered landless due to flood, erosion, earthquake and other natural calamities' (Provision 1.7 Land Policy, 2019, Revenue and Disaster Management Department, p. 3) will not be applicable to a community that is most impacted by it. Thus, the state while extracting revenue from Bengali Muslim char-dwellers still goes on rendering them landless by refusing to recognise their land-rights and woes caused by disasters.

This systemic state-induced landlessness of Bengali Muslims, be it through embankment politics, eviction politics or through racial land laws, is the beginning of devaluation of Bengali Muslim bodies. Devaluation happens when highly skilled landed Bengali Muslim cultivators are forcibly turned landless and are compelled to sell their labour far cheaper and in worse precarious conditions for the profitable running of the urban economy. David Harvey (2004) notes that devaluation of labour is intricately connected to the creation of surpluses for the capitalist economy. When the supply is far greater than what can be internally absorbed within an economic territorial market, then it automatically leads to devaluation, destruction or shifting of that surplus labour or capital to other geographies.

Mark Gould writes how the tactic of devaluing labour-power includes 'allowing illegal immigration into the United States. These illegals not only expand the pool of available labour but more importantly bring into the country workers who feel they must be subservient to capital, for fear of deportation' (1981, p. 148). The Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who by now are landless and are forced to move to the urban areas, accept their devaluation because of fear of citizenship litigations and no land to fall back on. Political and economic precarity feed into each other.

The devaluation of the poor migrant Bengali Muslim is in fact aggravated by his political precarity. And even here, the state uses environment to create a continuous bulk of 'doubtful citizens'. Most Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who after losing their lands to floods and erosion migrate to either nearby stable ecologies like the Pahar or government lands like grazing lands and reserved forests are immediately seen as newly arrived 'illegal immigrants'. They are then reported to the district administration or the Border Security Force (BSF) as 'suspicious'. They can then be turned into 'Doubtful voters (D-Voters)[3]' on a simple reference by the BSF, losing their basic right as a citizen—the right to vote.

The onus of proving citizenship introduces the poor, migrant Bengali Muslim to new legal and documentary regimes that only oppress him further. Many such families being landless cannot afford the costly legal procedures and enter into new cycles of debt or lose their citizenship. However, others who do have some land lose them systematically to be turned into landless labourers at the end. Either way, the state creates extremely politically precarious landless labourers who have no option but to provide cheap labour to the urban economy. These landless and politically precarious Bengali Muslims are then forced to provide labour at a rate much cheaper than the 'indigenous' labourers in the urban areas by working as informal labourers (Dasgupta, 2001).

Besides, the NRC has introduced newer regimes of political and economic precarity for the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who are already devalued. In my many interviews with informal casual workers in Guwahati, it became clear that the NRC introduced new cycles of indebtedness for them. Many were called for several hearings to prove their citizenship again and again at far-away places and had to borrow money each time. During my fieldwork in Guwahati with charua Bengali Muslim migrants who had been working as informal workers in the city, their economic and political precarity accentuated by the NRC emerged repeatedly. A couple who worked in a chicken shop in Guwahati said,

> My name is there, but my wife's name is missing. She was declared 'D-Voter' when because of floods we lost all our land and had to shift to Guwahati and apparently someone sent a notice to our village asking us to be present in front of a Tribunal but when we did not even get that news, how could we go? We only knew about she being declared a 'D-Voter' much later. Now besides fighting these legal battles, we have been called for hearings more than five times in remote places in upper-Assam. I had to book bus tickets, then a place to stay for more than five times now. On those days, we lose out on our income and this shop is rented, so even my owner loses out money. I have already borrowed more than a lakh from him till now just for these expenditures. Now the government is saying that 'D-Voters' will not even be included [in the NRC]? Why

> did we then spend so much? We have new loans and on top of that, we continue to live in fear of the police, what if they pick her up? I think this is our life now.

Suhas Chakma, a human rights activist, in an interview to *HuffPost* highlighted that the NRC is a mechanism to create 'second class citizens' ready to be exploited for cheap labour (Dasgupta, 2019).

The new cycles of debt that the citizenship project introduced in their lives, made them work twice harder for lower wages, ate up their savings and introduced them to far worse working conditions. In the next section, I will argue how this process of devaluation is caused by the state using environmental factors.

State-environment 'Collaboration'

Callon and Law (1995, 1997) taking forward the arguments from Actor-Network Theory (ANT) propose a critical reflection of human–nonhuman binary creation, something in the likes of Bruno Latour (1993) and Anna Tsing (2021). They introduce the concept of 'hybrid collectif' which understands that agency is reflected in networks that comprise both human and nonhuman elements. 'Hybrid collectifs' are complex and recognise the heterogenous pieces that are part of it and how when they come together as a structure, agency is subsequently performed.

In my many conversations with char-dwellers, the Brahmaputra is always referred to as a person, which also comes out strongly in their folksongs, proverbs, etc.

> Oh my Brahmaputra River,
> You have no mercy towards people
> You tore apart nations and villages
> And also our sandy chars

Thus, the nonhuman river along with its several components such as fish, sediments, plants and mud are already imagined as 'actors', as those that come together in a web of relations possessing the capability to tear apart nations, villages and chars. The state's embankment politics along with its silence regarding large-scale mining and deforestation in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra by large contractors and companies show how it is allowing poor and marginalised communities to continue to suffer, migrate and become continually landless and politically precarious. The river in turn helps the state when it erases documents (many lose them to floods and continuous migration), their sense of historicity to a place, the building of a sense of community, etc., by forcing them to continually migrate.

As said by De Leon, the state can draw on the 'agency of animals and other nonhumans to do its dirty work while simultaneously absolving itself of any blame connected to migrant injuries or loss of life' (2015, p. 43). This is seen when it allows violent floods to recur or in its inaction to control erosion in char areas, turning Bengali Muslims landless while putting any flood-related deaths, etc., on 'natural' factors. Same goes for deaths caused to squatters or villagers who live around national parks by wild elephants, tigers or rhinos, forcing people

to give up their lands and migrate. The increasing man-animal conflicts in Assam are largely due to the expansion of boundaries of national parks without consulting the locals, while the state continues to allow oil and construction companies to do development projects in the animal corridor areas.

Though accepting the environment's agency and collaboration in accentuating the landlessness and homelessness of Bengali Muslims, one must not decentre the primary role that the state plays in their devaluation. The over-indulgence on the agency of 'natural' and 'non-human' factors will contribute to the narrative of exhuming the state of any responsibility. Thus, it is ultimately the state that uses environment and its many components (be it in their embankment politics or its eviction politics) and turns the Bengali Muslims landless and politically precarious. These migrants then are left with no option but provide cheap labour to urban economies. Thus, the environmental factors that the state uses or let's say, collaborates with, be it floods, the river, the animals, national parks, grazing lands, etc., consequently become political and are not simply 'natural'.

Conclusion

As I wrap up my discussion with Abdul da's father, he kept repeating how things have changed—'When we were young, the Kalita Hindus would come, exchange pleasantries and sit around and share stories. But now, things have changed'. The relations between communities can no longer remain the same since with increasing floods and rapid erosion, there is increasing migration and settlement of people in lands that become accessible to migrating communities in whichever way possible. And this is bound to change relations, but the problem arises when the majoritarian state deliberately complicates such politics and makes the opposition between communities stark, rigid and unitary.

There is also a refusal of the state to acknowledge that most Bengali Muslim migrants are victims of an ecological crisis than being 'illegal immigrants'. This is reflected in the state's lack of data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the lack of updated geomorphological data on the river that is actively contributing to char-dwellers' rapid landlessness and homelessness. 'Unfortunately, maps or images of the Brahmaputra immediately after 1950 are not available to confirm the widening of the channel spatially, and the next survey of the river was carried out only during 1963–1975 after a gap of 13–25 years'. (Sarma & Acharjee, 2018, p. 9). Thus, though the state focuses on the 'incessant' flow of poor Bengali Muslim 'other' by projecting them as 'illegal Bangladeshis', they refuse to acknowledge or reveal what is leading to this incessant flow. It is a systemic refusal politics which helps the state to deny any land claims by char-dwellers, make them politically precarious and turn them into landless labourers. The IDPs, in fact, are not even recognised as 'environmental migrants' by the state in India and there exists no governmental policy to address the issues faced by them.

This article then charted how a historically migratory community has been systematically turned landless, deskilled and made politically precarious by the majoritarian state in collaboration with environmental factors. The political and

economic precarity that gets accompanied because of landlessness is actively facilitated by the state. Such devalued labour continues to then increase the benefits of an urban economy.

I am remembering my first conversation with Abdul da's father when he recalled how young people in chars are 'going everywhere now'; I could sense a feeling of frustration, of loss. And I understand this sense of frustration now—this is a new history of migration for the char-dwellers, wherein migration does not bring back memories of new land, cultivation, river-songs and collective fishing and trade but memories of disenfranchisement, debts, eviction, humiliation, and frustration, lots of frustration. And it is expressed not simply at the discriminatory state but equally on the 'greedy river'.

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Notes

1. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is literally a register of citizens of India. Though the constitution suggests that the NRC be conducted for the whole country, the exercise was carried out only in Assam along with the 1951 Census. As part of the Assam Accord that was signed between the leaders of the 'anti-immigrant' Assam Movement (1979–1985) and the Indian government, one of the mandates was to upgrade the 1951 NRC in Assam. In 2015, as part of a Supreme Court ruling that mandated the immediate beginning of the updation exercise under its supervision, the NRC updation exercise started. Finally, in 2019, the final NRC was published, from which 1.9 million people have been left out, most of whom were Bengali Hindus and Muslims.
2. There is a huge vacuum when it comes to addressing the specific situations of land in char areas in Assam. In 1897 though BADA was enacted in Assam, districts where char-lands existed in large numbers were kept out of this regulation. In 1971, the Assam Temporarily Settled Areas Tenancy Act was passed but it does not say much about chars. Revenue officers in Circle Office of Mandia were quick to add though that BADA in spirit largely guides when resolving land issues in char areas.
3. Doubtful Voter or D-Voter is a category in Assam who are disenfranchised by the state on account of their lack of proper citizenship credentials. D-Voters are required to prove their citizenship in front of Foreigner Tribunals which were set up as part of the Foreigner Tribunals Order 1964.

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