

# **Songs of life from fluvial worlds: A river, the state and Bengali Muslim char-dwellers in Assam, India**

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<sup>1</sup> The term Bengali Muslims is a generic term to refer to the community. However, there remains contentions regarding its use. Many within the community instead prefer to be called, 'Miya Muslims', 'Bengali speaking Assamese Muslims', etc. but no consensus exist in the usage of these terminologies too. Besides, I recognize the derogatory usage of the term 'Miya' by the majoritarian society. Taking cognizance of these factors, I have decided to use Bengali Muslims to refer to the community. The issue of naming has also been extensively dealt with in one of the chapters in the thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation looks at state-society relations of marginalized people living in liminal and (now) vulnerable ecologies. It is set in the fluvial and unstable landscapes called Chars or river-islands in Assam, a northeastern state in India. Using ethnography and archival sources, it looks at the historically marginalized Bengali Muslims living in these ‘chars’ and their interactions and experiences with a post-colonial majoritarian state, not just in the background of ‘*jatiyotabaad*’ or Assamese nationalism but also the rise and consolidation of a Hindutva regime both in India and Assam.

This narrative of state-society relations between Bengali Muslim char-dwellers and a majoritarian state is complicated by the fluvial and unpredictable ecological processes and Assam being a borderland state, sharing boundaries with other nations. Thus, as much as this dissertation understands char-dwellers’ relationship with the state through their everyday interactions, it also evaluates this relationship through events such as the ‘anti-immigration’<sup>2</sup> Assam Movement or the more recent citizenship project called the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

This dissertation thus, in its quest to understand state-society relations, has been informed by and makes commentary on concepts such as violence, fluvial environment, immigration, citizenship, bureaucracy, affect, among others. Using the works of Baruch Spinoza (2002), Gilles Deleuze (1994, 1997) Pierre-Félix Guattari (1987 co-authored with Deleuze) and Sara Ahmed (2014), this dissertation finds affect to be rhizomatic which is a principle guiding both this dissertation’s methodology and as it will be established, the state-society relations in this context. Thus, while

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<sup>2</sup> The use of single quotation marks for terms such as ‘illegal’, ‘immigrant’, ‘native’, ‘indigenous’, ‘anti-immigrant/anti-immigration’ is to recognize the historical contention and value baggage that surround these terms in the context of Assam. I use such terms under single quotations throughout the thesis.



it evaluates the violence that is characterized of this state-society relationship, the thesis will show that it is marked by beyond violence.

What are the varied dimensions, the other elements that characterize this state-society relation in a borderland state that historically has grappled with ‘anti-immigration’ sentiments but now also faces a fascist Hindu regime, while a river erodes and floods even more violently?

That is the story that this dissertation aims to understand.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is October 2019 and after a break of almost three months due to destruction of roads and unavailability of road transport following monsoons, I visit the chars again. By now, the people recognize me and as I take the ferry to get to the river-island, on the way, I see many people gathering in a distant char and a lot of commotion ensuing. As I try to figure out what is happening, my fellow passengers in the ferry laugh and some young boys shout, “Fight! Fight!” I am at a loss. This is when the man sitting opposite me remarks, “*Baideo*<sup>3</sup>, an old char that was submerged for years has arisen, so people will now fight determining boundaries of their personal plot. This will go on for days.” Following monsoon, once winter sets in, when the river’s water decreases, river-islands that were submerged earlier for years re-emerge. Most of the land in such chars are legal, permanent individually owned (*miyadi patta*), such that the owners continue paying revenue to the state even after the land remains under-water for years in the hope and knowledge of times that I witnessed.

This remarkable activity of the river brings in changed social relations among char-dwellers – conflict and in-fighting in their claim of land ownership (who owns where and how much), often among kin. It also contributes to the larger narrative of char-dwellers being ‘illegal immigrants’. According to the law, when submerged land is thrown up by the river, it is mandated that char-dwellers wait for state officials to affirm and demarcate their land from others. However, char-dwellers often migrate and settle down in their claimed land or start cultivating crops without

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<sup>3</sup> Assamese word for Madam or even sister

waiting for the state officials. They are aware that officials hardly visit the peripheral char areas. But the presence of “never-before-seen Muslim” men and women in islands that geographically sit close to the Bangladesh border raises suspicion and fear for the xenophobic, Islamophobic state and contributes to the discourse of ‘illegal immigration’ in Assam. Thus, geographical inter-play of rivers and land are intricately connected to questions of citizenship and immigration in Assam. This research is a story to capture such geo-political relationships – it is a story about a river in the borderlands, a marginalized community that live on the islands that get formed on the river, their histories, tales of violence, of discrimination, citizenship and a majoritarian state. The ethnographic moment illustrated above shows one how the politics of land-water and a majoritarian state are woven into the everyday lives of the marginalized migratory community of Bengali Muslims in the chars. But then what are chars? How are they formed? Who are Bengali Muslims occupying these chars and why are they marginalized? This introductory chapter is to flesh out the context of chars, Bengali Muslims and their relationship with the state in Assam, a borderland state of India.

Chars are river-islands that are formed due to the geomorphological activities of a tropical river. The Brahmaputra’s discharge per unit area along with its erosion rate is one of the highest in the world (Sarma and Acharjee 2018; Saikia et al 2019) leading to it carrying high volume of sediment load. “These sediments settle down and quickly form islands – chars – as the flow of the current drops in the post monsoon months.” (Saikia 2020: 45). The high sediment deposition has also led to the decreasing depth of the river along with the increase in its braiding patterns. The sediment load of the Brahmaputra was also increased by growing deforestation in the river’s upstream along

with Assam being in a tectonically volatile zone. Being in Zone V<sup>4</sup>, Assam has already seen two massive earthquakes in 1897 and 1950 measuring 7.1 and 8.6 magnitudes in the Richter scale. The two earthquakes increased Brahmaputra's and its tributaries' beds considerably, making the river shallow and widening it in the process. This has caused further erosion of its banks, adding more sediment to the river, and creating newer chars. The earthquakes also led to the change of course of the river considerably, once again creating chars in the process. In fact, the char I was working on was said to have been created after the 1950 earthquake when the Brahmaputra changed course and cut off numerous villages from the banks, making them standalone islands.

But these chars are very unstable. "During heavy monsoons, continuous rainfall may even completely inundate the low-lying chars." (Lahiri-Dutt 2014: 27). These sub-merged chars can then again re-emerge after floods or often after several years, as was seen in the introductory illustration of the chapter. The temporariness of the chars is also contributed by their continuous erosion, particularly in the time before the arrival of monsoons and during monsoons too. In fact, for the char-dwellers in my field, more than floods, it was continuous uncontrolled erosion that was more of a menace, forcing them to migrate more often than before. The chars in the past have gained some permanency through the growth of reeds and tall grasses. But they are extremely fertile since after almost every flood there is a generous deposition of silt. However, other parts of the islands are more sandy than clayey or silt-laden. The National Productivity Council has classified chars based on years of existence – more than 10 years as 'permanent chars', more than 5 but less than 10 years as 'semi-permanent chars' and less than 5 years as 'temporary chars'. (Kuddus 2012: 5).

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<sup>4</sup> India is divided into four earthquake prone zone – Zone II, III, IV and V with Zone V being the highest earthquake prone zone. (National Center for Seismology, India).



*Image a. The fluvial chars<sup>5</sup>*

Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013) have termed char ecologies as ‘liminal’ considering one cannot clearly determine whether these fluid, fluvial landscapes are part of water (when submerged) or land (when emerged). This liminal nature of chars confuses colonial tight-fixed categorization of land-water binaries and instead allows one to acknowledge hybrid, fluvial ecologies or ecologies in flux where land and water are in close contact, they blend and mix with much greater intensity and intimacy. The fertility of the chars allows the cultivation of a variety of crops particularly paddy along with a range of vegetables such as potato, tomatoes, chillies, etc. During winter, the chars are filled with mustard cultivation. In pre-colonial times, the chars in Assam were used by caste Hindu Assamese<sup>6</sup> for temporary cultivation and for grazing the cattle. In fact, Nepali herders frequented the chars for this purpose. In the chars of Eastern Assam, communities such as the Misings or riverine communities such as the Kaibartas inhabited the more stable chars and lived in ‘*chang ghars*’ or houses on stilts to protect themselves from rising water, particularly during

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<sup>5</sup> All images used are courtesy of the author, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> The term caste Hindu Assamese is used in the thesis to refer to the dominant upper-caste Hindu Assamese

floods or monsoons. (Kumar and Das 2019). Chars were also places where gold-washing communities temporarily lived, and driftwood collectors frequented them to collect driftwood. Both in colonial and pre-colonial times, such tasks were taxed by the state. (Saikia 2020; Goswami 2010). It was only with the arrival of the Bengali Muslim peasants from nearby East Bengal whose migration was encouraged by the colonial state, that chars, particularly in Western Assam, became areas of permanent cultivation and with time, permanent habitation. The migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal changed Assam's politics forever as it aggravated 'nativist' and later 'anti-immigrant' sentiments, repercussions of which still surround Assam's politics. The current citizenship project, National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a by-product of it.

## 1. HISTORY OF THE CHARS: Rise of Assamese nationalism and 'anti-immigrant' sentiment

### *1.1 Colonial times*

The British annexed nearly the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam after defeating the Burmese in 1826 and signed the Treaty of Yandabo. Parts of present-day Assam such as Goalpara region was already under the British rule since 1765. The British termed the chars as 'wastelands' considering they were temporarily cultivated and inhabited. The chars, as shown in the case of Nepali grazers or tribal communities such as Misings, were used collectively, including cultivation or fishing, such that a system of privately owned landholdings did not exist. The term 'wastelands' were hence used by the British to capture the lack of economic productivity from the chars that were characteristic of temporary cultivation and collective ownership. Besides, the British land revenue and land use system was guided by Locke's binary constructs of 'state of nature' and 'state of civilization' which were then overlapped with concepts such as 'wasteland/fallow land' and

‘settled cultivation’ accordingly. (Chakraborty 2012; Hilaly 2016) Thus, for the British, the conversion of the chars from ‘wastelands’ to permanently cultivated and settled lands was not just a mere economic project but also a cultural or moral project of spreading civilization in the ‘savage lands’.

The British, thus, encouraged the migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from nearby East Bengal who were familiar with riverine ecologies and were believed to be equipped with superior cultivation techniques. This, along with the fact that the neighboring districts in Goalpara and East Bengal were densely populated with peasants on the brink of revolting against the oppressive land taxation systems, prompted the British to channel this population to the sparsely populated Assam. Most were encouraged to settle down in chars and bring them under permanent cultivation. In 1898, the Assistant Director of Assam Land Records and Agriculture department, F J Monahan gave a detailed report on the prospect of jute cultivation in the Valley. The migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal was also encouraged to bring the char-lands under jute cultivation, jute being a major cash crop. Along with char-lands, large section of grazing reserves, forest and woodlands were opened up for agricultural use. From 1903 to 1919, jute production grew 3.6 times and by the second World War, Assam was the third largest producer of jute in India. (Das and Saikia 2011: 76-77).

Though migration of East Bengali Muslim peasants had started since 1905-06, after 1911, the number of migrants significantly increased. The Census Report of 1921 noted how East Bengali migrants, particularly from the districts of Mymensingh, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri were increasingly settling in Assam’s districts, particularly the ‘wastelands’, such that the numbers went up to 141,000 in Goalpara and 117,000 in other districts respectively. (Boruah 1980: 53). Besides the pressure on land in East Bengal, this rush in migration was also encouraged by the colonial policy

of partitioning of Bengal in 1905, such that Assam was made part of East Bengal (15 districts) with Dacca (present-day Dhaka) as its capital with the majority population being Muslims. This made migration easier. Thus, between 1901-02 and 1947-48, though the total cropped area under cultivation increased from 2.40 million acres to 4.79 million acres (Guha 1977), the population of East Bengali Muslim farm settlers had also increased to one and half million till 1951. (Goswami 1994). A land market and economy had come up and was thriving that eased the settlement of East Bengali Muslim peasants, particularly in the chars.

“Immigration had led to an all-round prosperity in Barpeta area. Many Assamese farmers had turned into land speculators. They sold off their lands to immigrants at a good price, then they cleared new plots (Pam) on waste-lands and sold them again. The immigrants were financed by their own headmen (matbor) as well as Marwari and Assamese (Borpetia) moneylenders. Even the hati (indigenous cooperative bank) funds of Barpeta were involved in this financing to a small extent.” (Guha 1977: 206).

This network of caste Hindu Assamese land speculators, Marwari moneylenders and East Bengali headmen (*mattobars*) was to a large extent an intricate network of exploitation for the poor East Bengali Muslim peasants who migrated to escape the oppressive taxation regimes in East Bengal. The monopoly of this network was difficult to break as they continued enjoying profits from the exploitative colonial policies that were strongly put in place.

Thus, though at first the caste Hindu Assamese welcomed the arrival of Bengali Muslim peasants into Assam through whom they were earning huge profits as well as gaining access to cheap labor in a province that was labor deprived; over time, with more and more Bengali Muslim peasants



entering and settling (now often beyond chars), they started fearing losing economic and political majority along with losing their culture. This led to the caste Hindu Assamese educated leadership demanding protection of the ‘natives’ interests – their lands, language and culture. In 1920, the British government introduced the ‘Line System’, beginning at first in Nowgong (Nagaon presently) district. “Revenue officials would draw lines on the map within which immigrants have to restrict their economic activities.” (Das and Saikia 2011: 77). The ‘immigrant’ villages were kept far away from the ‘native’ villages and no ‘immigrant’ could buy land or settle in the ‘native’ villages as demarcated by the system. The ‘natives’ on the other hand could not sublet their land to the ‘immigrants’ or employ ‘immigrant’ laborers to work in their fields. “Each immigrant family would be granted a maximum of 16 bighas or 5.33 acres.” (Das and Saikia 2011: 77).

The Line System created new binary constructs, discourses and terminologies such as ‘immigrant’/ ‘native’ for the people in Assam, repercussions of which continue to dominate even till date. So, while such discourses of discrimination were put in place and thoroughly exploited by the caste Hindu Assamese leadership, on ground buying, selling and sub-letting of lands continued. The network of caste Hindu Assamese land speculators, Marwari moneylenders and landed, politically influential Bengali Muslim ‘*mattobars*’ continued selling off lands at exorbitant rates to the newly arriving peasants by completely disregarding the system. These peasants often took loans from the Marwari traders who lent them at a very high interest rate. Many Assamese caste Hindu farmers were becoming rentiers and employed ‘immigrant’ tenants who had to pay higher rents than ‘natives’. Over time, the landed ‘*mattobars*’ brought in more poor, landless Bengali Muslim migrants to work in their fields or in the Assamese farmers’ fields and over time, many stayed back. These peasants did not own any land, including homestead land. (Das and Saikia 2011: 78). It was clear that the Line System had failed in practice but had successfully sown discourses of

‘us’ and ‘them’ while the caste Hindu Assamese, Marwari traders and landed Bengali Muslims were economically profiteering at the expense of the poor Bengali Muslim peasant. These peasants had not only become landless laborers, but had no savings, paid higher rents and even higher rates of interest. What they did gain was the hatred of the educated caste Hindu Assamese political class and overtime the ‘native’<sup>7</sup> Assamese, who saw them as ‘land hungry’ and as exploitative ‘outsiders’.

In 1937 when a Line System Committee was formed to review the workings of the system and decide on its retention or removal, caste Hindu Assamese leadership (including the Congress) strongly advocated for its retention. The caste Hindu Assamese leadership projected themselves as ‘protector’ of the ‘weaker’ groups, speaking for tribal groups such as Kacharis and Lalungs and also the women. (Pegu 2004). Assamese ‘native’ women were reported to be harassed or raped by ‘immigrant’ Muslim men. They thus, called for continuation of strict segregation through the Line System. “...the Assamese intelligentsia asked for retention of the Line System as means of guaranteeing land for the future generation.” (Pegu 2004: 590). This created strong ripples in Assam’s politics, as a section of Muslim leaders of the Muslim League, led by Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhashani, strongly advocated for the removal of the Line System and opening of more ‘wastelands’ and grazing reserves for the poor, landless Bengali Muslim peasant who was escaping land scarcity, population density and an oppressive taxation system in East Bengal. Caste Hindu Assamese leaders such as Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya saw the underdevelopment of Assam as a result of East Bengali Muslim peasants’ rapid migration and settlement. (Das and Saikia 2011: 77). These leaders instead wanted that settlement of ‘wastelands’ be prioritized for the “children

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<sup>7</sup> To refer here to the tribal communities such as Misings, Mikirs, Koch, Rajbangshis, Bodos, Dewris, etc. along with lower caste Assamese Hindus such as Kewats, Kaibartas, etc.

of the soil.” (Kachari et al 1938: 20). The system, thus, not just created the figure of the ‘immigrant Assamese’ (Pegu 2004) but also communalized Assam’s politics wherein the ‘land hungry immigrant’ was imagined as the Bengali Muslim peasant from East Bengal.

Sir Syed Mohammad Sadullah of the Muslim League who had formed five governments in the Assam Province between 1937 and 1946, launched the ‘Grow More Food’ campaign and encouraged the migration of poor, landless Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal to bring more land under cultivation and increase production. They were then settled in chars and government grazing reserves. The Congress under the leadership of caste Hindu Assamese leaders such as Gopinath Bordoloi saw this as a plan to bring more Muslims and make Assam a Muslim majority state such that the League could then propose that Assam be made part of East Pakistan as talks of two-nation and Partition had already filled the air. Just months before India’s independence, the February 1946 Assembly elections was a tensed one as both the League and Congress fought elections solely on religious and ‘immigration’ issues. The Congress had won all the general seats (League had won all seats reserved for Muslims) and formed the provincial government. Thus, as promised, the government ordered evictions of what it called ‘illegal encroachers’ from ‘wastelands’ and government grazing reserves. After the evictions, the League under Bhashani instigated many to build their houses again and made a furious appeal to stop evictions of Bengali Muslims – “The landless and evicted persons be advised to spread out and cultivate all surplus cultivable Government wasteland to produce food crop, to save themselves and thousands of others from miseries of the famine, starvation and death.” (Bhashani in Bhuyan et al 2008: 279).

As a result of the meticulous politics of Gopinath Bordoloi, Assam finally was kept in India with only its district Sylhet, being made part of East Pakistan following a referendum. But the removal

of Sylhet from Assam created a huge issue of migration of Bengali Hindus who were fleeing communal violence in East Pakistan. Bengali Hindus were in fact the first against whom Assamese nationalism, as conceptualized by the educated caste Hindu Assamese men, developed and spread. As opposed to Bengali Muslims, the migration of Bengali Hindus into Assam, following the Bengal Partition in 1905 and Assam being made part of East Bengal province, immediately threatened the 'native' caste Hindu Assamese. Educated Bengali Hindus who had knowledge of the English letter were preferred when recruiting for colonial administrative posts as opposed to the 'native' Assamese. This irked the newly educated caste Hindu Assamese men. Many of them, ironically, had started discussions surrounding promotion and preservation of Assamese language and culture in Calcutta, where the coffee houses and messes provided the space for such discussions to develop. In fact, many ironically were inspired by the Bengal Renaissance. Caste Hindu Assamese men formed organizations such as 'Axomiya Bhakha Unnati Sadhini Sabha' (Assamese Language Development Society) in 1888 and started its magazine '*Jonaki*' in 1889. Such efforts increasingly contributed to the purification and standardization of Assamese language wherein sanskritized words were underlined and incorporated and tribal, vernacular or 'impure' words were removed. (Sengupta 2016; Sharma 2011). These efforts which created both a leadership and discourse for Assamese nationalism, should also be seen in the light of imposition of Bengali as a court language in Assam in 1836. Such colonial politics ensured that language would continue to form the backbone of Assamese nationalism, contributing to violent conflicts and xenophobia in the state.

## *1.2 Post-independence times*

The seeds of hatred and violence against linguistic and religious minorities that were sown during the colonial times continued to flourish post-independence with the caste Hindu Assamese dominating the state institutions – from the government, judiciary to the media. Language became a big bone of contention for the Assamese nationalists against the linguistic minorities. Post-independence, it played a major role in aggravating xenophobia after the Indian state decided to form separate states based on majority language. Major lobbying for Assamese as an official language in Assam started from the 1950s and in 1960, the then Chief Minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha proposed a bill for Assamese to be declared as the official language in Assam. This sparked strong reactions from the linguistic minorities – including tribal communities from present-day Manipur and Meghalaya who were still part of Assam then. But the strongest protest came from the Bengali Hindus, particularly in the Barak Valley in Assam where they were in majority. Such sentiments met with violent attacks from the majoritarian Assamese such that on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1960, Bengali Hindus were specifically targeted and killed in Kamrup district's (now Baksa) Goreswar. This Language Movement (Bhakha Andolan) also came to be infamously known as the 'Bongal Kheda Andolan' (Out with the Bengalis Movement).

However, the 'anti-immigrant' Assam Movement that started in the 1970s was what was again that brought back the focus of hatred towards the Bengali Muslims and particularly towards those living in char areas. The Assam Movement that was led by organizations such as Asam Sahitya Sabha and All Assam Students' Union (AASU), both doyens of caste Hindu Assamese men, was triggered by a bye-election in Mangaldai constituency in Assam in 1979. During this period, the Election Commission while reviewing the voters lists declared that the electoral rolls showed large number of 'non-citizens' which led to the immediate outburst of protests led by AASU who

demanding that all 'foreigners' names be immediately removed before the bye-election. This trickled down and led to the start of a six year long mass movement. Though the movement encompassed issues such as economic neglect and exploitation by the Central Government and 'mainland' India, and the protests were against any 'outsider' who were not 'native' to Assam - starting from Bengalis to Marwaris, Biharis, etc., over the course of the movement, the 'immigrant' emerged to be the Bengali Muslim who was often imagined to be the 'illegal Bangladeshi'. This 'immigrant' was imagined as the one who was taking away land and economic opportunities from the 'native' Assamese.

Being led by upper-caste Assamese Hindus, the movement was chauvinistic in nature, with many tribal communities such as Bodos refraining from active participation in it. (Garg 2018). But it was particularly violent towards the linguistic and religious minorities, with hundreds of Bengali Muslims being killed by an 'indigenous' Assamese mob in broad daylight at Nellie in February 1983. Those being massacred included women and children too. During the movement, left intellectuals such as Dr. Hiren Gohain and Dr. Amalendu Guha who vociferously criticized the chauvinistic, communal and violent movement received threats from participants of the movement. Sections within the movement started demanding secession from India to escape from exploitation. "What more likely in the near future is a communal holocaust leading to the further dismemberment of Assam, presided over by the Centre in the name of national unity." (Gohain 1980: 2078). Gohain (1980) and Guha (1979) note how while the upper-caste, middle class Assamese Hindu leadership continued sending their own children outside Assam for higher education, poor lower caste Assamese Hindus or other religious and linguistic minorities suffered with educational institutes being called to shut down and government employees being asked to

boycott work. Char-lands being already imagined as havens of ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ were attacked too. In February 1983, around 190 Bengali Muslims were killed at Chawolkhua Chapori.<sup>8</sup>

The Assam Movement finally concluded in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord between the leaders of the movement and the Indian government. The Accord guaranteed socio-cultural, linguistic, economic and political protection, prioritization and preservation for the ‘indigenous’ Assamese. Another major demand of the movement that was agreed on as part of the Accord was the updation of the 1951 NRC. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is quite literally a list of all citizens of India residing in Assam. The NRC in Assam was first conducted in 1951 but the 1951 NRC was faulty because of the conditions under which it was created. Unlike an application-based process, it was collated through census slips, which was a door-to-door exercise. However, several Bengali Muslims who had fled Assam after the 1950 communal riots and later returned were not included while Bengali Muslims in remote char areas were not covered as many officers had no transport facilities etc. to reach them. The 1951 NRC was an important legacy document during the updation of the NRC process that began in 2015.

The 2015 NRC was an updation of the 1951 NRC and for people to be a part of it, they had to show firstly, a legacy document, meaning either they or any of their ancestors<sup>9</sup> were born or had migrated to India on or before 24 March 1971 and secondly, a linkage document, showing how they were connected to this ancestor. It is no surprise then that many religious and linguistic minorities have been left out of the current NRC and now stand at the cusp of being stateless.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information see <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/06/world/around-the-world-190-killed-in-assam-police-official-says.html#:~:text=Unofficial%20estimates%20put%20the%20death,villages%20on%20the%20island%20Feb.>

<sup>9</sup> paternal/maternal father or grandfather and the like

Many Bengali Muslims, particularly in the chars, who have been declared a ‘Doubtful Voter’ (DV) along with their descendants could not make it to the citizenship register as well.

The concept of DV stems from Assamese nationalism’s xenophobic and Islamophobic history. People’s citizenship could be called into question by both the Border Police forces and the Election Commission officials. Often while reviewing and verifying electoral rolls on ground, if a voter is found missing or his/her name appears in more than one constituency, Election Commission officials often put a ‘D’ in front of such names and they are barred from voting. They then must prove their citizenship in Foreigner Tribunals. Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who are generally shifting a lot are bound to be victims of this. My participants would often complain that when char-dwellers migrate to a new village, many being illiterate re-register themselves as voters of that village too, without removing their names from the previous constituency. While verifying voters lists, if Election Commission officials find such names, they quickly presume them to be ‘illegal immigrants’ and make them a ‘DV’. Many old women char-dwellers are DVs. Often these poor Bengali Muslim families spend all their land and savings in the judicial systems trying to prove their citizenship. Many DVs are declared foreigners by Tribunal judges if they fail to appear during the court hearings. Char-dwellers have complained that court notices are handled very carelessly such that many even do not receive them ever – officers or Border Police forces often are found sticking notices in public places, including tea shops which never find their way to the intended people. During the NRC exercise, stories about Tribunal judges being offered incentives such as promotions etc. if they successfully declared more Bengali Muslim ‘foreigners’ also came to



light<sup>10</sup>. Such DVs and ‘foreigners’ are then kept in detention camps housed inside prisons and in extremely poor condition.

Following the Assam Movement, the DVs, particularly the religious and linguistic minorities, were tried to be protected by the Central Government by bringing in the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) or [IM(DT)] Act in 1983. The IM(DT) Act puts the onus of proof of citizenship or non-citizenship on the accuser instead of the accused. In 2005, following a Public Interest Litigation, the Supreme Court struck down the IM(DT) Act and brought Assam in parance with the Foreigner’s Act 1946, wherein the onus of proof now was on the accused. This has led to a lot of hardship and pauperization of the already harassed and marginalized Bengali Muslims (often char-dwellers), against whom most DV cases are registered.

Since 2016, with the coming of the right-wing Hindu government in Assam, the Bengali Muslims generally and those living in chars particularly, have seen enormous structural violence. In 2021, the government introduced the Assam Cattle Preservation Act amending the 1951 Act and introduced numerous clauses that make slaughtering, buying and selling of beef in areas within a five kilometers radius of a Hindu/Sikh/Jain temple or a Vaishnavite ‘*satra*’ as illegal. This Act was also amended for stricter control of cattle smuggling in bordering areas of Assam, particularly those closer to Bangladesh, which immediately puts char-lands such as those where I have conducted my fieldwork in, under stricter purview.

The right-wing state has also fiercely engaged in eviction drives of mostly Bengali Muslim villages who are tagged as ‘illegal encroachers’ or ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ and are accused of taking up land

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/it-is-crucial-to-reform-foreigners-tribunals-101652967608210.html>; <https://scroll.in/article/927025/the-highest-wicket-taker-assams-tribunals-are-competing-to-declare-people-foreigners>

owned by the Vaishnavite '*satras*' or encroaching inside the state-owned National Parks and grazing reserves. The eviction drives have become far more violent and have specifically targeted religious and linguistic minorities. (Muktia et al 2018). The BJP government in Assam came under international criticism when during an eviction drive in Dholpur in 2021, two Bengali Muslims were killed in clashes between the settlers and the police with a caste Hindu Assamese male journalist stomping upon the dead body of a victim. While the settlers claim to be citizens and having legal property rights, the BJP government go on propagating for a '*Bangladeshi mukta*' (Bangladeshi free) Assam where the Bangladeshi is imagined as the Bengali Muslim. In a later chapter, I show how with increasing erosion and violent floods, char-dwellers are losing lands and are forced to migrate. They often have no option but to squat in nearby government lands. It is such migrant char-dwellers that the majoritarian state and society have always framed as the 'illegal Bangladeshi' and have violently evicted. Landless and politically precarious, they either languish in jails or are forced to migrate as landless laborers to nearby cities where they provide cheap labor to the urban economy.

Being havens of migrant populations, the chars since colonial times, have long been seen as harboring criminal networks such as river pirates, or more recently opium growers, cattle smugglers, Islamic terrorists and 'illegal Bangladeshis'. Government reports such as the report on 'Illegal Immigration' by then Governor S.K. Sinha (1998) also had claimed similarly. Police often raid chars accusing people of growing poppy for opium illegally, while being themselves involved at various levels in many such illegal trades. This framing of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers as 'illegal immigrants' and criminals while the state representatives profit off from such capitalistic networks is something that I do look into in the Weekly Market chapter. Though Bengali Muslims have always been at the receiving end of violence and hatred from the majoritarian Assamese

society, the rise of the right-wing in Assam has made their lives worse. The communal politics is now openly played out through everyday violence and policies. The Bengali Hindus, on the other hand, have received favorable treatment from the Hindu state with the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 wherein non-Muslim religious minorities from the neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan fleeing religious violence can now gain Indian citizenship through continuous residence of five years. However, Bengali Hindus have covertly always received sympathetic treatment from most states in Assam as they are imagined more as ‘refugees’ as opposed to Bengali Muslims who are always imagined as ‘illegal immigrants’. This became amply clear even in the archival documents of the Refugee Rehabilitation Scheme as post-partition, refugees from east Pakistan were allotted shelter and food by the Assam government, something that I explore in one of the later chapters. This open preferential treatment of Bengali Hindus has now doubled the exploitative gaze and politics around the Bengali Muslims, many of whom predominantly live in the char-lands of Western Assam.

## 2. MY FIELD

Assam, with a geographical area of 78438 square kilometers (Economic Survey Assam, 2021-22) has a population of 31205. (Census 2011). However, there is a serious dearth of information with regard to char areas in Assam. Two important surveys were conducted by the Government of Assam in 1992-93 and 2002-03 that showed that 14 districts of Assam housed a total of 2,251 char villages. However, with the fluidity of existence of chars, these numbers would change in the present times. In fact, this was clearly visible during the gap between the two surveys. In 1992-93 Barpeta district had the highest number of char villages and population which changed in 2002-03 when Dhubri district replaced Barpeta. (Chakraborty 2018: 182).

In between the two surveys, the number of char villages had increased by 7.75 percent but the population had increased by 55.63 percent. “The char dwellers comprise 9.37 percent of the State’s population but have only 4.6 percent of the State’s land and 4 percent of its cultivable land...the density of population in the char areas (690 persons per sq. km.) is more than double compared to that of the state (340 persons per sq. km.)” (Chakraborty 2018: 182). Char areas also suffer from the highest multidimensional poverty among all regions of the state (GoA 2016: 198). As per the 2002-03 survey report, 67.89 percent of the people living in char areas live below poverty line. Their economic pauperization is also contributed by the continued floods and erosion. These events continue destroying their land and properties and contribute to their continued forceful migration. “Backwardness of char areas was manifested in terms of poor socio-economic indicators in the Human Development Report.” (Kumar and Das 2019: 92). Illiteracy rate is extremely high in the char areas with literacy rate dipping in between the two surveys. (Chakraborty 2012: 23). Fertility rate in char-lands is astonishingly high while 91 percent households had no access to clean water. Mortality rate is 8.6 per thousand, much higher than the state average. (Goswami 2014).

Thus, while chars are housing some of the most fertile lands of Assam, the people living there are one of the most marginalized and impoverished with no access to proper education, health care, etc.

Within the district Barpeta, Baghbar revenue circle, under which the chars where I conducted my fieldwork are located, is dominated by chars. Hence, during the monsoon season, it is not unusual to find most areas of this revenue circle under water with many destroyed roads. During this time, many char-dwellers crowd and temporarily live on the embankments along with their cattle, while the administration gets busy distributing relief materials. During the 2019 floods, all 141 villages

in the revenue circle with a total of 187340 population were affected. Around 1140 hectares of cropped area was damaged. 105 families were completely uprooted due to erosion caused during the floods and more than 1000 houses were fully destroyed.<sup>11</sup>



*Image b. The Brahmaputra continuously erodes the chars, forcing people to migrate continuously.*

While I visited several chars during the fieldwork (mostly while accompanying the Boat Clinic Team), a large section of my fieldwork was specifically concentrated in two chars – Baghbar Pahar and Ramapara Pam. Baghbar Pahar, comprising of three administrative zones of Baghbar Gaon, Niz Baghbar and Baghbar Pathar, comprises of 5,373 people (Census 2011), the numbers of which

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<sup>11</sup> 'Detail Report of Flood Damages during Flood 2019 under Baghbar Revenue Circle Assam.' Report collected from Baghbar Revenue Circle.

have definitely increased due to increasing births and also migration of people from nearby chars to Baghbar Pahar. The Pahar, whose history I elaborate on in one of the later chapters, has a diverse population. Being earlier home to caste Hindu Assamese and tribals such as Bodos, Kacharis, etc., the Pahar now is predominantly dominated by Bengali Muslims as many non-Muslim population migrated permanently once the Brahmaputra changed its course following the 1950 earthquake and was rampantly destroying more and more villages. The Pahar (literally translating to Hill) being a solid, concrete geographical formation as opposed to the sandy chars around it, has survived erosion caused by the Brahmaputra over the years and hence many Bengali Muslims who had lost their lands and homes to erosion in the nearby chars have migrated to the Pahar and settled in lands that were left behind by non-Muslim people. Land ownership at the Pahar is particularly interesting with some families having permanent private ownership (*miyadi patta*), as they bought those lands on paper from non-Muslim families. However, more recent migrant families have ownership through informal understanding with the migrated non-Muslim families (on paper the owners are still the latter). A large part of the Pahar is owned by the Forest Department. However, with increasing population pressure, families have also been living on such government lands within the Pahar. It is not surprising to find houses where some parts of it are within *miyadi patta* land and some in government (*khas*) land.



*Image c. The Baghbar Pahar (Hill)*

At present, there are around fifty caste Hindu Assamese families, five Bengali Hindu and five Bodo families in the Pahar, while the rest are all Bengali Muslim families. The Bengali Hindu presence is greater in towns near to the Pahar considering Baghbar was also selected by the state to settle Bengali Hindu refugees fleeing violence both after the partition and during the Bangladesh Liberation war in 1971. The Refugee Rehabilitation scheme was put in place in several chars around the Pahar such as Dharmapur NC, Mowamari, etc. However, due to conflicts with Bengali Muslims who had returned after the signing of the Nehru-Liaqat Pact and with the river's change of course destroying land, houses and property, most villages had turned to sandy chars. Most Bengali Hindus, then migrated to far-away towns within Barpeta district such as Barpeta Road and started engaging in business. The Pahar has four Lower Primary (LP) schools, one Middle English (ME) school, one High School and one Public Health Dispensary. The Muslim and the non-Muslim population of the Pahar are spatially separated into Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods.

Baghbar's Weekly Market (bazar) is one of the largest in the district and unlike other weekly markets, it is a private market which is in constant contention with the state over ownership of the market, something I elaborately look at in the Weekly Bazar chapter. The bazar has one of the district's largest cattle markets and a large Juma Masjid (Mosque) that stands out in an economic landscape where people are not particularly well-off. The Hindus and Bodos have their temples – a Kali temple and a famous century-old Vaishnavite '*satra*' in their neighborhood and an old Bagheshwari Temple in the Muslim neighborhood of the village, that has also generated conflicts between the two religious groups.

Despite the state's lack of investment in education and health, its securitization measures are in place as Baghbar revenue circle stands very close to the borders of Bangladesh and the Brahmaputra flows along its banks. The presence of a Police Station, Forest Department's posts and vigil boats of the River Police along the Brahmaputra marking its landscape (though no government boats have been allotted to carry passengers) elucidate this point. During the days leading up to the publication of the final NRC, armed personnel were placed in several chars surrounding the Pahar as the state feared violence erupting in Bengali Muslim dominant areas, which already gives us a glimpse of how the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers are perceived by the majoritarian state.

Ramapara Pam is a sandy char within Baghbar revenue circle that is about an hour away on a motorized ferry ride across the Brahmaputra from the *ghat* at Baghbar Pahar. As per the 2011 Census records, the char has 2,189 population with the entire population being Bengali Muslims. The char was first used for temporary cultivation by people of Ramapara Gaon, however, as



Ramapara Gaon suffered more and more erosion, they migrated to Ramapara Pam<sup>12</sup>. Interestingly, much later in my fieldwork it was told to me that the actual Ramapara Pam char had sub-merged a few years ago, before I started my fieldwork in 2019. The Pam char that exists now is in reality a part of the neighboring Dharmapur NC (non-cadastral)<sup>13</sup> char village. The year when the Pam char sub-merged, all the families migrated to Dharmapur NC and renamed that part of the char as Ramapara Pam. Surprisingly, government records too have accepted the renaming of that part of Dharmapur NC as Ramapara Pam char as can be seen in census reports or in numerous administrative files such as relief distribution, etc. Thus, I decided to go along with it too. In the rest of the thesis, this part of Dharmapur NC is referred to and is understood as Ramapara Pam. Being on non-cadastral land, the entire Pam village, thus, now stand on government (*khas*) land. And though till a few years back, the state collected a small token fee legally recognizing and allowing such people to live on *khas* land, the collection of such fees has been abolished by the BJP state. The existence of such char villages now remains on precarious grounds; hence these char-dwellers can be evicted anytime by the state. However, during the course of my fieldwork, it emerged strongly how the state on the ground works through many entanglements, intentions and arrangements that one do not find in formal files and policies. Hence, though the precarity is mounting, it should not be seen singularly as such because in reality, the char-dwellers continue to live, contend and even negotiate with the state on many levels. It is important to underline here that such renaming of village names, wherein char-dwellers bring forward their older village names to their new settled area often happens in the chars, particularly if the entire village migrates. This was also evident in school names, as most schools after floods and erosion, often shift to

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<sup>12</sup> Pam generally refers to a place for temporary cultivation – '*pam kheti*'

<sup>13</sup> NC lands are those areas that are not yet surveyed by the state and are often classified as '*khas*'/state-owned land. The state is yet to survey, classify and collect taxes from such lands.

neighboring chars but the names of such schools (which often get named after their original char where they were first established), continue to exist. In fact, on paper, even the location of such schools is not changed (meaning on paper they lie on submerged chars). Even though in reality, they stand on new locations. The state is aware of such practices and silently works around it, as was seen with Ramapara Pam.

Ramapara Pam has one LP school and one ME school but no high school, for which most students have to go to Baghbar Pahar. There is one Anganwadi Center<sup>14</sup>. As compared to other chars, the Pam has a fairly good literacy rate with 54.22% and male and female literacy being almost at par with each other (55.05% males as opposed to 53.31% females) (Census 2011). In my interactions with the teachers of both the LP and ME school, it was highlighted how more girls are interested in pursuing higher education. This has been possible of late with child marriage of girls significantly coming down because of stricter legal laws of marriage<sup>15</sup> and several NGOs working incessantly to spread awareness against its practice. However, education faces threat as erosion and floods destroy schools<sup>16</sup>, force students to migrate and discontinue their studies. Most schools in chars are ‘venture’ as opposed to government, meaning, that they are recognized by the state but are not funded by it. The criteria for a school to become government is always difficult to be fulfilled by schools in chars as these include a concrete structure, a fixed number of regular students, documents of school structure standing on permanently owned (*miyadi patta*) land, etc. The ME school in the char has been a ‘venture’ school since ages with teachers not receiving

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<sup>14</sup> Literally translating to ‘courtyard shelter’. They are a type of rural child care center which was started by the Indian state in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition.

<sup>15</sup> The legal age for marriage is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. The Center has introduced a Bill to increase the legal age for marriage of girls from 18 to 21 years, which has not yet been passed.

<sup>16</sup> The LP school in the char had a concrete structure which was destroyed during the floods in 2019 and 2020; later it was operating from the premises of the ME school.

salary, often upto months. The teachers, with whom I worked closely during my fieldwork were dismayed at the falling rate of literacy and ‘quality students’ in the char – “During 1990s, we had more than five MA graduates here in the char, and now, hardly one!” they would often complain in front of me.



*Image d. The destroyed LP school at Ramapara Pam char.*

The health situation in the char was abysmal with high population rate, high infant and maternal mortality rates along with deaths due to lack of clean drinking water, etc. The health situation, particularly reproductive healthcare, has improved with the start of the Boat Clinics – wherein a medical team visits a char once a month in a particular district on a boat and keeps track of the health situation in the chars. I have elaborated on the Boat Clinics in a later chapter. Besides, the employing of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) has tremendously improved the health scene of the chars. ASHA are local women appointed in a particular Village Panchayat who keep records of the health situation, mostly regarding maternal/reproductive health which include vaccines, nutritional intake, medicines, weight changes etc. for the mother and later the infant too. They are also trained with providing basic emergency health care, including training for delivery

of infants. During the COVID crisis, they played a critical role in spreading awareness and implementing vaccination programs to contain the virus outbreak in the chars.

Both the Pam and Baghbar Pahar have their own separate Village Panchayats with separate Village Headmen. The choice of the two chars for focusing my fieldwork is driven by the idea that they present contradictory yet entangling scenarios. The Pahar with its rocky and stable geomorphological character, attracts migrants from neighboring chars that has not only changed the demographic character of the Pahar but has also allowed one to get a first-hand glimpse of the socio-political and economic changes that the ecological crises of floods and erosion have brought upon in Assam, on a microscopic level. The politics surrounding religion and immigration that have largely ruled Assam are starkly visible in the many everyday practices in the Pahar. Here, the fear of the caste Hindu Assamese of being turned into a minority has been turned into a reality. The area that once was dominated by the caste Hindus and tribals has been converted into a Bengali Muslim majority area where it is the latter who dominate the area's politics and economics. Being close to the border has only added fuel to the narrative of 'illegal immigration' that the majoritarian state and society have always used to justify violence against the Bengali Muslims. The coming of the right-wing state has added new layers to the already interesting communal and ethnic dynamics at the Pahar, all of which have been explored in the later chapters.

Ramapara Pam being a sandy char allowed me to observe the devastating effects of the river on the marginalized Bengali Muslims who are forced to migrate, rather frequently and repeatedly to places like the Pahar, grazing reserves or to neighboring towns. The crisis of land is so real for them, that many have spent everything simply buying government '*khas*' land 'illegally' from brokers. The socio-cultural life of chars be it rituals or songs surrounding fishing or cultivation is more starkly visible in the Pam. Besides, as opposed to the Pahar, the Bengali Muslims in the Pam

are more politically precarious with most migrating often, losing documents and changing addresses. Consequently, several are declared 'DV's and many have not found their names in the NRC. However, the interconnections between the two chars are critical to understand how the socio-economic and political lifeworld of char-dwellers is relational. Most people in the Pahar still have families and land in the Pam and other neighboring sandy chars where they visit almost everyday to cultivate crops and graze their cattle. I would often meet people from the Pahar going to the neighboring chars, including the Pam during my ferry rides and it is such interconnections and dependencies that dictate their everyday activities as most in the Pahar wake up early to catch the 6 am ferry to go to the chars where they spend the rest of the day cultivating or keeping track of erosion of existing land and emergence of eroded land. The kin networks across the river also mean visiting those sandy chars. Most houses are equipped with boats for allowing this very movement. The char-dwellers, thus, prefer migrating short-distances (given a choice) because of such arrangements.

On the other hand, the people living on sandy chars around the Pahar such as the Pam, frequent the Pahar for visiting the weekly market. Many depend on it to sell their weekly produce. During COVID, with the lockdown in place and the weekly market closed, many informants at the Pam reported how they had to throw away months of produce, incurring heavy losses. People from the Pam also frequent the Pahar for mostly visiting the local PHE since the Boat Clinics visit the chars once a month. Students from the chars who desire to pursue higher education also need to go to the Pahar as there is no high school in the Pam. The Pahar thus, acts as a node for isolated char-lands like the Pam to literally connect them to towns such as Satrakanara, Mandia and Barpeta which house the administrative headquarters of the district. Besides the Pahar, people from the

Pam travel south towards Goalpara, mostly via boats, to attend to other bigger issues or avail health and education facilities.

Char-dwellers from the Pahar and the Pam often migrate looking for economic opportunities to either places within Assam or even outside Assam such as Kerala, Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh etc. The migration networks are in place through their kin who migrated earlier to such places. Often however, it is male members of the family who migrate, and the rate of migration is lower if a family owns more land, and the family size is smaller. But migration also occurs due to pull factors such as higher wage rate, employment opportunities in the points of destination, etc. (Kumar and Das 2019).

Land conflicts are the major conflicts in these char-lands. With the river devouring more land, land available for each family decreases. With increasing birth rate, the division of existing land is high, such that individual plots of land become smaller and smaller and eventually not commercially productive enough. Thus, land conflicts amongst kin and even outside kin are very common in chars. However, such conflicts exist due to faulty land laws in the chars. This began from colonial times when finally, char-lands were brought under revenue administration. However, they were placed under annual revenue settlements. A.J. Moffat Mills (1854) suggested that char-lands should not have heritable property rights and that one *Mouzadar*<sup>17</sup> be given the ownership rights of one char/chapori who can then temporarily settle ryots and collect revenue annually.

The earliest legislation with regard to char-lands was the Bengal Alluvion and Dilluvion Act (BADA) 1825 that was enacted in parts of Eastern and Northeastern India. BADA, talking about

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<sup>17</sup> Mouzadar or a fiscal officer is one who collects taxes from one Mouza (revenue collection unit). Though this position finds its origin during British times, it continues to exist till date. All Mouzadars today are part of the Revenue department of the state government.

the emergence of new chars which are not the property of any individual, made them a property of the state if the channel of the river or sea between the island and the shore was not fordable. However, the char became the property of the person(s) most contiguous to it if the channel between the island and the shore was fordable. (Section 4(3)). In Assam, it was decided to follow the spirit of this legislation wherein disputes relating to land in chars would be solved using the spirit of equity, justice, customs and good conscience (Chakraborty 2012: 18), until 1897 when it came into full force. However, in 1929, almost all major districts such as Kamrup, Sibsagar, Nowgong and eastern duars of Goalpara where char-lands existed were excluded from this regulation.

Besides, for the longest time this regulation did not say anything about chars that re-emerge in-situ which were largely the case, and which led to many court cases. The regulation noted that the land continued to belong to the individual property holders if the owner continued to pay annual revenue, even while the land was sub-merged. Post-independence, the Assam Temporarily Settled Areas Tenancy Act was enacted in 1971, which does not address the specific conditions of the char-lands, except stating that when a new char emerges it is to be taken as the property of the state. The state keeps it either as a grazing reserve or settles it with cultivators as per Land Settlement Policy Resolution Force. However, in reality, as was seen in the beginning of the chapter, people in chars hardly wait for state officials to come and settle, which is when conflicts happen. (Chakraborty 2012: 22).

Revenue settlement in chars has not happened periodically, leading to many char villages still being categorized as non-cadastral (NC). Meaning, that they are still owned by the government and do not come under revenue collection. As can be seen even with my own field, many char-dwellers migrate and have settled in such NC char villages or government lands illegally, often

living there for years. Thus, they remain in severely precarious position as they can be evicted at any time. One settlement attempt of the chars in independent Assam happened in 1979 which was stopped due to the Assam Movement. This exercise was revived in 1985 but had to be stopped mid-way due to lack of revenue staff. In 1994, the process was reinitiated but with a few changes – chars with more permanency, that is, those that have existed for at least 15 years or more would be covered, and each household will be given six *bighas*<sup>18</sup> of land. However, due to strong ‘anti-immigrant’ sentiment and protests by various political establishments, the exercise was stopped again, after which there has been no attempt at conducting a revenue settlement, even though the state continues to promise that it will hold one in the future. (Chakraborty 2012: 22-23). The non-conduction of a revenue settlement in chars has only increased land conflicts, including conflict over the ownership of the Baghbar Weekly Bazar which I cover extensively in the chapter on weekly market.

This lack of proper legislation, the silence in existing legislations and the non-conduction of revenue settlements have contributed significantly to land conflicts in the char areas.

### 3. CHAPTERS

This research aims to understand how marginalized communities living in liminal and peripheral ecologies are experiencing the state. It will look at the socio-political world of char-lands situated in borderlands of India in contemporary times and understand the relationships and changes that this world has undergone and continues to undergo with the interventions of a majoritarian state. It draws the colonial politics and policies surrounding char-lands, immigration, land-water, etc. to

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<sup>18</sup> 1 bigha = 0.619 acres



situate the contemporary context of marginalization and pauperization of Bengali Muslim char communities. In the process, it will also shed light on state-society relations and the changes to each that have come with their interaction as the thesis delves into issues of citizenship, eco-political migration, infrastructure, violence, belongingness and recognition. While it will focus on events to flesh out arguments concerning the experiencing of the state by the char-dwellers such as the NRC, the Assam Movement, etc., it also will try and understand the state-society relationship through everyday presence and interactions of char-dwellers with the state. Additionally, the chapters will focus on how ethnic relations in char-lands have been shaped due to interventions of the colonial state and the post-independent majoritarian state.

The chapter 'boats' looks at boats as an ethnographic object in char-lands to understand how state interventions (or non-intervention) have changed char-dwellers' identity, memories and relations with each other as well as with land and water. It looks at the lifeworld of boats (particularly mechanized ferries) and the char-dwellers' relations to that world – how these boats help in understanding the river and its elements better while also shaping their distinct socio-cultural identity. I establish in this chapter the colonial politics of favoring land over water wherein land was not simply seen as having economic value but it was also recognized as a cultural and ideological category, through which civilization was furthered - something that was endorsed by the colonization project. I argue here that this was partly possible because of land's materiality – stability and sedentarism over water's unpredictability (particularly tropical rivers). I further look at the colonial politics of favoring land over water through two colonial categories of the 'wasteland' and the 'homeland' which propagated the politics of sedentarism – sedentary agriculture and sedentary belongingness (rootedness). This allowed the colonial state to not simply increase productivity and spread 'civilization' but also control the population better.

The land favoring politics is being carried forward by the post-independent majoritarian state such that relations of fluidity and hybridity defining char-dwellers' socio-political world are being slowly replaced by relations of precarity, fixity, revenue generation and securitization or criminality. I understand these changes by looking at mechanized country boats/ferries. These objects, I argue, keep alive the rhizomatic fluidity of char-dwellers as a cultural and political community as the boats and char-dwellers battle with a land favoring majoritarian state. Finally, I look at how the char-dwellers are negotiating with such a state and creating spaces of co-existence by understanding the state as affective, which opens up the culture of dialogue. 'Affective state' here is formulated by me as beyond Ann Stoler's (2007) understanding of affect for control but one that is rhizomatic and allows the flow of understanding between the state and the char-dwellers. This is what that opens up spaces of co-existence. Secondly, the char-dwellers' negotiation with a land favoring state is reflected in what I call their 'desire for *sarkarikaran*'. I introduce '*sarkarikaran*' as processes of state-making here and using Deleuze's conceptualization of 'desire', I formulate char-dwellers' deep desire for '*sarkarikaran*' as ways of acquiring tools for gaining better bargaining power with a land favoring and majoritarian state. This chapter will enable one to understand char-dwellers' relational and fluvial world through the ethnographic object of the boat and how such a world is changing because of a land favoring state's neglect of boats. In the process, it is also changing char-dwellers' relation with land and water, with each other as well as with the state.

The relational world of char-lands is highlighted when I next focus on weekly bazars/*haats* (markets) in chars that developed during pre-colonial times on various '*ghats*' (boatyards). In chapter two, I begin with a historical accounting of the development of weekly bazars starting from colonial times, before coming to the Baghbar weekly market, which is the focus of the chapter.

The ecological specificities of a *charua* weekly bazar that has literally shifted multiple times in the past have contributed to a massive legal conflict over ownership of the bazar between the state and the char-dwellers. The conflict allows me to conceptualize on the changing nature of legality and ‘illegality’ in such fluid landscapes and how land becomes vital for the state to establish legitimacy and control, particularly in the borderlands. This slipperiness of legality and ‘illegality’ allows me to formulate them as processes rather than as fixed states of being.

The weekly bazar at Baghbar helps me to understand how the state’s decisions to use (or not use) tools of state-making such as revenue settlement exercises, maps, censuses etc. are often based on arbitrariness. However, such arbitrariness is systemically produced, more often than not (as in our case), to make minority population invisible and ‘illegal’ subjects. This state production of arbitrariness is further seen in its decisions surrounding questions such as when to show maps, to whom, what becomes ‘illegal’ and at what point, etc. This is arbitrary because answers to such questions depend on the state’s interest *at that time*. I establish this arbitrariness as violence by the state on the marginalized char-dwellers. The existence of the private weekly bazar in Baghbar is a challenge to such arbitrary violence of the state where the char-dwellers use the very same tools and language that the state has been using against them to marginalize them further. The chapter elaborately shows that it is because of this, that the char-dwellers’ confrontation with the state irks the state that much bitterly.

Finally, the bazar gives space to explore the ethnic boundaries and tensions that exist between the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali Muslims and how such ethnic tensions are undergoing changes with the coming of the Hindutva regime in Assam. I look at this through the ‘Cow politics’, something that Assam and India have been engulfed in after the coming of the BJP in power. By analyzing the recently passed cattle protection laws, I enquire how such politics will impact the

weekly bazar that is already in conflict with the state. The Baghbar Weekly bazar's unique geographical fluidity, its location close to the borders of Bangladesh, being owned and controlled by Bengali Muslims while housing one of the biggest cattle markets in the district present interesting context to understand the impacts of right-wing 'cow politics' in contemporary times. Overall, this chapter argues that Bengali Muslim char-dwellers are claiming spaces using the very tools of state-making that are generally used by the state to control them by coming in direct contention with the state.

In chapter 'The Mobile State', I take up two projects of the state – Boat Clinics and SPV Standalone Solar systems to understand how the state is making attempts to be mobile to serve a migratory and marginalized population. I look at how despite being mobile, policies of the state are embedded in and reproduce fixity that marginalize the already marginalized char-dwellers. Defining routes or legitimate movements for a migratory population, introducing a regime of records, the importance of having fixed household numbers or ration cards to avail the benefits of a mobile state, etc. are some of the new fixities that this state has introduced to the char-dwellers. Using works from the New Mobility studies, this chapter looks at such new fixities produced by a state that attempts to be mobile.

I explore here the affective relationships that people (char-dwellers, in this case) share with infrastructures and how such affective relationships are politically used by the state not just as a sign of care but also to control people. The state does this by slowly affecting or changing their political subjectivity, creating particular kinds of political subjects. I have elaborately looked at this by examining the changed political subjectivities of *charua* Muslim women due to the easy availability and access to maternal health care and population control policies provided by the mobile Boat Clinics of the state. This is exemplified in the *charua* Muslim women learning to

discipline their own bodies, which not only improves their reproductive health but also allows the state to control fertility rates and population expansion of Muslims in Assam.

Finally, we understand how the char-dwellers are negotiating with a state-imposed political subjectivity and fixity to gain their rightful benefits. This section within the chapter excavates the many strategies that the char-dwellers use to maneuver through state-imposed fixities, establishing them as beyond 'passive victims'. Infrastructures, as I argue in this chapter, are beyond sites of fantasy and 'magic'. They are also sites of contestation where political subjectivities and the 'magic of the state' are challenged and are negotiated with.

I argue here that state-society relations mediated through infrastructures are not simply shaped through the state's imposition of new systems as means of control or the society's (char-dwellers here) passive fascination or active contestation of those systems of the state but through the interaction of these two. And what adds on to this relationship of care and control is the labor of the people in between – the intermediaries: from Boat Clinic staff to the Electricity department's district office employees. It is the performance of 'phatic' (Elyachar 2010) and affect-laden labor by such intermediaries that makes the relationship between state-society what it becomes in the process. And such labor of intermediaries in turn affects both the state and society in profound ways. The chapter enables one to see that state-society relations and interactions are a precarious balance between care and control which comes out through a state that is attempting to be mobile.

The next chapter focuses on the interconnections between migration caused by ecological factors and state-making processes in the chars, particularly in creating the citizenship crisis and increased xenophobia for the Bengali Muslims in Assam. I look at particularly the migration of Bengali Muslims from nearby chars to the Pahar who are escaping floods and continued erosion and how it has led to the change of demography in the Pahar, contributing to its ethnic and religious

tensions. I historicize the contemporary deterioration of ethno-religious relations between the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali Muslims in the chars in Baghbar (including the Pahar) by looking at the Refugee Rehabilitation schemes that were set up by the Assam government in the 1950s and 1970s. The schemes that favored the Bengali Hindu refugees over Bengali Muslims, had sown the seeds of conflict between the Hindus and Muslims in the Baghbar char areas.

Following which, I trace the journey of a landless, migrating Bengali Muslim char-dweller escaping flood-erosion and how the state through its politics of violent evictions further pauperize him and funnel him to provide cheap labor to run the urban economy. The production of landless, politically precarious Muslim bodies is a consequence of state politics. The state uses a variety of strategies to produce such landless and politically precarious Muslim bodies – rampant embankment building in the chars, deforestation and mining in the river’s upper reaches, lack of data on the river, on erosion or on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), conservation and ‘waste’ narratives, etc. The state directly or indirectly uses the environment in making Bengali Muslim char-dwellers economically and politically precarious and in framing them as ‘illegal Bangladeshis’. Thus, the final argument I bring in this chapter is that the state works in tandem with environmental factors to produce devalued, landless Bengali Muslim bodies first, through the politics of embankment building and later, using environmental racism to violently evict landless Bengali Muslims squatting on government lands. These Muslims then have no option but migrate to cities where they act as fuel for racial capitalism. The continued production of politically precarious (their citizenship is always put under scanner), landless migrant bodies as reserved army of labor is critical for running a racial capitalist urban economy.

The term ‘environmental racism’ was coined as part of the mobilization of community members and allies in Warren County, North Carolina in the 1980s wherein residents protested the dumping

of toxic chemicals on a tract of land in the small town of Afton. (McGurty 2007, Wright 2018). This struggle spread countrywide and became part of the environmental justice movement such that activists used ‘environmental racism’ to highlight unequal dumping practices and the impact of wastes on marginalized communities, which in that context were poor, Black communities. Writings of Pulido (2016, 2017) and Wright (2018) understand environmental racism as allowing dumping of ecological wastes or any kind of ecological violence on marginalized communities, particularly on black geographies and hence black bodies. Wright (2018) also understands environmental racism as increased surveillance on black neighborhoods, etc. While taking on the essence from such arguments, I look at environmental racism more in line with Ghassan Hage (2017) wherein Muslim bodies are projected as a) creating wastes and b) Muslim bodies are seen as ‘wastes’ in themselves (the ‘ungovernable/uncontainable other’ similar to waste). And it is in this context where Pulido’s (2017) and Melamed’s (2015) understanding of racial capitalism come in which argues that capitalism (in this case, mostly urban economies) is functioning on devalued black bodies, which in my context, are devalued Muslim bodies.

Pulido and Melamed develop on racial capitalism, a term that was coined by Cedric Robinson in 1983 through his publication ‘*Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*’ and later made popular by critical ethnic studies. Robinson (2000) argued that capitalism is intricately racial, which can be seen even in its plantation pasts. Capitalism needs severe inequality and unequal differentiation of human value to thrive (capitalists/workers, landed/disposed, etc.) and racism provides that inequality to it. (Melamed 2015).

While Pulido (2017) argues that environmental racism is part of racial capitalism, I show in this chapter how environmental racism (the narrative of waste and Muslim bodies) forwards or feeds racial capitalism.

The NRC as a massive bureaucratic and documentary project that grew out of ‘anti-immigrant’ sentiment directly impacted the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. In the chapter ‘Affect, Ambivalence and NRC lower bureaucrats’, I look at lower bureaucrats who were involved with implementing the NRC project in the char areas wherein I first focus on the disjunctures that the practice of this project revealed as opposed to on paper. I understand such disjunctures to be arbitrary structural violence which again is systemically produced. From wrongly spelt Muslim names to not giving receipts to minority applicants due to lack of printer-ink and papers in NRC Seva Kendras that have resulted in exclusions of Bengali Muslims from the NRC, I exemplify thoroughly here the arbitrariness of the disjunctures of the NRC, a project that was believed to be ‘scientific’, ‘rigid’ and ‘error-free’.

However, the rest of the chapter explores how two historically opposed groups – the lower bureaucrats largely being caste Hindu Assamese and char-dwellers being Bengali Muslims - showed possibilities of transformation of politics that currently defines them. I argue that years of ‘affective encounters’ between them (NRC was a five year long project and many officers stayed in chars) brought in ambivalence to the ideological and political positions of such officers. I bring in Homi Bhabha’s (1994) figure of the ‘mimetic man’ in the context of colonial societies to show how the *charua* Bengali Muslim ‘other’ acted as the ‘mimetic man’ for the dominant caste Hindu Assamese lower bureaucrats, making their always held on beliefs ambivalent. I further argue that it is because of the presence of such ambivalence that possibly there lies the potentiality of opening up a new politics surrounding belongingness and recognition, maybe even a new imagination of Assamese as a community. Thus, the transformational nature of ‘affective encounters’ (which is made possible because of affect’s rhizomatic nature) is elaborately understood here by looking at the practice of the NRC project between lower bureaucrats involved in it (particularly in the chars)



and the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. I argue in this chapter that when one is looking at state-society relationships, narratives of understanding, love and sympathy can exist in conjunction with and often alongside narratives of violence.

Talking about belongingness and recognition, the final chapter of my thesis looks at politics of belongingness and recognition by exploring three political moments – *jonogoshthi naamkoron* (community naming), Miya<sup>19</sup> Poetry and Miya Museum - where the Bengali Muslims (Miya Muslims for this chapter) are seen to be asserting and celebrating their distinctiveness as a socio-cultural and political community. I understand these political moments as ways to express their historical pain and also to feel belonged. Each of these political moments that I illustrate here are cries to be recognized as both a respected ‘Miya’ and as ‘*Asomiya*’ (Assamese).

I look at why at present we see an increasing sentiment of Miya Muslims asserting their distinct socio-political identity by looking at two factors – first, the colonial politics of rigid boundary creation, wherein cultural differences were turned into legal borders. The Line System, Bengal partition, breakaway of Sylhet, etc. are used as illustrative cases here.

The introduction of tools such as census and maps wherein continuously new boundaries were drawn for purely administrative convenience and economic benefits, detached connected geographies, cultures and people and attached disconnected ones giving birth to new conflicts, repercussions of which can be seen even today in Assam. Such colonial politics and use of tools contributed greatly to the politics of ‘othering’ of Bengali Muslims in Assam.

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Miya’/‘Miyah’ generally in Urdu means ‘sir’ but in the context of Assam, Bengali Muslims are derogatorily referred to as ‘Miya’ with connotations of ‘Bangladeshi/illegal immigrant/outsider’ etc. attached to it. Such political moments are trying to reclaim back the meaning of the word ‘Miya’.

Second, the violence faced by the Miya Muslims over decades. This violence faced by the Bengali Muslims has been understood as structural, everyday and total. I then dive into the importance of feeling belonged and recognized and the problematics of misrecognition. Misrecognition can lead to a distorted sense of self, including self-hatred and disgust which in itself is a violence on the oppressed. It is violence of such nature, which I argue here, has contributed in shaping their political subjectivities, interests and new collectives.

This chapter illustrates how feelings of belongingness are intricately tied to politics of recognition as I bring forward Nancy Fraser's (2000) model of status-based recognition which focused on both cultural recognition and socio-economic redistributive justice for people to feel belonged. Fraser develops this model as opposed to the Hegelian 'Identity model' which fails to address questions of economic redistribution and does not problematize reification of identities. I argue that the political moments of Miya Muslims' distinctness assertion adhere to a large extent to Fraser's model and yet in some respects digress from it and get tangled up in the identity model of recognition. And it is here that I see problematics of such political moments. I establish here that political moments like '*jonogoshthi naamkoron*' and demand for a Miya Museum can lead to 'fixing' of identities, making the identity of Miya Muslim monolithic which refuses dialogue and any kind of changes to it. I argue that it is such reification of identities that can change Bengali Muslim char-dwellers' historical sense of fluid belongingness. This final chapter enables one to explore how Assamese as a community needs to be reformulated to counter the present xenophobic, Islamophobic, exclusionary and chauvinist imaginations.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

My research is largely informed by a political ecology, environmental history and political anthropology framework, among others. The guiding literature I read and analyzed provide critical information on subjects such as migration, identity, citizenship, borderlands, etc. However, the larger issues that encompass them and on which my research has been primarily focused are divided into four conceptual blocks of – Environment, Violence, State and Affect. Through the themes, I convey that while my research looks at and understands the importance of events such as colonialism or violence through massacres, movements etc., it equally looks at the presence and the functioning of concepts such as violence and state-making in the ordinary everyday.

The analyzed literature through the four conceptual blocks will place my ethnographic and contextual understanding of marginalized *charuas*' experience with the state in dialogue with the literature that has either historicized or theorized this question in other contexts.

### 1. Conceptual block I: ENVIRONMENT

#### *1.1 Inter-connections, fluidity*

One of the major conceptual blocks that has largely loomed around my research is the Environment, wherein a lot of my understanding of the contextual specificities of chars has been informed by environmental history writings. I have studied the chars (river-islands) not as isolated environments but through their various inter-connections, be it with the state or with non-human elements like water, sand, boats, etc. Thus, my research is informed and situated in the environmental history and political-economic tradition of works such as Eric Wolf (2010) and

Sidney Mintz (1986, 2002) who through their historical, yet ethnographic explorations showed the inter-connections of how global processes were interacting and shaping socio-cultural and political worlds of local contexts. They have finely and critically used works of World Systems theorists like Andre Gunder Frank (1966) and Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) to explain how global processes like colonialism, carried forward by the world's core areas, were dictating and changing peripheral, marginalized and colonized societies' cultures and their socio-economic structures. Mintz (1986) for example, through his historical study of sugar showed how emerging consumption patterns in the 'modern core' areas were encouraging slavery, worsening labor conditions and pay, dictating migration patterns, shifting agrarian cultures to plantation economies and changing family structures in colonized, peripheral areas.

Thus, they showed how no community or tribe was 'isolated' but had connected histories. Colonialism indeed set in motion what were earlier regional inter-linkages into more world-wide processes and consequences, bringing what was believed to be 'primitive', 'frozen in time' societies into purviews of connected historical understandings. "The global processes set in motion by European expansion constitute their history as well. There are thus no "contemporary ancestors," no people without history, no peoples - to use Levi-Strauss's phrase - whose histories have remained cold." (Wolf 2010: 385). Colonialism, thus, forms an important breakthrough event to understand connected histories and establish the fact that everyone and every society, have a history. This was critical for my research wherein environments that are otherwise imagined as 'isolated' ecologies were severely impacted by colonial British policies and politics.

The chars were largely dictated by colonial Lockean beliefs of 'wastelands' and 'permanent cultivation' such that to make these otherwise 'liminal and unstable' (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013, Lahiri-Dutt 2014) wastelands more productive and permanently cultivated, the British

encouraged the migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal who introduced jute to the chars. Plantations of jute in chars of Bengal and Assam facilitated by such labor migration were then shaping jute markets in Britain and Scotland. (Saikia 2020, Goswami 2010). Post-independence, Assam's political landscape continues to be dictated by xenophobia and islamophobia against the descendants of such migrants from then East Bengal. Thus, ethnographies of chars as environments are ought to be studied historically. This is to understand how these landscapes and the communities inhabiting them have been shaped by global political and economic processes and inter-linkages while they too were shaping European politics and markets in the process.

Thus, even today when marginalized communities like Bengali Muslims of chars are called as people without histories by majoritarian forces, our arguments should be guided (and as has been) by Wolf or Mintz's understanding of such connected histories. Thus, just like Wolf or Mintz suggests, this research critically looks at boundedness, be it in terms of units (nation-state framework) or as a philosophy and celebrates the fluidity or "fuzziness of boundaries" (Eriksen 2010: x), particularly in 'liminal, hybrid' ecologies like chars at borderland India. These chars and the char-dwellers continue challenging the fixity of nation-states (hence authority) through the mobility of people, goods, life-stock, cultures etc. across the state defined boundaries. Malini Sur (2020, 2021) shows the fluidity of borderland spaces and infrastructures in North-east India where ideas of 'legality-illegality', 'citizenship', 'state authority' are all in a flux and fuzzed by cross-border exchanges, kinship relations, relations with security forces as people map out their own rhythms and routes.

This celebration of fluidity and drawing inter-connections as said by Wolf, is driven by Marxist imagination. Though I move beyond Marx, this research is informed by Marxian frames of analysis

for at the core of Marxist thought, it allows one to disrupt boundedness and appreciate relationality. “For him, production embraced at once the changing relations of humankind to nature, the social relations into which humans enter in the course of transforming nature, and the consequent transformations of human capability. The concept is thus not merely economic in the strict sense but also ecological, social, political, and social-psychological. It is relational in character.” (Wolf 2010: 21).

Environmental historians in India have acknowledged the problematics of bounded categories that were particularly established during colonial rule such as forestlands (reserved/protected), wastelands, grazing lands, agrarian lands etc. They have shown how colonial politics and history writing have failed to observe the fluidity and inter-linkages between communities that transverse among these categories of landscapes and are also dependent on each other. Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2000) show how communities practiced both forestry and shifting agriculture and that pastoral grazing communities often depended on market interactions with agriculturalists. Thus, they propagate for ‘agrarian environments’ where the interlinkages between bounded categories are made visible and agrarian worlds are seen in conjunction with the larger biophysical and social environment which are inclusive of both the urban and the non-urban, the arable and the non-arable, etc. (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000: 6).

This critique has also arisen (and very rightly so) because environmental histories of India have been written without questioning the bounded colonial categories such that agrarian historians like Ranajit Guha (1982) focused entirely on agrarian systems and property relations without putting primary attention to the relations that agrarian worlds shared with other colonial categories like forests, grazing lands etc. Having said that, my research is informed by Guha’s extensive and brilliant study of the Permanent Settlement Land Revenue System in Bengal, particularly to

understand the colonial governance's obsession with permanency and private property with regards to relations with land. Guha historicizes the colonial state's understanding of how individual property rights and permanency, or stability of those rights can lead to increase in revenue and settled agrarian expansion in Bengal. This 'principle of property' (Guha 1982: 17) guiding governance was important because settled agriculture was also seen in the light of civilization, development, etc. Thus, the colonial government exactly replicated the system in England when it dictated colonized people's relation to land through ideas of permanency, civilization, and individual private property. (Guha 1982: 18). Though desire for permanent and private land relations guided the colonial state's decision to encourage migration of East Bengali Muslim peasants to the chars, chars presented unique difficulties for the state for permanent land ownership to be developed because of the unstable, fluid nature of chars. The colonial state formulated the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Act, 1825 (BADA) that specially guided the land relations in char areas. Though BADA was meant to address the unstable nature of chars, the basic principle guiding it was permanency and individual property rights, wherein provisions were made for an individual to attain permanent rights over a piece of land, even submerged land, until one continues paying a fixed revenue to the state. This changed land relations that earlier communities had with chars, wherein chars were used for temporary cultivation, communal grazing or herding before the arrival of East Bengali Muslim peasants. In fact, for a long time, even migrant Bengali Muslim peasants relinquished their annually leased lands. (Saikia 2020, Goswami 2010, Lahiri-Dutt 2014). At present, chars in Assam are still ruled by the spirit of BADA, 1920 Act and char-dwellers have permanent, individual property rights over their lands in chars till they continue to pay taxes on their lands. The continuous deposition of taxes even on submerged (hence unused) lands, often for years, have made char-dwellers more pauperized. The growing scarcity of land for

char-dwellers have made their migration more frequent and sudden and many in fact, are spending lakhs buying government lands ‘illegally’ from brokers.

This has also impacted the char-dweller’s traditional relations with water. Because unlike land, tropical rivers with their unique drainage, sedimentation, flow etc. were difficult to be controlled and made in the image of temperate rivers and hence were looked down upon by the colonial state. This led to marginalization of communities like char-dwellers who were inherently depended on water and rivers. This privileging of land and changing people’s relation to land by making it permanent, private and a symbol of civilization, something that Guha (1982) has extensively talked about, has also sharpened the dichotomy of land and water, making them distinctly separate as analytical categories. This skews up understanding of hybrid, liminal ecologies like chars wherein it is inherently difficult to categorize them as entirely land or part of water (submerged/eroded). (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013). This strict separation of land and water and making land productive while controlling water was done by the colonial state through techniques of irrigation (Gilmartin 1994, 2003; Gidwani 2000, 2002) and embankments. (Saikia 2019, Goswami 2010, Lahiri-Dutt 2014, Dewan 2021).

### *1.2 Agrarian studies, forest studies: Environmental History writing in India*

In fact, environmental history writing in India that was influenced by the existence of agrarian studies literature, was also being guided by the literature around colonial techniques of irrigation, canal, embankments and dam building. David Gilmartin (1994, 2003), while studying the canal irrigation systems in the Indus Valley of Punjab, makes a gripping comment on colonial statecraft. For him, the colonial state was introducing canal irrigation systems not just to increase agrarian



productivity and hence economic revenue but also for making the colonized ‘civilized’ and introducing them to the imperial scientific political discourse or the scientific imperial empire. (Gilmartin 1994: 1133, 1134). However, Gilmartin (1994) noted that this scientific discourse was embedded in the local context of ‘custom’ and ‘community’ wherein traditional *chher* labor was used by the British administration for building canals.

Gilmartin (2015) in his work, *Blood and Water* examines more deeply how concepts such as state, community and environment are intricately connected when he looks at irrigation projects developed by the British in the Indus Valley basin. Through a narrative of controlling water and land settlement, he shows the complex layers of colonial statecraft wherein he understands how irrigation projects were not just for water control but also for gaining state legitimacy. And in this project of gaining state legitimacy, the colonial state not only changed the natural environment, but it also changed structures of community. He shows how the British understood community as a) communities of production and b) communities of blood.

“The first vision of community was one predicated on the autonomous actions of man on nature, with man conceptualized as a rational actor standing apart from nature and turning it into a productive benefit....yet it was a vision also imbued with the imagination of a common community of producers – a community rooted in the common need of all producers to adapt to nature’s unifying laws.” (Gilmartin 2015: 8).

Thus, this sense of community is rooted in ideas of controlling nature and extracting resources from it through scientific mastery. The other understanding of community comes from outside the productive relations, particularly to escape the destabilizing powers of capitalism. “This alternative

vision of community – generated not by man’s rational, productive action upon nature but rather by...nature’s nonproductive impact upon man...” (Gilmartin 2015: 9). Gilmartin shows how in their pursuit of making communities of production by altering nature (irrigation projects), the colonizers transformed communities of blood too – changing the customs, communal hierarchies and ultimately generating more internal conflict amongst the colonized. British politics on the environment, particularly building infrastructure to control and profit and make communities simply communities of production (char-dwellers as cash crop/jute producers, permanent cultivators, etc.) completely changed communities’ traditional relationship with the environment (land-water) and their relationship with each other. This is an idea that has informed my thesis and I look at this in detail in the chapters on boats and migration-environmental racism.

The building of embankments was again with the idea of controlling water and making land productive scientifically. The building of sluice gates or the colonial efforts of measuring the amount and quality of silt, particularly in char areas, show how the colonial state wanted to scientifically control nature and make it a resource. However, scholars (Saikia 2020, Goswami 2010, Dewan 2021) have shown how it completely disrupted traditional experiences of flood, led to ‘*jalabaddho*’ (water-logging), more destructive floods and rapid erosion, leading to quick rise of riverbed and rampant change in the river’s courses. (Dewan 2021).

The other important entry point for understanding an environmental history of India has been forests. Sumit Sarkar (2014) notes the enthusiasm for writing about forests in colonial India was also because of the strong interest, investment and exploitation of the colonial state when it came to forests. The 1878 Forest Act that created the ‘reserved’ and ‘protected’ forests categories, allowed the colonial state to increase lands under the reserved forests areas and gave sole monopoly to the state over those lands – “The Forest Department thus came to control about one-

fifth of the British Indian land area making it the biggest land manager in the area.” (Sarkar 2014: 80). Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil (1992, 1995) through their writings, have attacked the colonial state’s ‘conservationist’ argument by citing how forests legislations were framed purely for economic and political benefits. However, scholars like Sarkar (2014), Neeladri Bhattacharya (1998) and K. Sivaramakrishnan (1999) have carefully pointed out how environmental historians writing about forests allowed the existence of the forests/settled agriculture dichotomy to be maintained such that colonial expansion of settled agriculture in the name of ‘civilization/progress’ was seen by them as leading to fierce deforestation. Later studies that focus on the linkages between forests/pastures/farms/factories etc. have helped in understanding the holistic changes for they started with the basic premise that human’s relation with nature in any sphere and space is mediated with labor. (Bhattacharya 1998, Gidwani 2000).

The writings on the ‘scientific forestry’ schemes of the British wherein new forests with profitable trees were created and other lands were converted into agricultural lands showed how relations and inter-linkages between communities were changed while simultaneously some communities were prioritized over others. These critical writings on forests have enabled me to gauge into the colonial politics against nomadic pastoralism or a nomadic way of life. Arupjyoti Saikia (2014, 2020) has shown how with the migration and settlement of Bengali Muslims in chars, lands for grazing that were earlier available for traditional pastoral communities like the Nepali herders were decreasing day by day. This, along with the loss of chars for temporary cultivation for ‘native’ communities living in and around the chars completely changed relations between the incoming migrants and the communities living in Assam, repercussions of which we see even today. This was particularly visible in the violent eviction drive in Gorukhuti in 2021 when the right-wing state violently evicted Bengali Muslims citing ‘illegal settlement’ in grazing reserves, to which the

Nepali herding community extended support citing reasons of loss of traditional grounds for grazing.

Another learning from the literature on environmental history of forests is their intricate exploration on state-making since the state, be it the colonial or the post-colonial state, has been a constant against which commentaries were made. K. Sivaramakrishnan has made astute observations on state-making by endorsing the idea of a ‘political society’ (1999: 12) wherein he espouses for an understanding of the state which is intricately enmeshed in and have percolated into the civil society, without thinking of them as bounded entities. Forests again have been entry points for him to explain the process and mechanics of state-making in colonial and post-colonial India.

Sivaramakrishnan (1999) critiques Guha (1989, 1993) for forwarding an environmental history narrative which adheres to a nature and culture dualism and the “pre-occupation with colonialism as watershed in south Asian environmental history.” (1999: 13). He notes that both these characteristics were prevalent among a wide group of early environmental historians and political ecologists. He writes that by creating the concept of “ecological infrastructure” (1999: 13), Guha already bifurcates nature and society as two distinct and bounded entities. “In making this simple separation between nature as infrastructure and society as superstructure, Guha follows a dominant strand of US history which analyses nature and culture in ways that rarely examine the cultural politics of constituting the two categories.” (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 14). Sivaramakrishnan (1999) and Agrawal (1995) also critically look at the Systems Approach of Wolf (2010) that inspired writings of Guha (1989, 1990, 1993), Gadgil and Guha (1992, 1995) etc. and propagate instead for a mosaic approach to human ecology. This approach while looking at colonialism as a major disruptive event that changed several things – polity, economy, socio-cultures etc., did not

deny the importance of local ecological, socio-cultural, economic and political factors. They systematically showed how colonial state-making policies also met with abysmal failure because of local socio-political fabrics, with people working around systems and policies while simultaneously displaying their resistance and agency.

However, Guha (1993) in his later writings did recognize that despite colonial structures and policies, preindustrial ways of life of peasants, hunters-gatherers, pastoralists, etc. continued. He, thus, recognizes the influence of both American and French traditions within environmental history writing in India. While the former due to its European conquest has a disruptive history, the French due to lack of such disruptions, focus more on continuities. The Indian environmental history has a mix of both, and this history is overtly reflected in the critical environmental history writing of Sivaramakrishnan (1999), Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan (2006), Agrawal (1995), Gidwani (2000), etc. While I agree with Sivaramakrishnan and the rest about the importance of local socio-political and ecological factors, one cannot deny the massive disruptive and transformative event that colonialism was which is amply foregrounded in my research. The state-making tools of policies, censuses, maps and the scientific pedigree that colonialism brought in were unlike any other tools of political governance and had deep impacts on local contexts.

While acknowledging how the *Annales* or the *longue duree* tradition of writing total histories had influenced agrarian history writing in India and thus, inevitably had influenced the country's environmental history writing, Gagnil and Guha (1992, 1995) accurately projected the future direction of environmental history writing in India. They said that more regional histories of the environment would be written. The region is indeed the focal unit of analysis for subsequent environmental historians such as Sivaramakrishnan. And my research is informed by such unit of analysis too wherein the regional politics, economics and ecology have been understood both in

their linkages with global processes and interactions while deeply taking into account the local histories, politics and ecological factors such as Assamese nationalism, dominance of the local upper-caste Hindus, the ecological uniqueness of the Brahmaputra causing chars, building of embankments causing further floods, erosion while also displacing and creating a citizenship crisis for the marginalized Bengali Muslims in Assam. My study is deeply embedded in these regional interlinkages and uniqueness that equally shape the char-land people's politics. The regional is also important to be kept in mind as a unit of analysis because it allows the local or the marginalized to not be seen as 'victims' alone, highlighting the negotiations, maneuverings and outright contestations that they engage in, which makes the politics of state-making that much layered, complex and interesting as can be clearly seen in my chapters on the Weekly Bazar, Boats or even Mobile States.

The richness of perspective on state-making through the literature of environmental history is also because many of this literature was a response and a dialogue with the state projects of 'development' such as dam building etc. Thus, many environmental histories were written by being influenced from or in case of Guha (1993), influencing environmental movements. This literature revisited classic critical works on development by Arturo Escobar (2011) but were locally situated too. Guha critiqued these writings because they had undertones of moral righteousness attached to them and he argued that environmental history writing should be done simply with the purpose of expanding intellectual horizons of history. (1993: 124). Scholars like Amita Baviskar (1995), Mahesh Rangarajan (2006), Gunnel Cederlof, Sivaramakrishnan (2006), Arupjyoti Saikia (2020) etc. had contributed many writings as responses against dam-building, be it recording the Narmada Bachao Andolan in Gujarat or the Subansiri Dam Project in Assam, etc. Environmentalism played a big part in scholars engaging with environmental, political and

historical recordings and a lot of reflections were made on not just colonial state-making but post-colonial state-making as well.

### *1.3 Human-non-human interconnections and conservation debates*

Scholars like Mahesh Rangarajan (2006, 2014 co-edited with K. Sivaramakrishnan), Anna Tsing (2021), Radhika Govindrajan (2021) and Malini Sur (2020, 2021) look at global processes and mechanics such as functioning of world capitalism, colonial and post-colonial state-making, religious nationalism, citizenship and borders etc. by understanding the relational world of the humans with non-humans be it animals such as cattle and rhinoceros or plants such as mushrooms. Scholars like Arne Harms (2015, 2017), Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013), Naveeda Khan (2014, 2015), etc. have understood the liminal, hybrid and fluid landscapes and communities living in char-lands by continually keeping the focus on the river and its elements such as sand, clay, silt etc. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta's (2013) extensive analysis of char-lands in Bengal has shown how chars as ecologies question the age-old bifurcation of established categories such as nature/culture or land/water. They show how chars are lived realities and have undergone many changes due to politics of the colonial and the post-colonial state. They, thus, carefully excavate the networked world of the humans and non-humans as has been understood by the likes of Bruno Latour (1993). Their study is also a commentary on how boundedness as a concept can be challenged and how it undergoes changes in the peripheries, the edges of the world – not just ecological but also political edges, reflecting what Homi Bhabha (1994) said about culture and edges that edges can give birth to new hybrid and fluid cultures.

Thus, works by Khan (2014) which look at the layered cultures of char-dwellers in Bangladesh, show how the Muslim ecological thought is enmeshed with inter-species ideations. Placing the importance of dogs in Muslim char-dwelling world, Khan notes that the fates of dogs and *charuas* are inter-twined in that they are bound to the integrating and then the disintegrating earth. Just like dogs are fated to return back to the earth in a cyclical life that is well reflected in the myths of the char-dwellers, they too because of their constant migration (due to integration and then disintegration of the char-land, their homes), leave and then come back to the chars, again and again, to the point that they fear, they might at one point return back as ‘lesser-beings’ (emotionally, culturally and economically pauperized). She has beautifully traced char-dwellers’ historical attachments with the river and how such attachments and memories are getting ‘corrupted’ and changed with the change in the river – flow, depth, etc. (Khan 2015, 2016). This body of literature showing human-non-human inter-connections has guided my research in terms of understanding Assam’s char world which is equally relational and networked as can be seen in their connections with boats, rivers, fields, land, etc. This relational and networked world is celebrated in their traditional folksongs and festivals such as Ghassi, Pushura, etc. But as shown in my research, this networked world is changing as those traditions are increasingly disappearing and are getting replaced by majoritarian cultures.

Another important contemporary work on river-islands is Arne Harms’ (2015, 2017) study on the Gangetic deltas which looks at how rapid erosion has led to erosion of the political rights of island-dwellers, weakening their claim-making powers on the state. His body of work has helped me to reflect on the impact of environmental factors such as erosion and floods on not just land but also the citizenship of Bengali Muslims in the char-lands of Assam who because of their erosion induced migration are often easily suspected or tagged as ‘illegal immigrants’ by locals or the caste



Hindu dominant state. Annu Jalais (2005, 2007) through her work on the deltaic region of the Sunderbans has shown how the lower-caste Bengali Hindu migrants from Bangladesh living in the temporary, fluid chars were brutally evicted, many among them being shot at and killed by the Left government in West Bengal, an event that is infamously remembered as the ‘Marichjhapi massacre’ in 1979. Talking about “anthropomorphisation of tigers”, (2007: 339) she shows how the Marichjhapi massacre that was done in the name of conservation of tigers, has changed the relations between tigers and island dwellers as people believed that after the massacre, the tigers had become more violent and man-eating. Calling themselves worthless ‘tiger-food’, Jalais’s narrative also shows how precarious island dwellers’ relation has been with the state, to the extent, that at some point in the narrative, the state too seems like the metaphorical changed tiger who feeds upon the lower-caste char-dwellers.

Bringing the conservation debate closer to the local context of Assam, brilliant works have been done by environmental historians such as Arupjyoti Saikia (2009), anthropologists Sanjay Borbora (2017), Anwesha Dutta (2018, 2019), etc. who have shown how the colonial state or the present post-colonial majoritarian state has deployed state tools and machinery to evict Bengali Muslims migrating from eroded chars to the nearby grazing reserves or National Parks while raising questions on their citizenship. They also talk about how the marginalized evictees work around such a state. Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan’s (2006) edited volume raised the concept of ‘ecological nationalism’ to discuss how ecological or environmental protection demands have induced ‘homeland’, ‘nativity’ and belongingness debates. In contexts of marginalized tribal identities, such concepts of ‘ecological nationalism’ have allowed them to use their traditional attachment of cultures and livelihoods to their land, to fight against a capitalistic state. However, I have used their concept of ‘ecological nationalism’ to propound a case of majoritarian,

xenophobic, ‘sons of soil’-exclusive-nativity, wherein the marginalized Bengali Muslim squatters are evicted using the sentiment of them being ‘illegal immigrants’ and polluting the National Parks or grazing reserves. In fact, I argue that ecological nationalistic narratives referred by the dominant state and society are propagating environmental racism wherein the Bengali Muslims are thought of as not just producing waste but them being waste in themselves. (Pulido 2000, 2015, 2017; Kurtz 2009; Melamed 2011, 2015; Hage 2017, Butt 2020; Wright 2021).

## 2. Conceptual block II: VIOLENCE

The more than decade-long marginalization, harassment and stereotyping inflicted by the majoritarian Assamese state and society on the Bengali Muslims is critical to look at and hence, violence is another conceptual block that I have used not simply to historicize the char-dwellers’ contemporary pauperization and pain but also to understand their everyday relation and experiences with the state. I have understood this violence as collective, structural, everyday and often symbolic as it has been conceptualized by scholars such as Charles Tilly (2000, 2003), Giorgio Agamben (2005), E. P. Thompson (1960), Frantz Fanon (2005), Pierre Bourdieu (1991), Paul Brass (1997, 2006a, 2006b), etc.

### *2.1 Collective, structural and total violence*

Tilly (2000, 2003) has written extensively on collective violence rejecting notions that collective violence is simply a summation of individual ‘hooligan’ behavior occurring in ‘less-developed’, ‘third-world’ countries. He while elaborating on each ‘type’, combined relational, behavioral and ideal imaginations of violence wherein he understands collective violence being influenced by

ideas, though not solely depending on them and that such violence goes beyond simply individual violence. He believes that simply socially controlled motives and socially created opportunities are not enough to drive collective violence, one should also understand the changes in relations between collectives that can spark such massive violence. He talks about Sudhir Kakar (1996) who writes on riots between Hindus and Muslims in Hyderabad, India to show how Kakar combines ideal, behavioral and relational understandings of causation of collective violence. Thus, Tilly looks at collective violence in a holistic manner and though his focus has been on collective violence at the level of nation-states, he does occasionally look at gang-violence or collective violence at a micro-level. But all violence for him is collective –“politically driven and understood interaction among groups.” (Deutscher 2003: 276).

For scholars like Thompson (1960) and Fanon (2005), violence is not just collective, it is also structural and embedded deeply in capitalism and colonialism as systems of production and governance. Thompson directed attention to the everyday violence of the labor force in the capitalistic market and dismissed earlier notions of violence as simply a ‘criminal’ sub-culture or that violent protests by labor force were mere individual episodes of ‘outburst’. He understood violence on the labor force as structural and characteristic of unequal economic and political system of capitalism with revolution (which can be violent) as the means to achieve the Society of Equals. (Thompson 1960). He understands transition to this Equal Society as a culmination of continuous conflicts at every facet of life in a capitalistic society and these conflicts, may be violent, but are always fought on the principles of “interests, values, priorities, ideas....” (Thompson 1960: 12). But for him, revolution and revolutionary strands can co-exist within capitalistic surges as he writes,

“It is not a case of either this or that. We must, at every point, see both – the surge forward *and* the containment...the strength of trade-unions *and* their parasitism upon capitalist growth...The countervailing powers are there, and the equilibrium (which is an equilibrium *within capitalism*) is precarious. It could be tipped back towards authoritarianism. But it could also be heaved *forward*, by popular pressures of great intensity to the point where the powers of democracy cease to be countervailing and become the active dynamic of society in their own right. This is revolution.” (Thompson 1960: 15, italics in original).

This emphasis on co-existence and smaller events of conflict or decision-making which later can be supported by thousands, leading to a revolutionary agitation is an extremely critical thought within Marxist ideology. This has allowed my research to reflect on the fact that smaller acts of conflict in the everyday, initiated by the Bengali Muslims, be it the ‘Miya Poetry Movement’ or naming their ‘*jonogoshthi*’ (community) or even direct confrontation with the state as seen in the case of the Weekly Bazar can be vouched as successful and necessary conflicts, even though they have not yet changed whole structures of oppression. Besides, Thompson’s notion of violence has enabled me to frame that the decades-long oppression of Bengali Muslims in Assam has solid economic grounds – the continued production and exploitation of cheap landless Muslim labor go on to feed the urban economy as will be seen in the chapter on migration and environmental racism.

Fanon’s writings on colonial violence (2005) have also helped me to inform my research on structures of violence, seeds of which were sown by the colonial power. These structures were continued by the post-colonial state in Assam. The colonial tools of census, maps, etc. created permanent majorities-minorities and with it there persisted a continued demographic anxiety churning out violence till today. For Fanon, colonialism was based on “total violence”, meaning it

was violence at an economic, social, cultural, political and ecological levels, which was clearly visible in India and more particularly in my context, Assam. The physical and cultural trauma that sustain colonialism dehumanize the colonized ‘other’ such that, the ‘other’ is robbed of a sense of self. (Fanon 2005). Such colonial violence has been systematically carried forward by the dominant caste Hindu Assamese wherein the Bengali Muslims are reduced to things or animals – ‘ants’, ‘vultures’, ‘termites’ etc. They can be increasingly seen as eventually giving up their own distinct socio-cultural identities to assimilate into the larger Assamese identity.

However, as opposed to Fanon (2005) who believed that only through counter-violence the colonized oppressed reclaim back their sense of self, the Bengali Muslims through the ‘Miya Poetry Movement’, the naming of them as a distinct community or their demand for a ‘Miya Museum’ have made attempts to claim back their humanity and define their selves or distinctness without resorting to violence of any kind.

Structural violence was also looked at by Agamben (1998) wherein he understood exclusion as the very basis of violence during states of exception. (Gupta 2012). Looking at the German Nazi state, he showed how the Jews were excluded as legal subjects of the state and hence, were stripped of every right and were reduced to ‘bare life’ – that in itself was a violence of the highest order. His figure of the ‘homo sacer’ nuanced Michel Foucault’s argument of bio-power and bio-governance by showing that instead of being killed, some bodies are just left to die. (Agamben 1998). Agamben’s formulation of this figure along with his spatial imagination of the ‘Camp’ where the state of exception materializes, immensely helped my understanding of the violence on the Bengali Muslims, particularly with regard to their citizenship crisis. Most households in the chars had doubtful voters (DV), those whose citizenship is put under the scanner and who must prove their citizenship in the quasi-judicial courts called Foreigner Tribunals. The DVs along with declared

foreigners are kept in detention camps in the worst of conditions. Because of the NRC, apart from the existing six detention camps, ten other detention camps have been approved to be built in Assam to house 'illegal immigrants'. 1.9 million were excluded from the final NRC that was published in 2019. While cases of minorities committing suicide due to NRC anxiety do the rounds in the newspapers, many have already perished in the detention camps. This shows how 'bare life' is continually produced by the majoritarian state in Assam without the state being made accountable.

Agamben's take on structural violence and his understanding of bio-power was brilliantly used by Akhil Gupta (2012) who does his ethnographic work on the violence of poverty in India. Gupta notes how this violence of poverty suffers from a paradox such that even after the poor being included in welfare schemes that are introduced by the state for them, in practice they are left out. He sees that the state's exclusion of the poor is based on arbitrariness, but this arbitrariness is structurally produced. He thus looks at the linkages between violence and caring, wherein despite inclusion and genuine caring of the state, the poor are reduced to bare life in India, which is largely due to arbitrary decisions of a bureaucratic state.

Gupta looks at structural violence that is reflected culturally, such as, in the corruption narratives of the bureaucracy. He, through studying the bureaucracy, explores how the tools of structural violence (corruption, inscription and governmentality) are put to use. However, he is equally concerned with how the structures are mocked at and reversed continually in their everyday existence. This cultural approach to structural violence has enabled me to look at my own research critically, wherein despite violence that is embedded in structures, the people are not reduced to complete 'victims'.

Another scholar to look at violence at the macro level (nation-states) was Anthony Giddens (1985). He used a Weberian understanding of state monopoly over the use of 'legitimate' violence and control over territory to establish various linkages among different types of violence within modern nation-states. Giddens differentiates older kinds of war from the 'industrialized war' such as the First or the Second World War wherein capitalistic systems were intricately involved in violence between nation-states. Thus, military violence is also intricately involved with the violence of the labor force who are being used in factories to produce machinery/supplies that support or are used in such wars. The other violence is surveillance that is used to control dissent and keep workers serving the military violence in obedience. Thus, within modern nation-states, all violence is intricately linked - military violence, industrial violence, attack on democratic values and even environmental violence. Hence, he calls for a critical theory that combines them all – one where peace movements, environmental movements and labor movements have to be fought collaboratively, keeping in mind the inter-linkages.

## *2.2 Communalism and everyday violence*

The literature on communalism, particularly focusing on India, has also contributed to my understanding of violence against the Bengali Muslims by a caste Hindu Assamese dominant state and society. Paul Brass (1997, 2006a, 2006b) has extensively looked at various kinds of collective violence between religiously opposing groups in India such as riots, curfews, etc. and understands that riot production and control are inter-related for they both depend on political will and police administration. (Brass 2006a: 335). Often minorities (which in most cases are Muslims) suffer more violence through the state-imposed mechanisms of controlling violence such as curfews. In fact, riots for him have become more organized, deadly and have spread far beyond what

traditionally each community would attack in. He, drawing a co-relation between a strong state and worse riot violence, has enabled my research to understand that with the coming of a right-wing state with more centralized control, there is increased violence against the Bengali Muslims in Assam. By contextualizing violence in northern India's Uttar Pradesh, Brass shows that in cases of collective violence such as riots, they are "but the product of a process of narrative construction." (Mehta 1998: 387). He focuses on the narrative construction or the "storyness of the truth" (Mehta 1998: 388) around events such as violence and shows how rumors are important tools of power during events of violence as heroes, martyrs and victims are created. (Brass 2006b).

Gyan Pandey (1990) has shown how colonial official narratives solidified constructed categories and hence differences to divert attention away from real causes of conflict. He showed how the colonial official narratives that read violent events as 'riots' framed them as age-old Hindu-Muslim rivalry (solidifying their differences further) instead of conflicts arising due to moral economic transformations brought about by the colonial government. (Pandey 1990). Talking about the history of the terminology of 'communalism', he shows how nationalists in India adopted the colonial term without much question, which was extremely problematic. Just like Kakar (2000), he too shows how such terminologies make identities permanent and bounded and violence gets constructed based on these identities, such that instead of over-lapping issues, identities and concerns, people start focusing more on differences and hatred.

Kakar (2000), however, understands transformations of behavior during collective violence such as riots as stemming from moral psychological factors. The psychoanalytic school saw the violence between Hindus and Muslims as a necessary enmity in order to define their own identities while also as an outlet or "reservoirs...for hateful feelings for which no clear-cut addressee is available." (Kakar 2000: 881). His understanding of those who commit violence during riots (in this case



Hyderabad) is that that they are not psychopaths but those who firmly believe that their identities are under threat which includes “social dislocation, disappearance of traditional work identities, discrimination by the state...” (Mehta 1998: 384-385). He starkly differentiates between communal and religious identity and shows that when the communal identity takes foreground wherein a person simply focuses on the differences with the opposing community’s people, then it is arrival of the time of Kali, that is communal violence. However, there is a morality to this violence too since rape is looked down upon by all communities even during communal violence since after violence, these communities needed to live together, and rape makes any kind of socio-economic interactions or cohabitation impossible. (Kakar 2000: 892). Thus, Kakar looks at violence as both disruptive events (riots as special time of Kali) as well as in the everyday when communities continue living together.

Veena Das (2007) critically looks at Kakar’s proposition by saying that such communal violence creates new boundaries and divisions that are not that easily crossed or interacted with. Das (2007) through her study on both Partition violence and Hindu-Sikh riots in the 1980s Delhi has shown that to understand the workings of violence, particularly collective and structural violence, one needs to dive into the everyday and locate how people live through and alongside violence. The new boundaries that violence draws are mastered, domesticated, lived through and can only be located in the fabrics of the everyday which Das understands as eventful. Thus, it is important to understand the silences, the sub-text and the often invisible lurking of everyday violence before they become eventful in the sense of ‘newspaper headlines’. Everyday understanding of violence wherein violence co-exists alongside interactions as propagated by Das, Kakar and Brass has been crucial for my research to locate how historically opposed communities that is the Bengali Muslims and the caste Hindu Assamese continue living alongside as well as interacting with each

other despite sharing animosity and violent pasts. This was particularly visible in the politics of the Pahar where the caste Hindu Assamese were in minority, but also can be seen in the cohabitation and everyday interaction of the two opposed communities in Assam. Thus, the absence of eventful violence such as riots, etc. is not an indication of a lack of violence. The renewed perspectives that one achieves on violence if one looks at ways of negotiating and living with differences, dangers and hatred, particularly by marginalized groups is very illuminating, which have been ethnographically highlighted too in my research.

Living with and alongside violence in the everyday has also been looked at by Makiko Kimura (2003, 2013) who analyzes violence closer to my context of writing when she talks about the Nellie Massacre. She looks at both the Bengali Muslim ‘victim’ families and the Tiwa tribal ‘perpetrators’ along with the leaders of the Assam Movement, during which the infamous Nellie massacre happened where thousands of Bengali Muslims were brutally massacred by neighboring Tiwa villagers. What Kimura brilliantly noted is how the sharing of spaces by ‘victims’ and perpetrators can then shape the political subjectivities of each, but more so the oppressed. She notes that ‘victims’ of violence who continue to live in spaces of violence with people who have killed their families, friends, etc. often chose to forget or be selective about remembering that violence, and hence as evoked by Das (2007), it becomes crucial to understand the silences of the everyday. Kimura, just like Fanon (2005), Brass (1997), and Kakar (1996), shows that violence goes on to shape or transform collective identities of people. However, she notes that depending on the socio-economic and political conditions of the marginalized, they chose “whether or not to pursue their own identity” (Kimura 2003: 238). She believes that the Bengali Muslims have simply chosen to assimilate and do not have the power to mobilize themselves into a distinct identity or assert their distinct identity openly. It is here that I differ with Kimura to show that collective and structural

violence suffered over time, compel and often empower the marginalized to assert their distinct identities. However, this assertion of distinctiveness by the ‘Miya Muslims’ (Bengali Muslims) is done while wanting to still be part of the larger Assamese community. This has been reflected through the ‘Miya Poetry Movement’, the naming of their ‘*jonogoshthi*’ (community) and them demanding for a Miya Museum, all of which I explore in my research.

### 3. Conceptual Block III: STATE

The other conceptual block that has been a fulcrum to thinking through my research is the state. Some of the sub-plots through which I have tried to look at my research are the everyday presence of the state, the situatedness of the state in particular spaces and time-periods, the enmeshing of the state within society, the affective understanding of state procedures and understanding the state through infrastructure be it the bureaucracy or materialities such as documents, etc. Though a lot of my foundational understanding of the state and its way of functioning has been influenced by Marxist writings, particularly on the capitalist state, cultural perspectives on the state have also significantly contributed to my knowledge of the state that I encountered on the field.

#### *3.1 State in bifurcation*

Most scholars have understood the state in bifurcated terms – the state idea and the state practice. (Abrams 2006; Mitchell 1991, 2006; Ferguson 1994; Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1973; Migdal 1988, 2001). The state idea is the imagination, the ideology of the state that most scholars believe is non-fragmented and remains strong (Kaviraj 2010) while the state practices are fragmented and vary according to varied time and places. (Ferguson 1994). A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in his Preface

to the *'African Political Systems'* (1940) has said how the concept of the state should be removed from political analysis and should be replaced by concepts like governance which he found as adequate to understand political systems. The concept of the state, he believed, added to the mystification of governance systems.

Phillip Abrams (2006) echoed Radcliffe-Brown's views in the sense that it gets difficult to study the state for reasons such as inherent difficulties in accessing information about the state when it wishes to shroud itself in official secrets. He proposed that one should instead abandon "the state as a material object of study whether concrete or abstract while continuing to take the idea of the state extremely seriously." (2006: 122). Thus, his principal concern with the state was the state's ideological function of making the illegitimate legitimate. The state as a system for him involved "institutionalized practice" (Mitchell 2006: 169), while it is the state idea that constructs narratives surrounding state practices and masks actual practices or the real ways that the state as a system function on the ground. Therefore, he asks political analysts to look for spaces where the state does not exist rather than where it does, to avoid the illusions and understand the state as it is actually functioning on the ground.

Timothy Mitchell (1991, 2006) critiques Abrams by saying that instead of clarifying distinctions of state-system and state-idea, one needs to historicize them. "The state-idea and the state-system are better seen as two aspects of the same process. To be more precise, the phenomenon we name "the state" arises from techniques that enable mundane material practices to take on the appearance of an abstract, nonmaterial form." (Mitchell 2006: 170). For Mitchell, there existed no distinctions between the state and the society or the state as an idea or as a system or even the state as real or illusionary. He believed that such distinctions are constructed, legitimated and are survived by

what he calls the “state effect” (Mitchell 2006: 181) and scholars need to historically understand how such a modern state came about to be.

Such distinctions of the state-system and the state-idea were also an under-current in Marxist writings such as in the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. Gramsci (2006) while talking about the concept of ‘hegemony’ shows that the state needs hegemonic ideologies to control and make people compliant without using brute force to the point that systems of coercion should look like freedom and all the individuals imagine and view things similarly. This state which he calls an “ethical state” (Gramsci 2006: 78), is one that uses various means to make people serve the interests/ideas of the ruling class. For Gramsci, there still exists differentiated public or private institutions (material structures) through which consent for the state-idea is generated and the ruled mass is tried to be made into a unitary organism. Althusser (2006) too understood the state in bifurcated terms when he talked about how Ideological State Apparatuses, that is the *material infrastructures of state*, contributed to reproducing *the ideology of the ruling class*, which is in turn the ideology of the state.

Another important Marxist contribution to formulations of the state is the debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas. Miliband (1973) uses empirical evidence to understand how the state reproduces or furthers the interests of the capital. For him, the state apparatus is comprised of ‘inter-personal’ relations of various groups comprising the apparatus as well as inter-personal relations between individuals of various classes and individuals of state apparatuses. (Poulantzas 1969: 70). Poulantzas critiques Miliband on his reduction of the state to the relations and behavior of the members of the state apparatus and understands that the state instead is the “factor of cohesion of a social formation and the factor of reproduction of the conditions of production of a system.” (Poulantzas 1969: 73). Thus, unlike Miliband, who showed that the members of the

capitalist class often directly participate in the state apparatus, Poulantzas believed that it is when the ruling capitalist class do not participate directly in the state apparatus and keep themselves separate from the “politically governing class” (Poulantzas 1969: 73) that they best serve their interest. My ethnographic research showed how the ruling class which is the upper-caste, upper-middle class, Assamese Hindu, both directly and indirectly participates in the state apparatus in various capacities. It is through such participation that it reproduces not just the relations of production (where the ‘Miya Muslims’ provide the cheapest of labor) but also the ideological dominance of ‘*jatiyotabaad*’ (Assamese nationalism).

Keeping in mind these discussions surrounding a state in bifurcation, this thesis is influenced by such ideations. This thesis, in several parts, works from an understanding of a state in bifurcation. However, the ethnography shows how such strict bifurcations collapse on the ground. Besides, the research does not espouse the dominance of one over the other – the state idea and its practices feed into each other and shape each other’s life, as can be seen in the following chapters.

### *3.2 State-society dynamics*

This research has also benefitted from the debates surrounding the distinction and separation of the state-society dynamics. Joel Migdal (2001), who uses the Bourdieun concept of the ‘field of power’ (multi-dimensional interactions and relationships determining who dominates) to understand the state, brings forward the ‘state-in-society’ approach which again views the state in dual, paradoxical terms of a state ‘image’ which is coherent and unified as opposed to practices which are fragmented. However, Migdal believes that the state practices of loosely built networks and organizations ally with civil society groups outside, that influence or change the state image

too. Akhil Gupta (1995, 2012) talks of ‘blurred boundaries’ between the state and society when public officials use outside state spaces to conduct official and statist businesses. Brokers, or other non-state actors, are important mediators and often penetrate state-society boundaries and make them fluid. Over-time, state images of being the rule-maker and society as the rule-receiver have changed contextually. Scholars have ethnographically shown how the state and the non-state merge as state actors allow or actively participate in promoting ‘illicit’ activities, breaking these boundaries. (Schneider and Schneider 1999). Barbara Harris-White (n.d.) talks about a state that is formal and one that is a ‘shadow state’ which is largely visible in the sector of informal economy. The ‘shadow state’ that engages in corruption, tax exemptions, forced privatization of public assets etc. often uses the ‘formal state’ representatives such as bureaucrats, politicians, etc. to further its own agenda. These ‘private benefit providers’ of the informal economy that have grown because of failure of policies of the formal state then try to fill in the formal state with their kin and people. The state for such scholars is not unitary but “chaotic, incoherent assemblages” (Nugent 2007: 198) of multiple actors and organizations and this chaos arrives because of permeable, fluid boundaries between the state and society.

C. J. Fuller and John Harris (2001) while talking about the modern Indian state understood the permeability of the boundary, particularly because instead of remaining ‘faceless’, the lower levels of state apparatuses like the bureaucracy are thronged by ‘real faces’ with whom social relationships are built over-time. However, they also cautioned against over-emphasizing the permeability of this boundary because despite such permeations, the perception of the internal boundary remains. Because despite the permeations, the “myth of the state” (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 2) remains. In fact, this myth is often sustained by routinized bureaucratic procedures, documents (Hull 2012, Navaro-Yashin 2007, Mathur 2016) and infrastructures (Larkin 2013,

Harvey and Knox 2015; Knox 2017). In fact, often the myth is reproduced through them. (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 21). Michael Taussig (1997) calls this the ‘magic of the state’ wherein the state is fetishized and constructed as surreal through spectacles. My ethnographic work also establishes the fluid, permeable boundary between the state and society which is looked at through a relational and processual understanding of the state – for example, how ‘*mattobars*’<sup>20</sup> often are key mediators between the char-dwellers and the state officials or how they helped in the NRC process or how ASHA workers or community workers from the chars negotiate, bring information or spread awareness of government schemes or become part of the state health infrastructure, etc. The permeations of the state and the non-state wherein the state actively collaborates with non-state actors to promote ‘illicit activities’ are also elaborately looked at in the chapter on Weekly Bazars. However, despite everything, the ‘myth of the state’ or the state as an idea of being a unified, coherent and fantasized object remains which was reinforced through building bridges, or when the District Commissioner arrived in the chars or even through the NRC Project.

### *3.3 The contextual, affective state*

Research on the modern Indian state, particularly post-liberalization has provided significant insights for my work. One of the major works on the Indian state and class politics relationships has been of Pranab Bardhan (1984) who showed how three dominant propriety classes – industrial capitalists, rich farmers and the salariat all mobilize and acquire resources from the state that were meant for welfare schemes for the poor. This is done by each through their bargaining power.

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<sup>20</sup> Local char-dwellers who are economically well off and politically connected and hence, often provide or are approached to provide advice etc. to the poorer char-dwellers. Earlier, they also used to possess ‘lathiyal’ gangs (men with armed sticks) with the help of whom they occupied new chars or newly emerging chars ‘illegally’ through force; however, such practices are increasingly eroding.



Akhil Gupta and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2010) argue that post-liberalization, this argument by Bardhan holds no longer true, since clearly, the industrial capitalists now control all bargaining power. However, scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (2008), Kaviraj (2010), Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan (2010) argue that despite liberalization, the peculiar character of Indian democracy has forced the state to still spend on welfare schemes. This is largely because of the competitive electoral pressures since a large section of active voters in India come from the economically weaker sections. In fact, Kaviraj (2010), Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan (2010) believe that post-liberalization, the Indian state has become more decentralized and democratic with power being redistributed to the regional parties and federal states while local self-governance was empowered through the 33<sup>rd</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Panchayat Act. This body of literature is particularly crucial to understanding the working of populist politics for Indian state-making and how real welfare and empowerment are being currently eroded with the coming of a right-wing state in India and Assam. Populist politics such as the distribution of freebies have been crucial in the process of state-making in the peripheral borderland chars in Assam since poor Bengali Muslims have always been considered simply as vote-banks for parties. Voting for the char-dwellers is critical so that they are not included in the 'Doubtful Voters' List, which happens often because of their continuous displacement and migration (covered extensively on chapter on Mobile States and Migration-Environmental Racism). In such conditions, how do the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers still negotiate and uphold democracy and how are such powers of theirs getting eroded at the local level? These are questions, answers to which have been covered in this research. Thus, as David Nugent (2007) understands through his research on governing states in Peru, the state comprises of several governing processes that are responding to material and cultural forces that are located in time and space. Each specific context allows the development of a state that

shares certain uniqueness because they grow in response to such situated enmeshing of historical and contemporary processes. This is important to be kept in mind, as we understand the modern Indian state (in my case a majoritarian state embedded in a fluid, liminal and borderland environment) in a global, inter-linked and transnational scenario. (Ferguson 1994). Seminal ethnographic works like that of F. G. Bailey (1963) who looked at local levels of hierarchies and factions, situated in a world of caste discrimination and feudal relations in the small village of Bisipara in Orissa. He notes how such local hierarchies and relations change or interact with a newly modernizing independent Indian state to understand how contextual rootedness shape concepts such as state-making. Thus, understanding local processes and relations are critical to understanding the contextual functioning of states, including what becomes of concepts like state on the ground.

The literature on bureaucracy would say the same. Bureaucracy as understood by Max Weber (2006) is objective, status-based, hierarchical, dehumanized and is driven by rational-legal authority. However, ethnographic, located works on bureaucracy, particularly lower-level bureaucracy show that bureaucracies are machines for ‘social production of indifference’ (Herzfeld 1992) or violence (Das 2007). They are even responsible for the structural production of arbitrariness. (Gupta 2012). Nayanika Mathur (2016) just like Gupta (2012), showed that everyday working of bureaucracy in India is both mundane and affect-laden and that is largely because the way the state is practiced among lower level bureaucrats, brokers and local people diverges a lot from the way the state formulates itself through written laws, schemes on paper, etc. which was exactly what was established by James Ferguson (1994) in his study of the developmental state in Lesotho.

Laura Bear (2007, 2015) who looked at the modern Indian state at two different time-periods – one, at the cusp of a newly independent nation-state and the other, at the turn when the Indian state was welcoming more austerity politics and liberalization, also navigates to understand how the bureaucratic infrastructure, be it the railway bureaucracy in the *'Lines of the Nation'* (2007) or the ship/dockyard bureaucracy in the *'Navigating Austerity'* (2015), is far from being objective and dehumanized. Instead, they exist in an enmeshed network of caste, religion, community and nation. Bear (2007) talks about 'railway morality' which is a unique blend of *jati*, the British concept of pedigree and bureaucratic honor combined with the emotions of love and care. This 'railway morality' rules not just the railway bureaucracy but also the railway families and colonies, where bureaucrats, workers and their families weave new kinship and belongingness. Mathur (2016) elaborately understands the affective environments and the ways that bureaucracies and bureaucratic procedures in India both produce and embody which she terms as "*sarkari affect*". (pp.118). She looks at spaces such as government meetings, documents, etc. to understand how powerful '*sarkari affect*' is and how it is learnt and practiced. Such embodiment of affect by lower bureaucracies also produces a sense of awe and dignity among people for the '*sarkar*' or the state, that allows the state to gain legitimacy and control.

Documents, as understood by Mathur (2016), are another critical component of bureaucracies and particularly in the post-colonial states in South Asia. Documents keep alive or reproduce the state in everyday practice. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2007) while talking about 'make-believe papers' for Turkish-Cypriots shows how statist documents though written dryly, are interpreted affectively while also arousing a variety of emotions being "transacted in specific contexts of social relation." (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 81). Bureaucracies and state-making that have been studied through documents such as by Emma Tarlo (2003) or Matthew Hull (2012) in South Asia have shown how

the ‘official truths’ in files, ‘*parchis*’, ‘leaflets’ etc. exist alongside ‘unofficial truths’ and how common people often collaborate with lower bureaucracies to subvert the ‘official truths’ of the documents. This shows how documents were dealt and received with affective understanding that allowed such negotiations to occur. Hull (2012) talks about “graphic ideologies” (pp.14) that are contained by a variety of graphic artefacts that are in use and circulation within the Pakistani bureaucracy such as files, folders, *parchis*, maps, visiting cards, etc. He elaborates on the way they are perceived, stir emotions or even are used to control people’s perceptions of the state and their everyday interactions or behavior with the state.

In fact, scholars such as Ann Stoler (2007) showed how colonial state-making depended on state prescription and control of sentiments to control the colonized, including their own bureaucrats – deciding who should feel what, towards whom and in what amount. Such ‘affective states’ (Stoler 2007) are discussed by Begona Aretxaga (2003) who talks about how obedience is gained by states by making states an object of fear or what Judith Butler (1997) calls the ‘psychic life of power’. J. H. Jenkins (1991) echoes Aretxaga as she traces how the neo-colonial state controlled the Salvadoran people by making them believe that they were under threat from Marxist guerillas who were projected as objects of fear and hatred. This racialization of affect is well explored by U. Berg and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas (2015) who show how affect has been crucial in nation-building projects in Latin America such that non-white Latinos are infused with different emotions (“liable affect” (pp.654)) as opposed to whites (“empowering affect” (pp.654)), leading to undermined and privileged subjectivities respectively. Thus, looking at the state through the lens of affect, particularly its functioning amongst the lower bureaucracy or through the documents circulating, we see the complex web of relations, meanings and hierarchies under which the state as a concept emerges in the everyday life. Scholars such as Sur (2020, 2021) and Madeleine Reeves (2010),

who look at state-making in borderland areas, understand that legitimating the state's power requires affective dispositions and control.

This body of literature where we look at the state and state-making particularly through the lens of affect, has allowed me to understand the complex, layered webs of functioning of the state in borderland hybrid environments that are inhabited by marginalized 'othered' populations. And this has been extensively dealt with in all the chapters of my thesis. This has also allowed me to understand how concepts such as state and citizenship are reproduced and made visible not just through spectacular one-off events such as the NRC Project or the Namami Brahmaputra Festival (Weekly Bazar chapter) but also through routinized, affective bureaucratic procedures in the ordinary everyday where the char-dwellers engage in varied capacities with the state representatives be it with the Block Development Office or the Boat Clinic team. And of course, affective states allow the state to control people, but it is also about a continued conversation that involves caring and better understanding of marginalized char-dwellers by the state and vice-versa. Affective states, as understood and established in my research, engage in a state-society relationship that is beyond controlling and surveilling of populations. Understanding state-society relations through the lens of affect has allowed this research to locate pockets of continued negotiations or sometimes even direct resistance that people display while engaging with the state infrastructure or even with global economic development schemes, which Steven Gregory (2007) terms as 'infrapolitics'.

In fact, the literature on infrastructure has been crucial for my research since it actively deals with material infrastructure such as building of bridges, embankments, establishment of solar panels, boat clinics, documents, etc. and non-material infrastructure such as lower bureaucracies. I have particularly looked at infrastructure relationally, meaning, I understand that infrastructures are

embedded in society and hence shape and are shaped by context. The meanings, purposes and uses of infrastructure might change depending on spatio-temporal locations and people's positionalities. (Star 1999). In borderland societies, as argued by Edward Boyle and Sara Shneiderman (2020), state-making is also shaped through negotiations over infrastructure – that is interaction between “top-down geopolitics with ground-up aspirations.” (Boyle and Shneiderman 2020: 116).

This research has particularly gained a lot by looking at infrastructure be it material or non-material infrastructures from the lens of affect as has previously been mentioned with regard to bureaucracy or documents. Scholars such as Larkin (2013), Anand (2017), Hannah Appel (2018), Penny Harvey and Knox (2015) or even Gupta (2018) have shown how the intimacy and immediacy of infrastructures, in their ability to generate hope, fantasy or desire both constitute publics/subjects and evaluate the morality of the state. However, infrastructures through their presence, absence or in-betweenness (half-built infrastructure) can dictate access, cause eviction and aggravate problems, all of which can be termed as ‘infrastructural violence’. (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012). This has been amply demonstrated in my research.

Knox (2017) writing about roads, shows how disruptions or failures of infrastructure arouse despair, isolation and abandonment among the people. However, those disruptions can also lead to empowered affective responses such as protests. People can even remake or redefine the uses of those infrastructures which can change relations between the state and the society. Thus, each remaking the other in the process. This is reflected in my research when I talk about how though the infrastructural projects like the Boat Clinics, the SPV Solar scheme or the NRC (lower-level bureaucrats) use affect to control the char population, these infrastructures have equally been

worked around with by the *charuas*, bringing in new dimensions to the state-society relation in char-lands of Assam.

However, in borderland societies, infrastructures remain critical for state legitimacy and state presence. Infrastructures can shape people's subjectivities. This is shown by Nikhil Anand (2017, 2018) when he demonstrates how pressured water distributed through state pipes creates 'deserving subjects', graded citizens or a 'hydraulic public'. Hannah Knox (2017) also talks about this when she shows how infrastructures bring together the material and the political. Thus, in borderland char-lands that are often suspected as spaces harboring 'illegal immigrants', infrastructural projects such as building embankments, roads, bridges or the Boat Clinics and SPV Solar are partly done by the state to increase its presence and control.

#### 4. Conceptual Block IV: Theoretical framework - AFFECT

Theoretically, my research is guided by Affect Theory, and has gained a lot from feminist works on emotions. I have used the lens of affect to look at the various facets within hybrid and liminal ecologies of char-lands and their relationship to the state – be it boats as ethnographic objects, the bureaucratic and the documentary state, surveillance and notions of care existing together within 'Mobile Statist politics' such as Boat Clinics and Solar schemes, relationship of people with such statist infrastructures, or notions of belongingness and recognition. The lens of emotion/affect has also enabled me to understand the socio-cultural world of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers and their political anxieties surrounding citizenship, ethnicity, etc.

#### *4.1 Binaries: Emotion-Reason/Body-Mind*

One of the important issues that affect theorists bring to light is the quashing of the emotion versus reason binary. Baruch Spinoza, in fact, believes the centrality of affect in the production of thought. For him, for people to act and rise collectively, there must be an active collaboration of emotion and reason. One has to feel and feel actively and strongly. One has to “move from the passive experience of affect, the ‘sad passions’, even love in this case, to active joy.” (Ruddick 2010: 29). However, he believes that to move from ‘passive sadness’ to ‘active joy’, one has to deeply investigate all the passions, including sadness. One, he believes then, emerges as more reasonable and ready for emancipatory collective action. Thus, we can find how thought/reason or logos is intricately intertwined with emotion. Hence, Spinoza avoids (and rightfully so) the body-mind dualisms of Descartes-ian philosophy. Thus, affect for him, is not merely bodily, but it also involves thought. (Gatens 2014, Uhlmann 2020, Gregg and Seigworth 2010).

Spinozian philosophy is adequately supported by Gilles Deleuze (1994) who presents the concept of the ‘encounter’, where again the ideas of emotion/thought/body merge into each other. He wants people to engage and feel the bad emotions/sad passions when they encounter them, because he believes it is in the ‘violence of the encounter’ that one is forced to open up to new thoughts, even new politics. He presents the idea of the scream to capture that discomfort and the violence when one is forced to open up to new thinking— when our body is trying “to escape itself by means of itself...not simply waiting for something from the structure, it is waiting for something inside of itself...” (Deleuze 2003: 15). “The scream is a social act, the rendering visible of forces. It poses the problem at the level of sensation rather than resolving it – triggering an unhinging of faculties, a shock wave that reverberates through the system from sensibility to imagination to memory to thought.” (Ruddick 2010: 38).



Spinozian and Deleuze-ian understanding of the emotion/reason/body amalgamation, particularly Deleuze's understanding of the 'encounter' has helped my understanding of how lower levels of state bureaucracy, be it the NRC officials or the Boat Clinic staff that comprised mostly of the dominant caste Hindu Assamese, interacted with the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers and how those persistent encounters have in the process forced the state representatives from the dominant community to open up to new perceptions, thoughts or even politics towards the Bengali Muslims. It was the transaction of affectual worlds that allowed not just the state to impact society, but also the society to impact state.

Brian Massumi (1995) however, distinguished between affect and emotion to the point that he ended up producing the mind/body and emotion/reason dualisms. For Massumi, affect is more automatic, bodily, impersonal and without any intention or meaning while emotion is subjective, intentional and given meaning. Gatens (2014) writes that Massumi misunderstands Spinoza's devaluation of consciousness as the absence of thought. Affect, as understood by feminist scholars like Gatens (2014), Uhlmann (2020), Sara Ahmed (2014) and others, is deeply social and embedded in social formations and structures. Thus, just like feminist affect theorists like Ahmed, this research does not differentiate between affect and emotion and uses the terms interchangeably.

#### *4.2 Feminist affect writings: Addressing the political*

For feminist scholars, these binaries were also eye-pricking because it brought back gendered distinction of reason (men) versus emotion (women) that feminist scholars like Sherry Ortner (1974) have tirelessly tried to break. Feminist scholars have also critically looked at Patricia T. Clough's (2010) article. The article which heralded the incoming of an 'affective turn' as a turn to

bodily matter and phenomenon was critiqued by feminists saying that not only her article indicates that affect be understood as purely bodily but it also indicates that pre-1990s, there was no body of literature that talked about emotions. (Fisher 2016). Feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Spelman (1989) and Audre Lorde (1984) have written extensively on anger, framing it as a political emotion and the censorship that comes to its expression based on which gender is experiencing it. Lorde (1984) has connected it to racism and how black women live with and respond to racism via anger. Later, feminist scholars such as Amia Srinivasan (2018) take these conversations forward when she asks whose anger is apt? what about anger that is ‘unproductive’ or counterproductive? The fact that black women or marginalized women have to choose when and how much they could get angry is what she calls “affective injustice”. (pp. 127). Feminist scholars writing on emotions before the ‘affective turn’ were also not differentiating between reason and emotion. These scholars have shown how cognition and emotion are not different. In fact, emotions are directed with intentions, critiquing notions that emotional women act without any thought or intention. (Spelman 1989, Frye 1983, Campbell 1994).

The body has also been looked extensively by feminist biological writings (Donna Haraway 2016, Evelyn Fox Keller 1982) and have contributed a lot on materialist writings, which have been completely ignored by those who were claiming a new turn to bodily and materialist writings. (Ahmed 2008). But most importantly, feminist critiques of Massumi and Clough’s understanding of affect being simply bodily, spontaneous and without reason, come from the fact that it makes affect non-critical or more so apolitical. Hsieh (2008) notes that by making affect as spontaneous and simply bodily, Massumi fails to explain “how affects can be manipulated, how they are culturally generated and transmitted, how they can be utilized for change, Massumi deprives affects of political salience.” (Fisher 2016: 820, see also Hsieh 2008: 61).

Sara Ahmed (2006, 2014) is another feminist affect theorist who has used emotion to understand and theorize the political, particularly surrounding experiences of othering of bodies that are ‘alien’ or ‘strange’ be it the queer body, the non-white body, the migrant body etc. She understands emotions as ‘sticky’ and that different emotions stick differently to different bodies. Spaces and ‘proximity’ to the ‘affect aliens’ i.e., the feminist kill-joys, the queers, the non-whites, the migrants etc. evoke emotions of hatred, disgust and fear by the majority, simply by the existence of their bodies in those spaces. In fact, Ahmed believes that emotions neither come from the inside nor the outside but they move through the circulation of objects and stick to bodies, creating boundaries of who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’ or ‘alien’ and ‘non-alien’ bodies. This is the ‘sociality of emotions’ wherein they create social boundaries. Thus, emotions are political for they define boundaries of power. The moments when these world orders are tried to be ruffled with, by questioning the established emotions towards ‘alien affect’ bodies, those moments are radical, since those are attempts to get one’s body ‘unstuck’ from the prescribed emotions. Those moments, as Deleuze calls it, can be seen as the scream. Affect theorists such as Gregg and Seigworth (2010) place great importance on Lefebvre’s understanding of everyday affectual ‘moments’ which were at once all powerful and powerless such that they had the possibility to invoke new demands of change to the existing social order. They believed that such everyday moments instead of being deciphered, needed to be nurtured.

Ahmed’s (2006, 2014) radical criticism of the nation wherein the migrant, the refugee, the nomad or the non-heterosexual body (not conforming to masculine nation belonging ideas) are always being considered as an ‘alien other’, becoming objects of feelings of hatred, disgust and fear, etc., takes inspiration from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s works. (1987) Deleuze and Guattari (1987) question fixity, linearity, cyclical and binary thought-processes, including belongingness

by placing the image of the root which is always ‘tracing’ origins, goes in one linear direction, and works with binary logic in opposition to the image of the ‘rhizome’. As opposed to the ‘root’, the rhizome is non-linear, multiplies in any direction and works with the principles of connection and heterogeneity. The rhizome does not reproduce like tracing in exact ways, it is instead a map – it draws unique connections and is opposed to any fixed structure. A root reterritorializes but a rhizome deterritorializes, and then may again reterritorialize and again deterritorialize and this goes on without any order.

Navaro-Yashin (2009) while talking about Turkish-Cypriots living with ruins in the houses of Greek-Cypriots shows how affect is rhizomatic and how it leads to changes in the subjectivities of Turkish-Cypriots. Navaro-Yashin uses Nigel Thrift’s (2000) spatial theory of affect that is inspired from Deleuze and hence Spinoza’s understanding of affect, wherein affect need not be limited to humans and that even spaces and environments can be affectual. Thus, changes in subjectivities of Turkish Cypriots were contributed by the “spatial melancholia” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 16) brought about by the presence of a network of objects, that included the ruins.

Affect if rhizomatic, means can flow in any direction and make connections across planes without having an origin point or an end but simply a middle, a plateau, as understood by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Affect as rhizomatic has no structure, simply lines that multiplies. It makes new connections and, in the process, can change its nature. Thus, it is an assemblage and is constantly becoming, which Spinoza had it understood as ‘affectus’, which is the continuous variation in intensities. This allowed Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to formulate change in subjectivities, since affect is understood as processual and relationally – in connections with varied other things.

The way affect has been understood by feminist affect theorists or in feminist writings about affect has allowed me to understand how the majoritarian state and the dominant society have used affect

(fear/hate/disgust) to create the ‘other’ in Assam. This has continued the politics of otherization, ‘hate politics’ and influenced subjectivities of both the dominant caste Hindu Assamese and the minority Bengali Muslims. I establish in my thesis that historically for the char-dwellers, belongingness has always been conceptualized as rhizomatic as opposed to rootedness and how such understanding of belongingness is changing. However, I argue that affect being rhizomatic in nature has possibly the potentiality to open up new conversations surrounding politics of belongingness and community as more and more caste Hindu Assamese state representatives ‘encounter’ the Bengali Muslims and the chars as was seen during the NRC exercise. This is clearly argued in the chapter on NRC lower bureaucrats, wherein continuous affective transactions over years between historically opposed communities showed potentiality of opening up possibilities of changing community ideas – of who is Assamese, away from rooted and territorial notions. This has also allowed me to formulate that there lies no binary distinction or hierarchy between reason and emotion or mind and body or affect and emotion (getting rid of thus gendered distinctions too). Emotion, as will be shown in my methodology too, is rhizomatic in nature. Emotions make connections and evoke new thought or politics. Thus, I use affect and emotion inter-changeably because as argued by Sara Ahmed (2014), our concepts spill over or emerge in a world that is messy which does not respect or understand distinctions. Considering the experiential is messy, and to avoid binary distinctions, I do not differentiate between affect and emotion and embrace its rhizomatic nature which I believe, possibly has the potential to change xenophobic hate-politics of Assamese nationalism in Assam that continues marginalizing and violating the linguistic-religious minorities in the borderland area.

## CONCLUSION

The literature that is analyzed and that informs my research while taking account of structural arguments be it violence or policies surrounding property, forests, etc. by the colonial regime, also looks at cultural factors such as narrative construction surrounding violence, or state-making. Thus, it has allowed my research to understand concepts relationally and in a processual way. This enabled me to appreciate the inter-connections or the networks connecting local politics with global phenomenon. Thus, while my research looks at state-making through the historical and the structural factor of colonialism, I examine post-colonial state-making in India through cultural perspectives too – through the cultures of bureaucracy (writing, documentation, corruption) or material infrastructures of dockyards, railways, etc. This has enabled me to look at bottoms-up narratives or how the structure is actually practiced – be it violence or the state. It has allowed me to see people as beyond passive ‘recipients’ or ‘victims’ and more in engagement with the state and possibly also impacting the state. This literature has allowed me to appreciate the messiness and the ‘eventedness’ of the everyday ordinary – in the unfolding of concepts such as violence, ‘colonial scientific pedigree’, ‘othering’, state-making, etc.

The environmental history literature has helped me in placing my research in a political-economic tradition that is in constant interaction with ecological factors. The writings on colonial property regimes, agrarian developments such as irrigation, embankment building, forests and development projects, etc. are a testament to that and have largely shaped my understanding on how the ideas of a colonial state continue to be practiced by the majoritarian post-colonial capitalist state too. The continuation of such practices has not just impacted the environment, it has also changed relations of production in the previously colonized states. Char-dwellers being not just politically precarious but also becoming a constant source of cheap labor provision for the urban economy is

a reminder of that, something that I dive deeply into in the chapter on migration, environmental racism and citizenship.

The processual and non-binary understanding of concepts have allowed me to critically understand the strict bifurcations of concepts – nature/culture, human/non-human, state/society, state-idea/state-practice, emotion/reason, body/mind etc. I believe that concepts such as violence are propagated both collectively and structurally. The violence that is examined in the thesis is arbitrarily produced and is total in every sense, with the ability to produce ‘bare life’. However, looking at everyday presence of violence through a cultural perspective allowed me to see how violence does not annihilate people completely but people live through and alongside it.

Narratives of propagation and sustenance of violence, particularly the literature on communalism, allow one to see the workings of state-making and gain insights on the state. While I do critique binary distinctions of state/society or state-idea/state-practice, it is important to highlight how such distinctions still prevail widely among people – particularly about the state as an idea being unitary and ever-expansive, despite the percolations across boundaries and its many fragmentations in practice. This is largely achieved through the ‘myth’ and the ‘magic of the state’ produced via infrastructures, bureaucratic practices, and the control of affect.

In fact, affect plays a vital role through which the various conceptual blocks presented here are looked at. Though I draw theoretical insights from various sources, affect theory, particularly feminist writings on emotion, have acted as a fulcrum in my understandings of concepts such as state, bureaucracy, identity and belongingness. The rhizomatic understanding of affect, derived from Deleuze and Guattari along with the political writings of feminist understandings of emotion (of how affect shapes the world of power and creates boundaries) have helped me in understanding

the xenophobic and the hate-politics surrounding the Bengali Muslims in Assam and how such politics of belonging (or non-belonging) can be transformed.



### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

As understood by Sandra Harding (1987), methodologies are approaches to knowledge production but are more importantly about observing and understanding the world that the researcher plans to immerse in. Our approach provides the wind to push us into directions and spaces that were never planned for but that allow newer perspectives. Therefore, the politics of epistemology is deeply integrated with the politics of methodology. My understanding of char-lands, char-dwellers and the state in Assam has been profoundly shaped by ethnography. However, I also use archival research to support, inform and triangulate my ethnographic findings and observations. I conducted (disrupted) ethnographic work from June 2019 to February 2021 (with a brief return in January 2022). I had planned for the disruptions caused by annual floods, during which time I was meaning to finish my archival work at the Assam State Archives and the Assam Legislative Assembly Library. However, the disruptions over violent protests that broke out in Assam after the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) by the Indian parliament and of course the pandemic were unplanned and contributed in their own ways to shaping my research.

My research has been multi-sited with ethnographic work being conducted in char-lands (with the majority of work confined to two chars) and the NRC Hearing Centers (two Hearing Centers in Barpeta district, Assam). I supported this ethnographic work by conducting numerous interviews with bureaucrats in various government offices. I also did archival work and conducted a few interviews in New Delhi. One of the interesting 'sites' for me were the boats, be it the ferries that I took to travel to the chars or the Boat-Clinics that took the medical team and me to a variety of chars in the district. The boats allowed me to experience the river as a space, as a 'site' far better.

It opened my understanding to the various meanings that a river is endowed with, the fluid but constant presence of the river in the char-dwellers' lives and, ultimately, in my research.

The experience of the two kinds of boats – the ferries that are operated and used by the char-dwellers and the state operated Boat Clinics that are used by the staff on state payroll - also provided interesting contrasting perspectives on how the river is understood and experienced. While the char-dwellers understood the moods, currents, depth and the species that the river housed not just at present but also historically; the Boat Clinic staff feared and sometimes romanticized the river. As opposed to them, the char-dwellers understood the river temporally – how the river has changed with time or during what time of the day one finds the river calmer or which kinds of flood or season brings better fish or can lead to erosion or emergence of chars, etc. Thus, doing fieldwork in boats and chars meant that my field-site literally moved and floated and in case of chars, also got destroyed and re-emerged at times.

But the idea about 'field-sites' being contained in space and time has been broken by various scholars. (Katz 1994, Cupples and Kindon 2003, Nast 1994, Sparke 1996). The fact that 'field-sites' are non-continuous or not neatly separated be it spatially or temporally is well established in anthropology. Thus, distinctions of 'home', 'field', 'university' as neatly demarcated conceptual blocks are a myth. This became particularly overt with the pandemic when more 'fieldwork' was being done virtually, sitting at home and often with family. In such a context, time and again the 'home' or the 'university' got increasingly involved with the 'field'. The pandemic was a major unforeseen disruption that redefined my ethnographic fieldwork in a lot of ways, considering that I was in the middle of fieldwork at the time. When eight to nine months of time pass with no certainty of a 'return', one understands that the "situatedness of knowledge" (Haraway 1988) is also critically impacted by time – that our relations as 'researchers' with our participants exist in

certain timeframes that define the knowledge that we collectively produce. Lila Abu-Lughod (1988) returned to the Bedouin community in 1985 because of her fear that with such amounts of time lapsing she might turn her participants' lives mythical – that a lot will be imagined, instead of observing and understanding. The pandemic redefined the figure of the 'researcher-in-waiting' beyond narratives of researchers waiting for permits or ethical clearances to be obtained for conducting ethnographic work. (Altorki 1988). And in such time-periods, for someone like me being a 'native' researcher who was living with family, at 'home', with absolutely no movement whatsoever, these sharp distinctions quickly broke down and research came to be memorialized as a time-period of anxiety as I constantly lived in limbo.

The in-between position that I embodied while conducting my ethnographic fieldwork will be talked about in the next section. The many ways that the pandemic as a spatio-temporal period impacted my research will inevitably be an underlining constancy that will sprout out in the sections and ideas that I discuss here. This research thus, is informed by feminist ethnographic methodology with concepts of 'positionalities', 'reflexivity', 'feminist objectivity', 'affect' guiding it. The focus of this chapter will be on exploring the varied aspects of 'in-between-ness' that I experienced before moving on to understand the affective world that I, as a researcher, was enmeshed in while doing my ethnography.

## 1. THE 'IN-BETWEEN' ETHNOGRAPHER

Before and besides the pandemic, the context in which I did my ethnographic fieldwork also confuses several of the neat boundaries and distinctions – 'native/non-native', 'insider/outsider', 'home/field', etc. In June 2019, when I came back from my 'university life' in Ireland to Assam,

I was still looking for chars where I could do my fieldwork. I had previously never been to a char. However, my father having been a state employee, had visited several chars in the past and still had a few active connections in some chars. Thus, I eventually took help from my father in narrowing down the chars and getting in touch with people who had either lived or were still living in the chars and who could introduce me to the community there. Thus, my family, particularly my father, got involved with my fieldwork decisions. They were especially resistant to my wanting to stay with the Bengali Muslims in the chars. Their fears arose out of my and their own positionalities - that I, an unmarried upper-caste Assamese Hindu woman living on my own in a space filled with a community towards whom they have historically felt hatred and disgust – the Bengali Muslims. The chars too evoked stereotypical imaginaries as spaces away from ‘civilization’ where violent, ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ took refuge. They also imagined the Bengali Muslim man as sexually violent and deceiving. Thus, I entered a world where my body was seen not simply as that of a researcher but also situated in this politics – where the Bengali Muslim *charua* man is a violent perpetrator and I a helpless ‘victim’ in waiting.

After much negotiation, it was decided that I would stay with my grandmother in my ancestral village which was three hours away from the chars. Consequently, I was unable to observe the char-dwellers’ lives at specific time-periods (I had to take the last ferry which was at 3 pm every day) or failed to engage in an exercise of continuous rapport building. But it allowed me to continuously understand chars and char-dwellers’ lives relationally and comparatively. Living in a village with upper-caste Assamese Hindus while doing my research in chars inhabited by Bengali Muslim allowed me to see the intricate details of how and why Bengali Muslims are produced as a hated figure. Villagers would often sit with me, either taunting me or trying to make me understand the ‘dangers’ or ‘uselessness’ of doing research in the chars.

Thus, because of my ancestral connections, I was considered a ‘daughter of the village’ and besides my family, my entire village became involved to some extent in my research. In this unique context, the question then arises was I a ‘native’ researcher? I was born and brought up in Assam; I am Assamese, an ethnic identity that even my research participants, the char-dwellers identified with. However, my various other identities (Brown 2012) did not make me a ‘native’ or an ‘insider’ to their world; my coming from an upper-caste, upper-middle class, Hindu family and receiving my education from abroad had very little overlap with the experiences of the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. James Banks (1998) has suggested four typologies to dwell into the insider/outsider question of research – the first “reflects the origins of the researcher in relation to the community studied (indigenous or external) and the second the perspective taken during the research itself (insider or outsider).” (Acker 2001: 156). The four types are Indigenous-Insider, Indigenous-Outsider, External-Insider and External-Outsider. This must be problematized in my context because the notion of ‘indigeneity’ or ‘nativeness’ is still contested in Assam. Thus, for myself, I was Assamese, while for the char-dwellers I was also a privileged educated woman who had lived for many years outside Assam and now, outside India. They on the other hand had lived in Assam for decades, sent their children to Assamese medium schools and actively engaged in the promotion of Assamese language and culture as ways to be recognized as Assamese by the dominant community.

Thus, while for them Assam has been a ‘home’, lived and experienced thoroughly, I am not sure if I can call this ‘home’, for I have never lived here long or experienced it in its varied aspects, as I might have experienced Delhi or Ireland probably (the other places I have lived in). But my ‘home’ during fieldwork was also not something of a ‘home’ since I had not lived at my ancestral house in the village for more than a decade and definitely not for this long. Thus, identities such

as that of an ‘at-home’ researcher need to be seriously questioned as ideas of what exactly a home is get increasingly muddled. Nonetheless, because I spoke the language and ethnically belonged to the Assamese community, I was seen by my participants as Assamese, residing abroad for the time-being. And this kind of identification along with my own ‘multiplicity of subjectivities’ (Rosaldo 1989 in Narayan 1993: 676) allowed me the flexibility to occupy the ‘in-between-ness’ of my positionality – I was at ‘home’ and yet not (chars again, were not my ‘home territories’), I was Assamese but not enough in many counts, I was a ‘native’ and yet not. Having said that, I also fully recognize and understand that my caste, religion and class identities put me in an immeasurably more privileged position than my research participants. I have engaged in both my ethnographic fieldwork and my writing by being mindful of the vast material differences and inequalities that exist between me and the char-dwellers.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) present the concept of “the space between” (pp. 60) which challenges the dichotomy of an ‘insider-outsider’ but allows the development of a dialectical relationship wherein “differences are not conceived as absolute, and consequently the relation between them is not of utter antagonism.” (Fay 1996: 224 in Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 60). The complexity of similarities and differences are allowed to exist. Scholars like Kanuha (2000) or Aoki (1996) talked about how researchers often work not as a complete insider or outsider but at the hyphen between them and as such the “hyphen acts as a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction.” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 60).

The ambiguity or ambivalence of the ‘partial insider’ endows the researcher with a flexibility which makes far easier navigation through spaces or entrance in spaces that otherwise a ‘complete insider or outsider’ might find difficult (though a complete insider or outsider status is not possible). My identity of being a woman which might have restricted my movement in many

spaces and amongst many people (particularly men), was over-taken by my other identities, given that I was not from the community or given my outsider ‘resident abroad’ researcher positionality. Looking back, my upper-middle class social location played alongside or sometimes even overshadowed my gender identity as men (and women) in the chars were eager to converse or be seen with me as a matter of increasing their prestige. I remember asking Ahmed da<sup>21</sup> once why he got involved with NRC work as an assistant to the local LRCR<sup>22</sup> even though he was not getting paid at all. He replied that getting associated with the work or with such ‘important’ people or even just being seen with such people – “*utha-boha kora*”- could make him look important in the char. My class identity would often come out during conversations with char-dwellers or even government officers who would ask me about my village and my family. In those conversations, despite my best efforts, my grandfather, who used to be a Minister in the 1970s in Assam would be recognized through my village name or my father’s name. My social class position thus gave me access to files or secured meetings with bureaucrats, particularly officers engaged in NRC work.<sup>23</sup> Such power dynamics arising out of my upper-caste Hindu and upper-middle class positionalities defined in varied ways my relationship with my participants. (Soni-Sinha 2008).

The over-lapping of identities particularly class, gender, race and geography that can complicate power dynamics between the researcher and the participants has been well documented by Chandana Mathur (2006, 2018), a middle-class woman of color from the ‘developing world’

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Da’ is shortened version of ‘dada’ which means brother in Assamese. My usage of colloquial terms to address my participants such as ‘da’ over ‘sir’, or ‘ba’/‘bou’ (sister/sister-in-law) over ‘madam’ was also to develop familiarity, rapport and comfort with my participants. Everywhere in the thesis, my participants are being addressed using such terms.

<sup>22</sup> Local Registrar of Citizens Registration. LRCRs were appointed for one NSK, combining a few villages. They were responsible for overseeing the functioning of the NRC in that NSK, for that cluster of villages. They were helped by Operators.

<sup>23</sup> Often in government offices, my embodied identity of a short-height woman (“*horu suali*” or little girl as I would be referred by officers in ‘jest’) made me look non-threatening, allowing officers to share files or information easily.

(Indian) conducting fieldwork among working-class men in Indiana. While Mathur's middle-class academic background meant that her research participants almost unconsciously displayed class deference towards her; her gender, race and nationality meant that her white American male participants confidently approached her with their standard "categories of understanding" (Mathur 2006: 22) regarding non-Western parts of the world. Both responses were distressing to the ethnographer. In the chars, the overlapping of my class, caste and gender identities allowed me to engage with not just women and the private spaces where they spend most of their times but also men, of all ages, and spaces which otherwise were not frequented by other women – such as the *ghat* (boatyard), sections within the bazar where mostly men gathered such as the jute, oil or the cattle market, etc. My in-between positionality allowed them to see me as neither man nor woman, which in the chapter on boats, I do understand as an 'alien positionality'. It was also interesting how because of my extremely short hair, for some time in the initial days, people were also confused about my gender and later confided in me that young men at the char had placed bets on whether I was a man or woman.

I could also manipulate my positionality, deciding how much of an 'insider' or an 'outsider' I wanted to be depending on context. (Herod 1999). It is important for an ethnographer to recognize this fluid, changing and over-lapping nature of identities to avoid the trap of fixed, dualistic thinking, observe newer patterns and break the power hierarchies between the researcher and the participants. (Mullings 1999, Collins 1986, Naples 1996, Smith 1987). Haraway (1988) in fact encourages 'splitting' instead of 'being' for feminist epistemologies and methodologies to flourish. 'Splitting' meant allowing the existence of multiplicities of identities without squashing them into "isomorphic slots or cumulative lists." (Haraway 1988: 586).



However, working from the hyphen can be problematic too as one is never fully trusted, particularly if one is working with groups who are historically opposed to each other. In my case, though I was working primarily with Bengali Muslims, I also found it important to talk to the Assamese and Bengali Hindus who had been living in the chars for decades and were an integral part of the char's politics and history. At first, my own positionality as an upper-caste Assamese Hindu prevented the Bengali Muslims from trusting me with information that revealed the workings of ethnic and religious tensions in the chars, their opinions on the right-wing state's 'anti-Muslim' politics, their history of violence with the Hindus, etc. Almost everyone I talked to, for months, persisted with the narrative that the char had never seen any such conflict or tension and that everything was well. On the other hand, the Assamese and Bengali Hindus would see me as 'one of their own' and reveal their ethno-religious conflicts with the neighboring Muslims in almost all sectors of life. It was only months later, when I would openly sit and eat with the Muslims and voice some of my own political opinions about the current statist politics with regard to Bengali Muslims, that they shared stories of underlying tensions with me. However, my increasingly intimate mingling with Bengali Muslims raised suspicion and concern about my beliefs among the Assamese and Bengali Hindus. M. N. Srinivas (1976) in his historic ethnography on Rampura also faced such issues when he mingled with both the upper-castes and the Dalits in the village. In such cases, the researcher's 'alien positionality' of him/her being ultimately from a world different than the participants lets such behavior, which otherwise would be scorned (eating at a Muslim's house, for example), slide away.

Thus, not staying in the char also helped because otherwise my allegiances would have been constantly tested depending on which community's house/family I was staying with. Choosing a completely different space to live in, also allowed me to be more mobile as I could meet

bureaucrats or other state representatives in the district headquarters, a location which was comparatively far away from the chars. Besides, meeting and interacting with state representatives away from the char-dwellers allowed me to avoid being suspected of being a state-representative myself or being close to the state. And yet, I was often seen as a state representative. The fact that I used a large white Scorpio<sup>24</sup> (a car often used by politicians or bureaucrats and hence seen as a symbol of power) and had a driver to accompany me, often made char-dwellers believe that I was a high-ranking bureaucrat. My first visit to the bazar, a space over which the state and the char-dwellers have been at loggerheads for decades, drove the people into a frenzy. They thought I was there on a surprise inspection – considering the bazar also had shopkeepers selling items like kerosene, rice, timber ‘illegally’. Thus, my class-caste positionalities sometimes opened up access while in other ways they alienated my participants from me and raised suspicion.

This was also particularly evident during the time I had spent in Guwahati trying to track down Bengali Muslims from char areas who were now working as informal workers in the capital city. Because of my class and gender positionalities, many workers (mostly male rickshaw pullers and street-vendors) would be suspicious of me and would hesitate to open up. Many even outrightly refused to talk. Interestingly, the rickshaw puller who was taking me back home got curious about my research and we spent a lot of time talking. He later offered to take me around the streets of Guwahati, locating other workers, some even his friends who could talk to me. The next seven days were spent doing this, wherein literally I was on the move on a rickshaw, scanning through the streets and halting and talking to other interested rickshaw pullers or street-vendors. Azim, my rickshaw puller and guide, introduced me to other Bengali Muslim rickshaw pullers from the chars,

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<sup>24</sup> The using of a big car like Scorpio was out of compulsion since smaller cars would not have the capacity to bear the brunt of being driven almost everyday in char or country roads that were mostly in terrible condition.

their resting spaces, etc. His presence eased and comforted the others to open up. Being on the move on a rickshaw also enabled me to not disrupt their work schedules – if they got a passenger, they could take off. But towards the end, interestingly, many would voluntarily refuse passengers or ask someone else to carry a passenger and would be very interested in carrying forward the conversation. If I insisted on them not turning down any passengers, they would reply saying that it was important the world knew their struggles and besides, nobody really talked to them.

Being on the move on a rickshaw also enabled me to see a city through their eyes – the many shortcuts, meeting and ‘*adda*’<sup>25</sup> points, streets chosen to evade the police, etc. It was a reminder of how urban spaces are mapped and how the prying eyes of authorities are negotiated with or evaded by people at the bottom. It also helped me record how marginalized Bengali Muslims who are precarious and face a lot of harassment in urban spaces, maintain their communities and networks of support. Most of the sense of community comes from sharing similar geographies – the chars: their memories of chars, of the river, festivals, farming, fishing together, the pain of loss of land and homes, the continuous migration and finally their depleted life in the urban areas. They also found community and comfort in each other because of citizenship tales – many had family members labelled as ‘doubtful voters’ or those who had been excluded from the NRC. They helped each other during the NRC hearings by being witnesses or providing money or helping with arranging documents etc. Azim, whose own mother was a ‘D-Voter’ introduced me to other such people or families. Many were suspicious of me being a government officer who had the intention of putting their people in detention camps. At a time and in an environment when the NRC was ongoing, I could hardly blame them. But Azim’s presence nullified such fears and doubts.

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<sup>25</sup> Informal conversations, banter, etc.

The ethnographer thus, is under constant surveillance and judgement. The ethnographer's body be it hair length or skin color (fair skin is a mark of not just beauty but also class and caste in India) is in constant interaction and is under constant gaze and evaluation by the participants, which inevitably impacts the research. My adherence to certain gender norms such as clothing (I wore mostly *salwar-kurtas*, a common place dress for women, instead of jeans and T-shirts), earrings while sporting a short haircut as I interacted in their lower Assamese dialect or sometimes even Bengali, also allowed me to embody the in-between space. Thus, it is important to acknowledge how our bodies interact, are gazed at, evaluated and where they are situated. Haraway (1988) believes that our views and visions should come from a situated body – a body that is enmeshed in a network of locations, relations and only then can we produce meaningful knowledge. Feminist objective knowledge is situated, and partial and it derives from such understandings of bodies – “the “body” is an agent, not a resource.” (Haraway 1988: 595). Thus, it is important to be reflexive about flesh and blood matters, the politics of our own bodies and how they are perceived by the world that we as researchers enter into. (Billo and Hiemstra 2013).

My in-between-ness was also evident when I engaged in some activist work while doing my ethnography. This was largely unplanned. In December 2019, when protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act broke out all over the country, with Assam being its epicenter, I actively participated in those rallies both in New Delhi and Assam. My active participation was also triggered because of my witnessing of violence from close quarters during that time. On December 11, 2019 while I was doing my archival research in New Delhi, violent protests against the Act had broken out in different parts of Assam, including Guwahati where my family stayed. Both my father and brother were caught up in the middle of those protests and had to maneuver their way through burning streets, violent protestors and police-force to reach our home. For the

next week as I was nervously cooped up in New Delhi, internet and mobile services were suspended in Assam and barely any information trickled down to me about the state of my family, friends and other people back home. Back in Delhi, friends on university campuses were being attacked and threatened. As I stopped my archival work, evenings would be spent tending and talking to friends on university campuses while many parts of India, including Delhi, were seeing protest marches. That part of my time in India was a prolonged experience of fear, anger, violence and my participation in protests was triggered by such experiences and conversations. In Guwahati, I also organized discussion sessions regarding the Act and its future consequences.

Participation in protests in both Delhi and Assam allowed me first-hand experience to understand how the protests in both sites were starkly different - not just in their method or participants but also in their reasons of protesting. People in Delhi and rest of India were protesting against the CAA provisions that allowed persecuted people of all other religions from India's neighboring countries to be considered for Indian citizenship but excluded Muslims. In Assam, the people were protesting because the CAA violates the Assam Accord – meaning people in Assam were protesting against the inclusion of any kind of 'foreigner' as citizens. Such participation also allowed me to explore newer sites where issues of citizenship and immigration were being debated, observing both formal lectures and informal conversations. But looking back, my active participation in protests or organizing sessions was not a targeting of strategic spaces to collect 'data' but came from a need to express the horror of witnessing repeated violence by a majoritarian state. Such spaces also allowed for the processing of the experience of violence that I, for one, faced so closely for the first time. This active witnessing which Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes as "the anthropologist as *companheira*" (1995: 419; italics in original), positions the anthropologist not as a neutral, passive observer but "inside human events as a responsive, reflexive and morally

committed being.” (ibid). This position not only brings rich ‘data’ or push necessary conversations, but in my case, it also contributed to my healing. Besides, feminists have critiqued the binary division of activism/academia saying that they keep alive the unreal distinctions of body/mind, emotion/reason, real world/ivory tower, etc. (Dincer 2019, Grewal 2008, Maxey 1999). Feminist research instead critically merges the two as it uses research or academic tools to bring forward marginalized voices to the policy arena and trigger change or dialogue. (Bell 2015, Brooks 2007). Thus, time-periods that would otherwise be seen as ‘disruptive’ for ethnographic work, I engaged with them as an active participant with a genuine intention to make a statement against a violent majoritarian state.

## 2. AFFECT AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Feminist researchers have shown how emotions play an intrinsic role in research, particularly the emotions of the researcher, which is largely what my focus will be in this section.

“Whether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings complete with all the usual assembly of feelings, failings, and moods. And all of those influence how we feel and understand what is going on. Our consciousness is always the medium through which the research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher.” (Stanley and Wise 1993: 157).

Thus, instead of mastering or avoiding the emotions that a researcher goes through, it is critical that one acknowledges and engages with them.

In this section, I will particularly focus on my experience of guilt at the intersection of familial ties, my contextual positionalities, COVID and the research participants as I carried out ethnography in Assam. I will then go on to talk about how emotions (in this case guilt) of the researcher can be both burdening as well as freeing for the researcher, triggering new ways of thinking and producing new data sets when I juxtapose the concept of ‘sticking’ with ‘spilling’. Finally, I foreground the importance of the figure of the ‘vulnerable researcher’ and how engaging with our own emotions as a methodological approach can open ways to new directions in research.

I come from an upper-caste Hindu Assamese household. Both my parents took part in the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement (1979-85) and are ardent believers of Assamese nationalism or ‘*jatiyotabaad*’. My family believes that Assam continues to face an onslaught of ‘illegal immigrants’ and that the ‘native’ Assamese will soon turn into a minority and lose their culture and language. My father was a member of the right-wing party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) before switching to the Assamese nationalist party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). As with many caste Hindu Assamese households, the mockery and subtle hatred towards Muslims in general and Bengali Muslims in particular is normalized through jokes, myths and everyday stories. Thus, it gave them sleepless nights when I first discussed my research project with them. My parents were outrightly dismissive about my plans of staying in the chars amongst the Bengali Muslims. After tumultuous negotiations it was decided that I would stay with my grandmother in my ancestral village which was three hours away from my field-site. My father even moved in with me and my mother would make the occasional visits. So, I already began my fieldwork in a mesh of emotions: excitement, anger and guilt. Guilty for not being enough of a ‘good’ daughter (*Who wants to upset one’s parents?*) while also guilty for not being enough of a ‘good’ researcher (*Did I concede too*

*soon? Living so far away from my field will definitely impact my rapport building and research findings probably).*

### *2.1 Political Guilt*

In September 2020, seven months after I had temporarily halted fieldwork due to COVID, I began fieldwork again. Around 25 days later, my driver who accompanied me to my field, first showed symptoms of COVID which later spread to the entire household. Except for me, everyone had tested positive, including my 95-year-old grandmother and my father. This incident provoked tremendous feelings of guilt for me. But looking back, I now understand that manifestation of that guilt was an accumulation of all the incidents over the months where I felt guilt to some degree. When repeatedly it was underlined that I do have time for ‘research’ but no time for family, or that as a caste Hindu Assamese woman I do not show ‘collective disgust’ for the ‘other’, that I have not been the devoted carer of the family and instead have shown care and empathy for the ‘wrong people’ in their eyes, I did feel guilty to some degree. Sara Ahmed (2014) talks about how emotional responses and bodily sensations demarcate ‘others’ from ‘us’. The ‘stranger’ or the ‘non-white other’ is to be met with ‘hardened emotions’ of rage, disgust and fear by the dominant. My care and empathy for the ‘Muslim other’ was seen as breaking these boundaries of ‘othering’ and this was repeatedly conveyed to me, resulting in my developing a third kind of emotional response – guilt – in varied amounts over time. Ahmed (2014) borrows from Marx to argue that emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value. I understand that the guilt which I experienced after my entire family contracted COVID was a manifestation of such accumulated guilt.



However, I understand this guilt as political. I am arguing that what I felt was by the virtue of my positionality in the social structure – that is a) being a woman and b) being an unmarried, upper-caste Hindu Assamese. Ahmed (2014) talks about ‘feelings of structure’, meaning that what we feel is related to structural inequities and power differentials. She goes on to talk about how emotions should not be understood as ‘subject-centered’ as emotions are not bounded or located in an individual subject but that the subject arrives at a world where emotions are already circulating in very particular ways. She joins arguments given by Rosaldo (1984), Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) to project that rather than being psychological states, emotions are more socio-cultural practices. I too understand that emotions do not come from within to outside or vice-versa, but emotions are the very basis of creating an inside and outside or an ‘us’ and ‘them’ - that they create ‘objects’. Emotions create boundaries and one’s loyalty to collectives. So, emotions here, are guided by the politics of positionality. Hence, how an upper-caste Hindu Assamese woman ‘must’ be feeling for certain collectives – family and the Muslim ‘*charuas*’ are already defined. I just arrived in this world of already defined emotions. It is this sociality of emotions that also keeps alive the ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

But the idea of guilt also means the acceptance at a certain level of the moral standards defined by these collectives. It meant my accepting to some extent how an unmarried, upper-caste Hindu Assamese woman ‘ought’ to behave towards her family, the societal roles and responsibilities as well as to the ‘Miya other’. Claudia Leeb (2019) says political guilt can be passed on and reproduced intergenerationally and involves identification with a collective. In fact, for Leeb (2019), it is for this very reason that political guilt is truly collective in nature. I, too, was socialized towards the world of responsibilities that come with my positionality along with the emotional expectations placed on an unmarried Hindu woman by various social institutions. The guilt of my

own mother who prioritized higher education over marrying early or the guilt of my grandmother who did not, despite being interested in further education, are passed down. Feelings of guilt that come from occupying positionalities are not personal, individual emotions but accumulated and are passed down over generations and hence are as much political as collective.

And as a result of such deep identification with collectives, we take responsibility and accept ‘punishment’. My taking up of caring responsibilities and ultimately halting my fieldwork (till February 2021, when I returned briefly) can be seen as a way of taking responsibility for my ‘failures’ to adhere to societal roles and emotional boundaries. My feeling guilty can also be seen as a testimony to giving in to how I should evaluate and feel towards the ‘Miya other’ [“they are unhygienic, COVID spreaders and hence I ‘should have’ always felt ‘disgust’ towards them”], letting the boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ breathe deep.

## *2.2 Stickiness versus spilling*

I borrow Ahmed (2014) and Cala Coats’ (2020) use of the term ‘stickiness’ to understand my guilt – wherein I, as a subject, became more invested in particular structures than others. The movement of emotions as imagined by Massumi (1995), Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Ahmed (2014) is also accompanied by ‘stickiness’ wherein often some objects get accumulated with particular emotions. I am remembering Navaro Yashin’s (2009) work on Turkish-Cypriots who moved into homes belonging to Greek inhabitants, (who had to abandon their homes due to violence) but continued feeling discomfort, strangeness and melancholia looking at the ruins or objects of their earlier owners. For the Turkish-Cypriots, the emotions were so stuck on ruined objects that they could never accept their houses as their own homes even after years of living there. My emotional

stickiness to certain positionalities and structures, that is, being a daughter or an unmarried upper-caste Hindu Assamese woman over and above being an anthropologist or a researcher, produced continued emotions of guilt. And this stickiness was engendered by repetition of my position's roles and responsibilities. Scholars like Butler (1993) have shown us how social forms such as family, heterosexuality, nation, etc. are effects of repetition.

Ahmed understood feelings as being produced as effects of circulation (2014: 224), however, feelings or emotions as shown above can get stuck to bodies. She uses the concept of 'stickiness' to show how objects of hate and disgust are created along with their discourses. How the migrant, the 'racial other', the Muslim, the queer bodies get stuck with emotions of collective fear, hate and disgust, directed towards them. Stickiness invokes a sense of fixity and non-movement of emotions such that established emotions towards particular collectives/people/positionalities are difficult to be over-turned. Stickiness is experienced here a) at the level of how the Muslim char-dwellers are always perceived b) at the level of my own positionality of how an unmarried caste Hindu Assamese woman researching Muslim char-dwellers was seen by my family and the caste Hindu Assamese dominant village where I resided and c) myself at one level getting more invested with my role as a caste Hindu woman and its responsibilities and consequently experiencing guilt over and above my role as a researcher (aggravated by COVID).

Ahmed beautifully pens that "the focus on attachments as crucial to queer and feminist politics is itself a sign that transformation is not about transcendence: emotions are 'sticky', and even when we challenge our investments, we might get stuck. There is hope, of course, as things can get unstuck." (2014: 403). But from what I understand and argue, emotions can spill over too, and it is in this spillage of emotions where I find possibilities for ethnography - for creatively using emotions as a methodological intervention.

Emotionality is messy. Hence, I understand that when experienced in two field sites – the home with family and the river islands (though this sharp distinction can also be critiqued as this is purely analytical), instead of flow of emotions, I argue that emotions spill into one another.

As opposed to flow, spilling is an involuntary or accidental movement such that there is a possibility that it can go in different directions, hence there is an unpredictability attached to it. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in their work '*A Thousand Plateaus..*' consistently use the term 'overflowing/over-spillage' to denote that such movement leads to deformation or transformation of some sort. The use of 'over' to refer to spillage is particularly interesting when talking about the movement of emotions – for it denotes 'excess/excessive' movement or accidental and unpredictable movement. And such a movement can bring transformation, change or what Ahmed describes as 'unstuckness'. They in fact use overflowing to denote transformation giving example of how in metallurgy, qualitative transformation in form occurs when "an energetic materiality overflows the prepared matter..." (1987: 410). Even in the case of assemblages, Deleuze and Guattari argue for 'overflowing' as a movement of transformation. They talk about how under the capitalist system that changes established labor and property relations, new social subjectivities emerge when new codes of existence overflow from existing ones and "attain a level of decoding that the State apparatuses are no longer able to reclaim..." (1987: 452). Same goes for the demise of the capitalist system – "the workers' struggle overflow the framework of the capitalist enterprises..." (1987: 463).

As opposed to 'non-movement' and what William Ian Miller argues as "horrifying things *stick*, like glue, like slime" (1997: 26, emphasis mine), spilling allows for transformative movement that disturbs the established 'horrifying' emotions towards objects. Hence, what I argue here is of spillage of guilt from one field-site to another and what transformations and possibilities that can

open up for an anthropologist ‘stuck’ in particular investments of certain social positionalities and structures.

I understand that my two field sites with their own politics and social relations would not just spill sometimes physically – let’s say, when my father accompanied me to my field in the first few months or when my participants visited me at times in my village - but also emotionally. And it is in this emotional spilling, particularly guilt from one world to another that I am more interested in. This was particularly evident in the act of eating. My caste Hindu grandmother had strong reservations about my eating in Muslim households as Muslims are understood to be impure for their consumption of beef. She would insist everytime on my taking a purificatory bath. After the initial months, I created an elaborate charade of weekly new narratives of invented road-side restaurant names and the food that I ate in each. The lying however did make me feel guilty. After COVID when I began fieldwork in September, I carried my own food and was more reserved about sharing food. This struck them as odd and often my participants would remark, “*Baideo*, nowadays does not eat with us!” I felt guilty then for not eating with them. But I say emotionality is messy because I do realize that a part of me was also escaping from the guilt of lying to my grandmother. But the fascinating thing about spilling is the unpredictability, allowing the existence of newer possibilities. One does not know where the emotions can go and reveal newer corners. I understand that it is this unpredictable, accidental nature of spillage that brings out emotions’ rhizomatic nature. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) understand the rhizome as opposed to the root – such that as opposed to the root’s linear movement, the rhizome opens up in any direction. The rhizome, in their words, “neither has a beginning nor an end, but always a middle from which it grows and from where it overflows.” (pp. 21). The rhizomatic nature of emotions caused by spillage allows emotions to travel in any directions, multiply and undergo metamorphosis. The rhizome is anti-

genealogy, non-hierarchical and relational. When emotions, in this case guilt, spill-over from one field-site to another, I argue that there opens up a world of possibilities, wherein the emotions and hence even we, as researchers, are continuously becoming. What newer corners they opened up for me as a researcher as guilt spilled from one site to another is discussed in the next section. There, I go on to discuss the importance of the figure of the vulnerable researcher - acknowledging the constant presence of the messy world of emotions that a researcher works from.

### *2.3 The Vulnerable Researcher*

It is critical to understand that one cannot and should not escape or try to master one's emotions, including guilt. Ruth Behar in the 1990s wrote about the importance of vulnerability while doing fieldwork as well as while writing one's ethnography. As opposed to detached witnessing, she writes,

“Only in so far as you are willing to view them from the perspective of an anthropologist who has come to know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others. You should know that my one major vulnerability, my Achilles' heel, which I always thought was a problem in my becoming an anthropologist, is that I can't read a map. I'm the sort of person who gets lost just going around the corner.” (Behar 1996: 33).

Acknowledgement of the mesh of emotions from where an ethnographer works from is a vulnerability that always opens a researcher to better ethics of research while also allowing the researcher to be genuinely immersed in the world of the research participants.

The figure of the vulnerable researcher lets the ruptures open and lets researchers work around the emotion, which is guilt in this case, and not escape or master it. Anthropologists have demonstrated how in fact new ways of thinking and understanding are rooted in emotion. Only a vulnerable researcher opens up the possibilities of finding moments of surprise and shock to not just understand the topic better but also to constantly review methods and ethics of fieldwork. I ask how can vulnerability be used as a methodology for a researcher? The world that the researcher dives into is messy, where concepts, boundaries, values and identities overlap, clash and spill and are not defined in neat categories. And I understand it is possibly the vulnerability of the researcher that brings him/her/them closer to that world.

The feminist exhortation to become vulnerable is also in a way to break with the classical anthropological methodologies that persuaded students or practitioners to remain “objective”, be “rational” and non-immersed. It argues that new thinking or knowledge systems can be produced by using emotions, when researchers are not distant but open, vulnerable and immersed in the lifeworld of their participants. The acknowledgement of ‘patchwork ethnography’, meaning the messy world in which researchers are entangled, came to light when ‘native’, female, non-binary or other marginalized people started using ethnography as a methodology. The use of vulnerability and the celebration of the vulnerable researcher should be seen in this context.

Fieldwork is an intrinsically guilty act. From not really being able to understand our participants’ views (since we do not inhabit that location) to making them give their time to us for the purpose of a text, following which the ethnographer has the option of going back to the safe space of a university, all have the potential to make a researcher feel guilty. (Geertz 1974, Gable 2014). However, as Behar (1996) or Devereux (1967) write, acknowledging and working with guilt along with a varied set of emotions will allow the researcher to assess and access the world around better,

particularly the world of research. It was my feeling and working around guilt that helped me to understand how deeply rooted I myself was in Assamese nationalism, a concept I examine in my research and critique in my political writings. It also helped me understand better the everyday mundane workings of that ideology and how the family as an institution has tremendously contributed in it being supported and nourished. It helped me locate my own positionality in the field-site better and how the complex mesh of my own individual positionalities and the accompanied roles and responsibilities criss-crossed, sometimes helping in rapport building with my participants and at other times challenging them.

Behar (1996) argues that writing vulnerably is not randomized exposure of self nor a decorative flourish but picking up pieces of self and expressing them with the sole intention of forwarding some larger arguments. In addition, she warns us about the responsibilities of being vulnerable and expressing vulnerability as we must prepare ourselves for the shock, discomfort and raw reactions that the readers will experience while reading and identifying with the emotions of the ethnographer. Thus, allowing oneself to be vulnerable should come with that responsibility. Nonetheless, my admission, understanding and writing about doing ethnography from a web of emotions, particularly guilt, have helped me to situate myself better and produce situated knowledge. It helped me to review my relations with participants and my research's entanglements with my 'personal' world of family and village and how each contributed to my engaging with ideas that are at the forefront of my research - Assamese nationalism, citizenship, char-dwellers, state-making, etc.

Finally, I did feel guilty in the process of writing this about my family. Almost like I am trading off numerous dining table family discussions, maybe intimate family opinions and secrets in front of complete strangers. So why do I still do it? For more ruptures and possibilities to open up. When



I let my stories of guilt spill here today with the prospect that they will get stuck to newer corners, I am looking for newer ruptures and possibilities of making sense of the world, of methods, of fieldwork and anthropology better. For as Kant says, to know something is always to spill over the concept. Hence maybe concepts of emotions, guilt, fieldwork, anthropology will gain fresh meanings and discussions when I let my guilt from the two field-sites spill into now a third space – this, right here with newer participants, its own politics and relations.

### 3. ARCHIVES AND HEARING CENTERS

Besides my ethnographic work, I used archives of both English and vernacular (Assamese) newspapers on flood, erosion, NRC, eviction, etc., archives of Assam Assembly debates on flood-erosion and NRC, colonial reports on chars, Line System, census reports, maps of char-chapori revenue circles, jute production reports, etc., post-colonial state's archives on post-partition and 1972 War's relief and rehabilitation schemes, police diaries of Barpeta district, archives of government letters, memos, court judgements and orders on Baghbar Weekly Market, court cases of 'Doubtful Voters', archives of Asam Sahitya Sabha's (Assam Literary Organization) *patrikas* or magazines among others.

My substantial archival work was done at the Assam State Archives, Assam Legislative Assembly Library, Mandia Circle Office (floods/erosion/Doubtful-Voters/eviction files in and around Baghbar) and the Block Development Office at Mandia where I got access to Baghbar Weekly Bazar case files. Archival politics, that is what documents are stored, how they are catalogued, etc. speak volumes of the state's relationship with the society. I could find lot of information on Bengali Muslims and chars under 'Home and Political' division of the catalogues, which generally houses

documents related to security at the Assam State Archives. Detailed recording of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers and chars has been done in district police diaries along with government letters exchanged around post-partition time and the 1971 war. Such documents, besides keeping strong surveillance on char areas, have also framed the Bengali Muslim char-dweller as ‘suspicious’, ‘violent’, etc. Another category under which information on chars and char-dwellers was stored was ‘Relief and Rehabilitation’<sup>26</sup>. However, here too, the language of government documents showed the Bengali Hindus as ‘refugees’ as opposed to Bengali Muslims who were described as ‘foreigners’, ‘immigrants’, etc. I explore such projection of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers’ in government documents in greater detail in the chapter on Weekly Bazar. Such politics of archives – the presence, absence and description of information is with the sole aim of reconstructing truths that the state wants to preserve. (Gould 2017, Tarlo 2013, Brandt and Glajar 2017). Moyukh Chatterjee (2023) while looking at police archives during the Gujarat pogrom<sup>27</sup> in 2002 shows that the epistemic violence of state archives goes beyond erasure or repression of information. Strategies such as repetition, aggregation and affect that often lie at the surface of the documents, instead of being hidden, can also reveal how epistemic violence is committed on the minorities by the majoritarian state.

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<sup>26</sup> The branch of Relief and Rehabilitation was particularly created in the background of Partition and to keep a track of refugees in-flow and their settlement and relief. In Assam, at present, it has been remodeled as the Revenue and Disaster Management Department.

<sup>27</sup> The Gujarat pogrom in 2002 was orchestrated against largely Muslims in Gujarat. Though it has been treated by state narratives as riots (and Hindus were attacked too but large number of Muslims were violated), the Hindus had complete support by the then ruling state machinery. The state machinery in many accounts justifies the pogrom as a response to Godhra when a train carrying Viswa Hindu Parishad’s (VHP; a right-wing Hindu organization) karsevaks (volunteers) were set on fire by a Muslim mob. This is shown by Chatterjee (2023) in the police archives where various incidents against Muslims were aggregated together into one ‘Omnibus FIR’ that carried hardly any details of the perpetrators. In fact, while Muslim perpetrators were highlighted with details, Hindu perpetrators were kept anonymous or were being written about in vague language. Such politics of language in archival documents is reminding me of the favorable language that was used in the documents of ‘Relief and Rehabilitation’ department to refer to the the Hindus (refugees) as opposed to the Muslims (immigrants/foreigners) who were written about using vitriolic language by the state in Assam.

Thus, it is important to find alternative archives which store counter information and histories. In my fieldwork, I found archives of old magazines that were brought out in the past by Ramapara Pam char's ME School. Though few and not in good condition, they reveal counter histories of chars, of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers and their imagination of a community and a territory.

Such magazines often had poetry or short prose about what India was, about the Brahmaputra and its importance, in addition to work pertaining to their cultural identities. These narratives also fill up the gaps or the misconceptions that are harbored in the pages of *patrikas* of Asam Sahitya Sabha, a chauvinist Assamese nationalist organization against such minority communities. The archives of the Bazar court case documents are a rare counter-voice to statist politics of representation. These files had petitions, replies to petitions and case documents submitted by char-dwellers against the state's claims to the bazar, which I explore in detail later. Thus, such counter-archives are important and as Susan Pell (2015) says can be radically empowering.

Conversations outside the archives, be it in the tea stalls opposite the State archives or the Assembly Library provided opportunities to not just connect with other researchers (a few were working on over-lapping themes) but also network with staff members of the archives. Striking up conversations with the peons who find and bring the files to researchers also led them to suggest relevant files or themed catalogues containing relevant files to me. One of the peons, Achyut da, became very close to me. I even attended his wedding later and still remain in touch with him. Thus, such affectual outside-archive spaces along with building of such affective networks exist alongside an otherwise 'dry', formal archival space. Such networks also enable one to maneuver through, negotiate with or best of all, percolate through the webs of procedures, languages, etc. that keep information otherwise inaccessible.

I began my fieldwork by attending the NRC hearings in two Hearing Centers in Barpeta district. My access to the centers was provided through my father's connections as one of the Disposing Officers (DO) had previously worked with him and agreed to allow me to observe the proceedings on the condition that I would not make any video/audio recordings of any kind. He then introduced me to the DO of another center who agreed on the same condition.

These hearing centers were predominantly male spaces. There was only one woman officer in the two centers. However, these centers were thronged by a lot of women, particularly minority women of all ages who were called for hearings. I noticed how male members of the family argued for the woman, whose case was being heard. Women would stand at a corner or at the end of the crowd, despite being under scrutiny. In one center, when a woman's documents were found to be forged, the male members of the family were seen shouting at her in front of all regarding who gave her the 'ill-advice' of producing fake documents. Male DOs would often comment on how minority women were illiterate or did not speak Assamese well enough to converse with officers and present their cases. Hence it was convenient for them when male representatives were present. Thus, in a space where women were silenced or sidelined, these women would often talk to me when I would meet them outside the centers or even outside the rooms where hearings would continue, and men would be busy with 'work'. Hearing Centers, thus, provided space to start conversations with minority women who would share with me their anxieties, fear and confusion. My social class (which was reflected in my clothing, language etc.) also made them think that I could help them in some way. The most I could do was go through their applications and hearing notices and explain to them why they were called and what they could point out. Often people would approach me to look at their applications and suggest solutions, and I would oblige. These interactions also provided the spaces to begin conversations regarding the NRC.

Being present at the Hearing Centers allowed me to realize that the cramped, crowded Centers were extremely affectual spaces, an argument that I elaborate on in my chapter on NRC. These were spaces where people (mostly minority Bengalis) shared stories of pain and anxieties with officers and each other. In fact, these centers were where estranged daughters/sons met their families or family reunions happened, etc. The spaces surrounding the centers such as tea-stalls, photocopy shops, etc. were also interesting spaces to meet people and listen to their opinions while also encountering numerous rumors circulating surrounding the NRC. One of the many rumors that I had heard while sitting in a tea-stall was how showing older legacy documents (that is 1950 NRC copy over say, 1960 Voter's List copy) guaranteed inclusion in the NRC. Stories would also float around about which DO was better and who was clueless, etc. The NRC in such spaces had a life of its own and was imagined in varied ways. Such things displayed the way the citizenship project was impacting common people, particularly the minorities.

## CONCLUSION

My research used ethnographic methodology along with archival data and interviews. Besides, char-dwellers (with whom I conducted focused group discussions too), I interviewed bureaucrats at the Inland Water Transportation Department, Water Resources Department and Electricity Department at the Barpeta Division. I also interviewed bureaucrats in various departments who were handling the NRC, particularly in char areas. I interviewed the Boat Clinic staff and Bengali Muslim informal laborers in Guwahati, Assam. I also conducted interviews with academics working on char areas and activists and NGO workers working with char-dwellers helping them with citizenship cases, preventing child marriage, etc.

This research is guided by feminist ethnographic methodology – its ethics and intentionality. This chapter was largely focused on understanding in-betweenness as a researcher’s positionality, how it came to the foreground for me, and how I experienced it. It moves on to understand the affective world that I as a researcher was and continue to be immersed in, which I have lingered with while doing my ethnography. It is cognizant of and inspired by the principles of ‘patchwork ethnography’ which acknowledge how ethnographic practices are reshaped not just by the participants’ lives but also by the researcher’s own multiple personal and professional entanglements – from health, financial, political, temporal, environmental constraints, relationship with families and commitments at ‘home’ while also taking into account the new realities created by the pandemic. (Gunel et. al 2020).

I engage here with my in-betweenness and the confusion of sharply drawn boundaries between native/non-native, insider/outsider, home/not-home, activist/academic to show that I, as a researcher worked at and from the hyphen while engaging with binary divisions at the same time. This liminality allowed me the freedom of movement, and often access to spaces, people and conversations that my boundedness in fixed categories would not have provided me with. It is this liminality that Lilith Mahmud (2013) has termed the “ethnographer’s magic”. (pp. 203). However, I did face issues of trust due to my inter-mingling with opposed groups, even as this inter-mingling was enabled by my freedom of movement.

But my identities were fixed too – particularly by my family and village and I engaged with ethnography from a mesh of emotions. I particularly focus here on guilt since it shows the complex, layered worlds that collapse into each other when a female, ‘native’ researcher works at ‘home’ while staying with family. I show here that while guilt as an emotion kept me stuck to a few fixed identities– caste Hindu Assamese daughter; my guilt also spilled over from one to the other field-

sites impacting my relations in each and with each. This spilling of guilt allowed for transformative movements too. For example, with my father accompanying me to the chars during the early months of fieldwork, this allowed him to closely interact, observe and even be witness to a world which he had historically seen as filled with ‘hated others’. This changed a lot of his own perceptions and biases that he held about the char-dwellers – he discovered that they were not ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ for example. Towards the end of my fieldwork, he was even invited for meals which he gladly accepted.

My recognition and working with this guilt have opened up new ways of doing ethnography for me – of the importance and ethics of being a vulnerable researcher both while doing ethnography and writing it. I believe it has allowed me to understand the politics of positionality better and how it affects not just mine but all fieldwork.

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## CHAPTER 4: BOATS

It was almost the onset of monsoons as I rushed to reach the ‘*ghat*’ (Boat dockyard) so that I could catch the 10 am ferry on time. There are only three public ferries during the day for people to travel to various nearby chars or to the nearby district of Goalpara where char-dwellers frequent to reach the nearest hospital or various government offices or even schools and colleges. Most if they miss these public ferries would lose out on a day’s work or study and sometimes even precious lives. They can hire private ferries but that would cost thrice the rent than what they pay for a ticket in public ferries. During my initial days of fieldwork, when I did not quite grasp the schedule of ferries and due to the long distance that I had to travel from my ancestral village to reach the *ghat*, I often had to hire private ferries and that costed me. My first local contact in Ramapara Pam char, Abdul da had advised me to wake up early if I planned on working in the chars for a longer duration – “For us, the day starts early and ends early. It all depends on the sun. This is not a lifestyle choice but a necessity.” Before the coming of the solar electric panels, char-dwellers could hardly imagine what an electrified house of theirs would look like. Hence, they wake up around four in the morning. During summer, probability is they would wake up by three and eat some rice and fish and leave for the fields. Thus, the schedule of ferries also reflected that. The first ferry at Baghbar *ghat* left at six in the morning, which most people took to reach the nearby urban centers of Goalpara, Barpeta or Mandia to sell their agricultural produce in the markets there. The next ferry did not leave for four more hours and hence farmers in chars could not afford to miss the six am ferry.



By now I have settled to the routine of waking up at five in the morning, travel for two hours by road from my ancestral village and reach the *ghat* at most by half past nine. Ali da, the *ghat* lessee<sup>28</sup> who also runs the public ferries along with the boat drivers are well-acquainted with my schedule and on days that I do not reach the *ghat* on time, would give me an urgent call saying that I reach the *ghat* soon. This was one such day. When I finally reach the *ghat*, Ali da smiles and waves. The *ghat* along with the public ferries are very masculine spaces as men of mostly all ages would crowd them and be more visibly present. Men would gossip, share tobacco, cups of tea and joke around in the *ghat* shed cum waiting area where tea and snacks are sold. Women would mostly slide into the background. This was partly also the reason that I stood out in that space. I disturbed the *ghat* and the boats' masculine energy and routine. At first, the waiting shed and the boats provided an excellent opportunity for me to observe people and make small talks because this was a rare moment when I would find char-dwellers not in a hurry or working. I will be saved from the guilt of disturbing or interfering with their work schedule. At first, men would be amused at my curiosity to learn things that were not what they would say "worth learning", for example the mechanics of rowing a non-mechanized boat versus a mechanized boat. I suppose the idea of a woman intruding into experiences and knowledge and that too in a public space that they usually shared with other men was a bit jarring to them.

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<sup>28</sup> All public ghats (boatyards) at the village level are owned and managed by the state at various levels – smallest ghats are owned by the local Panchayat bodies, medium ghats are owned by the Anchalik Panchayats and bigger ghats (mostly in urban centers) are owned by Zilla Parishads. Apart from the Zilla Parishads, many of the bigger ghats are also owned by the Inland Water Transport Department (IWTD). The ghat at Baghbar is owned and managed by the Mandia Anchalik Panchayat who annually leases it out to the highest bidder, who then becomes the lessee responsible for managing the ghat and collecting revenue from it.



*Image e. The Baghbar Ghat (boatyard)*



*Images f. The Waiting shed, frequented by mostly men.*

But I was not completely an ‘insider’ – I was an upper-caste, middle-class, Assamese Hindu woman as opposed to the lower class, Bengali Muslim men and women and hence I was not absolutely seen as a ‘woman’. My identity as a woman which in most cases would have excluded me from conversations and spaces that were male-dominated was erased and diluted by my ‘outsider’ or what can be called my ‘alien’ positionality. I call this an ‘alien’ positionality because

though my positionality as a woman was diluted, I was not seen equivalent to a man either. There was a particular fluidity to this ‘alien’ positionality, almost like a liminal object, for I could slide into my ‘non-woman’ identity when I had to take part or initiate conversations in male-dominated spaces like the *ghat* and then emphasis on my ‘woman’ identity when talking to other women or in accessing private spaces of a household. So, when I say ‘alien’, I am referring to this fluidity arising out of a difficulty in placing one to a fixed category, *all the time*. Meaning, my positionality did not attempt to break naturalized categories but gave me the freedom to embody two often opposed categories at different points of time, depending on varied contexts. This difficulty of putting me into a fixed category was also added on by my appearance of having short hair, wearing *salwar-kameez* and often long earrings – my appearance confused their perceived understanding of how a man and a woman ‘look’ around them. This became pretty literal when months later Abdul da told me that apparently young men had placed bets on me being a man or a woman when I had first arrived in the char.

The boat, unlike the *ghat* or the waiting shed, was a space that was at once public and yet intimate. And hence was a space where I would exaggerate on my ‘alien’ positionality quite frequently. The intimacy of the space was underlined by the way a mechanized ferry was built. The traditional ferry was already a narrow space and the placing of the huge diesel engine inside the mechanized ferry took up more space – while men cramped on the two ends of the boat and the roof along with bicycles, motorbikes, etc., women sat on the interior area, just below the roof where there would be wooden benches hap-hazardly placed. And with lesser ferries and more passengers, the boats will be cramped with people. People had no option but sit or stand very close to each other. I would start the ferry ride almost always on the interior area, first talking to the women and children and then move out and chat with the boat-driver and helpers who would introduce me to other older

men. The intimacy of the space let out many stories of the char-dwellers which not only helped me build rapport but also understand that the boats are a lifeworld in themselves. They allow char-dwellers to appreciate and comprehend the river better while bringing out their identity as a distinct cultural community through all the folktales, folk-songs but most importantly through their everyday memories that are associated with boats, particularly memories associated with floods and monsoon.



*Image g. A mechanized ferry or a 'Bhotbhooti'*



*Image h. The 'intimate' insides of a mechanized ferry; on the roof, motorbikes (as seen), cycles and passengers all cramp together.*





*Image i. The diesel engine, taking up a lot of space inside the ferry.*

I met a middle-aged man who while taking interest on my research recounted his memorable marriage story that took place during floods.

“It was the 1988 over-flood. I, along with my friends, went to the nearby char via boats to get my bride. But the char was almost devastated and sub-merged and people, including the bride’s family had to shift. So when we reached there, the char had almost disappeared. We were circling in the boats for hours searching for my bride and her family when we found them on top of ‘bhels’ (temporary rafts made with banana stems). We approached them, took them on our boats and searched for a piece of land where we could get married.

But almost all the nearby chars were sub-merged. So, everyone decided that we should get married in the boat. The *qazi*<sup>29</sup> who read out vows and the loud sound of the diesel motor from the boats all mixed up together. And yet we could not go anywhere, the winds were maddening, and our boats were dancing in all directions. We spent two crazy nights just on the boats. Humeira, my bride, sat beside me and we both prayed side by side. Oh! I fell in love with that woman in a matter of those two nights!”

The boats were such cultural objects that came to life and continue existing through such everyday, intimate memories of char-dwellers. The shared memories surrounding flood, fishing or everyday travel on the boats produced distinct cultural experiences and an identity that tied the char-dwellers as a community. It became particularly clear when char-dwellers, both men and women, would be quick to point out areas where one would find what kind of fishes and which char will be sub-merged how much by the course of the river, which mostly were derived from their continued exposure to the moods and travails of the river through the boats. Older char-dwellers would recount times when they would spend months on the boats searching for different kinds of fishes and selling them on different weekly markets along the *ghats*. These were times when men would bond and share stories through songs. ‘*Bhatialigaan*’ is a category of folk-songs that developed out of such experiences. These are songs which mostly talked of separation from loved ones and imbibed themes of pain and longing. But older men would quip in saying that hardly anyone sings any ‘*bhatialigaan*’ anymore because of the implantation of the loud diesel engines in the boats. But also, because people desire for land transportation. There is an obvious growing fascination

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<sup>29</sup> A judge in a Muslim community whose decisions are based on Islamic religious law.

and bias towards roads and bridges among the char-dwellers. Thus, the socio-cultural lifeworld of boats has been disturbed and changed by the introduction of machinery as well as a politics that has given preference to land over water.

And it is to this second factor that this chapter will focus on. Extending on the arguments made by Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013), Gilmartin (2003, 2015) and Saikia (2020), I propose here that the present-day char-dwellers' preference for land transportation is a result of colonial politics wherein the British placed emphasis on land and tended to neglect water. This was the case not just because of its materiality but also because land came to be philosophized as a cultural category. Land as a cultural category, as I will explore in the next section, was critical to justify the project of colonization. This colonial politics continues to be celebrated by the present post-colonial, post-independent state too. Hence, what I aim to do in this chapter is understand that colonial politics and then go on to see how that impacted the lifeworld of boats and with it char-dwellers' relations to the boats, the river, water and also each other as a cultural community. The boat, thus, for me, would be an ethnographic object to look into how state intervention (or non-intervention) is changing char-dwellers' identity, memories and relations. The boats that largely guide my understanding here are the mechanized ferries that usually are used as public ferries by *ghat* lessees.

## 1. LAND OVER WATER

Water by its very nature is fluid. It can flow in any direction and is constantly undergoing change. (Strang 2005; Linton 2006; Hastrup et al 2016; Ballesteros 2019). "Water's diversity, in some respects, is key to its meanings. Here is an object that is endlessly transmutable, moving readily

from one shape to another: from ice to steam, from vapour to rain, from fluid to steam... This process of transformation never ceases: water is always undergoing change, movement and progress.” (Strang 2005: 98) Strang (2005) also notes how the materiality of an object plays a vital role in meaning-making. She takes cue from the Gibsonian approach that understands the correlation between sensory experiences generated through the materiality of physical environment and the construction of meaning.

For communities that have traditionally celebrated and depended on water, be it in their purificatory rituals or food and livelihood, the diverse, fluid and changing nature of water is life-saving and sacred. However, for the modernist colonial state, this diversity and ever-changing nature of water is representative of unpredictability, disorder and illegibility – qualities that are extremely problematic for the modernist colonial state. James Scott (1998) argues that the modernist state is obsessed with predictability and legibility so that it can control and manipulate better. “Legibility, after all, is a prerequisite of appropriation as well as of authoritarian transformation.” (Scott 1998: 219). Water leaks, flows, and evaporates. The unpredictable and fluid nature of water makes it difficult for the modernist state to make water legible in true sense and hence to control or keep it in order.

Unlike water, land symbolizes fixity and hence enables the modernist state to control, order and classify it better. Because of its stability, land was predictable and easier for the state to surveil. The fixity of land provided opportunities for the modernist colonial state to make it a unit of revenue generation because land could be easily demarcated into individualized properties. Colonial politics followed Lockean theory to understand that individualization of property was a necessity to extract value. Value creation was maximized when properties moved away from collective ownership. Collective belonging was in fact understood by Locke as value negation or



wastage. (Chakraborty 2012). The fluidity and unpredictability of water makes it difficult for the colonial state for individualization and organization. Thus, as we will see in the next section, the importance of water for the colonial state in India and particularly Assam, declined as opposed to land. The entire system of revenue generation for the colonial state was land-centric with tools of “high modernism” (Scott 1998: 87) such as the cadastral map, the land revenue register or the census being land centric. In fact, the development of proper cadastral maps was interlinked with the growth of a land market. “The map was especially crucial to the new bourgeois owners of landed estates, for it allowed them to survey a large territory at a glance.” (Scott 1998: 45) Kain and Biagent (1992) argue how the cadastral maps often had seas, rivers and wastes omitted because they failed in generating revenue. From this, one can see that a revenue generating system that was land-centric put water bodies in parallel to wastes.

The colonial system, in fact, saw anything that was not bearing value or was not economically productive as ‘waste’. Gorky Chakraborty (2012) understands that the colonial project was furthered by constructs and even land that was economically not generative was seen through the colonial construct of ‘wasteland’. To transform ‘wasteland’ to that of value was also seen as transformation from a state of nature to the state of civilization, which was the moral philosophy that justified the colonialism project. Land, henceforth, was critical for the moral justification of colonialism, which I will look at later. But at this point it is important to reiterate that the fluidity and unpredictability of water made it difficult for the modernist state to place it at the center of its colonial project – for water refused individualization, organization, and neat categorization. In fact, water came to be thought of as ‘resourceful’ or ‘generative’ not for its own sake but in relation to land – how productive or cultivable it could make land to be.

Water and irrigation engineering that brought water back into the language of the colonial state, also imagined water in relation to land. The term ‘water duty’ in water engineering texts represented “the measure of relation between the volume of water and the area of crop which it measures.” (Gilmartin 2003: 5058). What became important was “modern water” (Linton 2006: 8) meaning water that could be treated as a resource and water became a resource when it could cultivate land ever more vigorously. And it is ‘modern water’ which Linton says that becomes scarce in post-colonial states. “Water charges in the Indus basin were thus in practice taken, throughout the colonial period and beyond, not on quantities of water used but on the basis of matured crop areas under irrigation.” (Gilmartin 2003: 5059) Thus, water was believed to be ‘efficient’, ‘working’ and ‘non-wastage’ in terms of the land that it watered and crops the land returned. The 1873 Canal Act in the Indus Valley that gave control to the state to mobilize and direct water to individual producers was enacted based on “principles of highest *productive* water use...” (Gilmartin 2015: 107, emphasis mine). Water existed in colonial imagination as something that served land, the site where cultivation was practiced, the site where the colonial state realized its dream of civilizing or transforming ‘state of nature’ to ‘state of culture’. Hence, land was the site where the colonial project realized its ideological and moral purposes.

### *1.1. Land as a cultural-ideological category*

“To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them, all of this occurs on, about, or because of land...cultural geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about.” (Said 1994: 93) Said, through his works, be it in ‘*Orientalism*’ (1979) or ‘*Culture and Imperialism*’ (1994) shows how the colonial state understood geography in terms of socio-cultural ‘spaces’ and hence created constructs like the ‘Orient and Occident’, that carried

with them a web of meanings. Land, in that sense, was not simply about economic prosperity and providing revenue from the colonized peripheries to sustain the stability of the colonial metropolitan economies, it was also about culture and civilization. In fact, the term culture is believed to be derived from the Latin word for cultivation. "...culture has for long been conceived as something existing in "soil".” (Malkki 1992: 29)

Let me come back to the colonial construct of ‘wasteland’ to understand how land as an ideological category represented everything that the colonial state stood for and wanted to promote, unlike water. ‘Wastelands’ as a category was introduced not simply to denote lands that were not privatized or commoditized but also lands that were left idle or “lands untapped or not being tapped according to its potential.” (Chakraborty 2012: 5) And thus, even people who preferred to keep lands as “idle” were seen as ‘uncivilized’ or in ‘state of nature’. And it is through identifying and transforming such lands through cultivation that ‘culture’ would be infused into these societies. Thus, transformation of land stood as a legitimate purpose for appropriation and utilization by the colonial power – to bring ‘uncivilized’ territories and people into the light of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’.

Lands were also seen to be of value when they would be enclosed into private individually owned plots, and on which settled agriculture would be performed. Locke through his labor theory of value understood that “in a state of nature – i.e. where there is no government – he who picks the fruit of a tree removes it by his labor from the common stock where it was the right of every man and brings the fruit under the right of individual ownership and exclusive consumption.” (Moulds 1964: 180). Thus, one can derive that for Locke, whose philosophy widely influenced the construction of ‘wasteland’ and the colonial project of civilization, it was individual labor on land that transformed land from the ‘state of nature’ to ‘civilization’. And through individual labor,

Locke understands one extracts his individual right to property or the piece of land that an individual has labored and transformed. Individual property for Locke, is hence a natural right. He believes that it contributes to maximum productivity and efficiency of people. (Harvey 2011). Privatized individual land were seen to be an impetus for taking up settled agriculture and settled agriculture was a yardstick for culture and civilization. Any land that was not under settled agriculture was seen as 'idle' and hence as 'wastes'.

Settled agriculture was also enabled because of land's fixity and sedentariness, unlike water. However, one can argue that the fixity of land, in a way, was also highlighted and enforced when the colonial state saw land through the lens of 'individual labor', 'individual property' and 'settled agriculture'. Land as individualized property with immovable, legible population practicing settled agriculture could no longer be imagined as hybrid - mud or swamp (that had more water quantity) or under-water (chars, in my case). Land in this colonial imagery, was always fixed and under cultivation, for it is such a land that represented culture and civilization.

Sedentarism was also a virtue that was celebrated and desired for by the modernist colonial state. Sedentarism allowed people to be legible, classified and controlled. (Scott 1998). 'Natives' who were mobile were demarcated as 'uncivilized' and 'criminal' by the colonial state for they were difficult to be controlled. Land was not only imagined to be sedentary, but it was also imagined as the site that promoted sedentary agriculture. Hence, unlike water, the colonial and post-colonial discourses surrounding belonging originated through a sedentary imagination of land – the 'homeland'. This is the second construct that helps us understand why land continues to provide a better ideological trope for the colonial and the post-colonial project of 'civilization'.

"The idea of culture carries with it an expectation of roots, of a stable, territorialized existence." (Clifford 1988: 338). In fact, the metaphor of 'roots' has been brilliantly explored by Malkki

(1992) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to denote how land and sedentarism continue to dominate questions surrounding belonging, culture and 'nativity'. The colonial project understood sedentarism as a moral value and the metaphor of 'roots' amplifies that.

“It is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnoseology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy....from the root foundation, Grund, racine, fondement. The West has a special relation to the forest, and deforestation...” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 18).

The 'root' for Deleuze and Guattari (1987) symbolizes a western thinking that is linear, that traces, needs to be located and orders or structures things. And land is the site that nourishes the root, that allows imagination of 'rootedness' and sedentarism which represented and continues to represent culture and civilization for the colonial and post-colonial state. It is no surprise then, settler colonialism as shown in the case of Israel needed literal land to establish their 'rootedness', their cultural identity. 'Home' had to be located in a fixed piece of land. The establishment of 'home' is done by tracing how deep the roots go into that fixed piece of land. For the post-colonial nation state, land or soil also works as a metaphor for jingoistic nationalist sentiments and belonging that often encourage racism and xenophobia. That is, whose 'home' is rooted where and how deep, ends up determining and segregating 'our' community from 'others'. Hence, notions of 'home' arising out of fixed land is the modernist colonial and post-colonial state's way of categorizing and controlling people.

In light of this, people who are mobile, who do not imagine belongingness through a sense of permanent place or fixed land are seen to be anomalous or 'uncivilized'. Culture itself is imagined

as territorialized and “violated, broken roots signal an ailing cultural identity and a damaged nationality.” (Malkki 1998: 34). Such people can be understood as rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and hence, as opposed to roots. Meaning, such people represent tendencies of fluidity, multiplicity and hence an impossibility to be structured or categorized. “They cannot be sited, cornered, controlled, curbed or located.” (Navaro-Yashin 2005: 13). They are everything that represent water and hence it is safe to say that it is the rhizomatic nature of water that was the anti-thesis to the rootedness of land that made water a less popular material and ideological category for the colonial and the post-colonial state. People and communities that depended and celebrated water like the char-dwellers, imbibed and displayed rhizomatic nature of water which made them difficult to be controlled and hence dangerous or threatening to the modernist colonial and the post-colonial state.

Keeping in mind this context, I see the boat as an object that kept and is trying to keep alive the rhizomatic fluidity of the char-dwellers as a cultural and political community as it battles with a post-colonial state that continues to prioritize land over water.

## 2. BOATS AND CHANGED RELATIONS

### *2.1. Relation of hybridity-fluidity*

Let me go back to the marriage story of the middle-aged man. What stands out besides the intimate relationships that char-dwellers shared with boats, was the use of the term ‘over-flood’ by him. As a matter of fact, that would not be the first time when I had heard a char-dweller use ‘over-flood’, instead of flood.

“I have seen ‘over-flood’, 1988 the ‘over-flood’ that happened...In that ‘over-flood’, us char people had no place to go. Those homeless people took shelter in South Goalpara district, in a place called Sesapani. Char people’s houses were below water. We picked up such homeless people in our boats. People, cows, buffaloes, etc.” – Ali da.

During one of my interviews with Ali da in the waiting shed, where we sat down to discuss about his memories of flood, this was one of the many things he revealed. Eventually over discussions with other char-dwellers spread across several months, I understood that ‘over-flood’ was experienced by char-dwellers differently than simply floods. For char-dwellers, floods were natural annual events. They not only anticipate the floods, but also wait for them. For floods brought with them new variety of fishes and also much required silt that made their fields fertile. Floods also enabled char-dwellers to predict if and when new chars would emerge and which previously submerged chars would re-emerge. And accordingly allowed them to plan their movement, new settlement, and new lands to be cultivated. Floods were woven with imageries of abundance and necessity by the char-dwellers. ‘Over-flood’ was used to denote a flooding experience that disturbed that imagery. ‘Over-floods’ brought with them uprooting of homes, destruction of fields, loss of cattle and unplanned movement. There was a sudden-ness attached to ‘over-floods’, one that char-dwellers could not fore-see or plan for. ‘Over-floods’ brought with them imageries of loss, death and pain. ‘Over-floods’ as we will see in this section were brought about by the colonial politics prioritizing land over water and the politics of separation. ‘Over-floods’ destroyed char-dwellers’ relation of hybridity and fluidity with the environment and each-other.

Boats, traditionally, promoted char-dwellers' fluidity and hybridity as a cultural and political community. Though an agrarian community, boats allowed char-dwellers' to be closer to water, to understand the river better. Often when their houses would be sub-merged during floods, boats would turn into their fluid, in motion homes. An official with the Disaster Management Authority Department who looks after char areas in Baghbar recounted how during floods, char-dwellers refuse to be 'rescued' and taken to relief camps and instead prefer to be in their boats. He said that staying in a relief camp tends to restrict their movement and floods are natural occurrences in their lives, not a disruption. During floods, while at night they camp inside boats, during the day they would take their boats and go searching for work or visit their fields, take their cattle to graze or crowd areas in the river where new fishes arrive because of the floods. Boats allowed continuity of everyday life during floods. Hence, travelers and colonial officers often described such people as "amphibious." (Lowrie 1842: 68-69; Saikia 2020: 96, 559). A nineteenth-century traveler writes about the fluid landscape of Assam and the people inhabiting them:

"In the rainy season these channels owing to the inundation of the country are filled with water many feet in depth. Every house consequently is provided with one or more canoes in which inhabitants visit each other's isolated positions and the cattle are brought upon the little eminences at night and housed often times under the same roof...In this manner for four months of each year... are the people surrounded by floods but as if endowed with amphibious natures they seem equally happy in or out of the water and pass their time on board their boats in trading with other villages throughout Assam." (Butler 1847: 16-17).

Boats allowed them to accept and celebrate the hybridity of nature; allowed them to imagine land and water not as exclusive categories but as intermingled together. Boats gave them access to mud



where they would find small fishes, to clay which they needed to build their houses and semi-submerged lands for jute cultivation. Char-dwellers specialize in the production of jute that requires land that is submerged with water – a process that is called ‘retting’. Retting is a rotting process of harvested mature jute to ease the separation of the fiber from the woody stem without any damage. Large plots of land are either filled with water or swamps and ponds of ditch water are required where the jute could be left to rot. Mud, clay, swamps, marshes, ditches or submerged lands are not ideal imaginations of land and water for the colonial state that is premised on the separation of land and water, where each is understood as a distinct category. Boats allowed them access to such hybrid spaces and existence of hybrid spaces such as mud-clay-swamps-marshes-submerged lands were important for them unlike the colonial or the post-colonial state.

The colonial state was also at a loss regarding tropical rivers like the Brahmaputra which confused their land-water separation. It is important that I underline this colonial politics of land-water separation because it allowed colonial imagination of land as a fixed category, unlike water. And land being imagined as a fixed category fueled policies favoring it over water.

“Modern European environmental and agrarian imagination carried in their heads required them to split soils and fluids into discrete domains. Thus began an exorcism of water from land...primarily meant to turn the lands into useful property that could then become socioeconomic-legal objects owned by individuals. This perception of land was rooted in Adam Smith’s view of what an economy should look like, and on conceptions of the environment based upon rural England.” (Lahiri-Dutt 2014: 27-28).

Tropical rivers with their seasonal nature were very unpredictable for the colonial state and made it difficult for land-water separation.

Avijit Gupta (2011) while talking about tropical rivers notes that the geomorphology of tropical rivers is different from temperate regions of the West. The Brahmaputra, for example, shows “a wide range of variations in its channel and bed-forms.” (Gupta 2011: 162). The seasonality and ferocity of flow of tropical rivers meant that rivers that were sitting dry for a long time might suddenly be brimming with water or even cause inundation of their river-banks due to overflowing. The high ferocity also meant increase in soil erosion of their riverbanks and increase in sediment load along with bed load. Rivers, like the Brahmaputra were also affected due to massive earthquakes in 1897 and 1950, that led to significant change of the course of the river. (Lahiri-Dutt 2014; Gupta 2011).

Such unpredictable nature of tropical rivers gave rise to the creation of geographical spaces where land and water were often inter-mingled, be it the inundation of floodplains or the creation of chars. Tropical rivers, hence, were a nightmare for the colonial state. It did not help that “early geomorphology books were written largely by experts who came from temperate countries and saw in the tropical world what they set out to see in the first place.” (Lahiri-Dutt 2014: 26). Thus, tropical rivers proved colonial dislike towards water as an ideological category and became sites where the colonial state and the post-colonial state would create ways to forcibly separate land from water.

*2.1.1. Tools of land-water separation; prioritizing land over water: Embankments, railways, roads and bridges*

While the boat for the char-dweller was an object that tied them to the hybrid, fluid environment and allowed their identities to be hybrid, fluid or rhizomatic, the colonial state brought with it tools and policies that forwarded a narrative of strict separation and classification. These tools allowed the state to focus on land's fixity and separate it from unpredictable and uncontrollable water. This section will explore these tools adopted by the colonial and the post-colonial state to understand how land got prioritized over water which meant serious implications for the existence of boats.

Embankments in colonial times were needed for this and also to establish the colonial imagination of land's fixity that could provide not just economic benefits but also cultural and moral justification of the colonial project – civilization. After all, embankments encouraged settled agriculture and settled population.

“The heightened importance of revenue yielding land was propagated by a perceive need to protect it from the invading rivers. Consequently, more embankments were constructed and the heights of the older ‘pulbandi bandhs’<sup>30</sup>, that had allowed the annual inundation of rice fields were raised. The meaning of the embankments also changed...the embankments were meant solely for flood protection.” (Lahiri-Dutt 2014: 28).

This is what Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (2014) writes when talking about how embankments introduced by colonial state in Bengal differed from traditional ‘*bandhs*’ that kept water away from land and with it the fertile silt and fishes too.

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<sup>30</sup> Locally made embankments were low-lying, not extensive and often poorly maintained, allowing spill-overs, breaches and outlet of water into the field. See Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt's research paper titled 'State and the Community in Water Management: Case of the Damodar Valley Corporation, India.' Can be accessed at [http://www.wepa-db.net/pdf/0612sympo/paper/Kuntala\\_Lahiri-Dutt.pdf](http://www.wepa-db.net/pdf/0612sympo/paper/Kuntala_Lahiri-Dutt.pdf)

The tropical rivers with their erratic nature created many obstacles for smooth navigation of large steamers or boats introduced by the colonial state. The two major earthquakes led to increase in riverbed of the Brahmaputra, making several stretches of the river difficult for navigation of large machine boats. They also led to the creation of several new sandbars or chars that in the words of British administrator Walter Hamilton rendered the western part of the Brahmaputra difficult to be navigated. (Saikia 2020: 156). This, along with the rampant building of embankments led to greater change of course of the river, more erosion and increasing rise of the riverbed leading to destructive floods or what the char-dwellers experienced as ‘over-floods’. This led the colonial state to see water and water transportation as unreliable.

Besides, the British after discovering oil and coal fields and tea in Assam looked for faster means of transport. The time taken by water transport was relatively longer. Officials complained that time taken to send produce from Assam to Bengal in a country boat was equivalent to taking a voyage round the Cape to London by a sailing vessel. The British were also frowning at the low quality of country-made boats. The Assam Company, the joint stock company in London that had the support of several well-connected and wealthy English proprietors, showed its concern for country-boats that could hardly withstand the river’s downstream force. (Saikia 2020: 135). Hence, around 1870s, one saw the expansion of railways and the coming of automobiles. The annual Administration Report of 1877-78 noted that the steamer carriages were not sufficient and were turning out expensive to carry the abundant mineral resources along with passengers. Hence, from 1875 to 1878, both the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra were surveyed to extend railway lines to Guwahati. (Goswami 2010: 136). The building of railways also indirectly meant the building of embankments or high raised mounds of land where the railway tracks were placed and they increased the frequency of destructive floods.

The post-colonial state helmed by upper-caste, upper class Assamese Hindu men has continued with the policy of land-water separation and prioritization of land over water which can be seen in the building of numerous roads, bridges and culverts in char areas.

While travelling from my village to my field, I would notice the construction and quick completion of numerous new roads in the chars. In fact, the state had already rolled out plans of making a four-lane highway from Barpeta to Baghbar, a highway that connects the district headquarters to the chars. The local MLA<sup>31</sup> in a letter to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Government of India, dated 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 notes that the Highway, that will be widened from 900 meters to 28,400 meters under the policy “Economic Importance for the year 2018-19 in the State of Assam”, needs raising, such that “a stretch of road-length of about 7 km in Mandia-Baghbar portion has to be raised” because that portion of the road “submerges under flood-water every year.”<sup>32</sup> In my two-years of fieldwork, the annual floods that visit Assam from mid-May to August and are most destructive in the char areas, destroyed the Highway in discussion every single time. Consequently, the repair works need more funds and more time. Officials in the Water Resource Department confided in me saying that even engineers involved with construction of the roads in the char areas are aware that roads constructed there will not withstand the strong floods every year. But there exists a strong network between contractors, engineers and politicians for whom more repair work means more inflow of work and funds and more opportunities for corruption. The construction of more roads also looks good on the report card of MLAs before the elections and are easily used to seek more votes.

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<sup>31</sup> Member of Legislative Assembly.

<sup>32</sup> Memo no. 45/D-6(ii)/2020-21. Letter was forwarded to the General Manager, NPEC Consultancy Pvt. Ltd (firm responsible and given the task of making the Highway), Gurugram, Haryana from the MLA.

In 2000-01, the then right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led coalition government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee launched the ‘Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana’ (PMGSY) scheme<sup>33</sup> that planned to construct *pakka* or concrete roads in rural areas, particularly in inaccessible areas. The idea was to connect the rural areas to the nearby urban centers. Improved connectivity was believed to improve rural population’s access to nearby markets, hospitals, schools etc. However, this central government led project never took into account the specific ecological conditions of chars. The BJP led state is known for putting more emphasis on improving land connectivity instead of water. The PMGSY is in its third phase and under the BJP state, the length of roads concretized in rural areas has only increased – in 2016 the length of roads concretized was 546772.18 kilometers while in 2021, 767980.488 kilometers of roads were concretized. The local MLA in Baghbar using the PMGSY scheme has launched several road-building projects.

The state has raised a target of constructing 88 concrete roads under the “88 roads scheme”<sup>34</sup> in an area that is surrounded by water. But besides roads, one can also see the rapid construction of bridges on rivers in the char areas. The local MLA in an interview revealed how he planned to build minimum three bridges over Joljoli river (a tributary of Brahmaputra) and an RCC (Concrete) Bridge on the river Brahmaputra. In fact, the BJP led state is known to push for massive bridge building projects. In Assam, Narendra Modi launched two of India’s longest bridges over the

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<sup>33</sup> <http://omms.nic.in/>

<sup>34</sup> Facebook post, dated 10 December 2020 – MLA Sherman Ali Ahmed’s profile (post and profile are both public). See <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100057757763788/search?q=88%20roads>

Brahmaputra. The Bogibeel and the Dhola-Sadiya bridges of 4.9 km and 9.7 km respectively connect the districts in Assam with the districts in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>35</sup>

The char areas are crisscrossed with several streams and rivers. Hence, construction of roads or improvement of connectivity via land would inevitably require a large number of construction of bridges and culverts by the state. While enormous funds have been spent on building these bridges (most concrete RCC bridges in Baghbar area are built or are planned to be built with no less than Rs. 4 crores<sup>36</sup>), most of these bridges cannot withstand the strong currents of the river, particularly during flood and often break down. In a social media post by the local MLA, it was declared that Rs. 1.5 crore have been allotted by the state in renovating the RCC Bridge on River Bhelengi (tributary of Brahmaputra) in Mandia<sup>37</sup>. This is a cycle wherein bridges are built only to be destroyed and then built again. This enormous wastage of public funds by the state could be stopped if only half the attention and funds were diverted to improve water transportation in these areas. In fact, the building of bridges in various junctures in char areas has also interrupted the flow of the river as a result of which people experience more destructive floods. Hence, bridges are creating newer destructive experiences of floods for a people that has lived with floods and water all their lives.

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<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/zMhowFzkONQkLllh9ycZtK/PM-Modi-inaugurates-Bogibeel-Indias-longest-railroad-brid.html>; <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/all-you-need-to-know-about-indias-longest-dhola-sadiya-bridge/tributary-of-river-brahmaputra/slideshow/58852686.cms>

<sup>36</sup> Rs. = Indian Rupee(s). 1 INR/Rs. = 0.012 USD. Throughout the thesis, the local Indian currency of INR/Rs. has been used when provided with information regarding monetary value. 1 crore = 10 million.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed, FB post 27/01/2020

The enthusiasm of the state for promoting and building bridges and culverts in char areas that are at the intersection of so many networks of rivers and their tributaries indicates that the state imagines that water can be ignored or bypassed through the extension of land. Bridges are ways through which the state constructs or almost ‘creates’ land above water, or where land originally does not exist, almost challenging the presence of water.



*Image j. A newly constructed RCC (Concrete) bridge at Baghbar Pahar.*





*Image k. The headstone shows details such as date of inauguration of the bridge, by whom and under which government scheme; the char areas are filled with such headstones, which also are the state's ways to imprint its mark and increase visibility/presence. As can be seen in the picture, the Brahmaputra is increasingly nearing the Pahar and the bridge.*

The rampant building of roads and bridges has led to the closure of several *ghats* in the chars. River-routes and river transportation work in intricate networks, such that one *ghat* is linked to several other *ghats*. Hence when one *ghat* is affected, it equally affects the other connected *ghats* and the people dependent on those *ghats*. Baghbar *ghat* lessee Ali da informs that “Jogigopa was an extremely vibrant *ghat*, but after the building of the Jogigopa bridge, that *ghat* became dysfunctional and it was closed. With the closing of the Jogigopa *ghat*, even Baghbar *ghat* closed down as now no government boats ply here, only private boats.”

### 2.1.2. 'Fixing' water: Regime of registration

The British started the practice of registering boats since 1884 in the Assam province. (Grierson 1887: 47). This was a way of surveilling the rivers, particularly as incidents of river ‘pirates’

became quite common and additionally to keep account of the amount of trade that happened on a regular basis. It was also a way to record the export of boats from Assam to Bengal. This regime of registration of boats introduced a system that involved enormous paperwork and the knowledge of the letters in a land and an industry that largely thrived on traditional knowledge, connections and networks build over decades and which involved very little writing or reading. Hence, the export of boats as recorded went down drastically. While between 1883 and 1894 around 16,386 boats were exported to Bengal from Assam, in 1898 only 400 boats were exported. (Saikia 2000: 129)

The British also introduced the taxing of wood or trees that were felled traditionally by communities for making boats. A Forest Department was established, and levies were imposed on any forest produce that were carried by boats. In fact, in 1883, taxes were imposed on any new boats that were made. (Saikia 2020: 133). Besides, taxes were also introduced for boat-makers who collected driftwood (small woods or pieces of log that were flowing down the river) to repair the boats. Concerned officials were writing to higher authorities addressing how the number of boats had decreased and places like Dibrugarh did not have a single boat. This was not so much for concern about people dependent on boats but largely to address the decreasing agrarian revenue and the revenue collected on timber and boats. In places like Barpeta and Majuli, which were predominantly covered with water and were big agrarian and trading centers, people were unable to access their agrarian fields, particularly during monsoons. Besides, the revenue bureaucracy or colonial officers tasked with collecting revenue from the people were also depended on boats. (Goswami 2010) “The District Officer of Lakhimpur wrote in 1885 that these officials had to come occasionally on official business and unlike in the past when the journey was always made on

boats, now had to be conducted by rail. This entailed much expense, as each man brought two attendants and the railway fair was Re. 1 for each person”. (Goswami 2010: 137) Hence in 1883, the government relaxed the collection of tax on timber for making boats that were used for personal purposes. However, residents from outside Lakhimpur, particularly Majuli, a river island or char inhabited by Assamese Hindus and tribals like Misings sent in their complaints and requests on the orders:

“Under which a royalty of Rs. 2 is levied on each boat cut out of any tree on which royalty is payable when cut. Royalty at Rs. 2 being now payable on unreserved trees, it was urged that this order is particularly hard on those who cut boats out of Simul tree which abounds in the Majuli and the wood of which is almost worthless. Such boats rarely last more than 1 year or at the most 2 years and when sold it is said do not fetch a higher price than 4 or 5 rupees. A royalty of Rs. 2 on a boat the value of which does not exceed Rs. 5 seems excessive.” (Goswami 2010: 53).

Thus in 1885, the Government relaxed taxation on felling of unreserved trees for cultivators of Majuli alone. These trees, however, could only be used for making boats that were put to use for agricultural purposes such as visiting their fields, but not for commercial purposes. Additionally, the government decided on the number of boats that each village could possess, and concession was only granted to those who had streams to cross over between their homes and fields. (Goswami 2010: 54). The colonial state contributed to the loss of importance of boats. In the 1881 Census, only 7,126 persons returned their occupation as ‘Boatman’ in the entire province inclusive of

Sylhet and Cachar, out of which only seven persons were recorded as ‘Boatbuilders’. (Goswami 2010: 41).

The post-colonial state continued with the practice of registration of boats. In Assam today, the Inland Water Transport Department (IWTD)<sup>38</sup> takes up the responsibility of doing that. The IWT Departmental Head Office that can issue all kinds of licenses is in the capital city of Guwahati which is hundreds of kilometers away from the char areas. Till 2020, the submission of all forms and fees associated with any kind of licensing was to be done manually in the IWTD Head Office. The long distance that ne covered is a major discouragement for char-dwellers. The registration of boats requires various documents such as passport, electricity bill, Voter ID, etc. which many char-dwellers often do not possess. These are communities who lose documents due to annual floods, who move around a lot and hence it becomes impossible for them to have a fixed address proof, etc.

Before they get a ‘Certificate of Registration’ from the IWT Department, the boats need to be granted a ‘Certificate of Survey’ which largely involves an official from IWTD visiting the boat for inspection and seeing if the boat is in good condition, has safety equipment, boat insurance, etc. However, the Surveyor at IWTD told that the boat owner needs to personally contact the surveyor and fix a date for inspection. Now, for people like char-dwellers who often do not find contact numbers of surveyors readily available, he/she needs to travel all the way to the Head Office in Guwahati (capital city) for a trivial task such as this and often gets discouraged because

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<sup>38</sup> The Inland Water Transport Dept. (IWTD), Assam is largely responsible for maintaining, developing, capacity building and institutional strengthening of Inland waterways - Brahmaputra, Barak and their tributaries in Assam. They are also responsible for providing safe cargo and passenger ferry services in particular river routes, maintaining river navigability, boat crew training, boat surveying, licensing, boat-driver’s and maker’s license issuing, boat registrations, etc.

it involves both time and money. Besides, boat-owners need to personally bear the cost of the survey, including travel expenses of the surveyor. This is additional cost along with the application form fee and the insurance money. 'Hull' (Boat) and Passenger Insurances are largely done by private insurance companies like United Limited. For a lot of poor char-dwellers, these are enough reasons to be discouraged from getting their boats registered. Before a boat gets registered, it also requires safety equipment such as lifejackets which, as said by the surveyor himself, are extremely expensive for poor char-dwellers. Registration of boats thus involve several costs which cannot be afforded by people who live hand to mouth on an everyday basis.

The bureaucratic complexities of the procedure, the costs and the distances involved along with the lack of dissemination of information by the post-colonial state in the far-flung char areas have significantly contributed to discouraging char-dwellers to have a greater number of boats and also to get their existing boats registered. The latter increases the precarity of char-dwellers' lives - both of boat-drivers and boat-travelers, which will be discussed in a later section.

This regime of registration that was introduced by the colonial state is read here as an attempt to 'fix' water. 'Fixing' water is a concept that I borrow from Linton (2006) to understand the colonial state's discomfort with water's unpredictability, fluidity and transformability and its attempt to change that. This attempt is to endow 'fixity' to water rather than to understand and embrace its processual nature. This is to make water what Linton says, "cooperative of things". (2006: 4). Thus, water was tried to be given 'fixity by drawing up policies that made water and the objects associated with it such as boats predictable, legible and controllable. While some efforts went in to 'fix' water by putting down rivers on maps (Lahiri-Dutt 2014: 28), other efforts were of building

embankments, canals, dams etc. (Linton 2006: 10). The colonial state's introduction of the regime of registration of boats and taxation on timber that is used to make boats can be seen in continuation of this – that is to make water or rivers more controllable and legible besides earning revenue out of it. This 'fixing' of water, or the regime of registration resulted in the production of 'modern water.' (Linton 2006). This resulted in the decrease of boats and the fascination and interest with the world of boats – boat-making, boat-rowing, etc. Consequently, it replaced the sense of hybridity and fluidity among char-dwellers and other water dependent communities with fixity, which I explore in greater detail in the next section.

### *2.1.3. From hybridity-fluidity to fixity: rhizomatic to rootedness*

Boats help in the survival of 'relational' worlds (Bawaka Country et al 2013: 189). Relational worlds are what Rose (2005: 303) and Ingold (2006: 14) say as "domains of entanglements", where the world keeps progressing because of the network of relationships that exists between humans and non-humans. Boats showed that the char-dwellers have an acute awareness of a connected world which was seen when the closure of one *ghat* led to the closure of many other *ghats*, meaning char-dwellers used boats by being aware of the inter-connections of rivers (this also made travel time shorter, instead of land). Boats kept alive the 'relationality' because it allowed char-dwellers to experience floods not as 'destructive' events but everyday important cycles – that brought silt, clay, mud, new fishes and reappearance of chars. Boats made char-dwellers keep alive their fluid and hybrid cultures.

In fact, boats in their making itself embodied a process that was hybrid. The traditionally made '*Khasia* boat' in Bangladesh is a prime example of that. 'Khasi' is a tribe in Meghalaya who since pre-colonial times used to engage in boat-making and providing wood for boat-making in and

around Assam and East Bengal. The making of ‘*Khasia* boats’ involves techniques that were first owned by the Khasis and then replicated by boat-makers in Bangladesh. (McGrail and Blue 2003: 46) Even today the boat-makers in Baghbar refer to the two block ends of the boat as ‘*golo*’, a term that is popular among Bangladeshi boat-makers and boat-drivers to refer to the boats used there. Having ancestors who migrated from then East-Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), the char-dwellers in Assam incorporated culture and lexicon surrounding boats from across borders drawn on imaginary land on the maps. Thus, boat-making promoted the amalgamation of heterogenous cultures and hybridity between cultures.

With the state’s prioritization of land over water, the demand and use of various types of boats have decreased. As a result of this, boat-makers are not making different types of boats anymore. On interviewing boat-makers Hanif da and Makum Ali, both admitted that at present they only make ‘*Haat-naos*’<sup>39</sup> and ‘*Bhotbhootis*’<sup>40</sup>. Hafiz Ahmed, a scholar from the chars and the President of the Char-Chapori Sahitya Sabha (a literary body of and on chars) recalls in an interview with me how boat races or ‘*naao khels*’ were an integral part of the culture of char-chaporis and during *Pushura*<sup>41</sup>, a famous boat race was organized every year in Mandia. The ‘*Khel Nao*’ that the historian Samuel E. Peal (1870) mentions in ‘*Canoes of Assam*’ is the specific boat that was used for such races. However, Ahmed notes that it is no longer the case anymore as hardly one can find boat races being organized in chars. As a result, the demand for and the making of ‘*Khel Naos*’ have also disappeared. Both Makum Ali and Hanif da asserted that they will not make their own children boat-makers but ask them to choose different career paths. For an art-form that has

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<sup>39</sup> boats that are narrow and operates with oars and are generally flat at the bottom

<sup>40</sup> boats that use diesel/kerosene fueled engines to ply, mostly are passenger and goods carrying ferries

<sup>41</sup> A harvest festival celebrated in the winters in the char-chaporis. Pushura overlaps with the Assamese harvest festival Magh Bihu and displays similarities in many rituals.

traditionally been passed down generationally, this is a severe loss of skills and culture. The disappearance of certain types of boats also means the loss of certain values, particularly values celebrating hybridity that respected and accepted fluidity, difference, and heterogeneity.



*Image 1. A boat-maker at work*

Boats allowed char people to defy imaginary lines of borders of nation-states and make use of connected river-systems to move around and in the process acquire varied cultures<sup>42</sup>. Among the char-dwellers in Assam, the syncretism is well displayed in their cultural expressions. Their folksongs and festivals often celebrate nature by displaying a beautiful syncretism between their

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<sup>42</sup> Swarup Bhattacharya and Lotika Vardarajan (2001) write about the 'Patia' boats of Eastern Bengal in India and the Hindu communities associated with them. In a rare anthropological essay that captures the cultural traditions associated with country-boats in India, they elaborately talk about the various rituals associated with various stages of boat building – a) during 'nauka gothon' (initiation of boat-building), b) 'nauka chalon' (moment when the 'patia' is shifted from place of construction to some other place) and c)'nauka jatra' (first launch). They beautifully describe rituals that symbolically give life to the boat during the first stage of boat building (janmo daan), when the 'patia' (considered a female/daughter) is given up by the mistri (boat-maker) to the owner of the boat (jol daan and jol grohon) etc. Through the description of the rituals, they show how boats are beyond simply inanimate transport mediums. Communities develop kin relations, sacred ones at that with boats through which cultures, myths, legacies along with a community's economy survives. For more, see, Bhattacharya, S. and Lotika Vardarajan. (2001). Patia of Eastern India. Vestiges of a reverse clinker tradition. *Techniques & Culture* 35-36: 417-444.



cultures that are derived from their ancestral Bengali Muslim connections in East Bengal and the cultures of ‘mainland’ Assam’s Assamese Hindu community. One can see this in the following folksong:

*Sitting by the river,*

*Hasan and Hussain have stopped to drink water.*

*Oh look! What happened at Janakpur,*

*Lakshman’s brother Lord Ram*

*Arrived at Janakpur, broke the divine bow,*

*And married Princess Sita, the daughter of King Janak.*

In this song, the invocation of the religious Muslim men Hasan and Hussain, and the Hindu deities Ram, Lakshman and Sita finds equal place. This syncretism can also be seen when Ahmed, in the above-mentioned interview, notes how Muslim women in the chars make *alpanas*, or patterns on the floor using rice powder and water - a Bengali Hindu tradition - to decorate during the festival of *Ghasi*<sup>43</sup>. Boats allowed them to continue living a ‘rhizomatic’ life and identity wherein instead of having tight-fixed separate identities as defined by modern nation-states – either Hindu or Muslim or either Bengali or Assamese - they could amalgamate them and embody hybridity. They could go anywhere, imbibe and embody any cultural and political identity without following any fixed structure.

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<sup>43</sup> Another harvest festival of char-dwellers. Celebrated at a time when the fields are barren. It overlaps with the Assamese festival of ‘Kati Bihu’.

The colonial politics of ‘rootedness’ and ‘separation’ that was followed by even the post-colonial state changed that. There arose a necessity for the char-dwellers to have a ‘rooted’ identity, to belong to one place – to be known by a singular and tight-fixed identity. The post-colonial state that is dominated by upper-caste, middle class, Assamese Hindu men continues to see the char-dwellers as Bengali-Muslims (and not Assamese) and hence as an ‘other’. This state aggravates populist sentiments where Bengali Muslims are represented as ‘foreigners’ eating away ‘native Assamese’ people’s land rights and economic opportunities. The tendency to fit them into singular, tight-fit categories is borrowed from their colonial masters. This politics of monolithic separation has not only caused violence but fueled the ‘indigenous-versus-settler’ debate wherein Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who trace their ancestry from East Bengal are never considered to be indigenous and are always relegated to the status of settlers and hence are seen as insufficiently Assamese by the post-colonial state and the society alike.

The char-dwellers themselves are giving up their traditional syncretic cultures and identities in order to become more like local Assamese. Char-dwellers are slowly giving up their Miya language and taking up Assamese while festivals like *Ghassi* and *Pushura* are hardly celebrated. During my initial fieldwork days in the char, I noticed how every conversation with any char-dweller would begin with them telling me the number of years that they lived in this land. Some even showed me land records and school-leaving certificates. All this without me ever asking them about it. It was not difficult to understand that there is a desire or more so a necessity for fixity and legibility among them to escape the state and the majoritarian society’s decades long xenophobia and hatred. Char-dwellers’ anxiety resulting from their desperate attempts to belong to the Assamese community, to be seen as Assamese and Indian and not as foreigners is induced

by the colonial and the post-colonial state's politics. Both the colonial and post-colonial states favor static senses of belonging and identity, defined in terms of the nation and encompassing only the human community, such that the relationally understood idea of home held by a migratory population becomes an aberration.

This growing desire for fixity is reflected when char-dwellers' are themselves inclining towards land transportation. People I talked to in the chars, including Hafiz Ahmed, praised the local MLA for initiating the four-lane Highway and building many bridges in the chars, even though they have been destroyed during every annual flood. The MLA who in his election rallies promised to finish the "88 road scheme" and allot more funds in repairing of RCC bridges and roads in the chars has been re-elected in the recently concluded 2021 Assam Assembly Elections. Mitul Baruah (2018) while working in the river-island Majuli in Assam was interested with the people's fascination for big infrastructures like roads and bridges even though they might not end up helping the people at all. He writes,

"Indeed infrastructures are that powerful a thing. They are not simply technical objects that enable the circulation of matters; rather, as some scholars have pointed out, infrastructures embody desire and possibility, the collective fantasy of society. They evoke promises, imaginations, and a new, empowered sense of socio-spatial arrangement. No wonder we are constantly fed with the promises and potentials that come with gigantic infrastructures – bullet trains, expressways, industrial corridors, etc. for instance." (Baruah 2018).

What Baruah does not say is that this desire is rooted in the modern state's inclination for land – a site that represents values which the colonial and the post-colonial state have always wished to forward.

The boat that represented the char-dwellers' and their world's relational, hybrid and fluvial existence is facing a threat with the growth of desire for fixity among the char-dwellers. With growing xenophobia this desire is only going to expand. The waters are no longer 'home' but represent precarity now, one of the other major reasons why char-dwellers are getting inclined towards land transportation. This relation of precarity involving boats, water and char-dwellers is one of the other spillages of colonial politics' preference for land over water. This is what I explore in the next section.

## *2.2. Relation of precarity*

*“Here, every year, we see minimum one boat accident happen.” - Baghbar ghat lessee.*

In this section I try to locate boat accidents as a window to show how boats have been transformed into objects of precarity, consequently changing char-dwellers' meaning of and relation with water. The post-colonial state's continuous neglect of water and water transportation is personified in the way the IWTD is currently functioning. There is an acute shortage of manpower in the department. A senior officer said,

“Right now, I am looking after two offices which are physically located in two separate districts. There have been vacancies for months now but no appointment or very few people are applying. The public image and status of a department like ours is extremely non-glossy

as compared to the PWD (Public Works Department; the Department responsible for building roads, bridges etc.) which is well equipped and is also well-funded.”

The sentiment that the state has no money for improving water transportation as opposed to land transportation was underlined to me by officers at the Anchalik Panchayat Office.

The state goes on dismissing boat accidents as individual faults. On September 5, 2018 a mechanized boat carrying around 40 passengers capsized near North Guwahati killing three and many more missing till date but the Transport Minister was quick to address the issue by suspending the then Executive Engineer and two other officers of the IWTD, holding them responsible for the accident. However, as I will argue here, causes of boat accidents are systemic. The two important reports of the two committees – the Khosla Committee Report and the One Man Committee Report that were formed by the state were never made public. Officers at the IWTD refused to even discuss with me the contents of both the reports citing ‘sensitive’ data, making me wonder what systemic deficiencies were brought out by them. Boat accidents are a direct result of the state’s prioritization of land over water and the most effected are the char-dwellers. Here, I explore over-loading and low registration of boats, two causes often cited by the state, as systemic problems before moving on to understand how the modern state is simply obsessed with extracting revenue from boats and water.

### *2.2.1 Over-loading and low registration*

The 2018 accident was said to be due to over-loading of goods and passengers, but the question is why do boats face over-loading? The boat owner at the Baghbar *ghat* told me that over-loading

mostly happens due to the low number of boats. And government run boats are extremely low. IWTD's Director in 2018 admitted that there were only sixty-nine functional government vessels in Assam and most of them were old and rickety<sup>44</sup>. In the last fifteen years, not a single government boat has been built or was bought by the state. In Baghbar itself, the *ghat* lessee recalls how for four years the *ghat* was first maintained by IWTD with a government boat plying, however, after the boats needed repair, no new boat was provided for and the *ghat* till date has no state-run boat. With land transportation being prioritized, the demand for boats has also dropped down. Boat-makers Hanif da and Makum Ali repeatedly told me that the number of boats that they make have dropped than earlier times. Now, in char areas where the faster, cheaper and in most cases, the only means of transport has been boats, the poor char-dwellers depend on them for largely everything. With lesser boats, the intervals at which these few boats ply are fixed and limited as was discussed in the beginning of this chapter. No boats can run after dark resulting in overloading.

The other reason that the state generally gives for boat accidents is that boat-owners often do not register their boats and ply them 'illegally', that is without the state's permission while the boat-drivers too do not have licenses. Ali da, the *ghat* lessee at Baghbar tells, "I have been driving boats since 1985 and yet I do not have a license. Out of a total of twenty-one boats that I own, only two are registered." But the question is why are boats not registered? Particularly also because registered boats in case of accidents do get compensation from the state. Ali da revealed how boats that are made by licensed '*mistris*' or boat-makers alone will be eligible for registration. However,

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<sup>44</sup> See <https://scroll.in/article/893639/assam-boat-tragedy-again-exposes-the-states-broken-inland-water-transport-system>

the number of licensed boat-makers are extremely rare. Both Makum Ali and Hanif da who have been making boats for more than a decade now do not have licenses. On asking the reason for that, they said that most information, particularly government circulars and notices, are not even circulated in the chars. The information percolation is pathetic when it comes to reaching the remotest of chars, hence even experienced boat-makers like Makum da and Hanif da have very little idea of the processes involved in acquiring a '*mistri* license'. Besides, licensed boat-makers need to pay taxes to the government. "With already decreased income, tax payment is not even an option for me", said Hanif da.

IWTD officials mentioned about rules which stated that during the non-flood season (or when an area has not been declared flood-affected) passengers who either die or are injured in a boat accident involving an unregistered boat, will not receive any state compensation. Hence, the precarity of life of char people who depend on water transport is a systemic precarity. The state negligence and prioritization of land over water is coming at the cost of lives. This also changes char-dwellers' relation to water. In my interactions with char-dwellers it was made evident that travelling via boats have become more "dangerous", particularly during heavy rains and storms. This is coming from a people who thrived on water, especially during monsoons using boats.

The IWTD is literally and metaphorically more far away for the char-dwellers than the local Panchayat Office. Hence, the char-dwellers are most experienced and aware of state practices of revenue collection than with processes of safety. Being located in the capital city, the IWTD, where registration processes happen manually, is far away from the chars. This serves as a massive deterrent for people to register boats. But the metaphorical distance of the IWTD is revealed in the

schemes and policies of the department, which is well expressed in the recent World Bank funded IWTD scheme ‘Jibondinga’ in which the state will provide marine engines for every registered boat. The marine engine enables the driver to reverse the boat because it has a ‘back-gear’ which current engines do not have and it is believed that many boat accidents are a result of that. But every boat will be provided with two marine engines so that in case one fails, the driver can start the back-up engine. In char areas however, mostly smaller boats are prevalent, as was told by boat-owners and boat-makers, because smaller boats allow greater number of trips and hence more profit as opposed to bigger boats. Additionally, smaller boats are preferred for private booking such as times when patients in char areas are needed to be shifted to hospitals. However, according to Hanif da, smaller boats will not be able to take the weight of two marine engines. “We cannot install two engines in a boat whose size is lesser than 50 inches (*hat*<sup>45</sup>), it will be very heavy and it will be risky, the boat can over-turn or drown”, Hanif da warned. Hence, many boat-owners in char areas are hesitant in registering for the scheme.

However, the state department that is tasked with revenue collection in rural Assam through *ghat* leases, ferry leases, etc. are with the Panchayat/Anchalik Panchayat (local self-government body) which is just few kilometers away from the chars. This gives us the idea where the state’s priority lies while also giving us the impression how the state understands water and how such imagination of water has increased char-dwellers’ relation of precarity with boats and water.

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<sup>45</sup> 1 hat = 1.5 inches.



### 2.2.2 Revenue extraction

The state's imagination of water as a 'resource' that is meant to be providing revenue is another aspect of what Linton (2006) calls 'modern water'. This understanding of water erases water's ecological, cultural and social meanings and the context of its existence and makes water's meaning unilinear that is, simply a resource. The post-colonial state's obsession and prioritization of revenue extraction from boats and *ghats* as opposed to understanding the socio-cultural worlds in which boats in chars exist has contributed to this relation of precarity. This is a colonial legacy as most of the current laws regarding leasing out *ghats* and ferries in Assam are inspired and often directly extrapolated from colonial laws regarding the same. Colonial laws that were introduced regarding water were meant to fulfill two purposes – one, claim ownership of water and increase the state's presence among a public and two, for revenue generation. This could be seen when the British introduced the system of auctioning or leasing out fisheries<sup>46</sup> or *ghats* or ferries.

The Bengal Ferries Act 1885, which largely was one of the initial legislations to govern and dictate the waters in Eastern and North-eastern India, laid down the ideology of state ownership and profiteering from rivers. The rules were aimed with extracting revenue from resources owned by the state rather than determining the safety of passengers or crew that navigated the waters. The idea of 'auctioning' of 'public ferries' came from this Act – "The tolls of any public ferry, may from time to time, be leased by public auction for such term as the Magistrate of the district in which such ferry is situated may, with the approval of the Commissioner, direct." (Rule 9). In fact, flouting of safety regulations were seen as further opportunities for revenue collection as 'over-loading' in ferries were met with fines, some up to fifty rupees.

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<sup>46</sup> small water bodies dug out for the purpose of rearing and harvesting fishes, traditionally owned publicly by communities.

The Panchayat Act, Assam of 1994 that gives the power to local self-bodies such as Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and the Zilla Parishad to maintain the public *ghats*, ferries etc. reflects the sentiment of state ownership over public resources and the primacy given to revenue collection over safety, just like the colonial laws. This is overtly evident in the language of the Act itself.

FORM NO-18 SUB-RULE -17 OF RULE-47

REGISTER ON MARKETS, FERRIES, FISHERIES AND POUNDS

Account for the year.....

S I . N o	Name of the <i>assets</i> and address Panchayat wise	How acquired by Panchayat
Registration/patta/dag No. (where available of land)	Mouza	Name of lessee for the year with full address
Date of settlement	<i>Settlement price</i> for the year	Arrear any <i>Total amount</i> realized during the year
Receipt No. & Date	Balance	Remarks

(emphasis mine)

The problem also lies with the fact that laws that are dealing with revenue collection such as the Panchayat Act, Assam 1994 or the IWTD's Control and Management of Ferries Act, 1968 that still guide the IWTD are primarily focused on revenue collection while for safety regulations, there exist a separate Act – the Inland Vessels Act 1917 (2007 Amendments). The current legislations guiding water transportation in Assam are not just archaic but also do not witness a necessary osmosis of revenue collection and safety regulations. This largely happens when water is understood in singular, linear meanings of revenue generation. The state turns a blind eye to the

socio-cultural context and meanings that communities like char-dwellers endow to boats and water and warms up to the colonial legacy of land prioritization that increases precarious relation of char-dwellers to water. A phone conversation between an officer at the Anchalik Panchayat Office and his superior in between my interview with him best exemplifies this:

“Panchayat’s financial year starts from July 1... This time (2020) on 29<sup>th</sup> June, a letter came from Principal Secretary that due to COVID whoever got the tender last year, that contract be extended for another three months. For markets we did tenders last year but for *ghats* due to the High Court order we did not invite any tenders and hence, now people are just rowing their private boats and collecting the revenue which is going into their pockets instead of the state. Now this is wrong, these are government’s *ghats*, so ultimately the government is the owner, so we have deployed people at the *ghats* to collect the tolls from the passengers directly, this way at least the government earns the money.”

The officer was informing him that following the 2018 boat accident in Guwahati, though the Guwahati High Court had banned the plying of all mechanized private boats, the *ghat* lessees have been ‘illegally’ plying boats. This official was also aware that due to the High Court order the IWTD was unable to issue new registration of boats or renew registrations. So most private boats were plying without registration. The state is however not concerned about the safety of the passengers boarding unregistered boats (“people are at least getting to communicate”) but are more concerned about losing revenue.

The char-dwellers who have always lived with and around water now experience water as precarious because objects such as boats that have traditionally allowed them to understand the

lifeworld surrounding water are disappearing and with them knowledge systems that made them more adaptive to water are also disappearing. The rivers are being pauperized as communities like char-dwellers face a hostile state system that does not prioritize water transportation, making rivers ‘dangerous’ and ‘unpredictable’ even for char-dwellers. It is almost as if the char-dwellers are ‘Seeing Like the State’, borrowing Scott’s (1998) title of his famous book and increasingly giving up their traditional relations with boats, making their lives more precarious. In the next section, I understand how this is enforced as rivers and boats, particularly in char areas, became targets of surveillance and criminalization.

### *2.3. Relation of surveillance and criminalization*

Colonial laws that guide the current legislation surrounding rivers, *ghats* and boats were not simply for revenue extraction but also to increase state presence and surveillance. The River Police unit was created in 1915 vide Central Government notification No. 1525 and Assam’s River Police districts were carved out that covered the banks, shores and all places within 10 yards of the edge of the permanent bank on either side. The River Police was organized at first into two branches – Sylhet and Goalpara, which interestingly are areas dominated by chars. Thus, the purpose of setting up a river police was also with the aim of more state presence and surveillance in char areas – “Special attention particularly by night should be paid to villages of Chorais (chars/charuas) or where bad characters or suspects are known to reside.” (River Police Manual 1931: 31). Prior to that, fear of river dacoity was growing particularly for Indian insurance bankers and in 1878, *The Pioneer* also reported how the Brahmaputra was getting notorious for its “water-thieves.” (Saikia 2020: 120). The chars were increasingly seen to be havens for such dacoits and with the River Police’s aim for “prevention and detection of crime”, rivers and people living around it slowly

came under the state's gaze of criminalization. The River Police, hence, was tasked to constantly keep a vigil in these areas, to keep registers of "bad characters", to notify any changes in the "bad characters", to make acquaintances with every "respectable persons living on the bank or close to the rivers....and with every bad character who resides within five miles of river banks who use boats for depredations..." (River Police Manual 1931: 31). Hence boats that plied in and around the char areas were increasingly started to be seen with suspicion and as instruments of 'illegal' activities.

This legacy of the River Police in regard to char areas and particularly boats was carried forward even by the post-colonial state. A Forest Guard who was earlier posted in Baghbar informed how the River Police would conduct checks on boats that came in large numbers from the char areas particularly during the weekly market days in Baghbar. The general idea that boats are used to smuggle cattle and timber across borders (India-Bangladesh) from char areas is very rampant. It is extremely interesting when one visits the Assam River Police's website. As opposed to the IWTD, the department that is responsible for upholding safety protocols in the water-ways and is blind to the contextual lifeworld of the chars, the River Police's website is all focused on chars. The four aims<sup>47</sup> of the River Police, Assam make this amply clear:

1. To prevent and detect crime in the riverine route and *char areas* of the Brahmaputra.
2. To maintain law and order in riverine routes and *char areas* of the river Brahmaputra.
3. To keep vigilance on extremist activities/anti-social elements and smuggling of goods in the riverine route and *char areas* of the river Brahmaputra.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://police.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/river-police>

4. To prevent and detect illegal infiltration through the riverine routes of the river Brahmaputra from Bangladesh.

Hence patrolling activities around char areas and particularly of boats are done by the state not through the lens of safety provision but that of criminalization. *Ghat* lessees in char areas like Ali da do their own patrolling. These are informal, individual initiated efforts by *ghat* lessees particularly when there is enormous traffic such as on the bazar<sup>48</sup> days. On asked if he also checks out for ‘illegal’ activities if any, happening on the boats, he replied, “No, that’s not what these patrolling are for. These are for safety of the boats; I need to see if any boat is over-loaded. Yesterday was bazar day. I stopped a passenger boat which was over-loaded and shifted some people to a smaller boat that I brought from my home and then asked them to leave.” These informal patrolling activities are starkly different from the state led river police patrolling duties which are aimed at checking boats to stop ‘criminal’ activities like ‘illegal’ immigration across borders or smuggling. Hence, the attitude of the state even on locating and interjecting an ‘over-loaded’ passenger boat is not to save the passengers but look out for ‘illegal’ or criminal activities. Char-dwellers on boats are not just then passengers who lead precarious lives but ‘would-be criminals’ in the eyes of the state. Boat accidents are hence seen as mere ‘individual faults’ but not as systemic violence towards people dependent on water transportation.

During British rule when a private contract system was imposed on leasing of boats and *ghats*, communities who have traditionally worked with boats faced extremely precarious working conditions and worse payments. Hence, a lot of boat-drivers and their assistants in Bengal did

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<sup>48</sup> The weekly bazar on the ghats of Baghbar happens twice every week.

engage in ‘illegal’ trade, particularly opium. “The boats carrying colonial officers were seldom checked at river outposts. Manjhees (helmsmen) allegedly used this immunity to carry out ‘illegal’ trade. The space of the boat under the deck...which he allegedly zealously guarded as his privilege, was used for storing commodities such as salt and opium.” (Sinha 2014: 37). Accidents that were proven to happen due to the fault of the helmsmen because of over-loading or poor condition of the boats were not only refused to be seen as systemic problems such as bad payment of boat-men or difficulty in getting licenses etc., but were turned into criminal acts wherein the convicted had to pay fines of upto Rs. 200. (Sinha 2014: 38). Not much has changed since then.

The post-colonial state continuing with the legacy of seeing boats and boat communities with a sense of suspicion is also related with its fear of mobile groups. Sinha (2014) writes how the Mallah caste in Bengal who were traditionally boatmen was classified as a criminal caste by the British and it is only when over the years, they gave up boat-rowing as a major occupation and started practicing settled agriculture that they were converted into Class B of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 from Class C<sup>49</sup>. Because of their mobile nature, boatmen like dandies were either seen as direct collaborators in river dacoities or aiding river dacoits. The culture of extensive river patrolling came into place because of it.

The char areas where boats are a major transportation and communication means and allowed *charuas* to appreciate their fluid, hybrid identities and lifeworld, came under the colonial and presently the post-colonial gaze of criminality and surveillance. This also changed the char dwellers’ relation with boats and the river. During my fieldwork, char-dwellers who took the boat

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<sup>49</sup> Class C required resettlement and transportation. See also, Jassal, Smita Tewari. (2001). Caste and the colonial state: Mallahs in the census. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 35(3): 319-354.

with me would often describe their after-dark experience with the river in boats with words such as ‘patrolling’ and ‘River Police’. Meaning the rivers and boats were no longer spaces of sanctuary, privacy and ‘home’ (particularly during floods) but objects of the post-colonial state’s gaze. And they were aware of that constant gaze. The communities who have always lived with the river and understood the river’s mood and flows, now had a temporal sense of safety regarding the river while being on the boats – “After dark it is not safe!”. This was reflected in the boat timings that I talked about in the beginning of the chapter – no public boats were plying after 3 p.m. The char-dwellers’ everyday routine was fixed, including their emergencies, that were planned with the post-colonial state’s understanding of ‘safe’ movement of boats in the river.

The colonial politics of appreciation of fixity, predictability and control that was carried forward by the post-colonial state has significantly changed char-dwellers’ relation with water, with each other and to other communities. The complex, relational and fluid sense of belonging and their subjectivities are getting replaced. The sections here understood that by exploring the boat as an ethnographic object while placing it in the lifeworld of the char-dweller. In the next section, I understand how the char-dwellers involved with boats, are negotiating with the post-colonial state and keeping spaces alive where boats and some part of their fluidity can still breathe safely.

### 3. NEGOTIATING WITH THE STATE

This section will understand how char-dwellers are negotiating with a negligent, suspicious and revenue seeking state with regard to rivers and water transport by examining two concepts – *Affective governance* and *Desire for Sarkarikaran*.



### 3.1. Affective governance

I entered the Anchalik Panchayat Office in Mandia to enquire about the various *ghats* and the processes related to tendering or leasing out the *ghats* in char areas. I wanted to meet the Block Development Officer (BDO) who is the highest decision maker or the bureaucrat in the Block. As I entered his office and gave him an approximate idea of my research, he asked me to come back with formal letters and a list with all the questions the next day. I was disappointed because I also wanted to chat with the officers, to get a basic sense of the procedures. I was almost about to leave through the front gate when someone came running back and told me that I should instead meet TJ sir, who, I was told, had every information at the back of his hand. TJ Sir, unlike the BDO, has spent almost all his service life in the Mandia Block Office and has very acute knowledge of the char areas. As I waited for him in his office at the back, I saw a lot of people from the chars waiting for him too. There were rumors of a new tender call to be released for the *ghats* finally after the 2018 High Court ban and char people interested in bidding wanted to enquire from TJ sir. I recognized some of them from Baghbar and they came in to greet me. After formal greetings, they told me that I should not have gone to the BDO anyway – “they come and go...are very unaware...” They laughed saying how he must have no idea of the *ghats* or any questions I would have asked and instead asked the list of questions before-hand to save his face. They said, that list of questions would have come to TJ Sir anyway. Over conversations, it became eventually clear that they were very intimately involved and aware of TJ Sir’s daily routines, his family, vacation plans and what kind of food he likes when he visits them. “We have known him now for more than a decade!”

As I finally meet TJ Sir, I began casually conversing with him. At one point, when I asked him about the declining number of ghats, he said something that resonated with what the char-dwellers were earlier saying and what I will be exploring in this space. He said,

“Yes, with the increasing number of bridge building, ghats mostly have disappeared. The chars present interesting ecology too, because the *ghats* keep on shifting with the shift in chars and people. So, though the tender has been given for Kodomtola Paar-ghat, these boat-owners and drivers go towards Dolgoma (a little away from Kodomtola) ‘illegally’ and carry passengers from there because most people have shifted to Dolgoma in Goalpara district from Kodomtola, Ramapara and other nearby chars after their houses were devoured by the river. They get more passengers there plus these people’s agricultural lands are still in Ramapara and Kodomtola, hence they travel frequently. So we understand, though it is a little ‘illegal’ too. On paper this might be wrong, but on paper there are thirty [government/public] *ghats* too, but in reality are there really thirty *ghats*? No. In reality, there are less than twenty [functional public] *ghats*. So the people, they create their own *ghats* and passenger routes, to survive.”

TJ sir’s reply helped me understand why so many char-dwellers had lined up in front of his office and not the BDO’s. There is a mutual understanding and intimacy, an awareness and ignorance of ‘illegalities’ by such lower bureaucrats who deal with char-dwellers and their lifeworld on an everyday basis, sometimes for more than a decade in the same place. It is an affective space, a space that is co-created by the local, lower bureaucrats of the state and the char-dwellers. I understand this affective space as creative – it creates possibilities and a space for negotiation for the char-dwellers, a space of co-existence with a post-colonial state. The conceptualization of such

a space presented here is built on the idea that the state is not a singular entity, just in line with arguments presented by Philip Abrams (1988) or Akhil Gupta (2012).

Affective governance works in the *awareness* of the state of limitations of legislation, taking cognizance of contexts and creating spaces for flexibility so that people can navigate the system. When I talked to the Surveyor at the IWTD Head Office, he acknowledged that the Office was aware that boats were ‘illegally’ plying even after the ban order of 2018 by the High Court, but one must understand that without boats the life in the chars would absolutely stop. He also mentioned how during the survey of a boat if boat-owners are found having ‘incorrect’ insurance scheme (that is if the carrying capacity of a boat is 50 passengers but the boat has passenger insurance of only 30 passengers), he often issues the survey certificate while in the meantime asking the boat-owners to upgrade their insurance schemes. This leeway is provided because surveyors like him agree that along with safety equipment, private insurance schemes are extremely costly for poor char-dwellers and without such leeway no char-dweller will have a registered boat. The IWTD officers were also aware of many boats in chars having lesser crew than required. Often a separate person is required to start the engine, but boat-drivers often tie a rope to the engine and control it from their own seat. This arrangement reduces the necessity of a crew and hence boat-owners end up saving money.

Affect, I understand then, is rhizomatic. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Navaro-Yashin 2009). It can go and ‘stick’ (Ahmed 2006) in any direction, without any structure. Hence, it is not surprising that local, lower bureaucrats who even though identify themselves as upper-caste, middle class Assamese Hindu, are affected through their numerous interactions and affective exchanges with

Bengali Muslim char-dwellers (in this case boatmen and *ghat* lessees) which have been on-going for several years. They, through their everyday encounters, are much better situated and aware of contextual realities and the fact that the state at the top fails in taking account of them. TJ sir when listening to me complaining about boatmen charging higher ticket fares than what has been fixed revealed, “How can they keep the price fixed? Besides passenger footfall, the prices of diesel and kerosene have also gone up starkly. Diesel now costs Rs. 85 per liter and if they do a to and fro trip, the boat consumes 6 liters of oil. But ticket prices have not been revised for a very long time. Two years ago, in fact, I travelled various *ghats* and compiled a list of desired rates and submitted it, but it is still not in operation.” This gives us a glimpse that local bureaucrats are aware of such local realities and chose to ignore them. This creates an affective space that allows the char-dwellers to navigate with the state, get across their opinions and often survive a state that is oppressive.

Navaro-Yashin (2009) talks about how elongated living within a particular environment can produce affect accordingly. Though she talks about migrant Turkish-Cypriots living for decades with ruins of the “enemy” resulting in the production of specific affect, in this case, one can talk about how char-dwellers and local lower bureaucrats in Anchalik Panchayat and IWTD Offices who have worked in the same office for decades, who people have met and created affectual networks with over the years, have created such affectual understanding. It allowed feelings of consideration, sympathy and co-existence to flow between otherwise opposed groups – the land prioritizing caste Hindu Assamese state and the water dependent Bengali Muslim char community. And this affectual space is a mutual creation through many encounters between the char-dwellers and the lower bureaucrats.

‘Encounter’ is rather a fundamental concept for Deleuze (1994) wherein he believes that in intensified affectual encounters, there arise a possibility of generation of new thought. “...it is the destabilizing moment of the encounter, which might be joy or sorrow, which perplexes the soul, forces it to pose a problem.” (Deleuze 1994: 139-140). He successfully picks up Spinoza’s concept of ‘affectus’ or “affect as becoming” (Seigworth 2011: 189) to argue this. Meaning, the exposure to continuous but variedly intensified encounters and in such accumulation of affective encounters, there is the possibility of generation of new subjectivities, as was also argued by Navaro-Yashin (2009). I cannot argue at this point of a definite change in subjectivity of either the local bureaucrats or the char-dwellers in this context, but such continued intensified affectual encounters allowed the local bureaucrats to question certain policies of the state while also agreeing to allow certain ‘illegalities’ to continue. The char-dwellers in such affectual spaces in turn are endowed with opportunities to get close to the state, deal with it better and negotiate and survive. Cody talks about petitioners in rural Tamil Nadu who wanted to ‘see’ the District Collector for they believed that it would allow for an ‘affective claim’ to be made by them on the state through eye contact. (2009: 368).

“Deleuze suggests a delineation of combat emerging in a rather more cramped space of politics, a terrain in which one is forced to invent or create new possibilities out of necessity.” (Ruddick 2010: 41). The affectual space of governance between the char-dwellers and the local lower bureaucrats who have spent years serving the char-dwellers is *that* creation, created out of cramped politics of ignorance, negligence and surveillance of the post-colonial state towards the chars and water transportation. For as Nayanika Mathur writes that, “it is sarkari affect that allows for the persistence of everyday bureaucratic life.” (2016: 32). This understanding of affective governance

then is not in tandem with how states have traditionally used affect to control and surveil people (Aretxaga 2003) but how there is a co-creation of a space of negotiation and co-existence because of affectual encounters and governance between otherwise two opposed groups.

In the next section, we look at char-dwellers' desire for '*sarkarikaran*' and how that is expected to create better opportunities of negotiation with the post-colonial state.

### *3.2. Desire for sarkarikaran*

The word '*sarkar*' in Hindi can denote both the state and the government. Nayanika Mathur (2016) in her ethnography '*Paper Tiger*' shows how the fact that in Hindi the state and the government is imagined by the same terminology shows "an expansive notion of state power and government. Sarkar, in my reading, is best understood as an intimate repository of state power. Thus, it can mean just the government, but also as the prologue indicates, a person..." (Mathur 2016: 22). '*Sarkar*' henceforth is interchangeably used to mean both the state and the government or even sometimes a person with state power or authority, for example in a district, the District Magistrate is also referred to or understood as the '*sarkar*'.

'*Sarkarikaran*', a term that I introduce here, is largely indicative of the process of 'state-making' – that is, when the ownership is with the state or when objects or groups of people start imbibing a set of practices that are '*sarkari*' in nature. What makes a practice '*sarkari*' can be extremely vague and can only be understood "through the deeply immersive and intimate fact of living within the territory of India and being forced to deal with sarkar." (Mathur 2016: 25). Hence, I understand '*sarkari*' here through the notion of ownership and the performance of *sarkar* that the state

embodies. ‘*Sarkarikaran*’ in this context will refer to a set of state-making practices where the state is the owner and where ‘*sarkari*’ characteristics or practices are performed by its agents.

*Sarkarikaran* as a performance must be understood through the lens where *sarkari* characteristics such as “demanding everything to be set on a paper in a particular format, or asking for ridiculous details, or making multiple copies of the same document, or finding meaning in a stamp/signature” (Mathur 2016: 25) are continuously imbibed and practiced and they become part of a space (*sarkari*/government offices) or part of people involved. The agents of the state, particularly the bureaucrats, need to continuously perform the *sarkar* for it to exist, producing what Mathur terms “sarkari affect” (2016: 118) and allowing the reproduction of the state in the process. The *sarkar* is performed in various theaters such as public meetings, government offices, government visits, ceremonies etc. wherein there is an interaction amongst *sarkari* or state officials or between *sarkari* officials and the common public.

‘*Sarkarikaran*’ as I encountered in the chars was deeply desired by the char-dwellers, particularly people engaged with *ghats* and boats, including passengers. In other words, the char-dwellers, in the context of *ghats* and boats showed a deep desire to be part of the state or come under the state. This deep desire for ‘*sarkarikaran*’, I understand, is not to be further exploited by the state but to experience and understand the state better and hence negotiate and even benefit from the state.

I understand ‘desire’ in the way Deleuze (1997) conceptualizes, wherein desire is not a natural nor a very spontaneous determination but is instead a social production – “The project for Deleuze and Guattari, is to historicize desire and locate it in a social field, as desiring-production, which situates

Spinoza's combinatorial processes – the social nature of becoming active – in relation to a kind of infinite expression of man's co-production with the profound life of all forms or all types of beings.” (Ruddick 2010: 35). Thus, the desire for '*sarkarikaran*' among the char-dwellers (involved with *ghats* and boats) is located in the socio-political context of the post-colonial state's negligence of water transportation and the precarity that has been brought into their lives because of it. Desire is understood by Deleuze as “desiring-assemblages”, meaning how various components and factors join in and over time can break up and new factors can add in. For example, for a lot of char-dwellers, '*sarkarikaran*' is desired for a sense of security and stable income. Boat-makers like Hanif da says that having a government approved license will enable them to file police complaints if someone refuses to pay them money after they make boats. Plus, licensed boat-makers are paid more. For someone like Ali da who is the lessee of the *ghat* in Baghbar for the current year, he along with other *ghat* lessees have been demanding that *ghats* be taken up by the IWTD instead of the Anchalik Panchayat. He says,

“If IWTD takes up the *ghat*, we will get a string of benefits, including safety measures. The *ghat* will see significant improvement. Plus, boat licenses and driver's licenses will be done quickly. Besides, IWTD has more schemes than the [Anchalik] Panchayat. For example, if the boat is damaged or old, the government will financially help us, and we will repair the boats; the government will provide us with engines too. We also want to be now salaried employees of the IWTD, as we have managed the *ghat* for so long. We will have regularized salaries, our work will be formalized, as opposed to now, where all the work we are doing are mostly invisibilized and we are not getting any benefit from the government, we are just making do with whatever we have.”



Ali da informs that if the *ghats* are taken up by IWTD, it will enable them to earn more revenue, particularly from goods. In the Panchayat controlled *ghats* (as currently), the lessees cannot charge any money on the gunny bags that are brought on boats. However, in the IWTD controlled *ghats*, the lessees can get a 5% revenue from gunny bags – “So, on every gunny bag we can charge an extra Rs. 10, such that Rs. 5 will go to the government and Rs. 5 will come to us. During Baghbar bazar, which is one of the largest bazars in the district, so many goods get exchanged and yet, neither do we benefit, nor the government. The government can earn so much revenue, but it is not earning because the *ghat* is not owned by the IWT[D].” Thus, this desire for ‘*sarkarikaran*’ is with the aim of getting benefits, security and stability in their otherwise precarious lives.

But a desire for *sarkarikaran* can also be about recognition by the state, to feel less invisibilized by the state and might not bring any economic benefits to the char-dwellers. People like Ali da, Hanif da and many other char-dwellers feel deeply neglected by the state. This arises also because ‘*sarkar*’ is used with the sentiment of ‘*mai-baap*’ (mother-father) relation that one shares with the state, which reflects that people also share the imagination of a parental bond with the state. (Das 2007, Mathur 2016). The use of ‘*mai-baap*’ for ‘*sarkar*’ denotes the feudal nature of the state-society relationship, it is almost like the state is meant to notice its subjects and take care of them while in return the subjects obey and work for the state, particularly a socialist and a welfare state, which post-independence, the Indian state was largely characterized by. Hence, for people like Hanif da and Ali da, who have worked for the state for decades and yet the state does not notice, leave alone take care of them, they feel betrayed – “I have been associated with boats for so long but the government does not even know about us, this government has no record of people like me. The IWTD should have enquired who is running this *ghat* that has been in existence for almost

40-50 years, but no, this government has nothing on me.” Boat-makers like Hanif da simply want the state to recognize him with a ‘certificate’ after twenty-one years of boat-making. “That is enough”, he says.

The desire for *sarkarikaran* exists because char-dwellers want to be associated with the lifeworld of the *sarkar*, particularly the way the performative state leaves a mark on the char-dwellers (the public) in their many interactions. *Sarkarikaran* involves the performance of importance, of prioritization – from direct and easy access to important documents, schemes to even being prioritized in queues etc., *sarkarikaran* enacts the characteristic of the *sarkar* being ‘superior’. This, the char-dwellers encounter in their everyday – when they meet officials in the IWTD or Panchayat Office or even when government officials visit them during floods or other events, etc. The desire for *sarkarikaran* is therefore to be important, to be a priority, to get access to benefits of schemes of the *sarkar*, to get access to the information network that opens up better opportunities. Thus, this deep desire for *sarkarikaran* is to open up spaces and networks for char-dwellers like Ali da and Hanif da to negotiate with the negligent post-colonial state better.

Most char-dwellers engaged with boats and *ghats* agree that there is an informality attached to most of their work and this brings in precarity. Many char-dwellers get training in boat-driving or boat-making simply by observing and through trial-and-error methods. They observe people who already have learnt driving or boat-making earlier, assist them and then eventually learn. People like Ali da learnt about boat-engines and how to operate and repair them in a car garage in Dhubri – “if you have to operate machine boats, you have to know about machines.” There are formal training courses for them organized by the IWTD but they are in the Head Office in Guwahati and

very far away from the char areas. Hence, many young char-dwellers do not take up these formal courses and instead learn by observing. As a result, many continue to not have a boat-driver's license. A driver without a license if met with an accident will not be compensated by the state and in case of death, the family will not be given any compensation too. Plus, during patrolling checks by the River Police, license-less boat drivers often can be arrested. Thus, a desire for *sarkarikaran* is to end the precarity that comes with informalization of their work.

However, the irony is, that at a time when the boat-makers, boat-drivers and *ghat* lessees are desiring for *sarkarikaran*, the post-colonial state now is opting for increased privatization.

### *3.2.1 Increase in privatization*

Colonial laws such as imposition of a license regime and auditing of collectively owned resources like timber, fisheries, markets, etc. have increased state presence and state-making for communities that otherwise were traditionally self-sufficient. The post-colonial state continued with that legacy, particularly for revenue and surveillance in char areas. Communities like the char-dwellers who were depended on water and celebrated it were getting more and more exposed to state practices and state-making and in the process, were made more dependent on the state. To access benefits from resources like the *ghats*, fisheries, forests, boats, markets, etc. communities like char-dwellers needed to pay taxes or abide by the rules set by the owner – the state. Putting such a dependent culture and system in place, the state now however, is slowly vanishing from the horizon. With its growing focus on land, water transport and communities dependent on water have taken a back-seat - the conditions of *ghats* and boats have deteriorated, the people feel neglected and hence instead of *sarkarikaran*, there is now encouragement for rapid privatization.

It almost feels like a community that was fully self-sufficient was made dependent on the state for access, benefits and survival when the state increased its presence and then slowly the state pulls back, making the now dependent community wanting more state presence. However, this has only made their lives more precarious.

After the 2018 North Guwahati boat accident, the IWTD requested for an 88 million US dollars loan from the World Bank to revamp the water transportation infrastructure and make it more secure through a collaborative project entitled, 'Assam Inland Water Transport Project'. The 'Jibondinga' scheme which mandates the retrofitting of two marine engines on every private machine boat is under this project. The dangers of fitting two marine engines in a smaller boat have already been reiterated by Hanif da and considering in char areas smaller boats are more popular, a scheme such as this will not be of much benefit. But beneficiaries of the scheme will be selected after the Bank is satisfied with the terms and conditions set forth in the Operations Manual of the Bank.

The Project also outlines about increasing corporatization to increase efficiency and safety and to better environmental and economic regulation. It plans to establish the Assam Shipping Company (ASC) where the Government of Assam's "ferry activities will be corporatized... to operate the government ferries...and the Assam Ports Company (APC) to provide terminals and terminal services on a common-user basis to public and private ferry operators." (World Bank document 2019: 11). This corporatization that does not take cognizance of local contexts and the specificities of chars and char-dwellers is in the process of relegating the state to the back-seat. Affective

governance that allowed char-dwellers to negotiate or a state that came with the promise of security will slowly vanish, pushing char-dwellers' lives towards greater risk and precarity.

The Project plans to buy twenty big passenger ferries for the ASC with capability for carrying motorcycles, passengers and goods which will directly impact the earnings of current char-dwellers from boats and *ghats*, particularly of boat-makers, boat-drivers, boat-owners and *ghat* lessees. Their declining source of livelihood will be completely uprooted, and they will be forced to turn to other modes of income. It also will replace their relationship with the river and the knowledge, culture and skills that they have traditionally possessed about the river. The World Bank project does not take into account these factors. The project that plans to “modernize existing terminals (*ghats*)...with electronic monitoring systems including CCTV, wifi, phone charging facilities..” (World Bank document 2019: 34) does not take into account the fluidity or shifting of *ghats* in char areas.

The IWTD's entire internal administrative and control procedures will be laid down by the Bank such that financial delegation, auditing, budgeting, record keeping, etc. will be in accordance with these procedures of the Bank. A private chartered accountant firm will be appointed by the Bank. In fact, the Bank plans to bring in new professional staff for the APC and the ASC which will again disrupt relations of affect and co-existence that government employees and char-dwellers have developed over the years that have allowed char dwellers to benefit from the state. The professional staff, with little to no knowledge of specificities of char areas will only worsen the situation and close out spaces of negotiation for char-dwellers.

CONCLUSION: *“A history of boats is a history of my people.”*

I am sitting in Hafiz sir’s Guwahati home. We have been talking for more than three hours now - from his childhood in the chars to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the current political regime with regard to Bengali Muslims in Assam. I finally ask him how would he define the relation of char-dwellers with boats? He thinks for a while and says,

“How do I define this relationship? Let me tell you about Nazrul Ali instead. Nazrul Ali, who went on to become the famous Assamese literate brought along with him his sister’s son Usman Ali Sadagar when both boarded a British steamer ship to escape the oppressive feudal system in East Bengal and came to the chars in Assam. Over time, Nazrul Ali went on to contribute a lot to Assamese language while Usman Ali Sadagar became a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly and in 1937 supported Gopinath Bordoloi because of which, Bordoloi could form his first ministry against Muslim League. He, along with five other ministers, supported Bordoloi’s decision to keep Assam within India, instead of Pakistan and later Bordoloi became the first Chief Minister of Assam.”

At that time, I was confused about Hafiz sir’s recollection of this story with the question posed. But over-time I have now understood that the relationship of char-dwellers with boats cannot be limited to concrete definitions – it refuses fixity and pinning down. The relationship is complex, fluid and expansive – just like water. Boats brought in people like Nazrul Ali and Usman Ali Sadagar who go on to change Assam’s history and politics. Boats are enablers of such migratory history and fluidity in Assam, that made Assam what it is today.

The colonial and post-colonial state's predisposition for fixity is eroding objects that allow fluidity – boats in this case and with them, cultures and communities that were characterized by rhizomatic, hybrid relations and identities. Boats kept alive char-dwellers' multiplying, diversified political and cultural identities by allowing them access to hybrid ecologies (mud-clay-chars) and various cultures, defying the nation-state's imaginary boundaries. However, the colonial and post-colonial state's negligence and aversion to fluidity and hence to water and water transportation changed and are changing char-dwellers' relation to the river, water and with each other. Relations of hybridity-fluidity are being replaced with relations of precarity and surveillance and criminalization. Boats have become "unsafe", even among a large section of the char-dwellers and hence they now prefer land transportation. There is a desperation in them to be seen in rooted identities – as Assamese alone, often at times giving up their own hybrid cultures.

But almost all of char-dwellers still depend on water transport because roads and bridges often get damaged every year during floods – the river has become more 'unruly' and floods have become 'destructive'. Thus, char-dwellers create spaces of negotiation with a negligent, land-prioritizing and revenue hungry state. I show this through the conceptual blocks of 'Affective Governance' and 'Desire for *Sarkarikaran*'. While the former is explored in greater detail in a later chapter where I discuss about the NRC project, the latter is explored by taking cue from Deleuze's understanding of 'desire'. Deleuzian desire is distinct from Foucaultian 'power', for desire in Deleuzian understanding is an assemblage, a coming together of many components and then dismantling of some and addition of others. Desire in this sense is a flow, a process, a becoming. Power is a component within desire but cannot be simply reduced to it. This can be seen when there is a desire for '*sarkarikaran*' among the char-dwellers. But it is not simply with the aim to

gain power. Desire, in this context, is motivated with the aim for reducing precarity, for one to feel visibilized and for gaining greater access to state benefits. This desire is induced by the colonial and post-colonial state's continued negligence of water transport and its dependent communities and hence is also a component of desire. Over time, there is a possibility that other factors or components might add in, or some might get removed. Increased privatization of water transport and the precarity that comes with it, might also be one factor.

This chapter thus, as will be the thesis in its entirety, is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualizations – be it their understanding of assemblages, encounters or rhizome versus root. Their conceptualizations later go on to influence feminist studies, affect studies, critical nationalist and post-colonial studies. This chapter, as will be reflected in the other chapters, draws influence from such studies in its embodiment and proposition of a theoretical space.

As I conclude this chapter, I am reminded of Hafiz sir's words once again – “So many people's history and ancestral relations in the chars are related to boats and water...(pauses for a long while) A history of boats is a history of my people. From the time we are born till we die, there are boats in our life at every point, on every occasion.” For me, that long pause in between was very summative of char-dwellers' relation to boats. As Ivan Illich (1970) notes, “A language of which I know only the words and not the pauses is a continuous offence.” (pp. 21). For perhaps, the boats for char-dwellers lie in those unsaid pauses- in the memories, nostalgia, stories, songs that I often found char-dwellers unable to describe better, in words. After all, there are too many things to say, because boats open up a world of relationality and networks – connecting many stories – of fishing,



floods, weddings, etc. But the story I go on to next, is that of the weekly bazars in chars by the *ghats*, that flourished because of such networked, connected world of rivers and boats.

## CHAPTER 5: THE WEEKLY BAZAR

The first time I had visited Baghbar was with my father and a colleague of him. It was almost monsoon and my father's colleague, who knew the area well, kept on reminding me how I should avoid travelling to the chars during monsoons – “There will be broken bridges and broken roads. This road that we are travelling now is actually a ‘*kuccha*’<sup>50</sup> embankment but once the floods arrive and people are left homeless, you would see them with cattle and temporary tents all lined up and helplessly living on this embankment, there will hardly be any space for any car to travel.” I remember my mind immediately picturing that scene. But I, an upper-caste, Hindu Assamese, city-bred woman who was visiting the chars for the first time, could only imagine images that the racist ‘mainstream’ Assamese media feed their audience – helpless women, hungry children on their laps, all littered along the road as the headlines shout – “*Illegal Bangladeshis block roads! The floods flush out the ‘unwanted’!*” The collective memories of the upper-caste Hindu Assamese regarding the chars and char-dwellers do not go beyond the rhetoric of ‘floods’, ‘illegal immigration’ and ‘Mini Pakistan or Bangladesh’. Thus, what my father said next sounded interesting.

As we made way to the chars, my father recognized most villages on the way by the weekly bazars (market) that are held in each – “Is this place called ‘Milijuli’? You mean the village where the huge ‘Milijuli’ weekly bazar is held?” And then he would go on to tell us how historic this bazar was and how my grandfather, who was a doctor, would cycle all the way from our ancestral village to set up health camps in this bazar. He used to do free health check-ups of people who came there. He went on to add,

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<sup>50</sup> Not made of concrete but crudely made with soil and mud.

“Most of these bazars were set up during British time, that is how old and historic these bazars are. At that time, as the chars got populated, they needed places of exchange, and hence these weekly bazars came into existence. Over time they grew in size. So many people from the chars would flock and thus these bazars became convenient points for people like my *Baba* to conduct health camps. After all, people at that time in the chars, feared modern medicine and often died due to poor knowledge or lack of health facilities. *Baba* would use these bazar days to spread awareness and provide free health services. Ah! We only heard stories of these bazars from *Baba*. But looks like not much has been done by the governments today to improve them.”

It was raining heavily and was not a bazar day, so the bazars that we crossed on the way looked desolate, dirty and in shambles – the wooden structures that are put up for the shopkeepers to set up their businesses on the bazar day were hardly standing straight. But char areas to be imagined and be memorialized through the weekly bazars bring in fresh perspectives of the people and the area. Over months it would become clear to me how whenever I mentioned my field-site as ‘Baghbar’, caste Hindu Assamese people who in all probability had never set foot in char areas in their lifetime, could immediately recognize the site through the weekly bazars held – “Baghbar? The Baghbar bazar, Baghbar?” Most, like my father, would re-iterate how these weekly bazars in the chars are not just old but also extremely prosperous. Most char areas being very fertile, the harvest is good, and bazars are points where items like vegetables, jute and cattle are sold in large amounts. Retail shopkeepers from across Assam buy in bulk from these bazars and then sell them in the urban markets at a substantial profit. Thus, weekly bazars allow the non-char, majoritarian population in Assam to imagine chars beyond the negative rhetoric– chars through the imageries

of the weekly bazars are imagined as places of fertility, good harvest and prosperity that contribute substantially to the economic growth of the region.

Char-land weekly bazars are imagined as historic. And this opens up possibilities of a discourse where the majoritarian caste Hindu Assamese accept the char-dwellers' long duration of stay within Assam instead of suspecting them as 'illegal Bangladeshis'. The temporal requirement to be 'Assamese' for the caste Hindu Assamese is fulfilled in their imagination of the chars through the age-old weekly bazars. However, the bazars would still be imagined as predominantly Muslim and as places where 'illegalities' are rampant, particularly the 'illegal' sale of items (the fact that most bazars earn their highest revenue through the sale of cattle fuels wild Islamophobic stories too<sup>51</sup>). Here, I briefly discuss the historicity of *charua* weekly bazars before the chapter bifurcates into two distinct but interrelated conceptual blocks. The chapter draws all its observations by dissecting one weekly bazar in the char – the Baghbar weekly bazar. The first block will initiate conversations surrounding the slipperiness of 'legality-illegality' in borderland Assam's chars through the bazar in discussion and the production and use of arbitrariness by the state in such marginalized areas. The second block talks about ethnic boundaries that are heightened by the state's involvement in the weekly bazar in question leading to growing ethnic tensions. I argue that such rising ethnic tensions contribute to the rise of a Hindu-majoritarian state in Assam.

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<sup>51</sup> The age-old religious contention surrounding cow continues between Hindus and Muslims. The cow being a sacred animal is not consumed among believing Hindus. Its consumption is considered impure. Muslims' consumption of beef is what makes them impure for Hindus. Though cattle sold in these weekly markets include buffalo, goats and cow (including the fact that cows are sold not simply for consumption), the general perception of weekly bazars in Muslim majority areas earning their revenue through the sale of beef and smuggling of cows across India-Bangladesh borders remain strong. This has taken new turns with the coming of the Hindutva regime in Assam. I discuss this in detail in the later part of the chapter.

## 1. THE BRITISH AND THE BAZARS

A strong water transportation network led to the establishment and flourishing of weekly *haats* or markets in char areas, mostly at the *ghats*. The weekly bazars were spaces where the char-dwellers exchanged goods and met varied people from other parts of the country, particularly Marwari and Bengali traders and moneylenders, who came via boats to buy jute from the char-dwellers at these markets. The British encouraged the migration of East-Bengali peasants into Assam for they had seen how they were transforming Assam's productivity levels after settling in the riverine landscapes. These peasants introduced jute plantation which was very profitable for the British. The char lands provided excellent conditions for the growth of the cash crop and weekly markets were places where they sold them. The intricate relation of boats and bazars was seen particularly around jute economy, wherein jute produced in these char-lands was exported to Britain and other parts of the world via boats and steamers.

Bengali and Marwari petty traders (who also acted at times as moneylenders for the char-dwellers) needed boats to access the interior areas where these weekly markets were organized, and local char-dwellers sold their jute produce directly to them. These narrow and sometimes shallow areas of the river were inaccessible for the steamers. The petty traders transported the jute produce from the chars to the steamers via the boats. It is particularly for this reason too that weekly *haats* developed near the river, at the *ghats*.

“Weekly markets (haats) sprang up around clusters of numerous villages on the floodplains, especially across the central and western parts of the valley (*where char areas*

*are concentrated*)<sup>52</sup>. These *haats* consisted of make-shift tents in open fields...These markets were connected to Calcutta by boats and steamers apart from railways. On the Brahmaputra numerous steamer stations were built along storehouses for jute...In 1940, six steamer companies operated in East Bengal and Assam to carry raw jute.” (Saikia 2020: 333-34, emphasis mine).

Thus, weekly *haats* introduced and embedded the char-dweller into the global market economy as well as the cash economy. The prices that these peasants received from the petty traders in the bazars were abysmal than the prices at which the jute was being sold by the middlemen to the British. The jute economy also introduced to the char-dwellers the world of indebtedness and global market fluctuations. The jute economy plunged into recession along with other economies in 1929. “Between 1929 and 1933, jute prices fell by 58 per cent. The country’s export earnings from jute fell from Rs 320 million in 1929-30 to Rs 128 million in 1930-31.” (Saikia 2020: 336). The *charua* jute producers became dependent on the petty traders who also loaned out advance money to them. But with weekly *haats* not fetching them enough profit, they either ended up selling some of their lands or borrowing more money from these moneylenders. They, thus, fell deeper and deeper into indebtedness, something that these peasants were trying to escape from when they migrated from East Bengal to Assam’s char-lands. Besides, with water transportation facing tough competition from railways, many *ghats* closed down and with it several weekly *haats* located at or near the *ghats* eventually died down too. This impacted the jute economy and jute producers in char areas, and in some places some char-dwellers ‘relinquished’ their lands and migrated to ‘mainland’ Assam. This encouraged anger and ‘anti-immigrant’ hatred from the locals

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<sup>52</sup> Italized parts are inserted by the author, not in the original.

or ‘natives’ who now were losing lands to these newly migrating char-dwellers, moving towards the interiors. (Goswami 2010: 227).

The weekly markets were spaces where the char-dwellers first encountered the colonial state policies because of being incorporated into the jute economy. Despite the colonial state’s knowledge of the bazars’ deplorable condition, it did not intervene. The state, however, was worried about decreasing productivity and hence decreasing revenue and took steps to remedy them. It introduced new variety of seeds to these producers in the weekly *haats* which were supposed to fetch better productivity of jute. The state also sponsored commissions to study factors, particularly diseases, that impacted jute productivity. The weekly markets were at times also used as points to collect revenue from products such as timber and to facilitate the registration of boats and keep an eye on boat and timber trade traffic. “In 1879-80, the Assam government selected Dhubri and Bhairab Bazar on the Brahmaputra and Meghna respectively to estimate boat traffic between Bengal and Assam.” (Saikia 2020: 133). However, what steps the colonial state took to help the setting up or for the development of the weekly *haats* in the char-lands are not known.

Post-independence, the weekly *haats* came under state control and ownership under the Panchayat Act. In Assam, the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 (with amended rules) says that all public markets, *ghats* and fisheries come under the state. The state annually leases the bazars out to the highest bidder who is responsible for its revenue collection and maintenance. The Baghbar Weekly Market, the *haat* that I look at extensively here, however, is not owned by the state and is a private market. Claimed as one of the largest revenue-generating markets in the entire Barpeta district, the

state and the Baghbar Bazar Committee, that manages the private market, have claimed ownership over the market and fought numerous legal battles over it. The state authorities have claimed that the private market is ‘illegal’ but the continued existence and conflict over the bazar between the state and the char-dwellers led me to understand that char-dwellers at times deal with the state through confrontations, particularly challenging the state’s control and definitions of legality and ‘illegality’. I also look at how the state is responding back to them.

## 2. ‘LEGALITY-ILLEGALITY’

When I first saw the weekly bazar in Baghbar, I was dumb founded. The bazar that covers almost two hundred *bighas*<sup>53</sup> of land cannot be covered completely through one long glance, covering either length or breadth. The bazar that is pegged as almost the top weekly bazar in terms of revenue generation and items sold in lower Assam is divided into several sections. On the southern part of the bazar are semi-permanent shops selling electric items, clothes, etc. In the middle of the bazar, one could locate lines of shopkeepers selling un-packeted spices and pulses, a little further to the east, there lies a shed for shopkeepers selling a variety of fishes while in the western most part, adjacent to the *ghat*, one could find shopkeepers selling kerosene and timber. The biggest section within the bazar is the northernmost part which houses the cattle market or ‘*Goru Bazar*’ while just opposite to it, one can locate peanuts and cotton being sold openly in kilos to retailers. Though my description can give a sense of distinct separation of sections, on the ground, it is much messier – sections often merge, and one can often find clusters of shopkeepers selling items away from the designated section but there is a general sense of separation.

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<sup>53</sup> Fifty acres of land





*Image m. Baghbar weekly market (bazar)*

On the non-bazar days, the semi-permanent shops continue operating while on bazar days, they get lost in a sea of shops and sellers. The bazar is held on two days of a week – Wednesdays and Sundays. My first memory of the bazar was on a hot Sunday noon in March – a sea of men and too much dust. The bazar is dominated by men – the air is thick with men’s voices consolidating their dominance over a very public space - shouting, negotiating prices and calling the customers. Sellers and buyers too are mostly, if not entirely, all men. During my initial visits, my presence, even though tiny in stature, stood out like a sore thumb. In several instances, shopkeepers would see me with suspicion thinking me to be a government official or an inspection officer and with the ‘legal’ status of the bazar being in constant contention (which I will discuss next), many kept

their distance from me or would point me towards the Bazar Committee building in case I asked a question. The Bazar Committee house along with the Local Juma Masjid are the two significant buildings that stand out in the bazar space. My interactions with the Committee will go on to shape some of my crucial understandings of how the char-dwellers' deal with the state on an everyday basis – not through negotiation but active confrontation. And to understand this, we need to understand the issue of 'legal ownership' over the Baghbar weekly bazar.



*Image n. Baghbar Bazar Committee house*



*Image o. The Juma Masjid building*

Prior to the 1990s, the Baghbar weekly market, as records show and as char-dwellers remember, was operating on state owned land. At that time, the weekly market was put up for yearly leasing and the highest bidder who produced necessary documents and agreed to follow set rules by the state was given charge of maintenance and revenue collection. However, with rapid floods and continuous erosion, the market had to be pushed back from its original location, such that by 1995, one can find legal claims in court cases that the weekly market is being held in private char-dwellers' lands and as such the government can no longer collect any revenue from it, nor can it claim any intervention or ownership over it. In 1995, records show that the Mandia Anchalik Panchayat had to even purchase land at Baghbar Pathar village "measuring 7 bigha, 1 katha, 12 lessa out of its own resources in the name of Mandia Anchalik Panchayat by registered deed No. 190/1995 dated 23/03/1995, 191/1995 dated 23/03/1995 and 192/1995 dated 23/03/1995 which had been recorded mutation on land records in the office of the Circle Office of Baghbar Revenue Circle, for the purpose of running the Cattle Market simultaneously along with the old Baghbar Haat which was established about 40 years ago."<sup>54</sup> At present, the bazar is managed by the Bazar Committee, which again, is a twelve core-member team of only men. Their task is to rent out space to new shopkeepers, maintain hygiene in the bazar area, collect revenue on every bazar week (they employ young men for the job) and manage the spending of that money, among others.

The Baghbar weekly market has slipped in and out of legality through numerous court cases, in government letters, complaints by numerous revenue collectors, in tender notices etc. In a letter dated 05 June 2014, the Baghbar MLA had written to the Superintendent of Police that necessary

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<sup>54</sup> Taken from Para 2 from Parawise Comment submitted on behalf of Respondent 6 in respect of WP© No. 1503/2013 filed by Sekander Ali and others Vs State of Assam and 6 others. This is a response by the state of a court case filed by the char-dwellers contesting tender invitation notices by the state in 2013.

steps should be taken to close the “unauthorized and illegal private cattle market at Baghbar and thereby facilitate the smooth functioning of the Anchalik Cattle Market, Baghbar Pathar”<sup>55</sup> under the state. But again, the Guwahati High Court on 07 April 2015 ruled<sup>56</sup> that the market is on private lands and hence is entirely legal even if it does not pay any revenue to the state because provisions of the Assam Panchayat Act do not hold true for private markets or markets set on private land.

The weekly market exemplifies the fact that notions of ‘legality-illegality’ can change over time, through confrontations. Temporality and historical situations are crucial factors in helping one understand the fluidity of ‘legality-illegality’. The temporal nature of shifting of boundaries with regard to ‘legality-illegality’ is well argued by van Schendel and Abraham (2005) who write how the same group of people have been regarded as bandits and the police by the state at different points in time. “In-law or out-law status was determined by the nature of the relationship of a group to the state at a particular point of time.” (van Schendel and Abraham 2005: 8). The char-dwellers through the weekly market challenged the state’s understanding of legality at a particular point in time repeatedly, through direct legal confrontations. The fact that states can maneuver and change notions of what is legal and what is not according to their benefit at varied points of time has been time and again challenged by the char-dwellers. Interestingly, they have used the state authorized machinery and language to beat the state at its own game. For example, in 2010, the Mandia Anchalik Panchayat issued notification inviting tenders for the Baghbar weekly market (meaning the state was claiming ownership of the market), following which the char-dwellers who claimed ownership of land where the market was set up, filed a case in Gauhati High Court challenging the state’s claim. The Court ruled in favor of the char-dwellers and the tender notification was asked

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<sup>55</sup> D O Letter no 45/D-7(ix)/2013-14/SP.

<sup>56</sup> WP © 2999/14



to be withdrawn, recognizing that the private market, as claimed by the government, was not ‘illegally’ operating. The Court ruling established that it was a private *haat* and the state had no business in interfering in it. However, in 2012, the government issued another tender notification, making its claim on the space yet again, to which the char-dwellers filed another case and that too the government lost.

The char-dwellers are challenging the monopoly of the state to define what is legal and what is not at various points of time. The fact that notions of ‘legality-illegality’ can be changed even by such marginalized populations, living at the borders is exemplified by the weekly market. The char-dwellers used the judgement of a separate but related case<sup>57</sup> where the High Court in 2009 ruled that Section 107 that allows the state to claim ownership and collect revenue from private markets under the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was declared unconstitutional. Thus, the weekly market helps us understand how ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ are more processes than fixed states of being. What is ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ are questions of larger social and political projects. (Heyman 2013, 1999; van Schendel and Abraham 2005). Though, inside a given state the line between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ is considered as definitive but the functioning of ‘legality-illegality’ is very messy. “Legality and illegality are thus simultaneously black and white and shades of gray.” (Heyman 1999: 11). Things can slip in and out of ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’.

In the center of the conflict between the state and the Bazar Committee (the char-dwellers who owns the land on which the current bazar is operating) is the vital question of land – the ownership and control of land. In the numerous government letters and the court cases, claims and counter-claims were made by both parties on who actually owns the land on which the Baghbar weekly

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<sup>57</sup> W P © 3828/08 – Rupam Talukdar vs the State of Assam and others. Judgement given on 30-03-2009 by the honorable Gauhati High Court.

market sits. Land plays an essential factor in the modern state's authority and existence. "Without territory there is no modern state; a claim to statehood must begin from the political control of land." (van Schendel and Abraham 2005: 13). A challenge to that control is a challenge to state authority. And any actual loss of state control over land or perceived loss of control over land is a matter of urgent concern for the state and the state takes necessary counter-actions to reclaim back that state authority. (van Schendel and Abraham 2005). Hence, the repeated notifications by the Anchalik Panchayat (representing the state) inviting tenders for the weekly market, even after several court rulings favoring the char-dwellers, are efforts by the state to show how it wants to regain back political control and ownership over the land. In fact, as shown earlier, the state in 1995 even purchased land to disrupt the char-dwellers' narratives of private land ownership. Several court battles were fought by the state citing that some amount of land within the bazar is owned by the state – "...the NIT [notice inviting tender] dated 08-11-2012 was invited by this respondent under Memo No. MAP/Nibida/69/Pt-I/Hat ghat/2010-11/1884(Ka) dtd. 08-11-2012 for settlement of Anchalik Cattle Market, Baghbar Pathar which is on the land owned and possessed by Mandia Anchalik Panchayat and not on the patta land of the petitioner or any other persons."<sup>58</sup>

The symbolic authority of the state is also challenged when the state's revenue generating power is cut-short. It has been argued how historically modern nation states have devised several tools not just to surveil and control the population but also to generate revenue out of them. Giving tax to the state serves more than an economic purpose, it also means that the subjects are recognizing

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<sup>58</sup> Taken from Parawise Comment submitted on behalf of Respondent No.6 in respect of WP © No. 1503/2013 filed by ....&others versus State of Assam &6 others. It is claimed that plot numbers 157, 205, 206, 209, 210, in total 7 bighas, 1 kotha, 12 lessa are owned by the Mandia Anchalik Panchayat (state).

and legitimizing the state's authority. Revenue collection increases the state's visibility. The map, the census, etc. were tools used by the state to systematize the revenue collection. (Anderson 2006; Scott 1998). The private weekly market which generates tremendous revenue and yet deprives the state of appropriating it, is a challenge to that authority. In a letter to the Superintendent of Police, the local MLA writes, "...the revenue earned from the market in the year 2001-02 was Rs. 10,75,505/- only but unfortunately the market was not settled w.e.f 2002-03 to 2012-13..."<sup>59</sup> The tremendous loss of annual revenue was reiterated by higher officials when I talked to them about it, indicating almost that because of this very reason the market is 'illegal'.

With the High Court ruling against the state's interference in the functioning of private *haats*, the state now is making fresh attempts to buy more land in Baghbar in a bid to regain ownership and authority over revenue collection from that land. In 2020, a letter was released from the Panchayat Office (Zilla Parishad Office) demanding that the Revenue Department immediately take measures to find 10 *bighas* of land "in the Baghbar Market area" for setting up of an alternative state-owned market as the "said market is one of the important market under Barpeta Zilla Parishad for generation of large revenue."<sup>60</sup>

### *2.1 State production of arbitrariness: Maps and land-settlement*

The production of arbitrariness by the state is systemic and is best exemplified by Akhil Gupta (2012: 24) when he talks about how official bureaucratic decisions to distribute welfare schemes to the poor in India had no rational logic. Thus, he calls the ethics and politics of care of the Indian

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<sup>59</sup> D O Letter no 45/D-7(ix)/2013-14/SP.

<sup>60</sup> No. BZP(H/C)112/2014. The letter was sent on 03 June 2020, following up another similar request made by the Panchayat Office in 2018.

state as arbitrary. He understands the state production of arbitrariness as a result of bureaucracy's "indifference to outcomes." (2012: 48). In this section I argue that it is beyond that. The state production of arbitrariness in the char-lands of Assam, which is also a border region, is intricately tied with the purpose of making minority populations invisible, 'illegal' subjects – it is to fuel the populist Assamese nationalist narratives, which also in the process feeds into the right-wing Hindu state narratives.

I understand this production of arbitrariness through the tools of maps and land-settlement. For at the root of the legal battles over ownership of the bazar land is the absence of an updated map and land-settlement or '*jorip*'. Though anthropologists like Scott (1998) and Anderson (2006) understand that production of a map or a census etc. is actively undertaken by the state because they function as tools of state-making, in post-colonial societies, and particularly in this case of a weekly market in a border region, there is an arbitrariness attached to the state's decision to produce and use these tools of state-making.

“Would it not be a great satisfaction for the king to know at a designated moment every year the number of his subjects, in total and by region, with all the resources, wealth & poverty of each place...in his own office, to review in an hour's time the present and past condition of a great realm of which he is the head...? – Marquis de Vauban, proposing an annual census to Louis XIV in 1686.” (Scott 1998: 11).

De Vauban explains how the concept of legibility and countability looked so attractive for the monarchy. Later, the modern state builds on these concepts by expanding and systematizing the process of producing cadastral maps and censuses. Scott calls them as “instruments of statecraft”



(1998: 343) that were pursued and prepared by the modern state for purposes of simplifying complex ground realities and making people and topographies legible for purposes of better control and taxation. This he calls as “direct rule” (1998: 77) for it allowed the state access to a “previously opaque society.” (ibid).

However, in post-colonial societies, there exist a sense of indifference, even refusal to invest in the preparation and use of such ‘instruments of statecraft’. When and where maps and land settlements are prepared by the state is at the forefront an arbitrary decision. Over my many visits to the Circle Office which is tasked with carrying out all revenue, mapping and settlement tasks in a specific Circle of a district<sup>61</sup>, many officers (*Mandals*<sup>62</sup>) have themselves revealed how the sanctioning of a land settlement exercise by the Central government can ease out the life of the state itself. Adil da, the *Mandal* who is tasked to look after the revenue matters in and around the char of my research, reveals over a cup of tea, “*Baideo*, if today *sarkar* decides to have an updated land settlement, then it can save so much money on the many cases of land-conflicts that it fights in the chars. I mean, look at the amount of money it has already spent over years of court battles over the Baghbar market!” Land settlement or ‘*jorip*’<sup>63</sup> is an exercise by the state which reviews

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<sup>61</sup> In Assam, the administrative division goes like this: The federal state is divided into various districts managed by a District Commissioner, these districts are divided into Circles, managed by a Circle Officer and each Circle is divided into various blocks managed by a Block Development Officer (BDO), and each block is divided into Gram or villages, managed by a Panchayat.

<sup>62</sup> Mandals were also called tehsildars, and are entrusted with the responsibility of primarily everything to do with land revenue in a particular Lot Mandal (earlier tehsils; also a revenue unit, often comprising of a few village panchayats). This includes keeping track of new lands, the measurement of lands, the classification of a land, determining revenue, etc. The Mandal is the first point of contact in all matters related to revenue at a Circle Office at the local level. Though primarily tasked with revenue, Mandals are used for a variety of state purposes considering they are the most well-versed with the population at the grassroots level. They are often used during relief distribution in their entrusted Lot Mandal, distribution of ration cards, dissemination of information of government schemes, etc. They were used during NRC work too, particularly in distribution and collection of forms and awareness campaigns.

<sup>63</sup> <https://landrevenue.assam.gov.in/portlets/allotment-and-settlement-of-land>

the amount of different kinds of existing land<sup>64</sup>, updates the land's category if there is a change in the type of ownership (individual or government) or use (homestead or cultivation) and also accordingly updates the rates of taxation. During visits to the Circle Office and during conversations with char-dwellers, it became clear that the state has not ordered a land settlement since 1963 and the latest map for Baghbar and surrounding chars that the Circle Office possess is from pre-independent India. One can hardly identify anything clearly on a map that is soiled and worn out. On questioning officials in the Circle Office about why a land settlement and an updated map have not been prepared, they could only tell that the Central Government has not ordered it yet. "Even the 1963 order of the Central Government to hold a 'jorip' was sudden. No explanation, nothing. I think the one before that happened in 1936!" Adil da laughed while sipping his tea. The officers at the Circle Office claim that in all probability, the government does not have the required funds to conduct a settlement and only when a land settlement is conducted, can an updated map be prepared.



*Image p. The worn-out map of Baghbar char areas*

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<sup>64</sup> Types: Khas (government land), Miyadi Patta (Permanent individual ownership), Eksoina (temporary individual ownership) and Category 2 and 3 can be further divided as 'Bosti' (homestead) and 'Kheti' (cultivation). Another category is wastelands and mostly come under 'Khas'.

I remember asking Adil da if he could carbon-print the map of the chars relevant for my research considering the existent maps were partially damaged and un-readable, to which he agreed at first. However, as days passed by and with no hope of getting them, I enquired again. This time, he asked me to seek ‘permission’ from the Circle Officer (CO). Understanding his hesitation, I asked him if there was any procedure or an already prepared application form for this, to which he said that a simple hand-written application citing my details and the reason for acquiring a map addressed to the CO should suffice. I did as was asked. After a few months, on enquiring again, Adil da confirmed that my request was rejected. The Office had given me no formal reason whatsoever. This got me thinking, how is the state deciding? It was only later that Adil da told me that the power rests entirely on the CO and the basis of selection and rejection is only known to him. I was quite dejected and later that evening a few other officers in the Circle Office over tea confided in me saying that the application is just a formality, often decisions are made on who submits the application first – “The faster the application you submit, the better it is. Also, *baideo*, why did you not use some of your political connections? I am sure your father could have helped.”

The incident reflects Gupta’s (2012) recounting of how officials deciding on beneficiaries of the state’s welfare schemes was absolutely arbitrary. However, this arbitrariness attached to such state-making projects, of when or what gets mapped, what does not, when a land settlement happens, etc. has encouraged narratives of xenophobia and violence for the minority population living in the border areas of Assam. The illegibility that comes with not having a map or a land settlement in the names of the Muslim char-dwellers favors a state that is pushing narratives where the Muslim char-dweller is an ‘illegal Bangladeshi’. For interestingly, while politically these char-dwellers remain invisible, economically they are not. Char-dwellers have complained to me how not having

an updated map and a land settlement have ignited numerous conflicts over land ownership. Often people have very informal land agreements from previous owners and the names are updated in the revenue registers and rolls but not in the map. Meaning they continue giving revenue to the state but does not have any legal political claim over the land. In the recently concluded NRC project, Disposing Officers who presided over hearings revealed how surprisingly very few char-dwellers submitted a land-certificate as a supporting document to prove their citizenship. Hence, the state's unwillingness to use tools of 'high-modernism' is with the intention to perpetually keep the political status of borderland char-dwellers as precarious. Consequently, during evictions, the populist narrative of Muslim char-dwellers' being 'illegal Bangladeshis' remain dominant, and this also encourages active state presence in borderlands. This way char-dwellers continue to remain at the mercy of the state. Thus, the refusal or this systemic production of arbitrariness by the state in the usage of tools of 'high-modernism' are in turn making subjects invisible and keeping them in control.

The weekly market, however, presents a narrative that challenges this statist behavior. Here, the non-existence of an updated map and a settlement has led to a unique situation where the state is at a disadvantage. The ambivalence resulting from the non-existence of an updated map and a land settlement has been used by the char-dwellers to instead challenge the state's claim of ownership of the bazar land. The state is at a fix since it has no updated map to back its claim. Maps have been known to be creating reality and geographical space rather than the other way around. (Anderson 2006, Scott 1998, Thongchai 1988). In fact, Thongchai (1988: 310) writes, "...a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent...A map was now necessary for the new administrative mechanisms and for the troop to back up their claims...". Scott writes

extensively to show how the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia drew maps without regard or intricate knowledge of the local geography. This simplified knowledge allowed reproducibility such that “the local situation is legible to an outsider.” (Scott 1998: 45) This suited a bureaucratic system where positions were often replaced by newer people. The standardization enabled easy induction and understanding of local geographies by new administrators.

The weekly market gives a slight peripheral jolt to such practices of state-making. The char-dwellers challenged the state’s claim of ownership of the weekly market by showing that the current map in possession of the state does not justify the ground realities. The land on which the earlier bazar was set up might be on the map but no longer exists on the ground. That land is under-water and currently the bazar is held on privately-owned land and because of that, the bazar is a private one. Maps that are drawn with the purpose to save administrators the arduous task of visiting the real and complex geographies are questioned by the people living and experiencing these geographies. They question the characteristic of maps freezing time and space, with no regard whatsoever for changes.

When the state finally visited the ground, it understood that its tools no longer work. In a letter exchanged<sup>65</sup> between the Circle Officer (CO) and the Chief Executive Officer, Zilla Parishad Office, Barpeta, the CO reveals how the fixed concrete posts that are needed to measure the land according to the map and the registers and clarify the ownership of the plots of land, those posts are either missing or are under-water and could not be found. Hence, the inspection was unsuccessful and indecisive. The reproducibility and fixity of tools of state-making are what is

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<sup>65</sup> B.B.R.C. 17/2017/Sarkari/11. Dated 11 December 2017.

questioned by the char-dwellers through the weekly bazar case. Thus, the char-dwellers show a perfect example of use of what Scott calls “metis” (1998: 332), that is knowledge and decisions that show acute awareness of context, is fluid and local.

## *2.2 State production of arbitrariness: a market of ‘illegal’ sale!*

The market is a space where certain ‘illegal’ practices do take place. During my conversations with char-dwellers, it became clear that rice, kerosene and timber were sold ‘illegally’. The Indian government provides free ration of 5 kilos rice and 2 liters of kerosene every month to every family holding a Below Poverty Line (BPL) Card. These materials are stored at the community food and supply center known as the *Homobae* which is run by a committee. The committee has an elected President, a government appointed Secretary and members. To distribute these materials to the people from the *Homobae*, there are licensed Agents/Dealers who collect the materials for their respective villages from the *Homobae*. However, in my numerous discussions it was revealed by char-dwellers how agents often do not provide the government mandated amount of rice and kerosene and sell some amount in the weekly market. A char-dweller said –

“Char-dwellers often do not get rice, sugar, kerosene for 3-4 months. Where is this material going? Of course they are being sold in the bazar! And this the President knows, he has a share too, hence in an election for the Homobae, they are spending almost 12 lakh rupees in the name of the election. What agents engage in is slow distribution. Sometimes the January rice is taken so long to be distributed that it reach[es] February and then very slyly no rice will be distributed for February but in March. So this way the agent is saving up on an entire month’s rice, sometimes even 2-3 months’ time....For every APL [Above Poverty Line] Card, a fixed amount of 35 kilo rice per household is supposedly to be given for

which 30 kilo is given and for every BPL Card, a fixed amount of 5 kilo per family member is to be given but here they get 4 kilo, the rest is sold in the weekly market..”

When I first visited the weekly market with a local char-dweller, I was being seen with tremendous suspicion by people around and news about me had already reached the Baghbar Bazar Committee who even came to greet me. I was being thought of as a state official, but once they knew about my purpose of visit, they became more relaxed. However, something striking happened. While strolling through the crowded market I stopped and took out my camera to capture some photos of a group of people selling kerosene. The minute I took out my camera, all of them got up with panic-stricken faces and almost was on the verge of running away. The local char-dweller who was accompanying me immediately went towards them to comfort them by saying that I was no state official and that they were safe. I was later told by him that they were all selling kerosene that was meant for BPL families and asked me to avoid taking out the camera in the market. Prior to that, I was not aware of ‘illegal’ sale of kerosene in the bazar.

On conversations with agents, they did admit that such practices are prevalent.

“We dealers have to pay that one rupee per card [in advance] in the *Homobae* and get the supply materials. So lets say we pay Rs. 100 for 100 kilo of rice and then distribute it to the char-dwellers, who after receiving [it] pay us back Rs. 100. But what is our profit? In fact, dealers in char areas end up paying more than what we get. We need to rent a boat to carry the materials from the *Homobae* to the chars, then pay the labor who helps carry or load-unload the materials into and from the boat, etc. Plus, in chars people keep on shifting, so sometimes we also have to travel extra to give materials to the families. So, what most

dealers do is that we pay a little extra and buy extra materials from the *Homobae*, let's say 125 kilo of rice and sell that extra 25 kilo rice at a higher price in the bazar here. Or sometimes we also reduce the amount distributed to the people by 50 or 100 grams, a very small amount and then sell that too in the bazar. We cannot keep more than 250 grams or else the public will be enraged. Right now, they also are fine by that amount. That is the profit. I mean we also have families to look after..." – An agent.

Agents also revealed how char-dwellers holding BPL Cards often themselves sell the received rice and kerosene at the weekly *haat* where they get a much higher price. In fact, in later discussions, it became clear to me how some of the men who tried running on seeing my camera were char-dwellers who were selling the kerosene they had received free through their BPL cards. Most do not prefer the quality of rice or kerosene given to them as part of their free ration and sell the received ration to buy better quality rice and kerosene in the market. Barbara Harris-White and J. Jeyaranjan (2020) while looking at 'illegal practices' in criminal markets showed how most often than not, 'illegal/criminal' practices are embedded in shared understanding of moralities despite their image being 'dishonorable'.

Another article that gets 'illegally' sold in the weekly *haat* is timber. In 1996, the Supreme Court in a writ petition<sup>66</sup> found that the rate at which new plantation of trees were happening was extremely slow compared to the growth or set up of new sawmills for cutting timber. Deforestation of bigger and older trees was occurring at a much higher rate with uncontrolled licenses being given to every person wanting to set up any kind of sawmill. Hence, in the entire country, the Court

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<sup>66</sup> T. N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad vs Union of India & Ors, 12 December 1996. See court ruling and history at <https://blog.ipleaders.in/t-n-godavarman-v-thirumulkpad-case-study/>



immediately banned issuance of new licenses by the Central Government and in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh particularly, it ruled for the complete closure of all kinds of existing sawmills. However, in 2015, the Central Government in a bid to encourage small industries and to meet the growing demand for furniture, decided that licenses will be issued for 12 inches sawmills alone. A 12 inch saw machine can reduce smaller wooden logs, that is logs having smaller diameter, into planks and is mostly suitable for small businesses and entrepreneurs. It cannot be used on bigger logs with bigger diameter. It was done with the intention to save older, bigger trees from irresponsible felling. However, as said by a Forest Guard who earlier was posted in Baghbar, the chars and the bazar are lined with several ‘illegal’ mills. These mills possess larger than 12-inch machines, meaning they can reduce bigger logs into planks. He explains,

“Now generally mill owners who have a legal license of a 12-inch sawmill will ‘illegally’ open a 35-38 inches sawmill too. Mostly they are kept hidden from public eye inside and there is even ‘understanding’ between them and the [Forest] department officials. A monthly payment or share of income is collected. Now such ‘illegal’ mills are there with every 12-inch mill owner in Baghbar, who owns a license for a wood shop. In Barpeta district alone, such ‘illegal’ mills are almost 400 in number.”

He goes on to explain how there is a flourishing ‘illegal’ timber business in the chars with large ‘illegally’ cut timber logs of high value trees like Saal, Segun being brought via water routes. That timber is cut down to planks in these ‘illegal’ mills. Most of these timber gets sold in the weekly *haat*. “Now, the Baghbar bazar is not a government bazar, but a private one. So, there is no government control and hence there is a ‘*manmani*’<sup>67</sup> that goes in the bazar. If you had visited the

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<sup>67</sup> Do as one like

Bazar just six months back, you would have seen that just like fruits and vegetables, 'illegal' wood is being opened up for sale.”

This narrative of the market harboring 'illegal' practices because of lack of government control is interesting because as can be seen from this Forest Guard's conversations, the state and its various representatives are in fact actively involved in promoting this 'illegality'. From the Police to the Forest Department and various other state officials, the 'illegal' practices continue existing in the bazar because of the involvement and ignorance of the state. The Baghbar Police Station is just few feet away from the bazar. The guard recounted an incident when he visited the police station hearing that a new Police Head had joined. He said,

“Someday, I might need his help too, what if I am caught while taking money from mill owners? But when I told him I am in the Forest Department, this Head got very angry and shouted at me saying that no one should help me. Next day when I told my superior about it, he laughed and said that all departments in chars are eating up money, but they always have a problem with Forest Department fearing their share will decrease if we also start demanding money. It is all a big nexus. Without such a nexus where everyone is taking money, do you really think such a big bazar where literally an entire area of the market is lined with 'illegal' non-licensed mills would have functioned? So, we also work intimately with police, we let go of things and they do the same.”

There were rumors that were passed down to me during discussions with lower bureaucrats in the Anchalik Panchayat Office that the Bazar Committee pours in money everytime there was an inspection or inquiry by state representatives.

Thus, there is arbitrariness on when, how and what the state decides to identify a ‘thing’ or a ‘process’ as ‘legal or illegal’. The arbitrariness is heightened when it becomes apparent that the state not only simply knows about such practices but actively promotes and engages in them. Because sometimes it is advantageous for the state to promote ‘illegality’ to justify state authority and state control. (Andreas 2000; Coutin 2005; Galemba 2013). The narrative that spaces without state control are havens of ‘illegal’ practices serves well for a state that has repeatedly till now faced tremendous confrontations from marginalized people over its authority. The state at times also selectively hyper-visibility certain narratives over others to garner more public support and legitimacy of their presence and authority. For example, after the 2014 Gauhati High Court ruling against the state’s notification inviting tender (NIT) for the Baghbar market, the weekly market’s ‘illegal’ practices were widely reported in local Assamese newspapers. One newspaper<sup>68</sup> noted how there was a ‘mafia *raaj* (rule)’ in the bazar with several ‘illegal’ mills operating. It also talked about rampant smuggling of cattle from the bazar via boats to nearby Bangladesh. In a bid to increase state control, the state fuels ‘anti-immigrant’ narratives which in the context of Assam translates to ‘anti-Muslim’ narratives. The state uses and promotes narratives of ‘illegality’ in a private char-land weekly market and in the process, promotes colonial and rightist Assamese nationalist narratives of char-lands being ‘unruly’, ‘havens of criminals and illegal immigrants’ and of ‘disloyal, cunning Muslims’.

The state continues to produce arbitrariness in its everyday existence, such that while for many months, the state encourages and is directly involved in allowing the open sale of ‘illegal’ items, on one fine day, it can also order raids in ‘illegal timber shops’, print news highlighting the

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<sup>68</sup> See ‘Dainik Agradoot’, 22 May 2014, Pages 3 and 8.

market's 'illegal activities' and stop boats suspecting 'cattle smuggling'. It is this arbitrariness that is systematically produced and used by the state which allows it to garner and justify support for increased state power in the chars and particularly the borderlands. And in the process, it helps the prospering of xenophobic and Islamophobic nationalist narratives. On the more micro-level, the contention over the Baghbar weekly market between the state and the Muslim char-dwellers contributes to ethnic fractures and solidification of boundaries, which I explore in a later section.

### *2.3 State production of arbitrariness: Bazar's existence as counter to violence*

In both the cases, where there is a systemic production of arbitrariness by the state, they allow the state to forward Islamophobic and xenophobic narratives, that always put the Muslim char-dwellers' political status in the country into question. Be it through its indecisions or its arbitrary decisions regarding updating the maps and land settlement or its arbitrary decisions regarding when and what to declare as 'illegal' in the bazar, the state has contributed in forwarding xenophobic populist narratives of the 'Miya'. Vittorio Buffacchi writes how it was arbitrariness that was attached to a colonial state's actions and decisions that made it violent, meaning he equates arbitrariness as a direct cause of violence. "Colonialism is a paradigmatic case of historical injustice in part because of the entrenched arbitrariness at the heart of its system, and this arbitrariness is fully revealed by the nature of violence exercised by those in power within a colonial context." (2017: 198). For a post-colonial state, that is helmed by upper-caste Hindu Assamese men, such arbitrariness creates and allows continuous violence against the Bengali Muslims of the chars.

Many char-dwellers in the CO Office complained how officers simply refuse to show existent maps of the chars they reside in. On asking Adil da and others about the reason for this, most replied saying that char-dwellers do not have the knowledge to anyway understand a map, and the entire exercise will be a “time-waste”. Over many months of interaction with several officers at the CO Office, I would notice how for most things involving the char-dwellers, the term “time-waste” would be used. Almost, giving the idea that the officers were too involved with varied things. However, it became apparent to me how most officers spent hours and hours of time in the Office Canteen or in the tea shops outside the office simply gossiping and discussing politics. Most even arrived late. Months into my fieldwork, as I became a regular sight in the Office, officers would discuss almost everything about their lives and be curious about mine during their office hours. The arbitrariness at which important decisions such as showing a map to a char-dweller is taken is a marker of what Buffacchi calls ‘colonial violence’. Thus, tools of state-making, that allow the state to gather more information about its subjects, are being refused or ignored to be used and such decisions regarding their use or non-use is arbitrarily taken. This is making already vulnerable and marginalized people ‘illegible’ to the state and the society. This illegibility puts them at a disadvantage – it keeps them away from their political rights and increases a xenophobic society’s hatred against them. This is where the violence lies, for it allows the state to control its subjects, further its narratives and dictate or fuel people’s emotions.

“...how the production of legibility, knowledge, and truth regimes may rely substantially on statistical absences and even ignorance, instead of what Scott (1998) calls the “high degree of schematic knowledge” of modern statecraft and Foucault (2001, 2007) indicates as the in-depth data production necessary to make socio-environments intelligible...how

truth regimes can be effectively forged in the absence of calculations, through, for example, forms of official ignorance and silences....forms of official ignorance can propel, rather than undermine, the various powers of the heterogenous state and its forms of knowledge production.” (Truelove, 2018: 951).

Buffacchi (2017) talks about slavery to highlight how arbitrariness is violence because it is not only unjust but also the extreme degree of humiliation. Locke (2010) in his *‘The Second Treatise of Government’* repeatedly uses arbitrariness in relation to regimes of absolute power. The state production of systemic arbitrariness is violent because the potential exercise of its powers “...is not externally constrained by effective rules, procedures, or goals that are common knowledge of all persons or groups concerned.” (Lovett 2010: 196). The randomness at which the state decides to update maps, land settlements, show maps to char-dwellers (or this researcher), to declare a bazar’s ‘illegal’ practices or the bazar itself as ‘illegal’ is always done based on the state’s interest *at that time*. The rules and procedures are continually ignored or bent, and the interests of the char-dwellers are never taken into account, causing continuous and extreme humiliation to the char-dwellers.

The existence of the ‘private’ weekly bazar, wherein the char-dwellers (though all male) contest the ownership of the bazar with the state, is a challenge to that state production of continuous systemic arbitrariness. The char-dwellers have confronted the randomness at which the state applies and ignores the rules and the law by using law itself – the large number of legal battles are a proof of that and surprisingly they have won in each of them. The illegibility surrounding the land and its people due to lack of an updated map and a land settlement has been intelligently used

by the char-dwellers to beat the state through its own strategies. Gupta (2012: 231) notes how subaltern people in India use counterfeiting to circumvent the arbitrariness of state procedures and domination of bureaucracies.

The refusal of the char-dwellers to legitimize statist claims over ownership of the bazar land or allow practices that in turn is helping several neglected, impoverished char-dwellers to survive better, which otherwise the state categorizes as ‘illegal’ (while on most days, the state engages and profits from these ‘illegalities’), is where lies the char-dwellers’ challenge to statist violence. It is a refusal to accept statist strategies that are premised on arbitrariness. It is a refusal to legitimize state authority on all matters. This is what irks the state, and this is why the state continues the legal battles over ownership of the bazar. And in the process, the state is exploiting and amplifying already present ethnic fractures not just in and around the area of Baghbar but also in Assam, which is what I discuss in the upcoming section.

### 3. ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

Prior to 1970s, Baghbar Hill and its surrounding areas, as told by locals, were mostly inhabited by upper-caste Hindu Assamese people such as Kalitas and tribals like Kacharis, Bodos, Misings, etc. However, with the massive earthquake in 1950, the river changed its course and in subsequent years there were destructive floods that destroyed many chars. After the 1970s, with every annual flood making more people in surrounding chars homeless, most Bengali Muslim char-dwellers migrated to the nearby stable geography of Baghbar Hill and temporarily settled down there. Over-time, while some bought the land from their previous Assamese Hindu or tribal owners (who with the river nearing day-by-day shifted to other interior places), a few lived as tenants. At present, Baghbar Hill is predominantly inhabited by Bengali Muslims with just 50-60 households being

that of Hindu people. These include the caste Hindu Assamese, Bengali Hindus (who came as refugees during the 1950s and after 1970) and a few Bodo households. The once majoritarian Hindu population, who has over time become the minority in Baghbar, presents interesting ethnic tensions that get manifested in the weekly market.

The religious and ethnic divisions within the Baghbar Hill are physically demarcated too with separate neighborhoods for the Muslims and the Hindus. While two-thirds of the Hill are inhabited by the Bengali Muslims, one-third is inhabited by the Assamese Hindus, Bengali Hindus and the Bodos who live together. During my initial months in the chars, people would repeatedly underline how there has never been any case of communal violence in Baghbar. Often, I would sit by the Baghbar *ghat* and talk to the boatmen and passengers asking if this place was impacted during the Assam Movement or in the 1950's riots and people would reiterate that they remember no case of communal violence or in-fighting in the area – “During Babri Masjid incident, we even did patrolling to ensure the safety of the Hindu community. They were scared but no case happened here. No violence. They even served us tea thinking we were protecting them all night for their sake”, Ali da, the *ghat* lessee in one of the discussions had told me.

However, strict ethnic boundaries and sentiments of exclusion and violence may not always be manifested through events but may silently exist in the everydayness.

“...boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are



maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories...In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundation on which embracing social systems are built.” (Barth 1969: 9-10).

It is in the existence of the everydayness of the weekly market where one can locate the processes of the strengthening of ethnic boundaries.

The everydayness of the weekly market envelops boundaries which on the surface are hardly visible. The Assamese Hindu char-dweller who first accompanied me to the bazar is “well respected” by both the Bazar Committee and the people who sell items in the market. Being a caretaker of a depot who distributes kerosene to dealers as part of the state’s BPL Scheme, he admittedly has helped many Muslim char-dwellers in acquiring dealer/agent licenses. The Hindus frequent the market on every bazar day and buy their necessities from a largely Muslim dominated selling community. Discussions with Hindu char-dwellers also revealed how the Bazar Committee had donated land for making a crematorium and helped build the roads leading up to the local Hindu Bagheshwari temple. But as Barth says, this does not mean dilution of boundaries or sentiments of exclusion. In fact, increased continuous interaction and mobility can harbor or keep in place the disguised ethnic boundaries and distinctness.

At this point, I want to turn to how my own identity as an upper-caste Hindu Assamese played out in the field in this context. I had already spent close to three months in the field. By now, I was almost a familiar sight in Baghbar as I would regularly visit their homes, or meet them in the *ghat*

or in the bazar, etc. All my contacts till this point were Bengali Muslims and though extremely friendly, I could sense a weird nervousness or more accurately a sense of ‘pleasing’ me. This became more apparent when almost on every question regarding their relations with the neighboring Hindus or generally with the Hindu-favoring state both in India and Assam, they would almost always nervously smile and reply that they are in very peaceful relations with both their Hindu neighbors and the state. Over-time, I convinced myself to believe that possibly there truly was no conflict or ethnic tensions. I was wrong. For within days, when I started visiting and interviewing the Assamese Hindus, Bengali Hindus and the Bodos in the other part of the char, the internal ethnic ruptures were revealed to me and with enough past anecdotes. For hours I would sit listening to Islamophobic and hatred filled tales and opinions. Thus, I decided to ask Abdul da’s wife, Hasina bou<sup>69</sup>, who by then knew me well, to accompany me for a few days when I visited the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers’ homes. That changed dynamics a lot, my obvious visible comfort and camaraderie with Hasina bou, helped them to trust me more. After a few months, when I would have informal discussions with them, generally about the Indian state’s policies and its attitude towards Muslims, they would openly confide their fear and disgust towards how they are being treated by the larger Indian state and their distrust towards their Hindu neighbors. On one such discussion with a group of local middle-school teachers in the char, the issue of Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 came up as the violent protests and the renewed xenophobia were in full swing. Most seemed scared and after a lot of pauses, the Headmaster of the School said,

“*Baideo*, I think it is time to just accept the fact that no matter what we do for this land and the people, no matter how much we grow crops or send our children to work in their

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<sup>69</sup> Bou is an Assamese word for sister-in-law.

factories, their homes, build their bridges, we will never be considered as their own, as Assamese or an Indian. We will have to die proving everything. No matter how much we smile and behave properly with them, they will always spit on our faces and continue calling us monsters, ‘illegals’. We will always be the ‘Bangladeshis’!”

For a while no one spoke. There was agreement on their silence. It was a painful and a highly embarrassing moment for me, for even after years of independence, some communities will always be looked upon as a hated ‘other’. But for them to share with me this painful but honest opinion, to let me get a glimpse of their everyday fear and pain and to make me a part of their world of painful silences, made me understand that I was finally trusted.

My caste Hindu Assamese identity, however, played a significant role in the Hindu and Bodo char-dwellers opening up to me about the different dynamics of the weekly market. The fact that all of the Bazar lands earlier were with the Assamese Hindus and the tribals strengthens their belief that the bazar in reality should be in control of the Hindus.

“The Baghbar bazar has many plots that originally belong to us, Assamese and Bengali Hindus, but some are being sold or rented to them and some we don’t have any proof. Otherwise, how come the bazar which is entirely private, is so huge? There has to be plots within it which do not belong to them. But there are no maps, so no one knows, nor anyone can pinpoint exactly which plots belong to whom.” - a key informant from the Hindu neighborhood.

Baghbar Bazar as a space fit into the populist Islamophobic narrative of how the minority over-time can become the majority in both numbers and in power hierarchy. One of the Bengali Hindu char-dweller in an emotional discussion pointed out how the bazar does not have a single Hindu shop. He said,

“There was only one Hindu shop. It was titled ‘*Ma*’. We really liked it that there was at least one Hindu shop where we can go and sit and eat or drink tea. During Id once they asked that the shop should remain closed to which we said that this is not your shop. Next day someone slaughtered a cow in front of the shop and we were forced to close that shop. We do not have majority here. We were also not allowed to do any [*Durga*] *puja*<sup>70</sup> in the bazar. *Dhak*<sup>71</sup> was not allowed to play during puja because apparently it created disturbances during *namaz*.<sup>72</sup>”

The clear sense of loss of majoritarianism over a very public and visible space and the underlying ethnic tensions that are perpetually at play because of that is very evident. But these ethnic tensions do not stand out in gruesome violent events. Instead, they are weaved into the everyday, mundane existence and activities surrounding the bazar. Veena Das (2007) carefully captures this when she talks about eventedness of the everyday, meaning one should dive into the ordinary to trace the violence, for the violence will not stand out. One has to meander through the everyday, ordinary existence which will show the anthropologist a glimpse of social acceptance and harmony while

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<sup>70</sup> Durga Puja is an autumn festival celebrated largely by the Bengali Hindus. A ten-day festival, it is believed that Goddess Durga was created by combining the various powers of the male Gods of Hindu mythology to kill the Asur (demon) king Mahisasura, who had created havoc in heaven and earth. Mahisasura had gotten the blessing from Brahma, the creator God in Hindu mythology that no man could kill him. Hence, the male Gods created Durga. Durga, riding the tiger, is believed to have killed the demon king using a trident on the tenth day of Her creation.

<sup>71</sup> Dhak is a huge percussion instrument, largely played during auspicious occasions of the Bengali Hindus.

<sup>72</sup> Ritual prayers prescribed by Islam, to be observed five times a day.

also underlining patches of strong hatred and boundary-making. The violence in the case of the bazar, is present both underneath and alongside the strands of acceptance. It is true that the Hindu char-dwellers frequent the weekly market or the Hindu care-taker helps the Muslim dealers in acquiring licenses but “boundaries may persist despite what may figuratively be called the ‘osmosis’ of personnel through them.” (Barth 1969: 21).

### *3.1 Politics over cow*

The rise of the Hindu state in the country generally and in Assam particularly adds interesting complexities to the already present ethnic boundaries. The Baghbar weekly market, that is present in a Bengali Muslim dominated area and is largely run by them, is seen as not only a threat to the state, but more particularly, to the Hindu state. And in this, the symbol of the cow becomes relevant. The cow in the current Hindu statist narratives is being celebrated as the holy animal or also as the ‘mother’. This is largely done to create a stark opposition and strengthen the religious divide between the Hindus and the Muslims because of the latter’s consumption of cow. “Cow protectionism is a socio-political power assertion of the upper-caste Hindu nationalist politics, that equates the purity of the cow with the purity of an upper-caste *Hindu* Indian state.” (Narayanan 2018: 351, emphasis in the original). With the coming of the right-wing Hindu state at both the national and federal state level (Assam), there have been new legislations introduced regarding the ban on the sale and consumption of beef.<sup>73</sup> In August 2021, the right-wing government in Assam under Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma passed the Assam Cattle Preservation Act, 2021. The Act that replaces the Assam Cattle Preservation Act, 1950, now puts a complete ban on sale of

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<sup>73</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40116811>; <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/restrict-beef-eating-in-hindu-inhabited-areas-appeals-assam-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma/articleshow/82929422.cms>

cow and regulates the sale and transport of other cattle to a large extent. Out of its many provisions, one includes the ban on sale of any kind of beef items within a radius of 5 kilometers “of any temple, *satra*, or other religious institutions belonging to Hindu Religion...” (Provision 8, Government of Assam 2021: 6). The Act also prohibits the sale of beef in areas where the majority population is from a non-beef eating community. All violations of the Act are criminalized with fine upto rupees five-lakhs and a prison term of three to eight years, and these are all non-bailable offences. I am not physically present in the field, but I can already see this legislation bringing in significant widening of ethnic fractures in Baghbar. The Hindu *suba*<sup>74</sup> in Baghbar has a ‘*satra*’ or a Vaishnavite Hindu temple and the Baghbar bazar is within five kilometers of its radius. This means that there can be no slaughtering or sale of beef in the bazar. During my interactions with the Bazar Committee, they revealed how it was decided very early on that slaughtering and sale of beef will be done in an interior part of the bazar, which is publicly not visible. This was largely done to respect the religious sentiments of the Hindus in the area. An Act like this invisibilizes and mocks such local practices of attempt of co-existence. It will only contribute to terrorizing the minority and nurturing the sentiments of a ‘purified’ upper-caste Hindu nation.

The 2021 Act though, keeps in place and in fact strengthens certain regulations of the 1950 Act with regard to the bureaucracy involved in cattle politics. The Act allows cattle (except cow/calf) above fourteen years of age to be slaughtered after a ‘fit for certificate’ is obtained from the state veterinarian. This creates its own red tape-ism and a document regime and hence often poor, illiterate char-dwellers sell cattle without such certificates. The char areas, hence, are largely seen as havens of cattle smuggling by the state because of such reasons. The Baghbar weekly market is

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<sup>74</sup> neighborhood

tried to be delegitimized by infuriating the Hindu public sentiment where the state uses narratives of ‘illegal’ cattle smuggling from the bazar to Bangladesh. Being a private market and hence out of government control, the cow again becomes an important symbol for the Hindu state to regain authority. The making of ‘licitness and illicitness’ by the state is influenced by socio-cultural practices. (van Schendel and Abraham 2005; Galemba 2013). The ancestral link of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers with Bangladesh is evoked by the state to create them as ‘disloyal’, ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ engaging in the ‘illegal’ trade of cattle, an object of reverence for the Hindu public. This is the narrative that the Hindu state evokes to delegitimize and talk back to the challenge that the existence of the private Baghbar weekly market poses to the state’s authority.

An official at the Anchalik Panchayat Office informs,

“Cattle smuggling was easily done there because there was no government control. Earlier it was ignored even, but now after the government lost the recent court case, we are pressuring the bazar people in a different way. Considering it is a private bazar, the papers showing the sale and purchase of cattle is not signed by us [the Anchalik Panchayat/the State] and hence now the River Police make it a point to stop such boats and even put heavy fine. Earlier, this was still allowed but now they have gotten scared and revenue of the bazar has also come down.”

This shows how the making of ‘illegal’ happens at various stages and in various circumstances and often changes with time. First, the state knows the existence of exchange of other ‘illegal’ products such as rice, kerosene or even timber but visibilizes the ‘illegality’ of cattle alone to arouse the sentiment of a Hindu public and counter the challenge of Muslim char-dwellers to its

authority. Second, the cattle trade becomes a ‘smuggle’ when the state decides to declare it as such, sometimes at the stage when it is being sold at the weekly market but at other times when it is already sold and is being transported at the river. The state henceforth, chooses to be Hindu at its own will and choice, seeing when it would benefit from it the most.

Cow protection politics associated with Hindu nationalism arose in pre-independent India, particularly in 1881 when Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, published a text called ‘*Gaukarunanidhi*’ which advocated for protecting cows against slaughter. This led to the formation of the first cow-protection assemblies called ‘*Gaurakshini sabhas*’. This cow-protection politics stood at odds with rural economies where several Muslims and lower-caste Hindus engaged in cow trade. (Govindrajan 2021: 197). In fact, cow trading and protection in India cannot be contained into binaries of – religion-economy, ethical-moral, legal-illegal and Hindu-Muslim. (Govindrajan 2021; Adcock and Govindrajan 2019). Prior to the rise of the right-wing state, in the borderland region of India-Bangladesh, one even found a sense of co-existence and negotiation wherein Border Security Forces (BSF) of India used the slipperiness of cattle’s categories (agricultural purposes/sacrificial reasons/ ‘illegal’ smuggling) to allow movement while also at times negotiating with village panchayats over the acceptable number of cattle allowed to be crossed during Eid. (Ghosh 2019) Malini Sur (2020) writes about cattle smugglers in the borderland chars of Assam (India) and Bangladesh as people who experience the borders temporally. She mentions about ‘Signal Clear’, to show how temporal gaps exist within borders which are used by smugglers to transport cattle, but ‘Signal Clear’ also depicts a time of co-existence between security forces and char-people whose survival is propagated by cattle trading. Often, they even engage in bribing that allows such co-existence and negotiation to take place.



Govindrajan (2021) and Ghosh (2019) note that cattle trading and politics in the borders do not simply function through binaries - Hindu soldiers and Muslim smugglers - but more so as ‘labors of economies’ that are guided by a principle of co-existence and negotiation.

What the present BJP State at the center and at the state level have done is remove or dissolve such complexities and bring those binary categories back to the borderlands.<sup>75</sup> The char-dwellers, regardless of engaging in cattle smuggling or not, by being Muslims alone, are facing the heat of it. I fear the new Cattle Protection Act in Assam will only make matters worse and bring back a never-ending regime of what Sur (2020) calls ‘Armed Times’ (547, 559) which is marked by arbitrary checks on cattle markets suspecting smugglers, militants or terrorists and extreme arbitrary violence – “..armed times lead to anxious waiting, scarcity, and violence for the traders and their families, as well as to the prolonging of animal lives before their inevitable slaughter.” (Sur 2020: 551). The problem with having a Hindu right-wing state is that such ‘Armed Times’, wherein border regions and markets become extremely violent, may become the ‘new normal’, unlike it stretching for three months as observed by Sur. (2020: 565). Consequently, any Muslim in the chars, regardless of being a smuggler or not, will continue to be a suspect and experience

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<sup>75</sup> From 2016 to 2020, more than fifty fatalities were recorded due to mob lynchings related to cow protection in India. Compared to 2016, political violence regarding cow protection increased by 40% in 2017 and then doubled in 2018 (<https://acleddata.com/2021/05/03/cow-protection-legislation-and-vigilante-violence-in-india/>). Such violence has seen a sharp rise in BJP ruled states such as Uttar Pradesh, Assam, etc. The Human Rights Watch report of 2019 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/27/india-cow-protection-spurs-vigilante-violence>) has showed how the states under BJP have taken little interest in curbing the violence. The case of Pehlu Khan in Rajasthan in 2017 wherein Khan along with four others were beaten to death by a mob under the suspicion of them selling beef, raised nation-wide uproar. However, the police instead of nabbing the culprits, filed a case against Khan for exporting cattle and for animal cruelty under the Rajasthan Bovine Animal Act, 1995. In Assam too, mob lynchings for cow protection took lives of two Muslim men while three suspected Bangladeshi cattle smugglers were killed by a mob. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-39769172>; <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/assam-karimganj-bangladeshi-cattle-lifters-killed-6513410/>). Assam Congress MP Abdul Khaleque noted that mob lynchings of Muslims will rise following the passing of the Cattle Preservation Act, 2021. (<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/assam-cow-protection-bill-to-encourage-mob-lynching-congress-mp-abdul-khaleque-2486850>).

the violence of 'armed times'. With the coming of the right-wing state led by a violent Chief Minister, Assam's char bazars are going to be rapidly transforming and will constantly be feeling the violent gaze and surveillance of the Hindu state. The provision in the Act that now mandates that each sale and purchase of animals in "recognized" Animal Markets be in the "prescribed format" which will be up for inspection by competent authority makes me wonder what this could mean for a 'private' weekly bazar that has since been at loggerheads with the state and whose authority and ownership have never been recognized by it. I am recalling what the officer at the Anchalik Panchayat Office told me about the state now increasingly stopping boats with cattle from Baghbar bazar and fining them, for the state refuses to recognize the papers issued by the Baghbar Bazar Committee as 'legitimate'. I am wondering what it means now for the future of the cattle market in Baghbar and if at all the char-dwellers will now have to increasingly give in to the pressures and harassment of a Hindu state.

Moreover, this politics of the Hindu state is leading to the deepening of already present ethnic fractures and boundaries in Baghbar. The protection and bias of the Hindu state towards the minority Hindu population is underlined at every stage. Prior to the 1990s when the bazar was owned by the state, the Hindu char-dwellers recall how the Hindus would win every year's tender and each of them had large shares in it. "But now, after the privatization of the bazar, we do not even own a quarter of what our shares were earlier." This osmosis of cooperation and feeding into the narratives between the Hindu state and the minority Hindu char-dwellers can create fresh complexities and ruptures. One can see this in the narratives of cattle smuggling from the bazar. The state led belief that ethnic and kin networks support 'illegality' is mirrored by the Hindu char-dwellers. When the latter reiterates that "even today cows are smuggled from this bazar to

Bangladesh because the Bazar [Committee] President has his kin and in-laws in Bangladesh. In fact, Bangladesh's Supply Officer knows the name of Barpeta's Supply Officer", it feeds into and reflects the Hindu statist narrative that the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers can never be enough of Assamese or an Indian and they will always be under suspicion. That their kinship networks are enablers of 'illegality'.

Thus, what I discuss next is how the Hindu state has been trying to reclaim back its authority over the bazar using ethnic divisions and what it means for the future of a bazar and the Muslim char-dwellers that are confronting the state as well as are increasingly dependent on the bazar.

### *3.2 Reclaiming back the bazar?: Namami Brahmaputra Festival*

I was on my way to the char when in Barpeta town (the district capital), I noticed a big banner of a 'Baghbar Beach Festival' that was to be organized in Baghbar in December 2019. The banner immediately caught my eye, and I made it a point to ask about it to the people I know in the char. Later that day I met Abdul da who responded that I should meet the local boys who run the library, for the local library committee was organizing the festival. Abdul da went on to introduce me to them and I mentioned how it intrigued me to see the banner. To which, one of them enthusiastically replied back,

“Well *baideo*, the idea actually came from the Namami Brahmaputra Festival that was held by the state government here in 2017. Though it was beautiful and attracted a lot of people who would otherwise never have visited the chars, the state actually never asked the local people if we would want the festival here. I mean there was no question that we would have rejected such an offer, but we were not asked about it. Possibly if they would have

asked us, then those rumors about the state using parts of the bazar land to hold the festival would never have surfaced at the first place. The bazar people would have happily allowed the state to hold the festival anyway!”

The thought of holding the Namami Brahmaputra Festival in a remote char area was interesting to me. The Namami Brahmaputra festival was a five-day festival (March 31 to April 4, 2017) organized by the right-wing BJP Government of Assam in twenty-one districts of Assam along the Brahmaputra to celebrate the cultures and practices surrounding the river. The festival was critiqued heavily because through it, the state promoted its own Hindu agenda, where Hindu rituals and priests were called to worship the Brahmaputra. Many called it an attempt to hinduise the never before worshipped river.<sup>76</sup> The word ‘Namami’ itself is a Sanskrit word that translates to ‘I worship you’. Several leaders of indigenous tribal organizations also expressed their exclusion from the festival. Aditya Khalakahri of All Assam Tribal Sangha was seen speaking to the media complaining how the video released by the state to promote the festival had no footage of tribes such as Misings, who have traditionally celebrated and depended on the river.<sup>77</sup>

In Barpeta, the state chose Baghbar as its site for organizing the festival. This was particularly interesting for it almost looked like a Hindu state was making way for Hindu rituals and practices to penetrate into a Muslim dominant area. This came at a time when Hafiz Ahmed, the president of the Char Chapori Sahitya Parishad responded to the media<sup>78</sup> saying that the Muslim river

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<sup>76</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/833658/the-new-brahmaputra-a-river-festival-in-assam-draws-criticism-for-promoting-rss-brand-of-hindutva>

<sup>77</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/833658/the-new-brahmaputra-a-river-festival-in-assam-draws-criticism-for-promoting-rss-brand-of-hindutva>

<sup>78</sup> See <https://scroll.in/article/833658/the-new-brahmaputra-a-river-festival-in-assam-draws-criticism-for-promoting-rss-brand-of-hindutva>

communities of the chars and their cultures were missing from every aspect of the festival. Things became interesting when the district administration organized the five-day festival on parts of the bazar land. The Namami Brahmaputra festival with the Hindu state's massive display of Hindu supremacy and control, being held on Baghbar's bazar land is a statement of claim and authority by the state. The local Hindu char-dwellers were actively involved in the rituals too. The local Vaishnavite temple or *Naamghar* was also promoted by the state.

The District Commissioner who organized the festival in Baghbar happened to be a friend of my father and agreed to meet me when he got to know that my research was located in the Baghbar char areas. The man is known to my family as an extremely religious person and has often visited the local Vaishnavite Temple in Guwahati on my mother's request, donating in both cash and kind to the temple. During the interview, when I asked him about the Baghbar Namami Festival, his face immediately lit up as he smiled and acknowledged how he single-handedly conducted the festival and how that was the biggest highlight of his career before his retirement. He revealed how senior government officers were not at all enthusiastic in conducting the festival in a Muslim majority area and particularly in such a remote area with poor transportation. He had to convince the other officers saying that the festival would help promote the history of the area – “That area hosts ‘Hadirasaki’, the place where there was a historic battle between the Ahoms and the Burmese. In addition, Baghbar is known for its Vaishnavite temples set by Guru Madhabdeva. Have you visited the *satra* there?” As I nodded my head, I could not help but notice how that history was exclusive of the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who currently live in and around the chars of Baghbar.

The state's intricate involvement and promotion of Hindu values, practices and institutions were apparent. During the interview, the former District Commissioner said,

“I constructed a guest house within the premises of the *Naamghar* and inaugurated it one night before the festival. I ate with the people there, did ‘*naam-kirtaan*’<sup>79</sup> and spent the night at the Guest House. The festival provided a brilliant opportunity to display Baghbar and the Vaishnavite tradition to the people outside of Baghbar.”

The Hindu state in its attempt to throttle the challenge to its authority and control by the Muslim char-dwellers is emboldening the already present ethnic boundaries and adding newer situations of conflict into the everyday existence of communities through its celebration of one religion over others.

Interestingly, the display of the Hindu state's authority literally happened on parts of the private bazar land which the state has been trying to gain ownership and more so legitimacy of its power. The land where the state has continually faced challenges and lost to the char-dwellers. While the state refused to give any particular reason on why the bazar land became a part of the location for organizing the festival – “I mean, it was inevitable, most land by the *ghat* was owned by the Bazar, so we had to” - I also approached the Bazar Committee to understand if any conflict arose in the process. To which the Committee has always maintained that an agreement was reached between the state and the Committee to host the festival on some parts of the Bazar land but refused to reveal details. Some char-dwellers also noted how the Bazar Committee suffered losses because the five-day festival meant the bazar could not be hold for one Sunday (April 2, 2017) but gave in

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<sup>79</sup> Devotional singing, prevalent in Vaishnavite Hindu traditions

possibly to political pressures. These were part of many speculations that were doing the rounds in the char whenever I asked about the festival being held on bazar land. But one cannot deny the fact that the Namami Festival introduced majoritarian religious principles and the right-wing state in Assam used it as an opportunity to publicly consolidate and visibilize Hindu values and votes. The festival being spear-headed by a devout bureaucrat of a Hindu state in a Muslim majority area itself carries tremendous symbolic value. The festival being held on the contested Bazar land while involving the neighboring Hindu *suba* speaks how the state used the festival in not just asserting and appeasing the minority Hindus in the area but also challenged the Muslim char-dwellers' refusal to bow down to the Hindu state's claims of ownership of land and in turn its authority. The sad part is, in this process, it is inflaming and changing dynamics and opening newer ruptures between the Hindus and the Muslims of the area.

CONCLUSION: *"This is our land, we will always fight this!"*

After COVID hit and lockdown was imposed, due to lack of state planning on timely procurement of agricultural produce from char areas, Abdul da on the phone lamented how they had to throw away bags after bags of vegetables, all harvested with sheer hard labor on the Brahmaputra. The bazar is a weekly source of valuable income for this agrarian community and with COVID, everyone who depended on the bazar - the Committee members, sellers, rentiers of land who rented their private land in the bazar, any seller who wished to set up a shop or sell goods in the bazar, all were hard hit. In February 2021 when I went to finally say my good-byes to the char-dwellers and met some of the Committee members, everyone emphasized how COVID was just one of the conflicts in a long list. For decades now, the Bazar Committee has been fighting the state through proper legal channels, spending a lot of money in the process. So, when I asked if the battle now

was over, considering the Court had finally given its judgement in their favor, the almost eighty-year-old Committee President smiled and said,

“If the judgement is in our favor, it is never the end of the battle. We have many more legal battles to fight and the state will always find a way to get back. But we too have documents, we have proof, a language that this state invented and has to abide by. This truly *baideo*, is our land and we will always fight this!”

The man’s eyes continued to be lit up even though his almost frail body was giving up throughout the rest of our conversations. With the Hindu state in Assam bringing in newer, stricter anti-Muslim policies which include the new Cow Protection Act or the ‘pro-indigenous Land Bill, 2019’ that does not recognize the Muslim char-dwellers as ‘indigenous’, I wonder if he can continue to light the fire in his eyes for long. I wonder if the char-dwellers can keep the bazar land to themselves for long – for the fight over the bazar land is a very much symbolic and ideological fight and the win or loss of any side has a lot at stake for each.

This is definitely not to deny that the Bazar Committee and the bazar in itself did not have internal hierarchies and fractures. For example, how the Committee was run by almost all men of relatively well-off families. This meant that poor, or politically less influential Muslim char-dwellers were unable to participate or control decisions regarding the bazar. This also meant that some char-dwellers were profiting more than others from the bazar. However, this does not negate the fact that every and all char-dwellers in varied capacities were dependent and economically profiting from the existence of the bazar. The focus of this chapter was to explore the power dynamics between the Muslim char-dwellers and the Hindu state, such that the former in any capacity will



always remain lower in the hierarchy. The chapter does not intend to expand on the internal power dynamics and workings of the Muslim char-dwellers with regard to the bazar which probably can be dealt with in another writing.

The weekly bazars in char-lands of Assam which are economic exchange points and hub for mostly all char-dwellers have and will increasingly come under the grip and gaze of the Hindu state, particularly also because they are largely frequented and managed by Muslims. Radhika Govindrajan (2021) uses Joshi's (2018) concept of 'regional Hindutva' to explain how Hindutva is mixed with regional anxieties of identity and belonging in local contexts. This is exactly the kind of Hindutva circulating in Assam and that has in the past and will in the future cause tremendous violence to Muslims in Assam, particularly Bengali char-dwelling Muslims. This will also change local ethnic relationships and imaginations of weekly bazars in the chars. In Assam, the upper-caste Assamese Hindus who have led movements in the name of saving 'indigenous Assamese', have time and again raised fears of losing identity and culture to the 'invading illegal Bangladeshi' who is always largely imagined to be the Muslim Bengali char-dweller or the 'Miya'. The current 'anti-Muslim' Hindutva hatred is almost always mixed with these regional nationalist anxieties. The weekly bazars in char-lands have and will face this variety of 'regional Hindutva', wherein the char-dwellers will not only have to face the Hindu state but also continue proving their 'Assamese-ness', their loyalty to the '*jati*' or the ethnic community.

The worst part is the systemic production of arbitrariness by this post-colonial state be it in its refusal or ignorance or arbitrary use of tools of state-making or framing things/people/processes as 'illegal'. This erodes their political rights which unfortunately will only increase with time. The

bazars and the Muslim char-dwellers will increasingly feel the arbitrariness of violence grow and this will contribute to changing the character of or even the demise of many weekly bazars in char-lands. However, this chapter has once again shown that the transactional world of Indian markets is intricately embedded in society – religion, ethnicity, etc. (Schwecke and Gandhi 2020, Parry 1989, Raheja 1988). What I show here is that it is equally embedded in the environment or the geography with the fluvial nature of the ecology of chars allowing char-dwellers to question the state's authority. In fact, Schwecke and Gandhi (2020) argue how market spaces have established the fact that the state is simply one of the authorities and how several 'non-state' forces often have the upper hand with the state engaging in an accommodative relationship rather than an overarching dictatorship determining transactional life.

I am remembering again my first trip to the chars on that rainy morning with my father and how he recalled the weekly bazars of the char areas on the way. The stories of my grandfather's free health camps for the Muslim char-dwellers or the economic prosperity and the colonial history that were attached to his nostalgic remembrance of the bazars are so far away from how the bazars in char areas are imagined now. They are not just neglected by the state but also seen as havens for carrying out 'illegal' activities, away from the eyes of the state. The collective memories of prosperity and historicity that were attached to char-land bazars have given way and will be soon lost. They will be simply reduced to 'Muslim' bazars. New memories and imaginations of weekly bazars in the chars are being shaped by the state, playing on the already present xenophobia and islamophobia. For people living far away from the chars, I wonder if they will ever be able to imagine the weekly bazars through its variety – the colors, smells, sounds that the bazars put on display. Funny, how my vivid memories of the bazar are above state politics and internal conflicts

– but all olfactory and auditory – the smell of the dried fish, the colors of the spices, the crowd of the cattle market and the sounds of sellers and buyers bargaining.

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## CHAPTER 6: THE MOBILE STATE

### *Image 1*

It was early February 2021 when I last accompanied the Boat Clinic team to the chars. The river was calmer and had dried up considerably leading to the boat being harbored at a greater distance than the char village that the team was visiting. The machine boat cannot operate on lesser depth. As the boat came to a halt and we prepared to de-board, one of the nurses quipped,

“We are still lucky today. We just have to walk for a few kilometers, and then Rehman da [one of the three Community Workers in the team] has arranged a *haat-nao*<sup>80</sup> for us to cross a small stream on the way and we would reach today’s camp site. Otherwise, we have to walk kilometers, carrying the registers, medicine cabinets and laboratory equipment. On days when we are lucky, the Community Workers or the ASHA workers arrange for us bullock carts or better motorbikes and cycles.”

On the way, the muddy silt-filled lands were so unstable that one of the other nurse’s feet went right inside and had to be pulled out. The team was greeted by the ASHA worker and a few teenage boys walked along with us with the hope that they would receive the state distributed free soaps and masks<sup>81</sup>. The head of the team, the District Project Officer (DPO) Swati *baideo*, was walking the fastest and had reached the camp-site way before us and was now chit-chatting with the women who had gathered there, asking them about their health, their children’s marriages, if ‘X’ could finally go visit her mother or if after lockdown ‘Y’s son could safely reach back home from Kerala.

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<sup>80</sup> Boats that move with hand-held oars.

<sup>81</sup> The visit was after COVID had hit

The char-dwellers' knew them as much as they knew the char-dwellers. When I travel with the Boat Clinic team, numerous fascinating scenes like these unfold in front and around me, letting me take a more nuanced, diverse and closer look at the relationship of marginalized people with the state on an everyday basis.

More often than not, the camp-site is not zeroed in on the first go. On most occasions, the team has to look around for a shaded area that has enough space to keep tables, chairs, equipment and also where patients can queue up and wait. Additionally, the team also requires a covered space to check up on pregnant women. Once, after several attempts, we found a huge bamboo bush and set up the camp there when someone pointed out that it was just behind someone's latrine and we had to pack things up again and shift to a different location. We have established camp-sites and awareness camps on varied locations – from someone's courtyard to ruined schools or even by the side of the road. One is lucky if a suitable site is chosen by the ASHA and the Community Workers well before hand.



*Image q. The mentioned nurse getting stuck on the silt and mud while on our way to a camp.*

*Image 2*

Before I started doing fieldwork, one of the general perceptions I had about chars was the lack of electricity. But on my first day of fieldwork, as I made way through the bazar and reached the chars, I could see that almost every house in the char had solar panels fitted onto their tin-roofs. I was happily surprised to find electric fans working in perfect condition. Ahmed da, one of my key contacts in the char who was eager to take me to his house, was bemused on seeing my face looking contently at bright tube-lights and fans – “We have electricity now, thanks to solar! The state distributed the panels and we got them free of cost! Almost everyone has a panel now.” I understood why he wanted to bring me to his house. The batteries of the solar panel that get charged to work at night, are kept in the living room and are decorated with a tablecloth and a

flower vase. This strategic placement and treatment of batteries, which over time I would come to realize was in every char-dwellers' home speak a lot about their affective relation to infrastructure, to the state – the decoration of batteries was to assert to the world outside that finally they feel seen and cared for by the state. And this change in status and relation had to be put on display, for everyone to see, but largely people who were coming from outside the char, someone like me.

After the annual floods, when I again visited the chars in September 2019, Ahmed da's house was nowhere to be seen, nor were the solar panels. Ahmed da, who was accompanying me, said that they had to move again for the river had eroded a large chunk of the char and was almost at their door-step – “One more heavy rain spree, and my home would have been devoured!” he said. I was informed that they unpacked the house and shifted everything piece by piece in a matter of few days. The char-dwellers' houses being made of tin, can be easily unscrewed and tin-sheets can be taken off and carried to new plots of land. The shifting of the wooden logs that are used to support the tin-sheets that make up the walls and ceiling, is a little tedious and dangerous. But I was also wondering about the solar panels and thought, if now Ahmed da and his family have to live in darkness? It was only when I visited his new home it became clear to me that even the solar panels are movable, and the light weighted ion-battery can be easily carried too – “This is why *baideo* it is so popular now in the chars. You don't just carry your home on your shoulders and head, but you can carry your light too!” The statement sounded prophetic and got me thinking about how the state is attempting to figure out the ways of a population that is constantly on the move by being on the move too. This is a drastic departure from a colonial state that was obsessed with categorizing and making populations sedentary.



*Image r. A house being shifted, the tin walls have already been taken, what is left are the tin roofs and the concrete posts.*



*Image s. An SPV Standalone Solar Panel in the char*



The image of the state moving around and trying to adjust to the rhythms, needs and ways of a mobile, distant population – taking a portion of a clinic and travelling around in a boat, carrying chairs and equipment, sometimes literally on top of a head, crossing streams, building-destroying and then re-building camp-sites or designing electricity that can be removed, carried over and erected back – is a fascinating image to understand the changing nature of state, wherein the state has become mobile and is attempting to literally move closer to a population that is constantly shifting. What I want to focus on this chapter is what happens to the experiences or relationships between char-dwellers and the state when the state attempts to become mobile? And I explore this question through the lens of mobility, affect and infrastructure. Here, I focus on two infrastructural projects by the state where the state has tried to cater to the needs of a mobile population by being mobile – first, the Boat Clinic and second, the Stand-Alone Photo Voltaic (SPV) Solar Panels under the Indian Government’s ‘Saubhagya’ Scheme.

In the first section, I argue how despite attempting to be mobile, the state’s policies are embedded in fixity and how they re-introduce (sometimes, without intent) new patterns of fixity that act as constraints for a mobile population who are already marginalized. I borrow careful observations from the ‘New Mobility Paradigm’ studies and the criticisms that followed them to elaborate on my observations. The second section looks at how these mobile infrastructures are affectual in nature and how affective infrastructures allow the state to generate particular kinds of political subjectivities and with it develop varied kinds of relations with the state. In the final section, I examine how state generated political subjectivities are countered by the char-dwellers, as they re-evaluate and make the infrastructure their own while negotiating and challenging the fixity that the projects imbibe in certain aspects. But before that, I want to map out the two projects – the Boat Clinic and the SPV Solar Scheme.

## 1. BOAT CLINIC AND SPV STANDALONE SOLAR: The schemes.

### 1.1. *The floating clinics*

I had first heard about the Boat Clinic when I was chatting with a group of women in the char, particularly around issues of health. The local ASHA workers of the char were present too. ASHA or Accredited Social Health Activist is a trained female health activist who is chosen from the village she resides in and is accountable to it and forms the bridge between the local community and the public health system. She is particularly trained in providing immunization, taking care of maternal health and family planning, including carrying out health awareness campaigns on an everyday basis.<sup>82</sup> ASHAs have played a vital role in reducing maternal and infant mortality rates in Indian villages and have been critical for vaccinations, spreading awareness and testing campaigns during the on-going COVID pandemic, particularly in remote areas like chars. (Kalita et al 2020; National Health Mission 2020)<sup>83</sup>. Though the establishment of ASHA workers was a favorable change in matters of health in Indian villages, in remote areas like the chars it was still difficult for people with serious health conditions, people who met with accidents or even for pregnant women who regularly needed pre-natal and ante-natal check-ups to access the hospitals. It proved difficult even for ASHA workers to send quick word to the hospitals. Most hospitals were far from the chars and people had to rent boats and pay a hefty amount simply to reach the hospitals. Besides, the Primary Health Centers (PHC) that cater to the villages are not enough in numbers to qualitatively investigate the health of all people.

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<sup>82</sup> For more information see, <https://nhm.gov.in/index1.php?lang=1&level=1&sublinkid=150&lid=226>

<sup>83</sup> See <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/iwd2021/international-womens-day-caring-everyone-asha-workers-covid-19-story>; <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/track-test-treat-asha-workers-lead-covid-fight-in-assam-villages-2467545>;

In such a situation, the Boat Clinics have come at a critical time for the char-dwellers. During my conversation with the char women, they first introduced me to the Boat Clinics when they started talking about visits by '*Nao Daaktor*' (boat doctors). When I asked them about this rather peculiar terminology, one of the women responded that doctors and nurses come by boat once every month in the chars and do check-ups, give medicines and conduct tests, particularly of pregnant women.

In June 2004-2005, a non-profit organization 'Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES)' under its managing trustee, Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika, funded the design and building of a boat clinic with the intention to provide health services to remote communities in the Brahmaputra Valley, particularly the chars. The project won a World Bank Award for innovative ideas to bridge gaps for marginalized communities. With funds from the award, it started out small with just one boat clinic in Dibrugarh while having the support from the district administration. However, in January 2008, the state got involved when the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM/NHM) entered into a public-private partnership with C-NES, making the state a major share-holder in the initiative.<sup>84</sup> NRHM is responsible for expenditure on recurring costs such as manpower (salary), medicines, maintenance of boats, camp organization costs, etc. while C-NES is responsible for construction of boats and their insurance. (Regional Research Centre for NE States 2013). Frequent training of staff is also provided by UNICEF.

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<sup>84</sup> See <https://c-nes.org/programmes/boat-clinics/>



*Image 1. A Boat Clinic; courtesy: C-NES<sup>85</sup>*

At present there are fifteen units of Boat Clinics functioning in thirteen districts of Assam – Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Sonitpur, Morigaon, Kamrup, Nalbari, Dhubri and Goalpara. The Boat Clinic team that I accompanied and who was responsible for covering the chars in my fieldwork was the Barpeta Unit II (There are two Boat Clinics in Barpeta district, given the high number of chars and population). Each unit is led in the district by a District Programme Officer (DPO) who “coordinates with the District Health Society and the targeted communities for smooth implementation of the programme along with the Medical Officers and supporting clinical staff and is guided by the programme management unit (PMU) at Guwahati and Delhi.” (Regional Research Centre for NE States 2013: 11). Besides the DPO, the team consists of two Medical Officers (MBBS doctors), two Auxiliary-Nurse Midwifery

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<sup>85</sup> See <https://c-nes.org/939/5-more-boats/>

(ANM), one staff nurse, one pharmacist, one lab technician and three community workers. The team is in regular contact with the village ASHAs, the nearby PHCs and the district administration.

As part of the MoU signed between C-NES and NHM, the Boat Clinics are responsible for providing curative and preventive care, maternal and childcare (during and after pregnancy immunization), family planning awareness and services, early basic testing and emergency care services in times of disasters, epidemics, etc. (Regional Research Centre for NE States 2013: 12-13) During my several visits to the different campsites in chars with the team, I noticed the team conducting check-ups for pregnant women, providing them vaccines and nutritional medicines, carrying out immunization drives of infants and children, performing laboratory services for older people to detect common diseases such as diabetes, and holding awareness campaigns. I attended awareness campaigns on hand-washing and personal hygiene and maternal mortality and health. The team needs to conduct on an average 18 to 20 days of field-visits and organize around 20 to 22 camps per month. They do office work in the remaining days of the month.

During 2019-20, boat clinics covered a population of 203,579, conducting a total of 3280 camps.<sup>86</sup> As per 2013 reports, Barpeta Unit II Boat Clinic team covered a total of 30 chars while conducting 184 camps and catering to 28,006 people. The team had almost all services, as mentioned in the MoU, functional. Plus, during COVID, the Boat Clinics were assigned screening and awareness duties, distribution of masks, sanitizers, etc. by the local PHCs in the remote chars. I had accompanied the team on six camps conducted in four different chars in the Barpeta district.

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<sup>86</sup> See <https://nhm.assam.gov.in/schemes/boat-clinic>

## *1.2 Carry your light with you!*

I was on my way to the *ghat*, when in the bazar, I had seen a massive crowd. At first, I thought it was a huge sale of fishes – only discounted sale of good variety of fishes attract this much crowd in the chars or maybe sometimes big politicians. But it was not a bazar day, so on enquiring with people around, I was told that the state sponsored solar panels under ‘Saubhagya’ scheme of the government were finally being distributed by the Village headman and the assigned sub-contractor. From afar I could see Ahmed da, who was busy too, rapidly jotting down names of people who still had not gotten them or busy listening to people’s complaints. The popularity and necessity of solar brought free mobile electricity is very evident from this scene.

In 2017, the Indian government launched the ‘Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana’ (Saubhagya) scheme with the aim to provide last-mile connectivity and electricity to all un-electrified households in rural areas and economically poor households in urban areas that were not covered by the ‘Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana’ (DDUGJY) scheme. DDUGJY was launched in 2011 to provide free household electricity to BPL families. The beneficiary households were selected from the 2011 Socio-Economic Caste Census data (SECC) with specific importance given to female led/widowed households, tribal groups, lower castes or landless households that derived a major part of their income from casual labor.

The Saubhagya scheme has two types of connections – the micro-grid and the SPV Standalone Solar systems. The last-mile connectivity which includes “erection of pole, conductor etc. as may be required for extending service connection to remaining unelectrified households” (Ministry of Power, Government of India 2017: 5) is covered by establishing a micro-grid connection. The second type are the SPV Standalone Solar systems which are largely designed keeping in mind areas where grid connectivity is impossible, particularly mountainous regions or in our case river-

islands. It is in such areas, where carrying poles or establishing the poles becomes difficult or where there is a great chance of grid connections being continually damaged due to floods and erosion, that SPV Solar can come handy. “In case of un-electrified households located in remote and inaccessible areas, power packs of 200 to 300 Wp (with battery bank) with a maximum of 5 LED lights, 1 DC Fan, 1 DC power plug, etc. may be provided along with provision of Repair & Maintenance (R&M) for 5 years.” (Ministry of Power, Government of India 2017: 5-6).

Though the Rural Electrification Corporation Limited (REC) was made the nodal agency for implementation of the scheme at the national level, at the state level, it was the state electricity departments who were carrying the bulk of the work keeping contextual situations in mind. Aslam, who is an officer at the Assam Power Distribution Company Limited (APDCL) revealed how despite Saubhagya being launched in 2017, it was implemented in Assam only in the end quarter of December 2018.

There were three levels of survey tallying and preparation. Aslam pointed out how along with the 2011 SECC data and the 2011 Census, surveys done during Gramin Vidyut Scheme and a few surveys that were carried out by APDCL itself were tallied and mixed to create the first draft of the beneficiary lists. The APDCL then called out for public tenders and a suitable contractor (often a big national company) was selected, who often used to sub-contract it to a local contractor with more regional presence and manpower. The contracts are between the state electricity departments and the contractors. The Indian government or the REC is not involved here. The hired sub-contractors then carried out another verification and prepared the lists accordingly. Following the distribution of the solar panels, if any huge anomalies are found, the department carries out another round of verification too on the ground. And it is these stories on the ground that make for

interesting narratives of how the scheme is running, what consequences it is producing and what relations it is changing.

In this chapter, I would only be looking at the SPV Standalone Solar system which is what is being distributed and is used in the chars. The entire infrastructure, comprising of solar panels, batteries and the provided electric equipment, is mobile. They can be easily unscrewed, panels can be taken apart and carried, along with the batteries, and put back together again in the new location. Though eighty-five percent of the funding in ‘Special Categorized’ states like Assam come from the central Indian government and the rest from the state government, the total money is released to the contractor only on visual proof of connection. So, following connection, contractors click and upload photographs with the beneficiary. These intricacies that were put in place to maintain transparency and accountability, are creating new loopholes and complexities. The state that is attempting to be mobile and to move with a population, changes and gets changed too in the process. And next, it is one of these aspects of the mobile state that I delve into.

## 2. FIXITY OF MOBILE STATES

### *2.1. Routes and routing*

The state by being mobile, by trying to provide service keeping in mind a population that is constantly shifting or that lives in the periphery, has brought a lot of relief for the char-dwellers who have always lived in state neglect and suspicion. In areas where child marriages of young girls had been prevalent, women’s health, particularly maternal reproductive health, family planning and infant mortalities, have significantly improved. Besides, solar panels are allowing



households to have electricity and often char-dwellers use them to run their pumps and water their fields too.

But I want to stir the conversation towards how despite the state's attempt to become mobile, its policies are embedded in and reproduce fixity that marginalizes the already marginalized char-dwellers. "Mobility is always located and materialized," when Sheller and Urry (2006: 210) noted that, they emphasized what sociologists like Sassen (2002) had argued before. The necessity of immobility that is accompanied with mobility is expressed well by Marxist geographers like Harvey (2006), who shows how easy flow of capital, people and ideas need the support of immobile infrastructures, land, etc. which inadvertently lead to capitalism's spatial destruction and uneven geographical development.

One of the ways that the mobile state produces immobility or fixity in this case, is through its necessity to plan routes that Boat Clinics undertake. Every boat clinic unit has fixed routes that is prepared in the beginning of every year with the help from the PHCs, the C-NES's PMU and some involvement of the DPO. Since every unit can cover only a fixed number of chars for a particular district (all boat clinics are divided into different districts), in a way this mobility of the state is still defined by fixity of administrative or state created borders. However, the mobility of the char-dwellers, the shifting that is part of their life, often than not, neither follow such fixed routes nor any district boundaries. Due to floods or erosion, char-dwellers residing in chars in Barpeta district often shift to chars in the nearby Goalpara district or sometimes far away to urban centers like Guwahati. It is then when problems arise.

Boat Clinic teams prepare 'Action Plans' based on the number of people recorded in a char. The lists of people are prepared by the PHC, PMU and the district administration based on voter's lists or the last Census data. Based on these numbers then, materials such as medicines, vaccinations,

etc. are allotted. Pregnant women are entered into records that are strictly maintained and are given a 'Card' that records their history of vaccines given, their monthly blood pressure, weight, height, etc. and after pregnancy, the card records their infant's details and his/her vaccine history. Char women would refer to this card as a '*Beji Card*' (*beji* in Assamese means injection). I delve a little deeper into the '*Beji Card*' in the next section.

While talking to women in the chars that I visited with the team or during conversations with ASHA workers and the Boat Clinic team, it became apparent that due to floods or erosion, when char-dwellers shift mid-year, they often miss out on vaccinations or getting necessary medicines during pregnancy because they no longer fall under the routes of the assigned Boat Clinic team. Additionally, if that char does not fall under the route of any boat clinic team, the char-dwellers are back to dark days. ASHA workers and the Boat Clinic team members do try to keep track of the people, particularly pregnant women, but most fall out. Rehman da, who is from the chars himself, notes why char-dwellers never update their addresses – because of political anxieties. Char-dwellers are often declared a 'doubtful-voter' when they shift to a new place. This largely happens when during field visits to update voter's lists, census or election commission officials often do not visit individual houses but end up updating lists sitting in the house of the Village Headman or a '*mattobar*'<sup>87</sup>. Newly arrived faces are always seen with suspicion of being 'illegal Bangladeshis' and officers often do not verify. Besides, often out of ignorance, when char-dwellers change their addresses in voter's lists, they do not cancel their previous addresses. The election commission officials often tend to cancel such people with two addresses from the voter's lists believing them to be 'illegal immigrants' and thus, declare them as 'doubtful voters'. Thus, even

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<sup>87</sup> A local landed and influential man, often with political ties. Earlier, mattobars had their own henchmen and would often act as land mafia but now the character of mattobars have changed. They now seek more social status through being involved in various political activities.

though one does not physically live in that char, the addresses are never changed due to fear of being declared a ‘doubtful voter’. It is no surprise then, that often people who are registered in one char address are not found in that char and many unregistered char-dwellers arrive in new chars, to whom Boat Clinic team members find it difficult to cater to, with no valid address proof of their residence in the new char.

It is also difficult for the Boat Clinic team on ground when new faces suddenly show up at camps, particularly when new families shift from another district following erosion and floods. One of the ANM of the team notes –

“For us too, our records might say that in ‘X’ Village, there is supposed to happen ‘x’ number of births or vaccinations in a particular day or month. But often the number increases on ground because maybe more people migrated (floods/go to brick kilns) and populated the village, now those cannot be asked to leave, but we face crisis in terms of medicines, equipment, money, etc. There is shortage of vaccines too. We often ask them to come to the nearby char where we conduct our camp the following day.”

Talking to char-dwellers, particularly women, it became clear that going to a nearby char for health check-ups involved boat rent, time and leaving aside their household and field duties and often men of the household do not encourage them.

“Now when pregnant women or their families shift, we have no idea of knowing where they shifted, when will they be back, if they will be back or not. That impacts our performance records. Now earlier if we record 1000 people in the char but by mid-year the population is 300, out of which we will not even be able to show 9 deliveries, then there

remains no point of doing camps in that char. Number of pregnant women shifting and disappearing impacts on the numbers in our registers who are supposed to be attending the camps in chars and hence, there remains no point of conducting camps in the chars with declining pregnant women. Plus, we have to show 4 pre-check-ups for pregnant women in the records... This one woman we heard gave home delivery and due to complications died – how can we keep track when they are shifting and not updating addresses?” -Rehman da.

The obsession with keeping detailed records and achieving targets<sup>88</sup> that encompass this project are other fixities attached to a state that is attempting to be mobile. The records and targets fix people on paper and define their routes, routes following which alone they can access the benefits of the state providing mobile health services. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) when talking about nomadology, show the difference between a vanguard and a nomad, such that the nomad though mobile, follows a traditional route defined by seasons etc. and hence, it is easier for the state to keep a track of, but the vanguard on the other hand is someone who moves or shifts without any pre-defined or traditional route and is a menace for the state to keep a track of. It is hence the latter that is the real threat to a state that is trying to control its population. No wonder the western world till late saw several anti-vagrancy laws. Thus, by defining the routes and keeping strict records the state is introducing new variations of immobility or a mobility that is approved by the state to the char-dwellers. “Producing order and predictability is not simply a matter of fixing in space but of

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<sup>88</sup> Most programmes of the Boat Clinic that is run by the NHM are target based programmes such as number of hospital pregnancies, number of immunization done – both mother and child, number of maternal mortalities and infant mortalities, etc. This ‘target-meeting and number’ game can be located in India’s past poor performances with regard to maternal and infant mortalities which came under strict criticism from WHO. Thus, mobile bodies of char women are also tried to be fixed or sedentarized through continuous gaze of international health and development politics.

channeling motion – of producing correct mobilities through the designation of routes.” (Cresswell 2010: 24). Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (2001) talk about ‘tunneling effect’ wherein state produced infrastructures like speed-trains or modern highways connect certain areas through certain routes and drop out other areas, making some areas more valuable than others. The following of fixed routes by Boat Clinics is creating ‘appropriate’ mobility and fixed mobilities, making some routes and chars more ‘valuable’ than others for the char-dwellers.

## *2.2. The household distribution*

Though the Standalone Solar system under the Saubhagya scheme was launched keeping in mind inaccessible areas and has been beneficial for people who constantly shift like the char-dwellers, the distribution of the Stand-alone Solar system is done at the household level. The ‘Scope of the scheme’ mentions, “Providing Solar Photo Voltaic (SPV) based standalone systems for unelectrified *households* located in remote and inaccessible villages/habitations, where grid extension is not feasible or cost effective.” (Ministry of Power, Government of India 2017: 3, emphasis mine). The scheme officially recognizes that the solar systems should be distributed based on distinct household numbers. This is practically impossible for chars where most people are continually shifting or are living in public lands with no personal rights. This also means that having a recognized heterogenous family unit is the key to receiving the freely distributed stand-alone solar systems in the chars. The lone vanguard or any unit that cannot establish itself as a heterogenous family or as a household cannot be beneficiaries of the infrastructures representing a mobile state.

But what is a household in this scheme? How is it defined? The officers at APDCL said that the scheme officially recognizes a separate household when the kitchen is separate. But in chars mostly, two to three families live together, often sharing a kitchen. This would mean that a lot of families would be deprived of getting a solar system. Thus, officers at APDCL after several consultation meetings with the national agency, decided to consider ration card as a criterion for a separate individual household, for ration cards are given to individual families. However, acquiring a ration card involves cruising through a documentary regime which char-dwellers often tend to lack in. Char-dwellers lose documents or are left with destroyed documents due to floods, erosion and continuous movement. And to get new documents involve a lengthy bureaucracy and often money. The recently concluded NRC exercise is a case in point. The NRC has left out many char-dwellers because they did not have ‘appropriate’ documents. These char-dwellers now remain at the cusp of being declared ‘stateless’ non-citizens.

Besides, in chars, often families tend to bifurcate following marriages of young men in the house who then go on to establish their own individual households at a distance. These young men who till their bifurcations were getting ration based on their father’s/mother’s ration cards, now needed to get new ration cards. During group discussions with char-dwellers, newly married young men complained how despite showing a separate kitchen - establishing being in a separate household, they are left out of the beneficiary lists due to non-possession of a ration card. Andrea Ballestero (2019) while talking about how in Costa Rica, the Consumer Price Index<sup>89</sup> is used to determine the price of water writes,

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<sup>89</sup> that measures changes in relation to consumption of particular goods and services by an idealized household

“...this shift also marks a change in how relevant people are to the definition of the household in comparison to the goods and services they purchase. While this shift from people to purchases might seem a small technical change, it is more than that. It is the statistical culmination of a trend for which the specific conditions of kin and class relations, with their historical particularity, are pushed into the background. Instead, we see the statistical emergence of the person in the household as an unmarked potential customer.”  
(pp.111)

Though in our case, the heterogenous family unit still remains crucial, the household emerges as an empty marker entangled in the tentacles of the documentary state – the person again gets reduced to a number or a face legible or registered on papers approved by the state. Thus, though the infrastructure created by the state is mobile, the char-dweller gets pinned to papers and households, yet again.

The tricky part is that the household needs to show signs of permanent habitation. When asked the officers at the APDCL how they determine ‘permanent habitation’, one of them replied – “I mean you can determine that just by looking. Old structures, old trees, family history, etc. you can figure out permanent habitation.” In an area and for a people whose entire houses run the risk of getting devoured by the river almost every year or when char-dwellers need to constantly be on the move, the criteria of ‘permanent habitation’ by the state to distribute solar panels leads to a lot of exclusions. Aslam notes how families often complain of not getting stand-alone solar when distribution is done or when officers visit. The most reason being, families are absent in the houses or houses are missing during verification because often during floods they shift to nearby embankments for a few days or nearby chars for a few months and then return once the water

recedes. Their names get dropped from the lists. Thus, though the state created an infrastructure keeping in mind a mobile population, to receive that infrastructure in the first place, the char-dweller has to show signs of fixity or permanency.

In my many conversations with Aslam, it was revealed how the ‘Saubhagya’ scheme was not applicable to Non-Cadastral (NC) villages, Village Grazing Reserves (VGR), Permanent Grazing Reserves (PGR) and Forest Grazing Reserves (FGR), considering these are government lands and are not taxed. However, most char-dwellers often migrate or even buy land in these government lands because of scarcity or continuous loss of their lands due to floods and erosion. Ahmed da and many others from the chars who have bought plots of land in the nearby government lands from ‘*dalals*’ (middlemen) ‘illegally’ also continue to pay a small tax to the local officers at the Circle Office. The risk and precarity is high but people like Ahmed da who are already living on an NC village with all their ‘*miyadi patta*’ lands under water, have no option but to take a chance. However, for most char-dwellers who live on government lands it also meant no solar through Saubhagya.

“The thing is *baideo*, these policies are made by people far away from the conditions here. I mean from the guidelines of Saubhagya, it does not look like these people understand the peculiarities of char-dwelling. Standalone Solar is meant for people in inaccessible areas but the guidelines suggest that connections will not be provided to households of ‘migratory nature’. What does this say? That the officials making the policies have no understanding or imagination of ecologies like chars and the people living there. When contractors from ‘mainland’ India come and do survey after getting the contracts, they are shocked at the rate at which people shift here!” – Aslam.



On January 2022, when I revisited the field and met Aslam, he said that ‘Saubhagya’ has started a ‘Phase-II’ scheme to include all households in chars that were not previously covered. A ‘Concept Paper’ was prepared by the APDCL where it was noted that, “in SAUBHAGYA scheme near about 788 villages of Barpeta district is covered and remaining villages could not be covered...because of NC, FGR and VGR in status. As a result, a major portion of people residing in these villages are lacking of electricity.” (APDCL 2019)<sup>90</sup> The ‘Concept Paper’ proposed an expenditure of Rs. 32,16,90,390.00 for installing the Standalone Solar at NC villages of char areas. This, Aslam noted, was possible only because of continued reports from the district office of APDCL which underlined the problems with the original guidelines of Saubhagya.

Besides, the beneficiary lists are prepared keeping the base data as the SECC and Census data which were prepared in 2011 while the scheme was implemented in 2018. By now families have bifurcated, moved or increased. Aslam said that when sub-contractors bring back updated lists with sometimes over 270 additional households than the original lists, the department often would verify once again on the field. However, if the verification team came after a flood and the family had shifted, those names would drop out. Thus, mobility is political and hierarchical. (Cresswell 2010; Urry 2010.) What the mobile state propagated through the projects of the Boat Clinic and the Standalone Solar system is that mobility is still state controlled when it decides where they can go, how far they can go, how frequently they can go and when they can go. In the case of the solar, the char-dwellers need to be present at the same fixed place as given in the 2011 Census or the SECC data or at least when a verification team visits the char to be included as a beneficiary. This

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<sup>90</sup> See Memo number: CEO/BPEC/APDCL/7041

renewed control brought about by a mobile state puts the char-dwellers back at one of the most marginalized positions in the hierarchy of mobility.

Cresswell (2010) notes that a “carefully controlled physical movement characterised a feudal European sense of movement where the monopoly on the definition of legitimate movement rested with those at the top of a carefully controlled great chain of being.” (pp. 27). The mobile state introduces legitimate movement – routes, place, frequency, time – following which char-dwellers will continue to receive benefits and state care, be part of documentary regimes and churn out new documents (*‘beji card’*) which ultimately indicate their political inclusion and legitimate existence within a national territory. Receiving such benefits or state care then contributes to making state defined and produced mobilities as ‘favorable’ and attractive for the char-dweller.

### 3. AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURES AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES

I want to go back now to the image of the decorated solar batteries in the living room of Ahmed da’s house and his eagerness to invite me over. The strategic placement of the batteries and the care they received at Ahmed da’s house are, as I had mentioned before, not rare sights in the chars. This goes on to show that the infrastructure of the solar panels and the batteries that are provided to the char-dwellers free of cost, bring them more than electricity. For the char-dwellers, they bring in hope and a sense of care and visibility by the state. A state that has always ignored or suspected them. The decoration of the batteries or the enthusiasm of the char-dwellers to invite an ‘outsider’ like me to their living rooms, where the rooms are lighted up and the batteries are strategically placed for one to see, in such scenarios, infrastructures are marked by a deep sense of affect.

“Infrastructure gave form to relations between states and subjects...” (Apel et al. 2018: 4-5). And these relations are shaped by affect. Infrastructures are indeed imagined as sites of aspiration, desire and promise, not just by the state but by the subjects too. (Harvey 2010, 2018, Knox 2017, Coronil 1997, Larkin 2013, Star 1999). Scholars like Anand (2011, 2017, 2018), Harvey and Knox (2015) show how infrastructures like roads and water pipelines can shape and weave dream worlds of desire and hope for the marginalized population. And how when those dream worlds are shattered, it changes relations with the state as people then project or materialize their frustration and anger by organizing protests, among other things. Infrastructures also indicate the materialization of the paternalistic nature between states and subjects (redefining their subjectivities and subjectification/control) when subjects demand to be taken care of or looked after by the state. Infrastructures stand proof to the state’s care and the knowledge of that can truly satisfy subjects, just like how the char-dwellers’ felt when they first saw electricity or received medical attention. (Gupta 2012, Mathur 2016).

“I have so many memories with light. Before Solar came, we used to study, even for my own matric exam using the light of lamp. Then in 1984, when Assam Movement was going on, then diesel/kerosene supply was closed down here, and people used to use dried jute sticks and stand in collectives and we used to eat immediately after sunset. And take turns to hold those sticks while the next batch ate. Then, do you know ‘Hurricane Light’? Those were used too to study for a long time. Then when Solar came, at first people were skeptical but when they saw electricity in my house, all fears were removed. They all applied for it!”

– Ahmed da.

The way Ahmed da recalls about 'light', the memories of 'light' and the transformations that were witnessed by the char-dwellers with the coming of Solar, project the Solar as a representation of 'development' for the char-dwellers. I am remembering Larkin who said, "the promise of infrastructure derives from exactly the political rationalities, sense of expectation, and desire that take us into the realm of discursive meaning....The very word 'promise' implies that a technological system is the aftereffect of expectation; it cannot be theorized or understood outside the political orders that predate it and bring it into existence." (2018: 178, 182)

Thus, the circulation and entanglements of affect with regard to the mobile infrastructures that is promised or in this case, brought into existence by the state need to be seen politically. The 'politicization of affect' is necessary to understand to what aims the state uses affective relations brought about through infrastructures. The political nature of affect (that is what kind of affect is evoked and the ways of its circulation) is made evident when the state uses it to control its subjects. Nuijten (1998) was on point in writing how the bureaucratic machinery of the state fuels itself on hope – calling it a hope-generating machine. Infrastructures generate and embody varied affect, which the state then uses it for controlling populations, particularly in the margins.

Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good et. al. talk about the state control of emotions which they define as "the role of the state and other political, religious, and economic institutions in legitimizing, organizing, and promoting particular discourses on emotions." (Good, B. Good and Fischer 1988:4). Jenkins (1991) who looks at the conflict between Salvadoran army and Marxist guerillas in 1989, brilliantly fleshes out how the Salvadoran state repeatedly used narratives to provoke emotions of distrust, hatred, fear and disgust towards the guerillas while the state army was shown as defenders of 'liberty', 'education', 'equality', etc. to instill feelings of trust and paternalism. She calls this the 'state construction of affect'. The state made active use of media to instill particular feelings

towards the ‘evil other’, referred to as “savages” or those with “mental illness”. Sara Ahmed in her *‘The Cultural Politics of Emotion’* (2014) notes how the ‘stranger’ or the ‘racial other’ is created through the construction, circulation and stickiness of particular emotions, such that the ‘racial other’ is always to be seen or felt with emotions of ‘disgust’, ‘fear’, or hatred.

The mobile infrastructures introduced to a marginalized shifting population in the borders by the state generated emotions of hope, desire, promise and often frustration that, I argue, led to the development of particular subjectivities among the char-dwellers. The char-dwellers by emotionally experiencing these mobile infrastructures over years have undergone changes as ‘political subjects’, which also impacts their relationship with the state. I want to exemplify this through the Boat Clinic’s role in changing the political subjectivities or in the construction of a particular kind of a political subject i.e., of the ‘char-dwelling Muslim woman’.

*The MBBS doctor of the Boat Clinic team has been requested to particularly make a speech as part of the team’s Awareness Campaign for ‘Maternal Mortality Rate and how to prevent them’. It is already afternoon, the meeting has gone for long and following this the team has to do its check-ups too. So, he got up hesitantly and began. By now Rehman da and the other community worker along with the ASHA worker of the char are distributing tea and biscuits to the gathered audience so that they do not run away, and check-ups can be done.*

*Doctor: Young aged girls should not be married because her body is not fully developed. So, when she conceives, it is a high-risk birth – her nutrients are not good, the hemoglobin is low, bones are not strong. I am here to speak about Pregnant women and prevention of*

*deaths. I ask all pregnant women to get the ultra-sound (US) done. I prescribe but you do not get it done and tear apart the papers. I know most do not know how to read, but at least show it to someone who knows and ask what needs to be done, ask that person what I have written.*

*[Rehman da asking more kids and women coming in to sit in front rows – the tea is being served, with biscuits too, hence a lot of women are coming]*

*Doctor: Why US is asked to be done? To see the child's condition inside the womb – if the head is big, remember how much problem it can create? You guys without doing US, think its magic etc.! During the first 3 months, we give you folic acid, Iron tablets etc. to prevent that. Four US minimum should be done. In chars, hardly one US is done. You think it costs you money but it is important. Only in a few chars, US is happening. Otherwise, most char people do not do it. In government hospitals, everything is free, except the travel money. I know you always end up giving excuses when we ask you about why US was delayed or not done but US should be done on date. Blood tests should also be done. Diabetes needs to be checked and so are blood groups. There are different Blood Groups – if you lose blood, this information will help hospitals to get blood. Hence, all these on-time tests need to be done. [Most have got their kids, crying children]*

*D: And what should I say?*

*Others: HIV?*

*D: No, HIV need not be told in chars.*

*Others: Tell them about hospital delivery only – some do need caesarian deliveries.*

*D: Abortion should be done in good places[hospitals], if not done, then the successive deliveries can be tricky.*

*Hira ba: Have you understood what is abortion? Huh? Have you?*

*Doctor talks about nutrients/dietary routine/size of stomach comparison and keeping tablets and being aware of one's health.*

*Hira ba: Nowadays, the government has made everything free. Even the rent for boat will be given by the government. Do you know that?*

*Rehman da: Just heard that if referred, all, including boat rent will be given by the government to and from a Block PHC. So, if anyone has any issue, contact your ASHA. She will take care of everything. I know many people run away from giving their blood for blood-test. That, as Sir was saying, can be very problematic for pregnant women, in times of need. When Sir has asked you to do any test, give it importance and do it. Do the US!*

*As I looked around, the audience is all women – mostly visibly pregnant women, some older women and rest, women with very young children. At first, this struck me, but over time, I would notice that it was mostly women who attended all Boat Clinic awareness camps or check-up camps. In a report conducted by the Regional Resource Centre for NE states (2013), it was reported that 78.3% of the attending people in the camps were women.*

When I first asked the Boat Clinic team members or the char women visiting the camps about this stark invisibility of men, they had the same answers – that *charua* men are busy with agrarian work and hence, do not find the time or the necessity to visit them. But what stood out was the reply that

it is *charua* women anyway who are sicklier than men. This was repeatedly underlined even by *charua* women themselves. This idea that *charua* Muslim women's bodies are sicklier is a political subjectivity, that I argue, is contributed partly by state politics.<sup>91</sup>

The Boat Clinic as an infrastructural project was started with the focus on immunization of young children and mothers and on reproductive care i.e., giving attention to pre and post-natal care of pregnant women. As much as it helped and is still helping *charua* women, particularly pregnant *charua* women, it has also contributed in bringing about newer modes of control and surveillance of Muslim women's bodies and development of newer kinds of political subjectivities, one being of having 'sicklier' bodies. Althusser (2014) first noted how state apparatuses produce identities that can ultimately create subjects. The subjectivity that proceeds that process is indeed what I want to discuss here.

The 'Beji Card' that the group of *charua* women were referring to me in the beginning of this chapter, is a case in point. The terminology itself is striking – 'beji' means 'injection' in Assamese, so the way the card is memorized by the *charua* women is starkly different from the state given terminology of it, which is – Vaccination Card. For *beji* or injection induces meanings of invasion of bodies by something alien/outside while vaccination can imply meanings of protection from viruses/diseases outside. This is something that requires further digging around, something that currently lies a little beyond the scope of my focus.

Nonetheless, the card, that records the progressive details of a pregnant woman is given to every pregnant woman by the state. The card records height, changes in weight, blood tests reports, Ultrasound reports (if done), number of times nutritional tablets are given, delivery due date, blood

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<sup>91</sup> Factors like a patriarchal Muslim char society leading to low nutritional intake of women, child marriages of girls, low literacy rate of women, early and frequent marriages, neglect of their health, etc. equally contribute too.



pressure and sugar levels, vaccines given etc. of the mother while also tracking medical records of the newborn baby, often up to six years of age. The Boat Clinic team recalled how earlier male doctors were not allowed to touch the body of a pregnant woman in the chars. Some recalled a time when the pregnant woman would go behind a screen and a small hole would be made, and the male doctor had to do her check-up through that hole. Hira ba recalls how earlier pregnant women had no consciousness of healthy eating and hardly kept the vaccine card in proper shape – “Most, often lost them or left them in pathetic condition!” However, the team agreed how over time, pregnant women have understood the value of the card – that they will not receive the required medicines or vaccines without it – and hence they keep the cards safely. And in case of damage or being lost, they voluntarily ask for a new one. The popularity of the term ‘*beji* card’ among *charua* women also indicates to the fact that there is a changed subjectivity among them.

And as much as it is about improving the maternal and infant health of marginalized women in the chars, it cannot be denied as an exercise of strict record-keeping that can be used by the state to control and surveil the population. I am recalling scenes when there was a maternal mortality in the char and the DPO was fuming at the team for not keeping ‘proper records’ for an inspection team from the district headquarters would visit them soon. The panic and urgency were also replicated at the ending of every month, when the team needed to submit reports to NHM. They would start filling out record-books and reports in the boat itself. Hira ba in an interview with me noted how unlike other programs of routine immunization, including COVID vaccination, the programs with the pregnant women and infants are target based ones. “In terms of ‘target work’, for us Boat Clinic people, it is only to do with pregnant women – ANC (Ante-Natal Care), PNC (Post-Natal Care), vaccination, etc. Though we are also given awareness and distribution work for national schemes like for diarrhea, respiration, etc. but the main work of Boat Clinic is to do with

pregnancy – mother/infant mortality and care”, notes Hira ba. Rehman da made it clear that every newly pregnant woman gets an ID when they are given the vaccine card and that all records against that ID is maintained and logged into. This data is then accessed by people in New Delhi.

Thus, the ‘targets’ of every char are strictly monitored and the failure to reach ‘targets’ is scorned at by the district review committees of the NHM which as mentioned by Rehman da earlier is always tricky when it comes to char people. The shifting of people in chars directly impacts their ‘performance records’ meaning their inability to reach ‘target’ vaccinations or hospital deliveries or bringing down maternal and infant mortality rates. And besides fixity that is imposed on char-people by a seemingly mobile state, this regime of strict record-keeping of a mobile state infrastructure result in surveilling and ultimately controlling the char-people (or char women in this case).



*Image u. An ANM giving vaccines while the local ASHA (in pink headscarf) continuously keeps records. The green card seen on the table is the ‘Beji Card’.*

Berg and Ramos-Zayas (2015) talk about how construction and manipulation of certain affects by the state can result in developing of particular subjectivities, keeping alive the hierarchies of race. They note that when “liable affects” (pp.656) are developed, they lead to the growth of ‘undermined subjectivity’ among what they call the racial ‘Other’ as opposed to “empowering affects” (ibid) which are preserved for the growth of ‘empowered subjectivity’ among the privileged ‘whites’. The state has constructed particular affective narratives through infrastructures like the Boat Clinic and then in many ways has used them to cultivate certain political subjectivities among Muslim women. The first Boat Clinic that C-NES started was named as ‘AKHA’ – the ship of ‘hope’. C-NES in its website mentions the project as, “for every beginning of a transformative process, there is a dream and a dreamer. The dreamer was Sanjoy Hazarika, C-NES’ Managing Trustee and writer, analyst and documentary maker, who says he was driven by the tragedy he had seen among island dwelling families who had lost pregnant women or sick children for lack of access.”<sup>92</sup> The way the program has been propagated, including the language that is used, is to generate emotions among the char-dwellers as well as general public, and so it did! The Boat Clinics generated feelings of hope, care and trust among char-dwellers, particularly among *charua* women, who are their main ‘target population’.

The affective relation of the *charua* women with the Boat Clinic (and hence the state) could be seen when they exchanged intimate details of their lives with the Boat Clinic team members, particularly with the women members. From exchanging trivial details like when their working children would be back to as personal as sexual violence by their husbands and in-laws, one could see the existence of a sense of comfort and trust between them. The growing consciousness of their reproductive health and bodies and the comfort to share their bodily ‘anomalies’ were cases in

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<sup>92</sup> See <https://c-nes.org/programmes/boat-clinics/>

point. Nishida (2022) while talking about affective relation between care-givers and receivers talk about ‘affective relationality’ such that a subjectivity develops between them wherein they not just adapt their bodies and behavior to each other but also sympathy and care start circulating between them. The Boat Clinic members (including ASHA Workers) through practices of sociality are building communicative infrastructures that allow the flow of information, trust and hope from the char-dwellers to the state and vice-versa. The state then uses such infrastructures for a variety of goals – starting from improving char-dwellers’ health to their surveillance. In her ethnographic study among women in Cairo, Julia Elyachar (2010) calls such practices of sociality as ‘phatic labor’ which involve cultivating ‘*wasta*’ (relations/intermediaries). Since cultivating ‘*wasta*’ requires a great deal of spending time and energy, often involving social visits or random phone-calls for the sake of it, without always having a specific goal in mind, Elyachar understands it as ‘labor’ – labor that allows the building of infrastructures and using them for a variety of purposes. Thus, boat clinic members are performing ‘phatic labor’ that already has helped and will in the future further help the state to achieve several other goals.

The affective relationship of the char-dwellers with the Boat Clinic infrastructure, developed over a period of years, is also a result of their earlier inaccessibility to any medical knowledge or services.

“There is a sub-center but the Community Health Officer (CHO) doesn’t even live for a month, just for 2-3 days and then he leaves. He was from Nalbari (caste Hindu Assamese bastion). So far away, how can he also come everyday? He came for 2-3 days and then left, didn’t want to stay. Now what can we say? He was a Hindu too. So mostly we asked pregnant women to go to the Hospital, but even hospitals are far and who will give the boat’s rent? So, we used to give training to *dais* (local delivery women), mostly all used to

be home deliveries. In complicated cases, we took them to Goalpara, Barpeta etc. which are far away; the pregnant women might die on the way too. There was another CHO, he left after one day, just came to see the place.” – ASHA worker.

It is this previous sense of lack and the sudden endowment of attention which attracted the *charua* women to the state and its infrastructures greatly. The trust and comfort branch out later. The affective relationship that develops between the *charua* women and the state through the mobile infrastructures, allows the state to impact their political subjectivity and further the state’s control and monitoring of the *charua* women’s bodies. In 2021, the right-wing Hindu government in Assam launched a ‘Population Army’<sup>93</sup> who would be sent specifically to spread awareness and distribute contraceptives among the Muslim population in chars. ASHA workers were made the pivot in the scheme and the Chief Minister in his Assembly speech spoke of the need to induct 10,000 additional ASHA workers to provide contraceptives and birth control measures to women in the chars.

For the *charua* women, introduction of birth control measures had already been started by the Boat Clinic. However, in my many conversations with the char women regarding contraception, they would refer to contraceptives as ‘Mala Bori’. ‘Mala Bori’ largely refers to a particular brand of oral contraceptive pills called the ‘Mala-D’ and unlike the condom, was a hushed but a household term. The distribution of oral contraceptives as opposed to condoms is particularly high also because of the high attendance of women in the camps and the team’s unwillingness to reach out to the male population. Thus, the Boat Clinic team, in a way, was not disturbing the patriarchal

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<sup>93</sup> See <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/assam-the-war-on-womens-bodies/cid/1829901>

fabric of the char society and instead was helping it to thrive better. Poor illiterate women could never ask their husbands to wear a condom, while ASHA workers being from the char themselves, equally were hesitant to talk about condom usage in front of male char-dwellers.

ASHA workers confessed how the availability of oral pills from the state is far better than that of condoms and hence it feeds into the loop of low demand-low supply-low demand. The right-wing Hindu state's introduction of the 'Population Army' in Muslim char areas wherein the Muslim woman is again made responsible for controlling population is not a surprising move. The state through the mobile infrastructure of Boat Clinics had already set the ground or prepared the Muslim char women's bodies and consciousness to be monitored. Both the Boat Clinics and the Population Army put the Muslim *charua* women's bodies at the center of the health narratives or even the population control narratives. The state through these schemes/policies projects the use of oral pills as the only option to control the rising Muslim population in Assam. "How certain subjects affect and are affected is not a random process, but demands theorization toward the level of population, toward how affect moves through or gets 'stuck' to certain bodies-in-information and that also participates in creating subjectivities across various political contexts..." (Lara et al. 2017: 34). The state's targeting of Muslim women's bodies in chars through mobile infrastructures is political and not simply random.

The women by now, as the Boat Clinic team and ASHA workers reveal, in fact voluntarily come forward and ask for 'Mala Boris' and know what to do if they missed one. During a group discussion with *charua* women, one of them told me that 'Mala Boris' have helped them control their menstrual pain. They could now work in the fields during their periods and plan their visits in advance since the menstruating dates get fixed. None, however, was in awareness of the side-effects of such oral pills nor had ever asked their husbands to wear condoms.

Clough (2008) was right in indicating that the political power of affect lies not in what the body can do but what the body can be made to do. The state through the affective relations of char women with Boat Clinics have successfully managed to make women discipline their own bodies to fulfill the Hindu state's objective of controlling the Muslim population in the borderlands while strengthening the patriarchal structures in char-lands. Their political subjectivities have changed. They are no longer 'rowdy' Muslim women who resist touches from the doctor or do not keep 'record-books'/ 'beji cards' in good shape, they are 'responsible' Muslim *charua* women who throng the camps in large numbers, who safely keep the 'record-books' and voluntarily ask for 'Mala Boris'. They see themselves as 'sicklier' than men, without recognizing that the state's mobile health infrastructure has always put the *charua* Muslim women's reproductive health as its focus. The majoritarian state does this to not just improve *charua* women's health but also to further control the rise of future Muslim population. Consequently, one sees the presence of more women attendees in the camps.

Thus, when the Hindu state introduced the 'Population Army' with women taking charge, the ground was already set. The women were already ready to obey the state. The trust, hope and promise that Boat Clinics generated over years with the *charua* women had cemented such actions. Aretxaga (2003) was not wrong in highlighting that critical obedience to the state comes through fear and hope, as much as through physical force.

#### 4. NEGOTIATING AND RESISTING POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES

As opposed to Althusser's subject in the 1970s, the figure of the less-passive subject capable of resistance followed, particularly through the works of Stuart Hall who was "initiating the move of

structuralism's subjectivity away from both a Marxist economic perspective and biological determinism." (Lara et al 2017: 31). As the state engages in a process of shaping new political subjectivities, the char-dweller too emerges not as a 'passive subject'. As the state strategically uses the char-dwellers' affective relationship with mobile infrastructures to generate particular kind of political subjectivities, the dwellers do negotiate, work around and resist such state efforts.

The afternoon when I was with a group of char women discussing issues of health, doctors, the Boat Clinic etc., one of them recalled the grim incident of how a young pregnant woman had died on her way to a hospital due to over-bleeding. But the state authorities who arrived the following day along with the Boat Clinic members looked more interested in verifying her address, identity and citizenship proofs, medical history, etc. in their "*bohi-khatas*" (record-books). "Women have no value around here *baideo*. We are ultimately like rats and monkeys both for the government and the families. We just become important during election time. Then they need us, they need our vote." The woman who was recounting the grim incident ended with these words. This is a critical moment to understand that the Muslim women whose bodies are the targets of surveillance and control along with care through the mobile health infrastructures of the state, do have the consciousness of 'being used', of being simply numbers to be filled in '*bohi-khatas*' of the state. They can, in some clear sense, identify the politics of care, hope and promise that the state has brought in through the mobile infrastructures like the Boat Clinic. And this consciousness is an important moment to recognize that they are not simply 'passive subjects'.

Infrastructures indeed prove as great sites to study how political subjectivities are negotiated. As Sara Schneiderman and Edward Boyle note when talking about borderland infrastructures, that infrastructures are not simply top-down impositions but are also shaped by "ground-up aspirations and enable engaged analyses of negotiations between these scales." (2020: 116). The negotiations



and resistance that char people were involved in are evidently visible in their engagement with the mobile infrastructures. For example, when the state imposed newer versions of fixity with the requirement of household numbers and permanent habitation, it created problems for char-dwellers who constantly keep shifting. However, to avail the solar panels from the state, they resorted to creative solutions. Aslam da noted how char-dwellers on knowing of verification teams' arrival or lists getting prepared for beneficiaries, would over-night shift back to the addresses in chars which are mentioned in their voter or ration cards. "We have also got cases of people carrying vegetation, including big trees to plant near their over-night made houses to show signs of permanent habitation. And since their houses are already made of easily movable materials, it does not pose much problem for their back and forth shifting," revealed Aslam da.

Though the state introduces certain infrastructures and evoke particular sentiments and emotions among the public with the intention of control, gaining legitimacy, popularity and surveillance, the public's engagement with those infrastructures and what ultimately they make of them are equally critical in what finally happen to infrastructures as an object or even defining the relations between the state and society. This is reminding me that while conducting a survey in the char where I tried collecting basic data on health, education, economic activities, income etc., I found out that most people were paying money in order to finally get the state-distributed solar panels – "*Baideo*, minimum 5000 rupees we paid to the sub-contractor to get our solar!" was what neighbors of Ahmed da told me. I was shocked and confused. On asking Aslam da about it he said that this corruption is breeding because of technical faults in the procedure. The sub-contractor due to lack of handy transport facilities to chars, often carries the solar panels in batches. But they spread the rumor that only few people will be given the panels, inciting fear and doubt among the char-dwellers. Thus, char people being illiterate and fearing that they might not receive any solar panels

later, pay money to the sub-contractor to receive their solar at the earliest. In the char where I worked, the sub-contractor stored the solar panels in the house of the Village Headman. There were rumors that some portion of the money also go into the pockets of the Headman.

Consequently, char people often sell their solar panels at a higher value in the market and pay again to acquire another solar panel at a price that is still lower than what they profit from selling their earlier solar panels. Thus, what infrastructures become on ground – what practices or affect get attached to them or how they are negotiated with - all go on to disturb the state visioned aims of control and narratives of ‘passive subjectivity’. Infrastructures emerge not just as sites of ‘magic of the state’ (Taussig 1997) but also as sites of contestation. (Apel et al. 2018). Scott (1998), De Certeau (2002) and Mrazek (2002) have all showed how infrastructures are altered, re-imagined and re-purposed by people’s dreams, desires and practices. All of which can really come in conflict with the people who built these infrastructures or as in our case who introduced them - that is the state. Hence, though infrastructures through their “immediacy and intimacy...enable those subjects to hail the state and hail them as publics” (Apel et al 2018:22), these very subjects are not passive in accepting the meanings, aims and relations as passed down by the state.

This is reminding me of how char-dwellers always demanded more medicines from the Boat Clinic team even when they might not suffer from that disease. The team revealed how the char people would particularly ask for liver tonic and vitamin at any given time and would express anger if not provided to them. Rehman da, who himself is from charlands, understands this behavior of char-dwellers as a survival technique. The stocking of medicines by the char people is an insurance against unseen calamities, for they know that at times of necessity, the state can become inaccessible again. Thus, they use the state provided mobile infrastructures as a protection against

such an unpredictable, inaccessible state. This shows that despite state intentions, the char-people have not completely or blindly trusted the policies of the state.

Schneiderman and Boyle (2020) while emphasizing on a borderland approach to infrastructure note that in the borderlands, the state's aim of introducing new infrastructures is not simply to induce hope and promise but also as a response to dilute threat and fear from neighboring states. The attempt of the state to become mobile by introducing these mobile infrastructures in the remote borderland chars is also in a way to keep a track of bordering Muslim population who are constantly suspected of either being 'illegal Bangladeshis' themselves or harboring such people from neighboring Bangladesh. Such infrastructures are attempts to dilute senses of 'disloyalty', while building legitimacy and visibility for the state. The borderland approach to infrastructure is also critical in understanding the varied layers of negotiations. "These negotiations give rise to what we call infrastructural effects, demonstrating the "simultaneity of the social and the material in the coming-into-being of infrastructural forms" (Reeves 2017: 213), while also incorporating their "affective life" (Reeves 2014, 2017)." (Schneiderman and Boyle 2020: 117). The negotiations engaged in by the char people regarding the state's mobile infrastructures are critical in the coming together or the existential reality of the infrastructures themselves, along with the relations they help form.

Knox (2017), while talking about how people in Peru marched in the streets demanding that the state fulfill its promise of building a good-conditioned road in the area, shows how the march itself was then bringing changes or disruptions into the behavior and practices of a normal-day functioning state as bureaucrats rushed to negotiate. This shows that as much as the state defines societal subjectivities, the society too remakes state subjectivities and behavior, "continuing an ongoing play of material affect and diagnostic response." (Knox 2017: 379). This was evident in

the changed subjectivities of the upper-caste Hindu Boat Clinic team. The team, comprising of people who had never before visited chars in their life, had very common-sensical notions of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. Their perceptions of chars and char-dwellers were built through narratives that largely circulate among caste Hindu Assamese households. They believed char-dwellers to be unhygienic, rowdy etc. However, the continuous exposure to the chars and the dwellers have gradually allowed such perceptions to change. “Till now it is good, it is a very different experience. Unlike people from our areas, char people did not know basics of healthcare. Now it has changed a lot. So that feeling of working for backward areas, is good,” Hira ba, who admitted that she had no clue about Boat Clinics and char areas at all when she interviewed for the job, was heard saying. The image of char-dwellers being ‘victims’ of continuous floods and erosion, leading to their shifting or they being poor, hard-working and illiterate people instead of ‘illegal immigrants’ has largely been accepted by all the team members. I am reminded of how Swati *baideo*, the DPO and other female members of the team would first exchange news with the char women, ask their well-being, keep a track of their day-to-day life stories, manage their children at times while conducting the camps. These daily rituals implicate that emotions of empathy, care and understanding flowed across to the other side too, as shown by Nishida (2022) between caregivers and receivers. The emotional investment in the lives of the Muslim char-dwellers allowed spaces where the agents of the state (Boat Clinic members) were able to build newer imaginations and perceptions regarding the chars and the dwellers.

## CONCLUSION

Though the state introduces new patterns of fixity, governmentality, political subjectivities and control by being mobile, I do not want to discount the fact that this attempt of the state to become

mobile for mobile populations by introducing new infrastructures is indeed benefitting the char-people in material terms. In 2019-20, the Boat Clinics have attended to 203579 patients in the chars, conducting 3280 camps with increase in immunization, better pre and post-natal care of mothers, increase in vaccinations of young children and improved family planning.<sup>94</sup> With the Standalone Solar scheme too, the char-people finally saw electricity. The mobility of the solar panels has allowed them to become independent, in terms of getting electricity. They have also benefitted a lot since now solar energized pumps can be used to water their fields better, reducing the need for more labor.

The ground-level staff, that is the Boat Clinic team members and the district level officers at the APDCL, who represent the state for the char-people, do genuinely care and are concerned for them. The Boat Clinic team members have been working under particularly constraining conditions with salaries not being paid for over three months at the time of my fieldwork. There were times when the DPO paid from her own pocket to buy medicines for the patients and also to conduct camps. Some camps had to be cancelled because of lack of funds and yet, it was evident how desperately funds were arranged by team members to continue conducting camps, so that the char-people, particularly the pregnant women, did not miss out on vaccinations. During COVID, the team was also tasked with vaccination duties in the chars, remunerations for which are yet to be paid by the state. The team worked during floods and storms and as was seen in the beginning, by undertaking often long arduous journeys on foot to reach their destination.

The APDCL officers at the district level too understood the constraints of the project, the limitations and absurdity of some of the clauses of the scheme regarding char areas and tried

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<sup>94</sup> See <https://nhm.assam.gov.in/schemes/boat-clinic>

changing them by sending repeated reports of suggestions to make the scheme inclusive for char-people. This is important to highlight here because the everyday functioning of the state on the ground is actually happening through patchwork and it is through these actions of the local agents of the state that genuine care, concern and a want to improve the life conditions of marginalized people come across as an aim of the state and is achieved by it. Thus, the ‘phatic labor’ (Elyachar 2010) or practices of sociality such as being constantly exposed to the char-dwelling life, being in regular touch, knowing about their everyday life, their problems, etc. that the intermediaries of the state have constantly engaged in for years have also allowed these state intermediaries to be communicative channels for the char-dwellers in front of higher state authorities. They make the state at the higher level aware of contextual specificities, problems and needs of the char-dwellers which have benefitted the char-dwellers as the state plans and builds other infrastructures.

Thus, what becomes of the infrastructure is not only shaped by the desires and practices of the state at the top level or the hopes and negotiations of the people at the receiving end, but also through the practices, conditions, relations and affectual ties of the state agents in between – those who actually implement that ‘magic’ or promise of the state on ground.

Akhil Gupta (2001) in a brilliant essay on Anganwadi workers in rural India talks about how governmentality can have varied dimensions in post-colonial societies, a concept that can mean beyond Foucauldian control.

“I have emphasized throughout that governmentality is never just about control, it is most of all about a *concern* with the population, with its size, but also its health, happiness and productivity. It is precisely this relationship between the state’s increased capacity for the surveillance and control of women’s lives and its concern with saving the lives of children, particularly girls, and protecting millions of others from more acute forms of malnutrition

and disease (Sen 1990) that becomes hard to grasp in conventional academic discussions that pit the state against the civil society....In the government of conduct, the state is only one among a number of heterogenous institutions and cannot simply be assumed to be the dominant player. Nor can it be assumed that the conduct desired by planners, policy-makers, and bureaucrats is actually achieved, for the subjects of these policies may well alter the nature of the programs themselves, and thus change the conduct of government as much as government changes them.” (Gupta 2001: 94-95, emphasis in original)

It is, however, important to highlight that though Gupta makes an excellent point, and the governmentality of care and concern came across as an aim of the state in my research too, the context of introduction of mobile infrastructures in the Bengali Muslim dominant borderland chars by a right-wing Hindu state cannot be ignored. The context of Bengali Muslims always being under suspicion in Assam and the politics of the majoritarian upper-caste Hindu Assamese state add different layers to the politics of control, statistics, record-keeping and fixity imposition introduced by the state’s mobile infrastructures, a context that is vastly different from Gupta’s field world. And the wise perspective is to always read between the lines of anything that this state puts forward in these times.

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## CHAPTER 7: MIGRATION, ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND CITIZENSHIP

It was almost monsoons when I took a few days off from sitting in an NRC Hearing Center and noting down my observations and accompanied Abdul da to the char to meet his father. I have been meaning to meet him for a few weeks now, for he is one of the few remaining older men in the char who had knowledge of not just the char he inhabits now, but also of the entire Block<sup>95</sup>. I was particularly interested in knowing the history of the Pahar (Baghbar Hill), the surrounding chars, the refugee colonies that the Indian state had established in the area in the 1950s and 1970s and the changes that he has seen over the years.

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. His father looked extremely old and frail and had no memory of a birth-date so we collectively discussed and decided that he probably was in his late eighties. On asking him 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. Steamers used to create so much noise, now the river is very quiet. No steamer, as big as those I have seen, can ever ply again in these waters. 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

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<sup>95</sup> An administrative unit, smaller than a district but larger than a village.



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 at present times, they migrating 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 they 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 chapter 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 labor for the continued reproduction of the urban economy. Thus, this chapter will argue that the majoritarian state along with the environment (river, ecological waste narrative) continuously create landless

and politically precarious minorities who then go on to provide cheap labor 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 Pahar has changed demographics and inflamed ethnic and religious tensions by bringing in the context of Baghbar's religio-ethnic history. Next, I go on to talk about eviction politics and how the state using 'anti-immigrant' and 'conservation' discourses is justifying violent xenophobic and Islamophobic acts. Finally, I understand how these landless, politically precarious Muslims are bound in helping the urban economy to run smoothly and how the state-led citizenship project, NRC has introduced newer regimes of economic and political precarity for them. Conceptually, I will engage with the works of Laura Pulido (2017, 2016 co-authored with E Kohl and N-M Cotton), Ghassan Hage (2017) and J Melamed (2015) who talk about environmental racism and racial capitalism; with David Harvey's (2004) understanding of devaluation and Jason De Leon's (2015) and Michel Callon and John Law's (1995, 1997) understanding of 'hybrid collectif' to further my main argument.

## 1. MIGRATION 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. In fact, the people living in the Pahar get their fresh water from the streams that run down from the crater. While talking to the local teachers in

the Hindu *suba* and a few older Bengali Muslim men, it was agreed that the British used the Pahar's high point as a lighthouse at a time when the area saw substantial water traffic.

As recalled correctly by Abdul da's father, the Brahmaputra indeed was towards the south, closer to present-day Goalpara. The Pahar and its surrounding areas were largely inhabited by caste Hindus like Kalitas and tribals such as Bodos, Kacharis, etc. "From my house to Bagheshwari, there used to be around 100 households. And beyond Bagheshwari, there used to be Bodo people. Then around 1930, we had a few Muslim households..." an older Bengali Muslim man in the Pahar recalled. 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, Moamari, Moinbori, etc. 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. The caste Hindus along with tribal families either sold their land to the Bengali Muslims fearing future destruction from the river or simply migrated to the upland areas within Barpeta district such as Howly, Bhawanipur, etc. Some just left by allowing temporary residence of Bengali Muslims on their lands but never returned. Hence, even today, many Bengali Muslim families in the Pahar are living on land that on paper do not belong to them. 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. I will discuss these tensions in a while, but at this juncture, it is important to understand how the state's action or rather inaction against floods and erosion has

contributed to the char-dwellers' violent, sudden and frequent migrations. Increasing migrations have added on to the ethno-religious tensions in the Pahar in particular, but also within Assam in general.

The Brahmaputra's discharge per unit area along with its erosion rate is one of the highest in the world (Sarma and 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 (8.9 richter scale). 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 and 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. This was also discussed in the chapter on boats. The loss of homes and land for the char-dwellers have been sudden and frequent than earlier times. Many char-dwellers have shifted more than seventeen times in their lifetime, including Abdul da. The tropical nature of the river along with earthquakes and deforestation did play a role in floods and erosion becoming more violent and frequent but here I look at the continued importance given to the building of embankments or '*mothauri/bunds*' by the state in char areas that has only aggravated the situation and has increasingly led to violent migrations.

### *1.1 Embankments and violent migrations*

The building of embankments in Assam was present during the 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*, though most of them faced tremendous challenge in terms of breaches from floods and increased siltation. (Saikia 2020: 89). The embankments built during the Ahom rule, however, were made of organic materials such as mud, tall grasses and were largely voluntarily constructed by the peasants themselves. (Saikia 2020). Missionary scholar Sydney Endle noted that even among the Bodo-Kacharis, the skill to construct earthen embankments was highly prevalent. These embankments were used to divert water from “river-beds into their rice-fields.” (1911: 12-13). However, this changed with the incoming of the British. The British, of course wanted to construct embankments to increase the productivity, but through strict land-water separation. Hence, they were more focused on building ‘water-tight’ permanent embankments. Camelia Dewan (2021) understands floods in Bangladesh to be of three kinds – *borsha* (annual monsoon floods), *bonna* (irregular destructive flooding due to storms, etc.) and *jalabaddho* (waterlogging) and notes how the construction of water-tight permanent embankments in the Bengal delta destroyed the ‘*borsha*’ flooding cycles. The water-tight 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: 21-22).

Saikia (2020) notes how the British construction of water-tight embankments in Assam’s floodplains led to the demise of various local species of fish for they obstructed in the spawning of the fishes. From the 1940s, with the railway and steamer companies shifting their operation bases from Bengal to Amingaon in Guwahati, several raised mounds of earth were built on which

railway tracks were put up. “The railway embankments emerged as a major cause of increased floods in the valley and the Bengal delta.” (Saikia 2020: 195). On top of that, the massive earthquake of 1950 that increased the Brahmaputra’s riverbed added on to this saga of violent floods and migration. It only fits well why the Bengali Muslims from the chars started migrating more frequently to the Pahar from the 1970s.

Within the British too, there were sections who were enthusiastic about embankments and some who opposed them. Among the former were Principal of the Guwahati Government Seminary, William Robinson and the then Commissioner of Assam, Francis Jenkins. They both believed that it was neglect when it came to repairing and maintaining the embankments that resulted in their frequent breaches and ultimately caused violent floods. The colonial officials were tasked to use local peasants in repairing the bunds. Often raiyats refused and were coerced and put to task. This was largely because repair works became decentralized and raiyats were not even compensated for their work. Dewan recalls W. A . Ingles’s (1946: 11-12) review of the colonial embankment policy and legislations in Bengal and how the laws made no provision of providing any compensation to the cultivator. (2021: 33). Thus, most peasants often used to cut breaches in the repaired embankments to allow floodwater to flow in some amount into their fields which, in a way, was also their resistance to the colonial state.

From 1853, following M. J. Moffat Mills’ report and the supporting reports prepared by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the construction and repair of embankments, particularly in the char-chapori lands were increased. However, Robinsons’ successor, Colonel Keatinge in 1876 opined that building embankments on floodplains was unwise. He believed that it would make flooding experiences violent and productivity low as crops either would be frequently destroyed or would be of low nutritional quality because of their inability to get fertile silt. (Saikia 2020: 260). Despite

this, the construction and repair of embankments continued and is being seen by the post-independent state as one of the few ways of reducing flood losses.

Post-independence, the construction or even repair of an embankment is highly centralized, just like the colonial times. As said by an official at the Water Resources Department (WRD) [*the branch responsible for the task in Assam*], at first the engineers at the WRD do a detailed survey of the river and the area, particularly the changes in the river's volume, current, velocity, discharge, etc. in the past fifteen or twenty years. That survey is used to send a proposal to the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) based on whose suggestions, a revised proposal is submitted to the higher authorities for sanction. Once the amount is sanctioned, notices for tenders are called for contractors to get involved. 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. It is a pity because the char-dwellers are more aware of the geo-morphological conditions of the river and possess extensive memories of past floodings. No wonder, construction of embankments leads to massive conflicts with regard to displacement of the local people.

The same official in WRD noted how the Bahari to Baghbar embankment that was built in 1954-59 was breached on several occasions. Immediately after its construction, the Brahmaputra started taking aggressive turns and in 1961, did massive erosion in Bahari, Chesra, Chakaboushi and Manikpur. He believes that this was partly due to the odd increase in sedimentation in some parts of the riverbed. Since then, the embankment has been breached in 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2012. Char-dwellers recollect the construction of three or four embankments in recent times, which I believe were repair works after breaches in the Bahari-Baghbar embankment. He admits 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.”<sup>96</sup>

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 Rs. 2.3 crores. In an earlier chapter on boats, I had reiterated how the 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.

### *1.2 Ethno-religious tensions*

The state’s singular focus on centralized 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.

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<sup>96</sup> WRD Official to me in an interview.



As I sat with a group of caste Hindu Assamese women in the Hindu *suba* of the Pahar, I was being enquired about how my research was going and I could sense a tone of disappointment. When I instinctively asked them if something was wrong and if there was something they were keen on sharing, Malati bou, the wife of one of my key informants and with whom I had grown close said, “We see you hanging out with the Muslim people a lot. Hasina takes you around in the Pahar and goes with you to the char and all of us here were wondering if you never wanted to talk to us and hang out with us. But I did tell them that your research possibly demands it.” My positionality of an upper-caste Assamese Hindu woman, as mentioned earlier, was an important marker of my presumed loyalty towards them. That played a big role in people from the Hindu *suba* opening up to me about the Pahar’s ethno-religious tensions much quicker than the Bengali Muslims. It was also because of the tensions being concentrated in such a closed geography that I was constantly being watched by both the neighborhoods and my actions, or inactions in this case, impacted my rapport with each. This was one such instance. As I went in to assure them that for better research, I did need to talk to everyone, most women in the group became eager to put their side of the story.

“We get no opportunities here. All the ASHAs are Muslims and their quality of work is very bad. When my son was about to be born, the ASHA assigned for this area did not even come to remind me of my check-ups or delivery dates. They do not care about the Hindu women. All our land is gone. Some are under water, and some have been sold to them and those that are still in our name, they are just there in namesake. It is they who are settled there. Our men now only have the option of working as ‘*hazira* laborers’ (those paid on daily rate) on their houses and farms. Some days it is difficult to find work for them even then. We hardly go to the bazar because it is filled with Muslims, and it is so difficult to

find suitors for our daughters or sons because no one wants their children to get married in a Muslim dominated area.” – a woman informant from the Hindu *suba*.

As one of the women went on raging about these dynamics, the brimming everyday presence of ethno-religious tensions, that by now I already had inkling of, became more and more apparent. Though Baghbar has been otherwise celebrated by the locals as a space that has never seen any ethno-religious violence, the subtle, everyday and the covert presence of tensions came out rather well in my fieldwork. And I want to situate this presence in the context of the post-partition state scheme - the Refugee Rehabilitation programs, that were advanced by the Indian state in the 1950s.

From local histories gathered by talking to the char-dwellers and the Pahar inhabitants and by scanning through the archived government documents, it became clear that the Central Indian state decided to build camps/colonies for refugees in and around Baghbar to accommodate those who were fleeing partition violence from then East Pakistan. Being very close to the border, it is no surprise that Baghbar looked a viable option for the state. But that state decision was supposedly, as locals remember, one of the early acts that saw ethno-religious tensions and, in some cases, overt violence in the area.

In August 1947, as two nations were born, minorities from each nation fled towards areas where their community was in majority. Bengali Hindus from then East Pakistan fled the violence and entered through the border of West Bengal and Assam, among others in the East, while Muslims fearing violence fled to the other side. In Assam, the state chose Baghbar as one of the blocks to allot lands as part of the ‘Refugee Rehabilitation Scheme’ to the incoming Hindu refugees. “There were 16 villages in four mouzas in the Baghbar circle which form the scheme area,” noted P.

Goswami, the Relief and Rehabilitation Officer, Barpeta as part of his report on the scheme area in 1953.<sup>97</sup> The various government letters and reports in the early 1950s establish that some lands allotted were in fact *patta* lands of Muslim *patta*-holders who had earlier fled to East Pakistan. In 1950 with the signing of the Nehru-Liaqat Pact and as communal violence subsided, many Muslims returned back to find their lands under the occupation of the Bengali Hindu refugees. It was complicated by the absence of updated land records or previous government posts (demarcating '*khas*'/government land from private '*patta*' lands) to back the state's or the Muslim char-dwellers' claims.

“The area is mostly non-cadastral and no survey has as yet been done. It is therefore difficult to say which land belongs to muslim pattaders and which is scheme land of the refugees. This leads to constant dispute, between muslim pattaders and refugees over possession of good land and it is very acute in places like Chapari, Kapahtoli and the like. In the absence of any map or records of right it is also difficult to ascertain which particular land is allotted to which refugee and what its actual area is.” notes Goswami in his 1953 report.

As noted, this created serious conflict among the Bengali Muslims and the refugee Bengali Hindu population and though the state highly recommended the immediate survey and demarcation of *patta* land from the scheme land and other government land, the conflict continued. Goswami in

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<sup>97</sup> See Memo No. RHXIV/3/53/15-23

another report<sup>98</sup> to the Assistant Survey Officer, Baghbar in December 1953 highlighted four categories of people who should be evicted:

- i) A non-refugee occupying land in the scheme area earmarked for the refugees.
- ii) A refugee occupying land in non-evicted area or patta land of others.
- iii) A refugee in occupation of land in excess of the area he is entitled to settlement...
- iv) A refugee in occupation of land without allotment from the R. R.<sup>99</sup> Department.

However, in most government letters the violence inflicted by the Muslims were constantly highlighted and it was their eviction that was suggested for. In 1954, in a letter<sup>100</sup> to the Secretary of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department in Assam, the Inspector General of Police, Assam writes, “After a brief period of peace, the Muslim immigrants began to take aggressive measures to occupy the Khas and evicted lands forcibly by driving away the refugees. In course of these activities they committed assault, rioting, theft, etc. and harassed the refugees systematically.”

In many cases, it was also reported how “Muslim immigrants” were encroaching on government/*khas* land and disallowing the settlement of refugees. The reports suggested the eviction of such “immigrants.”<sup>101</sup> The conflicts were acute in fertile char areas like Chapari and Kapahtoli. Matters became worse and in 1952 a Sub-Divisional Officer had to depute a Magistrate with an armed force for an amicable settlement, as was noted by Goswami in his report in 1953. The state, however, was more sympathetic to the refugees and was even willing to provide loan

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<sup>98</sup> See Memo No. RHXIV/3/53/39-A

<sup>99</sup> Relief and Rehabilitation (R.R.)

<sup>100</sup> No. C. 57/53/16. Office of the Inspector General of Police, Assam in response to letter no. RHH. 121/53/33, dated the 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1953.

<sup>101</sup> See Memo No. RHXIV/42/53/39 Letter dated 12.07.1953 from the Sub-Divisional Officer, Barpeta to the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of Assam, Shillong.

and land for both their agricultural practice and their housing. Goswami also mentioned that the areas around Baghbar Pahar could be provided for the resettlement of 100 refugee families.

However, with the 1950 earthquake and floods and erosion becoming more frequent and violent, many Bengali Hindu refugees along with the caste Assamese Hindus and the tribals left and shifted to the interior and upland areas like Barpeta Road. Locals recalled how Tarabari flourished as a big town because of the presence of business communities like Marwaris and Bengali Hindus. However, when the river shifted course, it was turned into a char and now very few of them were left. Abdul da's father was quick to add how in the chars west of Chapari, there were all settlements of Bengali Hindu refugees and how after the 1970s many sold their lands and left – “I too bought a piece of land from Nitai Sahoo. At that time, to get a job in the Post Office, one needed a *miyadi patta* land, and showing that *patta* land, I got the job. Most Bengali Hindus have gone to Cooch Behar, Falakata, Barpeta Road and Bijni.”

Almost 17 kms. from Baghbar Hill, even today, there exists a locality known as ‘Camp’ in Satrakanara village that stands witness to the state’s refugee rehabilitation schemes. A few Bengali Hindu families who trace their ancestry to such displaced refugees can still be found. At present, a few of these families live around the Pahar in close proximity to the Hindu *suba* where the few remaining caste Hindu Assamese and Bodo families live. As one of my key informants in the Hindu *suba* underlined,

“We, Assamese Hindus, are greedier and more scared. We flee at the first sign of opportunity or danger and that is how all our lands are with them. We are at least more than 60 households, but look at the Bengalis [Hindus], they are probably around 10-15 households and yet they are stubborn to never leave. They are visibly Hindu too. They

publicly celebrate *Durga Puja* annually and made sure to establish a Kali Temple in this area. They are holding on to their lands and their legacy, not like us. They are very brave!”

The present ethno-religious tensions surrounding the Pahar and the chars nearby, should be located in this history of refugee inflow and the state’s establishment of the Refugee Rehabilitation Scheme wherein the state actively favored the Hindu refugees while framing the Bengali Muslims as ‘violent immigrants and encroachers’. Despite that, the loss of such lands to floods and erosion and land conflicts with the neighboring *charua* Muslims ultimately led the Hindu refugees to migrate. It has also turned the Hindus into a minority in the area. The current anchoring of land with identity and religion in Baghbar, particularly among the Hindus and the tribals, is a desperate attempt to not let that history of theirs repeat again. Successive caste Hindu statist leadership in Assam have helped in this attempt of theirs but the present right-wing Hindu state has taken things to different directions and inflamed the situation in newer ways as will be discussed shortly.

As one elderly Assamese Hindu man while discussing the history of the Police Station in Baghbar said, “The then Chief Minister Mahendra Mohan Choudhury wanted to save Baghbar. Hence, he used to visit here a lot. Conduct these very public functions here and so many big officials from around the district would throng them – meat, fish, everything was prepared! The Police Station was set up in Baghbar because they envisioned a bigger and brighter future for Baghbar. But look at us now!” The entire trope of ‘saving’ Baghbar is indicative of ‘saving Hindus’ from ‘invading, encroaching illegal Muslims’ and has found new meanings with the current Hindutva regime in Assam.

To provoke sentiments of ‘anti-immigration’ that border on ‘anti-Muslim’, the current right-wing Hindu state has repeatedly invoked Baghbar’s historical legacy of having witnessed the ‘Hadira Chowki’ war, wherein the Ahoms fought the invading Burmese army and lost. The Hindu state openly appeals to overturn that result at present. (kamrupablog 2021). The Namami Brahmaputra Festival organized by the state that introduced new Hindu practices in relation to rivers was organized in Baghbar and even then, the Hadira Chowki war was underlined.<sup>102</sup>

The other important symbol and trope that the right-wing Hindu state has used with regard to ‘saving the Assamese community and the Hindus’ from ‘invading Muslims’ is the preservation of *satra* land. *Satras* are Vaishnavite temples that were established by Vaishnavite religious scholars Sankardeva and Madhabdeva and their disciples in Assam. Interestingly, Vaishnavism as conceptualized by these scholars was initiated in opposition to Hindu religious practices that were seen by them as ‘corrupt’, ‘sacrificial’ and seethed in Brahminic oppressive codes. Thus, the present right-wing Hindu state’s use of the *satra* to promote ‘anti-Muslim’ and ‘anti-immigrant’ sentiments is ironical.

The right-wing BJP government while criticizing the previous Congress governments of harboring ‘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. The then Chief Minister in 2016 declared that eviction process would continue till all 700 *satras* were made encroachment free. 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

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<sup>102</sup> See <https://assamtribune.com/barpeta-dc-vows-to-place-baghbar-on-tourist-map>

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 Rs. 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. The Baghbar *satra* along with other *satras* in Baghbar and Jania revenue circles, have often featured in the present Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma’s speeches to inflame ‘anti-minority’ sentiments. In 2019, he commented how the Moinbari *satra* had to be shifted elsewhere because of violent aggressions by Muslims, to which Muslims in the area protested saying it was to protect the *satra* from erosion.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> See <https://thenewsmill.com/citizenship-bill-fir-against-himanta-biswa-sarma-for-communal-statement/>



In the past, Baghbar was under the dominance of the caste Hindus like the Kalitas. The men in the Hindu *suba* recounted how the *homobae* was first set up by them and how one of their uncles was its first Secretary. They recounted stories of Nareswar Gaonbura and Member Bodo and how they used to rule Baghbar, sometimes literally, by killing tigers. The Bengali Muslims have corroborated these stories, and many believe that the name ‘Baghbar’ was given because of the large presence of tigers in the area [*Bagh* in Assamese means tiger]. “Our ancestors had so much economic and social status, unlike us. But they were never politically involved. Hence, they never took any benefits from the state. But we have no option. Unlike them, we are out-numbered today. Unlike them, we are no longer important anymore in this area.” This revelation by one of the men in the Hindu *suba* speaks a lot regarding their insecurities and fear. And the Pahar’s ethno-religious tensions should be seen in the history of everything discussed here - from ancestral dominance to environmental factors. Hence, one cannot overlook the role of the state in solidifying or amplifying these tensions which are becoming more overt and uglier day by day. It started from the state’s Refugee Rehabilitation Scheme of the 1950s that saw the framing of the Muslim as ‘violent encroacher and immigrant’ versus the ‘victim Hindu refugee’ to the present right-wing state’s policies in regard to ‘saving the *satras*’ from ‘Muslim aggressive encroachers’. Time has passed but not much has changed. In fact, it has only gotten worse.

As the right-wing state engages in a violent politics of eviction for conservation, the Hindu *suba* too anchors its pitch in such state politics to get various benefits. This, however, has further complicated their relationship with the Bengali Muslims who have been displaced due to flood-erosion. In the next section, I look at this politics of eviction and conservation through the concept of environmental racism and how such politics create freshly displaced landless Muslim bodies, preparing them for cheap labor provision to the urban economy.

## 2. EVICTION, ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM, DEVALUATION

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*<sup>104</sup>. 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 tension 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. As mentioned earlier, 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. Tigers, as recalled by locals were also gunned down by caste Assamese Hindus when they attacked their cattle.

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<sup>104</sup> An open area at the junction of two or more roads.

The Bengali Muslims have been living in the Pahar for years. Some parts of their lands are government/*khas*, some are in temporary ownership (*torji*)<sup>105</sup> 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 is 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. Isn't he 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 laborers 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

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<sup>105</sup> wherein they pay a rent to the actual owners, mostly the Assamese Hindus who no longer live on those lands. Some continue living without paying any rent but are not worried as the actual owners do not seem to be returning. However, on paper they are still not owners.

the interior parts of the Pahar left the very next night of receiving the notices. Guess, our efforts were not all waste!” – key informant from the Hindu *suba*.

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. In this section, we talk about how, when they migrate and squat in nearby ‘*khas*’ land such as grazing reserves or on the fringes of National Parks, they face violent evictions led by the caste Hindu Assamese dominant state. The dominant society is ready to cooperate, chuckle and celebrate with that state.

### *2.1 Eviction and “Wastes”*

In September 2021, the right-wing state in Assam carried out a massive and violent eviction drive in Gorukhuti, located in the Darrang district of Assam wherein around 1,500 Bengali Muslims were evicted. Gorukhuti is a grazing reserve area in Dholpur, Darrang district and all grazing reserves be it Village Grazing Reserves (VGR) or Professional Grazing Reserves (PGR) are government lands. 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. Though eviction of Bengali Muslims by the state is not a new phenomenon, the recent evictions under the Hindu BJP state have become more violent. Anwasha Dutta (2018) who looks at ‘illegal’ forest squatters in Assam

through the concept of '*dokhol*' (land occupation/grabbing) highlights how the relation between the squatters and the local forest bureaucrats is marked by negotiation and co-existence, something that is missing in the drives carried out by a Hindu majoritarian state.

The growing celebration of eviction drives of Bengali Muslims by a caste Hindu Assamese society is largely because they see them as 'illegal Bangladeshis' and hence, as a threat to the '*jati*' (Assamese community). Interestingly, they are also seen as a threat to the environment. Studies have highlighted how Bengali Muslim migrants have caused the destruction of grazing lands, wetlands and natural habitats through poaching, over-grazing, waste generation and their usage of chemical agricultural materials. (Bhagawati et al. 2006; Chatterjee et al. 2006; Sarma 2015). This framing of Bengali Muslims as 'illegal immigrants' and 'environment degraders' show how the xenophobic nationalists use the environment to further a distinct kind of ethno-nationalism. Gunnell Cederlof and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2006) talk about Ecological Nationalism as –

“...a condition where both cosmopolitan and nativist versions of nature devotion converge and express themselves as a form of nation-pride in order to become part of processes legitimizing and consolidating a nation. The concept of ecological nationalism links cultural and political aspirations with programs of nature conservation or environmental protection while noting their expression in, and through, a rhetoric of rights that includes civil, human and intellectual property rights.” (pp. 6).

Though this definition of theirs is implemented in the context of marginalized indigenous communities using environment to claim their territorial rights from a capitalist state; I use this definition of theirs to propagate how dominant ethno-nationalists in Assam - the upper-caste,

middle-class, Hindu heteronormative men use environment as a site to further their xenophobic, Islamophobic and narrow ethno-nationalism. And Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan indeed did touch upon this – “...regionally dominant communities or particular cultural and political groups may symbolically and materially appropriate nature for the sake of increasing their own political and economic control within a region.” (2006: 8-9). They differentiate between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. They say that while the former in the guise of metropolitan secularists uses ecologism to deny a complex web of claims, rights and sovereignties, promoting a unitary and dominant nationalism in the process, ethnic nationalism accommodates more pluralist political space and propagates an inclusive discourse of ecologism. Here, I understand that in the case of Assam, one can see a convergence of civic and ethnic nationalisms wherein dominant understandings of ethnicity and political community by the elite majority are used to promote a unitary nationalism. The environment becomes another site for such groups to establish this kind of nationalism.

The argument of waste generation by ‘illegal Bengali Muslim immigrants’ that destroy the environment, be it the scenic quality or poisoning of food chains in wildlife reserves/national parks/grazing reserves or land-use changes is something that I want to explore further using the concepts of ecological nationalism and environmental racism. I am arguing that the majoritarian ethno-nationalist state and society fiercely call for eviction of Bengali Muslims from ‘*khas*’ land such as grazing reserves and national parks because they see them not only as people generating wastes but as ‘wastes’ in themselves. Bengali Muslim ‘immigrants’ have often been referred and imagined as ‘ants’ and ‘crows’ in several government reports. In 1931, the then Census Superintendent of Assam C. S. Mullan in his Census Report regarding large scale migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal to Assam writes, “...an event, moreover, which seems

likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam ...has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali immigrants; mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal...the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of large body of ants...” (Mullan 1931). Mullan’s metaphor of ‘ants’ to refer to the Bengali Muslims has been used by the post-colonial state in its various reports - be it the Brahma Committee Report of 2017<sup>106</sup> that suggested measures on how to protect the land rights of ‘indigenous people’ in Assam or the S.K. Sinha Report of 1998<sup>107</sup> that looked at the situation of ‘illegal immigration’ to Assam.

The image of the ‘ants’ to refer to the Bengali Muslim migrants is interesting for it weaves the meaning of ‘incessant flow’ and ‘ungovernability’, something similar to unrecyclable ecological waste. Ghassan Hage writes,

“The ecological crisis began to intrude into our lives as crisis precisely at the point when we started experiencing the results of industry’s and government’s loss of control and inability to manage and recycle waste in the ways we hoped for, giving rise to an ungoverned flow of unrecyclable waste that is increasingly polluting – visually, chemically, and in many other ways – our lands and waters as well as the atmosphere.” (2017: 42)

Just like Hage (2017) mentions, the Muslim ‘other’ with their migratory nature and having been forced to squat and settle on government lands<sup>108</sup> is imagined as ‘waste’, that are *incessantly* flowing and destroying the ‘natural habitat’. They are thus an ecological threat and hence, need to

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<sup>106</sup> See <https://pratidintime.sgp1.digitaloceanspaces.com/2018/05/BRAHMA-COMMITTEEM-Report.pdf>

<sup>107</sup> See <https://jagadishbhuyan.in/downloads/SK%20Sinha%27s%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> often they happen to be grazing lands or nearby Reserve Forests or National Parks

be evicted. The incessant nature of their flow is conveyed through the metaphor of ‘ants’. But the use of animalistic metaphors to refer to Muslims as ‘wastes’ is not new. The use of ‘cockroaches’ to refer to Arabs showed how the racialized Muslim body was seen as closer to “dirt, rubbish and waste, an inevitable left-over of the process of colonization that one has to live with and manage but that one can do without.” (Hage 2017: 41). The use of ‘crows’ to refer to the Bengali Muslims is to indicate how they live off wastes and are ‘wastes’ in themselves. Samyak Ghosh and Suraj Gogoi while looking at ethno-nationalist street art in the streets of Guwahati, Assam saw the repeated drawing of ants and crows. They write,

“Within this space of a majoritarian political expression, the iconography of the outsiders or *bongāls* as poisonous ants and crows explain their location in the realm of elimination. Their dark bodies (*kolāsarīra*) are a sight of disgust. Their living is understood as an act of scavenging and their dwellings are believed to have been built on the resources of the insiders. The very precarity of their existence carries the burden of a possibility of elimination.” (2019).

Thus, migrant Bengali Muslim bodies are seen as not just creating waste but as ‘ungovernable’ wastes in themselves and thus a threat to the environment. The use of animalistic metaphors to refer to minorities as ‘wastes’ have been extensively done in the case of Roma people too. In April 2020, Vladimir Tismaneanu, an acclaimed Eastern European scholar at the University of Maryland posted a meme where the Roma were compared to crows.<sup>109</sup> Several Roma activists condemned this, calling this an act of racism against the Roma people. The use of crows to refer

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<sup>109</sup> See <https://www.rferl.org/a/deposition-of-roma-as-crows-exposes-deeper-racism-within-romania/30558933.html>



to communities like the Roma and the Africans is a racist behavior that is widely prevalent. The crow in such racist slurs is imagined as a scavenger, feeding on wastes and is infused with the meaning of degeneration. The blackness of the crow is used to represent “all that’s evil and demonic”<sup>110</sup> which in the context of India is also a marker of lower castes and class and a sight of disgust. J. David Cisneros (2008) while examining the metaphors that are used to describe Mexican immigrants in the US notices how metaphors of pollution, toxic waste, diseases and infestation were used to refer to the immigrants.

The incessant flow or the continuous movement of Bengali Muslim migrants is threatening. The use of ‘ants’ as a metaphor is to cement such arguments and imaginations further – “Yet, like the seeping, oozing, and pooled toxic waste of Love Canal, immigrants are also portrayed as mobile threats. Not only are these dangers accumulated on street corners...immigrants are continually shown moving through the desert and a growing problem.” (Cisneros 2008: 580). Thus, Muslim bodies become a threat to the environment or the community because of their continuous increase - just like ants - be it through the inflow of ‘illegal immigrants’ via a porous border or through their ‘bursting’ birth-rates, something that both the caste Hindu Assamese nationalists and the Hindutva forces have used for their ‘anti-Muslim’ propaganda.

The use of metaphors, as Cisneros (2008) shows, can project a sense of ‘objective’ knowledge and weed out any specific, contextual or critical understanding of those that are represented through the metaphors. Metaphors can become hugely popular and hence, enable widespread generalized and biased political formulations of people/communities such that any alternative

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<sup>110</sup> See <https://animalpeopleforum.org/2016/04/11/get-out-of-here-you-crows-the-gypsy-crow-relationship/>

understanding can be simply refuted. Hage (2017) by studying the relation between racism and speciesism explains that,

“Animals...as they are classified and imagined...have long served as a source of metaphors for the portrayal of subjugated and inferiorized people...The animalistic metaphor is not just an “observational racist category” but a declaration of intent...This can be considered an extension of what Hannah Arendt calls race-thinking (Arendt 1944: see also Razack 2008).” (pp. 17-18).

He notes that it is people who wish to dominate who employ animalistic metaphors. He quotes David Theo Goldberg (2015) who notes that animalization and bestialization have been critical for racist representation that implies ‘thingification’ of people or more precisely, dehumanization and devaluation. (2017: 24)

Scholars like Mary Douglas (2002) and Gay Hawkins (2006) understand the varied ways that ‘wastes’ and ‘dirt’ get formulized in various cultures and how people’s behavior towards ‘waste’ talk about their attitude towards the self and the other. So, ‘waste’ is made – what becomes ‘waste’ “is an effect of classification and relations.” (Hawkins 2006: 2). Douglas in fact understands that ‘waste’/dirt is not outside ‘order or systems-thinking’ but allows the visibility of order. Thus, ‘Muslims as ungovernable waste’ is a narrative that is woven by the majoritarian state to highlight the ‘normal or desired’ order/system and how Muslims as ‘ungovernable, incessant wastes’ are a threat to that order. Besides, the imagination of migrant landless Muslim bodies as ‘wastes’ is a narrative of systemic devaluation, something that is actively produced by environmental racism as will be shown in the next section. Thus, the

eviction of such ‘devalued’ ‘waste’ and environmentally destructive migrant Muslims is not just encouraged but also is necessary for the urban economy that runs on such politically precarious, landless and cheap Muslim labor.

## *2.2 Devaluation and Environmental racism*

Devaluation of Bengali Muslims begins when the upper-caste Assamese Hindu dominant state renders them landless. As we saw, the landlessness is actively engendered by the state. Firstly, 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 secondly, 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 (in fact homeless, as they technically already are landless). The state, in the process, also successfully inflames xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments of the upper-caste Assamese Hindu society. Since the coming of the right-wing state, within two years (2016 and 2017) itself, there are records of almost eleven cases of eviction within Baghbar Revenue Circle alone, an administrative unit that is Bengali Muslim dominant.<sup>111</sup>

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 pauperized without they being able to reap any

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<sup>111</sup> Records from Disaster Management division at Mandia Circle Office.

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<sup>112</sup>. BADA was meant to help the British to 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.

“BADA considers two main categories of charlands rising within the river-banks: those rising in-situ and new accretions...For the right to land that once existed, but was diluviated, and subsequently resurfaced in the old site, BADA considers that right to be incidental to one’s title to a tangible property...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: 21).

New lands that arise as new chars, are considered properties of the state and hence, inevitably become ‘*khas* or government lands’. Except, if that land is separated from the shore through a stream/channel that is fordable at any season of the year. Then the ownership goes to the one whose lands are the “most contiguous to it.” This establishes that while vast areas of new chars

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<sup>112</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction chapter, 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, but 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 except that when a new char emerges it is to be taken as the property of the state which it keeps as a grazing reserve or settle with cultivators as per Land Settlement Policy Resolution Force. 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.

inevitably became government properties, the other lands that char-dwellers owned were physically unavailable to them for usage of any kind since they would be under-water. The *charuas*, however, continued paying revenue for such sub-merged lands so that they could continue claiming their ownership over them. Thus, while the state went on enjoying taxes from them, the Bengali Muslims in very tangible terms, continued to be landless. Even today, most char-dwellers I talked to, on paper are owners of *miyadi patta* lands but in practice are landless. They continue to pay taxes and have become economically pauperized.

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’. The notion of ‘indigeneity’ is highly controversial in Assam for there is no clear consensus on who an ‘indigenous’ is. However, even after living in Assam for decades, the Bengali Muslims are not considered indigenous by the majoritarian state and society alike. There is a strong sense of differentiation that the state and Assamese society draw between ‘indigenous Assamese Muslims’ and the ‘migrant Bengali Muslims’. In 2021, at a time when the state was trying to list out the ‘indigenous’ communities in Assam and thereby provide welfare schemes to them, the Janagosthiya Samannay Parishad (JSPA), an umbrella body of thirty odd ‘indigenous’ organizations in Assam started a ‘census’ of Assamese Muslims to separate themselves from the Bengali Muslims.<sup>113</sup> 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: 3) will not be applicable to a community that is

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<sup>113</sup> See <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/online-census-for-assamese-muslims-launched-by-several-indigenous-associations-7275481/>

most impacted by it. Thus, the state while extracting revenue from Bengali Muslim char-dwellers, still go on rendering them landless by refusing to recognize their land-rights and woes caused by disasters.

In 2015 when the state announced land and monetary compensations for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) affected by flood and erosion, 30,000 IDPs applied but the state processed none of the applications citing lack of funds and changing beneficiary criteria to those possessing *miyadi-patta* lands.<sup>114</sup> For those evicted, the state hardly provides resettlement. Even in case of the Gorukhuti-Dholpur eviction, the state still has to resettle the more than hundred odd Bengali Muslim families. For the state, there lies no land that could be made available to the Bengali Muslims in any whatsoever way.

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 labor far cheaper and in worse precarious conditions for the profitable running of the urban economy. The devaluation of landless Bengali Muslims is evident in their low incomes and wage rates as compared to other laborers in urban areas, as will be discussed in the next section.

David Harvey (2004) notes that devaluation of labor 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 labor or capital to other geographies, which Harvey says,

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<sup>114</sup> See this detailed report <https://article-14.com/post/assam-s-evictions-are-turning-skilled-bengali-muslim-farmers-into-labourers-615f056954558>

gives birth to uneven geographical development. It is also the creation of such surpluses, that for him, has led to accumulation by dispossession and an era of ‘new imperialism’ of the global capitalist powers. In Assam, the state through its policies on land, embankment and eviction, consequently produce a continuous surplus of landless Bengali Muslim migrant laborers who serve as the necessary reserved army of labor for the capitalist urban economy but are in turn devalued in the process. Mark Gould (1981) writes how the tactic of devaluing labor-power includes “allowing illegal immigration into the United States. These illegals not only expand the pool of available labor but more importantly bring into the country workers who feel they must be subservient to capital, for fear of deportation.” (pp. 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.

Thus, landlessness is seen as a necessary step by the state to create devalued Muslim bodies and this process of devaluation that the state engages in is closely tied to environmental racism wherein racist violence by the state is conducted using the environment. (Wright 2018: 792). The state’s rampant building and repairment of embankments in char-lands without consulting the local char-dwellers have contributed significantly to Bengali Muslims becoming landless rapidly and hence, them being devalued. The other tactic remains of establishing the displaced Bengali Muslims as people who are generating wastes or are destroying the environment and hence, the state violently evicts them, making them once again landless/homeless. The eviction of landless displaced Bengali Muslims is celebrated for they are constructed as ungovernable and growing ‘wastes’ whose numbers are continually rising and who in the process are degrading the environment and society. They being constructed or imagined as ‘wastes’, make

the narrative of devaluation literal. It dehumanizes and deskills them. This was made evident when a state sponsored journalist while covering the eviction drive in Gorukhuti repeatedly trampled upon the dead body of a Bengali Muslim evictee after he was being shot at by the police.<sup>115</sup> Currently his family along with the other evictees live on pavements in temporary make-shift shelters, in hunger and without any employment.

Thus, it is important to recognize this landless as state induced landlessness because it is this that ties together environmental racism arguments and devaluation of Bengali Muslims. Laura Pulido writes,

“Land is thoroughly saturated with racism. There are at least two primary land processes to consider: appropriation and access. Appropriation refers to the diverse ways that land was taken from native people...Once land was severed from native people...the question of access arose, which is deeply racialized. Numerous laws and practices reserved land ownership for whites. Indeed some groups...actually lost land that they once owned.” (2016: 528).

Environmental racism of the state prepares landless and devalued Bengali Muslims to then provide cheap labor to the urban economy. They are hardly left with any other option. In the next section, we will see how this state enabled environmental racism devalues Bengali Muslims politically too which only contributes to forwarding racial capitalism.

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<sup>115</sup> See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/12/india-assam-muslims-forcibly-evicted-dhalpur-bjp-darrang>



### *2.3 Citizenship and Racial Capitalism*

In my two years of fieldwork in the chars, I met several people who were called ‘doubtful or D voters’. The Election Commission, in response to complaints by several civil bodies, issued a circular that allowed the marking of ‘D’ in front of voters whose citizenship are found to be suspicious by election officers while doing the verification of voters lists. (Misra and Sultana 2015). The situation got worse when on July 12, 2005, the Supreme Court in a verdict on a public interest litigation (PIL) initiated by the Assamese nationalist leader and current BJP MP Sarbananda Sonowal, made the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 unconstitutional. The IMDT Act was put in place in 1983 in response to the Assam Movement which put the onus of proving someone’s citizenship on the accuser and not the accused unlike the Foreigner’s Act, 1946 that ruled the rest of India. This led many to believe that the Act was inherently biased towards the ‘illegal immigrant’, and many quoted the low rates of conviction or declared ‘foreigners’ by the Foreigner Tribunals (FT) to validate their arguments. This Act was then suspended, and Assam was brought in parlance with the Foreigner’s Act wherein the onus of proving citizenship laid with the accused, which in this case, was mostly the poor, migrant and landless Bengali Muslim.

The devaluation of the poor migrant Bengali Muslim is contributed 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 and 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 ‘D voters’ on a simple reference by the BSF. The other situation through

which char-dwellers are turned ‘DVs’ is when verification officers from Election Commission come for updation of the voter’s lists. These officers often belonging to the upper-caste Assamese Hindu community already have their own biases against Bengali Muslims from chars. Additionally, they, instead of conducting house-to-house verification, often simply verify the list in the house of someone influential in the village, such as the Village Headman. It is often on the Village Headman’s suspicions of seeing ‘new arrivals’ in the village that migrant and landless Bengali Muslims become ‘D Voters’. Their political precarity is accentuated by not just their inability to vote but also their exclusion from several government welfare schemes. D Voters then have to prove their citizenship in Foreigner Tribunals who have their own ‘anti-Muslim’ bureaucracies and procedures.

Shahjahan da, a human rights activist from the Bengali Muslim community, has been advocating against the regime of D Voters since ages now and has also helped in legal cases of such people, along with guiding people during the NRC exercise. In our many conversations, he revealed how the state is simply ‘constructing’ foreigners out of citizens and the NRC is the latest in that line of narrative. He mentions how notices informing char-dwellers of their status of being a ‘D Voter’ and asking them to present themselves in the local police station or the Foreigner’s Tribunal (FT), often do not reach them.

“These people cannot afford to live in one place. They have to migrate. And the few notices which reach that village, the concerned people are not found, and the authorities immediately think them to be ‘foreigners’. I remember once a notice asking someone to appear in a FT was put up in a small ‘*chai*-shop’ (tea shop) in the market. How will this critical information reach the concerned person? What about women who are largely

illiterate and often do not come to public spaces like the market? The Hindu officers do not care, they just want their ‘foreigners’ numbers to increase.” – Shahjahan da.

It has been also reported how caste Hindu judges and BSF officers get incentives such as promotions when they declare or refer greater number of ‘foreigners’. (Amnesty International India 2019).<sup>116</sup>

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. While others who do have some land, lose them systematically to be turned into landless laborers at the end. Either way, the state creates extremely politically precarious landless laborers who have no option but provide cheap labor to the urban economy. Even for establishing them as ungovernable ‘wastes’ who are destroying the environment, their precarious citizenship statuses are highlighted to justify the violent evictions by the state that further turn them landless. For the Dholpur eviction, the authorities claimed that the evicted families’ names were not in the NRC leading to the state’s announcement that rehabilitation of the evicted families will only happen if their names appear in the citizenship list.<sup>117</sup> This shows

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<sup>116</sup> Also see <https://scroll.in/article/927025/the-highest-wicket-taker-assams-tribunals-are-competing-to-declare-people-foreigners> ; Anjuman Ara Begum has prepared an elaborate paper titled, ‘Irregular and undocumented immigrants in Assam: Understanding the Jurisprudence in past, present and future’ that can be accessed at [http://www.mcrg.ac.in/IWM\\_Migration/Draft%20Papers%20\(IWM\\_26\\_26\\_June\\_2020\)/Anjuman%20Ara%20Begum%20Dealing%20with%20illegal%20immigrants%20in%20Assam.pdf](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/IWM_Migration/Draft%20Papers%20(IWM_26_26_June_2020)/Anjuman%20Ara%20Begum%20Dealing%20with%20illegal%20immigrants%20in%20Assam.pdf) [PRELIMINARY DRAFT, NOT FOR CIRCULATION].

<sup>117</sup> For more information, see <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-dhalpur-evictions-in-assam-report-claims-they-were-not-illegal-migrants-authorities-question-funding-for-report/408625> ; <https://cjp.org.in/rehabilitation-for-evicted-families-only-if-name-in-nrc-assam-govt-to-gauhati-hc/>

how landlessness and political precarity is inter-related and both lead to the establishment of a doubly devalued Muslim body.

These landless and politically precarious Bengali Muslims are then forced to provide labor at a rate much cheaper than the 'indigenous' laborers in the urban areas by working as informal laborers.

“According to published newspaper reports in 1991, the going daily-wage rate for the internal displaces from the flood-affected areas of Morigaon and Lahorighat in Lower Assam, was as little as Rs. 5, whereas the average daily wages for the rest of the population at that time was at least Rs. 30. As the daily wage market becomes saturated due to continuous and unceasing out-migration from the riparian areas, and in the absence of any relief and rehabilitation from the government, many of the Muslim IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons] begin to move out further afield...Low wages, back-breaking labour, exploitation of women and children are harsh facts of life for these internal displaces.” (Dasgupta 2001: 7).

Dasgupta (2001) also notes how the Bengali Muslim IDPs in urban areas of other North-eastern states who work in the informal sector as rickshaw pullers or as construction workers are paid far lower than the locals. Since most of them speak in an accented Assamese or wear their traditional '*lungi*', they also face the fear of being suspected as 'illegal Bangladeshis'. In my fieldwork among Bengali Muslim rickshaw pullers in Guwahati who belonged to the chars, I noted how the plying of an electric rickshaw (installation of electric machines in earlier manually driven rickshaws) required licenses from the authorities but almost all plied without

a license. Thus, they often lived in fear of being harassed by the police, of not just being picked up for ‘illegal’ plying of rickshaws but also asked to show documentary evidence of their citizenship. Most Bengali Muslim rickshaw pullers I talked to wore special half pants under their *lungis* that had large pockets sewn by them to safely keep all their documents all the time. They knew facing harassment was a regular affair. Thus, political precarity along with landlessness force these Bengali Muslim laborers to provide labor at a cheaper rate without raising a hue and cry, just like the Mexican ‘illegal immigrants’, lest they be charged with fresh citizenship cases or worse thrown in jails.

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 where they had no places of accommodation or any known people. 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 a 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 because

all my savings are gone in the earlier legal battles over her court cases. Now the government is saying that ‘D-Voters’ will not even be included? 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.”

Most rickshaw pullers did not own a rickshaw but worked on rented rickshaws and paid a share from their daily income to the owners. Many of these rickshaw pullers stopped attending their NRC hearings simply because they could not afford to lose out on a day’s income and were already neck-deep in debt. As a result of this, many lost their citizenship and became more vulnerable in the process. Suhas Chakma, a human rights activist in an interview to the HuffPost<sup>118</sup> said,

“Chakma pointed out that the point of NRC, realistically, could not be deportation but severe economic disenfranchisement. “If these people can’t fight their appeals in tribunals, the government can’t send that many people back to Bangladesh. So what will they do? They will strip them of land rights, cut them out of government schemes and snatch their right to vote,” he said. It will create, what he said, ‘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

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<sup>118</sup> See <https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/assam-nrc-the-nightmare-that-awaits-assam-s-poor-in-5d6e3b43e4b09bbc9ef45396>

conditions. These new cycles of debt also made the laborer tied to one place for a longer duration, leading to their substantial loss of freedom of movement. Jan Breman (2010) calls this ‘neo-bondage’ which is directly linked to a worker getting tied to a system or a place because of advance payment (indebtedness) which cannot be repaid back through one season’s work but often continues throughout generations, producing a generational supply of unfree landless laborers. Many Bengali Muslim laborers have not visited their char villages for years because of the necessity to continually repay additional debts.

This landless unfree labor is critical for the continued sustenance of the capitalist urban economy. Scholars like Rosa Luxemburg (2003, original 1913) and Tom Brass (2014) write how unfree labor is not just compatible with modern capitalism but also is its priority and note that this unfree labor unlike what dependency theorists would argue is not relegated to the ‘peripheral’ regions but is found as part of the center, that is, metropolitan capitalism. Brass (2014) brings in Barrientos, Kothari and Phillips (2013) to argue that contemporary labor relations cannot be clearly distinguished as free and unfree as most labor in modern capitalism is unfree and asked that “the connection between these relations should be ‘approached dialectically’, as part of ‘a single spectrum’ arising from the need of capital for more efficient forms of control and exploitation.” (pp. 298).

Environmental racism, wherein the state performs racist violence using the environment, is intended to push thus a capitalism that thrives on the state encouraged racism. Be it embankment politics that makes the Bengali Muslims landless in greater succession or eviction politics that sees the Bengali Muslims as ‘wastes’ and producing wastes and destroying the environment, both such politics create doubly devalued Muslim bodies – landless and politically precarious. And it is these bodies then who are forced to continually provide cheap and unfree labor to the

urban capitalist economy. “Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups...conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.” (Melamed 2015: 77).

Environmental racism of the state in turn enables racial capitalism. “Industry and manufacturing require sinks – places where pollution can be deposited. Sinks typically are land, air, or water, but racially devalued bodies also function as ‘sinks’.” (Pulido 2017: 529). Thus, it is easier for the right-wing state and the upper-caste Hindu Assamese society to frame the Bengali Muslim migrant bodies as ‘wastes’ and turn them landless who then are forced to provide cheap labor in worst working conditions. In my many conversations with Bengali Muslim rickshaw pullers in the city, they would re-iterate how their status have changed from people who used to be associated with land and who used to cultivate to now being ‘wasted’ laborers, with nothing to offer. Waqas H. Butt (2020) who worked with the lower caste garbage pickers in Pakistan notes how they working with wastes led them to start thinking of themselves as ‘wastes’ too. He brings in Mary Douglas (2002) who notes the porosity of bodies and how substances like ‘germs’ can move between bodies and thus shape one’s understanding of one’s own self. And this would be the greatest victory of the majoritarian state when Bengali Muslims would themselves start believing to be unskilled, dirty and ‘wastes’, leading them to accept their unfreedom and all varieties of exploitation of racial capitalism.

Pulido et al. (2016) has argued that the racialized environmental injustice needs to bring back the role of the state – or more importantly the capitalistic state in understanding how environmental racism that is unleashed by white supremacy and privilege on ‘black



geographies' is done by the state to fulfill the demands of a capitalist economy. The state is an equal collaborator, in fact, it actively uses the environment to support racial capitalism. In the next section, I look at how the state along with the environment produce landless, migrant and politically precarious 'second-class citizens/non-citizens' who go on to fuel the urban racial economy.

### 3. 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 critique humans' tendency to see themselves as superior when it comes to having agency and relegating the non-human to a passive onlooker role. Instead, what they bring forward is the concept of 'hybrid collectif' which understands that agency is reflected in networks that comprise of both human and nonhuman elements. They talk about 'attributions' to convey the linear and the singular way in which agency is thought about. (Callon and Law 1995: 503; Latour 2005: 10). 'Hybrid collectifs' are complex and recognize the heterogenous pieces that are part of it and how when they come together as a structure, agency is subsequently performed. These structures may change and the agency they perform may differ at varied points of time and in different spaces.

Jason De Leon (2015), who looks at the treacherous journey of 'illegal' Mexican migrants to the US by walking through the deadly and dangerous Sonoran Desert, uses the concept of 'hybrid collectif'. He shows how the state through its 'Prevention through Deterrence' policy, leaves incoming immigrants with no option but cross the border via the desert and in the process

makes sure that most of its own dirty work is done by the desert. Many immigrants die or are eventually forced to return to Mexico because of the deadly conditions of the long journey in the desert. Thus, the US State intentionally funnels them towards the desert so that violence and deterrence on immigrants are covert and can seem ‘natural’. The desert plays its part by putting in play various elements such as scavengers, deadly snakes, heat with no water sources around etc. and prevents a large section of the ‘illegal Mexican immigrants’ from entering the US.

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.

*Kichhu khanio daya nai*

*Manush bor pratire*

*Desh bhangili, gaon bhangili*

*Bhangili balir char o*

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

Thus, the non-human river along with its several components such as fish, sediments, plants, mud, etc. 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 Brahmaputra’s geomorphological characteristics allow the state to wreak havoc on the lives of Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. The “annual rainfall in the southern slopes of the Himalaya drainage of the Brahmaputra is between

1000 and 3000 mm and between 2000 and 4000 mm over the Brahmaputra valley in Assam...Hence, discharge per unit area in the Brahmaputra is amongst the highest in the world.” (Sarma and Acharjee 2018: 7-8). This means that the sediment load in the Brahmaputra is already high because of high discharge and rainfall along with its strong currents. On top of that, Assam being in a highly sensitive seismic zone meant more destructive earthquakes – the 1890 and 1950 earthquakes raised the riverbed of the Brahmaputra significantly, leading to the reduction of its depths. This caused further widening of the river, erratic change in its course, high sediment load and more violent floods and erosion. (Sarma and Acharjee 2018, Saikia et. al. 2019). The state’s embankment politics with a particular zeal to construct roads in char areas have worsened the situation. The progressive increase of the widening of the river is accelerated by “deforestation due to large-scale road construction and logging operations in the forests of the Arunachal Himalayas during this period.” (Sarma and Acharjee 2018: 9). The state’s silence regarding large scale mining and deforestation in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra by large contractors and companies shows how it is allowing poor and marginalized communities to continue to suffer and migrate. Becoming both politically precarious and landless laborers in the process.

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. One of the questions that I think through my PhD is why has this community, even after facing so much violence, harassment and exploitation never risen, be it institutionally or through spontaneous movements? Why is this community still trying to please, still trying to obey? The river and its increasing erosion and floods force them to continually move. This leads to the temporariness of relations, poor development of networks, low economic security

etc., factors that impede the growth of strong movements. These factors, I believe, have added to that narrative.

Agamben (2005) talks of states of exception and how in border areas it is easier to implement such regimes. The chars being far away from public visibility and imagination while being closer to the Bangladesh border allow the state to let the river and its activities wreak havoc on the people's lives, frame them as 'doubtful voters', strip them of their citizenship arbitrarily and funnel them to ultimately provide cheap labor to the urban economy.

There is 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 and Acharjee 2018: 9). Researchers have complained about lack of consistent clear data on discharge, soil particles, riverbed depth, river's water temperature, sediment load, etc. that are directly responsible to drive thousands of char-dwellers to migrate every year. Thus, though the state focuses on the 'incessant' flow of poor Bengali Muslim 'other' by using metaphors of 'ants' and 'crows' to argue that they are creating waste and destroying the environment, 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 laborers. During my

fieldwork, officials in the Brahmaputra Board<sup>119</sup> revealed how at most times designing for flood and erosion prevention projects become difficult due to either the lack of data or the involvement of money and lengthy bureaucratic procedures to access that data. This ultimately discourages the implementation of such projects. The lack of data or more specifically publicly available data on rivers, its activities, erosion and its impacts, particularly on marginalized communities, is reminding me of refusal of the colonial state to examine, understand and appreciate the tropical rivers and the consequences of such politics on the colonized. Official statistical databases with regard to villages displaced, relocation of people and their conditions of survival remain very dispersed and vague. (Coelho 2013).

The IDPs, in fact, are not even recognized as ‘environmental migrants’ by the state in India and there exists no governmental policy to address the issues faced by them. In Assam, the Disaster Management Act 2005 does not even recognize erosion as a natural calamity. “That such a critical issue has drawn almost no policy attention, at the Center or State level after 1985 in Assam, is indicative of a gross lack of political will towards its resolution as it continues to be an effective election slogan in many parts of the state.” (Dasgupta 2001: 7). Aatreyee Dhar (2022) shows how there remains several Bengali Muslim char-dwellers who despite facing the climate crisis, violently refuse to migrate. But the state has no data on such people, for such a database does not forward the narrative of environmental racism that in turn fuels racial capitalism.

It looks like as if the state works in collaboration with the environment. And this collaboration turns Bengali Muslims landless and politically precarious. This is also shown in how the

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<sup>119</sup> The Board is responsible to harness the Brahmaputra’s water and suggest measures to prevent flood and erosion.

majoritarian state uses grazing lands and national parks as sites to forward the narrative that they are being environmentally damaged by the Bengali Muslims and need to be conserved. The separation and neatness of space that are selectively kept for preservation of 'wildlife' and flora started with the colonial state when it created spaces such as tea gardens, reserved forests, wildlife sanctuaries, etc. This completely destroyed the unique interconnectedness of human-non-human relations and their dependence on each other. It consequently made poor and marginalized communities 'criminals' and 'environment destroyers' while capitalistic ventures of tourism, tea gardens, etc. continued to be promoted by the colonial state. (Sharma 2011; Borbora 2017). Borbora (2017) talks how the 'anti-immigrant' post-colonial state has appropriated the rhino as an Assamese nationalistic symbol, framing the poor and the marginalized Bengali Muslim farmers who squat around national parks as violent poachers. It then uses this argument to justify violent eviction drives, satisfying in the process, the xenophobic and Islamophobic upper-caste Assamese Hindu society.

As said by De Leon (2015), 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." (pp. 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 or wildlife sanctuaries 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.<sup>120</sup> The state allowed Numaligarh Oil Refinery to construct a massive golf course in the animal corridor in Kaziranga while poor farmers, tribals and Bengali Muslim squatters face the brunt of animal attacks and eviction on a regular basis. (Borbora 2017).

This collaboration of the state with the environment that gets manifested as environmental racism in turn facilitates racial capitalism. “Indeed the state is deeply invested in *not* solving the environmental racism gap because it would be too costly and disruptive to industry, the larger political system, and the state itself...Environmental racism must be seen in the context of a long line of diverse forms of state sanctioned violence that facilitates racial capitalism.” (Pulido 2017: 529). Thus, though accepting the environment’s agency and collaboration in accentuating the landlessness and homelessness of Bengali Muslims, one must not decenter the primary role that the state plays in it. As observed by De Leon (2015) too, that “the Border Patrol has intentionally set the stage so that the other actants can do most of the brutal work ...In this context, agency is relational and produced as part of a human-induced chain reaction.” (pp. 61). 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, refusal to keep data or initiate policies recognizing IDPs or its conservation and eviction politics*) and turn the Bengali Muslims landless and politically precarious. These migrants then are left with no option but provide cheap labor to racial urban economies. Thus, the environmental factors that the state uses or let’s say, collaborates with, be it floods, the river, the

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<sup>120</sup> See <https://www.eastmojo.com/in-depth/2019/02/28/theres-no-end-to-miseries-of-man-animal-conflict-victims-in-assam/>

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 visit us in the chars and buy all their monthly or weekly vegetables from us. We used to 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 make the oppositions between communities stark, rigid and unitary. The right-wing state’s indifference, inaction and silence on Muslim char-dwellers’ continued forced migration and landlessness along with its violent eviction politics remind me of Huub van Baar’s (2016) concept of ‘evictability’. Van Baar looked at the Roma community in Europe to show how some communities are made more susceptible to continued eviction by the state and how through such continued spectacles of evictions the state engages in “social and political production of the Roma’s alleged “nomadism” and “rootlessness”” (Van Baar 2016: 223), turning them into objects of fear, hatred and distrust. The Muslim char-dwellers are facing a similar fate wherein they have been turned into objects of ‘evictability’.

The char-dwellers have historically been a migratory community, but the nature of their migration has changed now – they are being systematically forced to lose their lands, migrate and become



politically precarious, providing unfree, devalued labor for the racial urban capitalist economy. This migration is deskilling them, dehumanizing them and systematically cutting them off from their generational relations with land and water.

Climate change has only worsened the experiences of floods and has increased erosion rates. The floods and erosion today are rapidly displacing char people, damaging their crops and devouring their lands. Between the period 1986-2015, temperatures in the Brahmaputra flood plains are said to be increased by 0.90 degrees Celsius. Rainfall is believed to be increased by 2.5 mm per year in the floodplains that will lead to an increase of the discharge of the Brahmaputra by 13%. (Dutta et al 2021, Borah et al 2022). It is also said that the sediment load of the Brahmaputra will increase by 40% by 2075 that will lead to the widening of the river and subsequently cause more violent floods. (Borah et al 2022). This is a serious warning bell for places like char-lands which are criss-crossed by different rivers and their tributaries and are formed by the fluvial activities of the river. Climate change has already destroyed agricultural production, causing severe loss to char-dwellers who are largely dependent on agriculture. This is clearly seen in river-islands like Majuli where people are slowly giving up their traditional livelihoods and have been turned landless and are thus, rapidly migrating. (Das 2015). Barpeta district, where my fieldwork is based has been declared as one of the vulnerability hot spots in the North-east India region. (Alam et al 2022).

Feminist geographers writing from the standpoint of critical climate justice have shown how the impact of climate change is differentiated and how one's vulnerability to climate change effects varies depending on one's caste, class, gender, region, religion, and other socio-political locations and factors. (Sultana 2021, Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2007, Lahiri-Dutt 2012). In this regard, char-dwellers, particularly Bengali Muslim women in chars are extremely vulnerable to climate change induced consequences. The impact of such consequences on char women came out starkly when

it came to collection of potable water for households. The Pahar, as mentioned earlier, was believed by char people to be volcanic in origin and had a massive crater at the top of it. This crater stored large amounts of fresh water which then flowed down through numerous streams. So instead of the river, people in the Pahar drank water from these streams. And unlike river water, water from the streams could be directly used without it being filtered. However, during my conversations with char women it was revealed that over the years, numerous streams had dried out and they needed to climb higher altitudes than before to collect fresh water. This has increased their labor and older women could no longer share the work. Many have started collecting water from the river but that meant extra labor for filtration. Like many places in South Asia, collection and management of water, particularly drinking water in char-lands, continues to remain women centric labor and climate change has added to their burdens. Such added labor also adversely impacts their health, and in patriarchal societies like char-lands, women's health is hardly a priority in the families.

Besides, in my fieldwork, it became apparent that while men migrate from chars in search of employment, often to distant places, the women almost always stay behind to take care of the family and manage the small-sized remaining fields. On top of that, for a very long time, child marriage of Bengali Muslim girls in the chars was very common. Many did not send their young girls to school at all, while others who did, did not allow them to continue after a point and arranged for their quick marriage. This again affected their health – frequent pregnancies of young girls in the chars I worked in, made them malnourished and hence, more vulnerable to diseases. Thus, this section of people in the chars are the most vulnerable to climate change induced consequences, including violent floods-erosion since they do not have the socio-economic and political tools to survive such scenarios. It is also then not surprising that a large section of minority women (often

from chars) has been left out of the NRC.<sup>121</sup> Many of these women either lost their documents to floods and erosion or did not have any documents as prescribed by the state to prove their citizenship. Their early marriage or illiteracy also meant that there are no legal documents proving marriage nor any school certificates. Thus, the citizenship project has added new layers of vulnerability to the already present climate crisis and the vulnerability that arises from that for the minority char-dwelling women. If they lose their lives to disasters, these women are not even eligible to receive any Gratuity Relief (GR) because of their inability to prove their citizenship.

The state's contributions to this climate crisis can be seen by acts such as allowing rampant deforestation in the Brahmaputra's upstream areas, or allowing coal mining in Dehing Patkai, one of the last remaining rainforests in Assam.<sup>122</sup> The rampant building and repairing of embankments, as shown in the chapter, have also made matters worse for people in the chars. Wasson et al (2020) while looking at this culture of rampant embankment building in Assam understand this as a technological 'lock-in' wherein "one solution gains ground and others are marginalized." (pp. 84). In 'developing' countries, embankment building is done to secure profits for contractors, elites and other political parties. (Wasson et al 2020).

In Assam, the informal sector has only increased in leaps and bounds with 89.77 percent of workforce being employed in the informal sector during 2009-10 out of which casual workers were the second dominant category. Their numbers must have only increased in the last ten years<sup>123</sup>. (Saikia 2019: 4017-4018). The political and economic precarity that get accompanied because of

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<sup>121</sup> See <https://www.inclusive-citizenship.no/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Women-worst-affected-by-Assams-RCA.pdf>; <https://thewire.in/rights/women-without-parents-an-nrc-ground-report>

<sup>122</sup> See <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/assam-north-eastern-coalfields-protest-tinsukia-coal-mining-1688463-2020-06-12>

<sup>123</sup> Source: NSSO various rounds

landlessness and environmental racism is actively facilitated by the state. Such devalued labor continues to then increase the benefits of an urban economy.

This chapter 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. 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, 'wasted bodies' 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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## **CHAPTER 8: AFFECT, AMBIVALENCE AND POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSFORMATION: A case of NRC lower bureaucrats.**

I was sitting at one of the big dingy rooms at the Barpeta Division of Assam Agricultural Department where I was supposed to meet Pankaj da who besides being an employee of the Department, also worked as an LRCR (a lower bureaucrat handling the NRC process in one NSK or NRC Center) in the chars where my fieldwork was based. Since the beginning of my fieldwork days, i.e., June 2019, I had been frequently in touch and often taking interviews with lower bureaucrats involved with the NRC process in Assam. By now, most were willing to talk about their experiences with the huge state-mandated citizenship project. They entered the project with a lot of zeal and with the intention to save the '*jati*' (regional community) from 'illegal immigrants' but as the project, that lasted for almost five-years (some processes continue till date), neared its end, they were left with more questions and confusion.

Pankaj da, who arrived late, offered me tea, and immediately started talking,

“I knew about the chars, even visited some earlier as part of my departmental work, particularly during floods but I had not stayed there before. At first, I was not at all happy when deputed in the chars, I mean who would like to work there? Tell me? Communication was the major issue. I had to travel first to the *ghat* via bike, then take the ferry and reach the NSK. We used to work there at the NSK, sometimes till late at night, and of course I could not travel at those hours crossing the Brahmaputra, so I often used to sleep at the local Assistant LRCR's house. Towards the end, I used to stay back often. It felt good, you know, I cannot lie. We would even prepare meals together. I became close to a lot of people there. The operator under me, a young boy from the char, used to take me around in his

cycle from house to house particularly during verification phase. Later on, when he wanted to buy a motor-bike, I loaned him money too.”

In my numerous interviews and conversations with lower bureaucrats involved with the NRC, particularly in char areas, such moments, where I could sense a glimmer of change of perceptions of lower bureaucrats (mostly upper-caste, middle class Assamese Hindu men) towards Bengali Muslims in Assam, were in abundance. Even, while I was observing officials and common people (claimants) at the Hearing Centers<sup>124</sup>, such exchanges and encounters were visible.

This chapter will understand the NRC process through largely the experiences of lower bureaucrats involved with it. It will argue that though the NRC was designed as a highly rational, rigid and technical project, the involvement of the lower bureaucrats brought in an invasion of affect to this technical process and in return made the caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats ambivalent. The bodily encounters with Bengali Muslims, a community who historically they have learnt to hate, introduced different affectual experiences to them, making their beliefs in ideologies like ‘*jatiyotabaad*’ (Assamese nationalism) ambivalent and I argue that it is in this ambivalence where may potentially lie the possibilities of change of politics between two historically opposed communities. This chapter looks at how the rational, legal bureaucratic state is impacted in its encounter with a marginalized population, a population that it has historically controlled and violated. This chapter derives its argument from my interviews and conversations with lower bureaucrats, char-dwellers and NGO workers who were helping the char-dwellers with regards to

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<sup>124</sup> where people who were left out of the draft lists of the NRC were allowed to claim citizenship in the ‘hearings’ conducted by a Disposing Officer (DO). Often previously who worked as LRCRs were appointed as a DO in a different NSK/Hearing Center.

the NRC, as well as from my observations at the two Hearing Centers where I participated as an observer for a week in June 2019.

But then what exactly is the NRC? And why was it implemented in Assam? Let me delve into a brief history of it and the technicalities involved with the process, before engaging with the main argument of this chapter.

### 1. NRC: The whats and the whys?

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a direct outcome of the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement of the early 1980s that was led by upper-caste Assamese Hindu men. The movement ended when in 1985 the leaders of the movement and the then Indian Prime-Minister Rajiv Gandhi signed the Assam Accord. One of the primary clauses and demands of the Accord submitted by the leaders of the movement was the creation and updation of a citizens’ register called the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Under the Accord, all residents of Assam who had documentary proof to show that they were born or had migrated to India before January 1, 1966 would be outrightly considered as citizens. However, anyone born or migrating between January 1, 1966 and March 24, 1971 would be de-registered as voters for a period of 10 years. Following which they can register again after showing continuous residence for a period of 10 years in India which would allow them to be considered as citizens. Anyone migrating after March 24, 1971 will be considered a ‘foreigner’ and immediately would be detained and deported back.

The NRC would maintain an updated list of all citizens and it was first conducted in Assam along with the 1951 Census. In 2010, the then state government wanted to start a pilot project of updating the 1951 NRC in two revenue circles in the districts of Kamrup and Barpeta. However, such

attempts had to be aborted after violent clashes broke out in Barpeta between the police and the AAMSU<sup>125</sup> activists (student activists belonging to minority communities) who wanted to submit a memorandum to the government showing issues with certain clauses of the NRC updation. Many people were injured, and a few were killed too. However, after several court petitions by organizations of civil society such as Assam Public Works (APW), the Supreme Court ruled that the NRC updation process in Assam was to begin under its own supervision from 2015.

The NRC updation process demanded documentary proofs for two things: 1. To show that the applicant or the applicant's ancestor (father or grandfather or great-grandfather and so on) had migrated to India before March 24, 1971 and 2. To show the applicant's linkage (what is his/her relationship) to that ancestor who had migrated before March 24, 1971. The first documentary proof is called the 'legacy document' and the second documentary proof is called the 'linkage document'. The Supreme Court had listed a couple of documents to prove one's both legacy (1951 NRC copy or 1966 Voter list or 1971 voter list) and linkage. The applicants had to tie them along with the application form and either submit online or manually at the NSKs. Besides these, certain special clauses were included such as clause 3(3) according to which any 'indigenous' or 'original inhabitant' was automatically made part of the NRC without any documentation proof. However, there is still no official definition of who is an 'indigenous' or 'original inhabitant (OI)' of the state of Assam. In such circumstances, it is interesting to note how the lower bureaucracy involved with the implementation of the NRC actually identified an OI.

Coming to the lower bureaucracy, the chain of command of the NRC project is as given below:

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<sup>125</sup> All Assam Minority Students' Union



*The Supreme Court (overall supervision)---Registrar General of Citizens Registration (RGCR; direction and control of the project)---Director of Citizen Registration (DCR; representation of RGCR at state level)---State Coordinator (the highest authority at State level who will be appointed to manage and see the implementation of NRC at the State level)---District Registrar of Citizens Registration (DRCR; see smooth implementation of NRC at district level, DRCRs were all District Commissioners of the state government)---Additional District Registrar of Citizens Registration (ADRCCR; to assist the DRCRs)---Circle Registrar of Citizens Registration (CRCR; see smooth implementation of NRC at circle level, CRCRs were all District Circle Officers of the state government)---Local Registrar of Citizens Registration (LRCR; see smooth implementation of NRC at the NSK level, LRCRs were all gazetted officers of various departments of the state government)---District Project Supervisor (DPS; a contractual employee who supervises the workings of all CPS for one district)---Circle Project Supervisor (CPS; a contractual employee who supervises the workings of all operators in every NSK for one circle in a district)---Operators (contractual employees responsible for entering every manually given information as data into the system)---Sweepers (responsible for cleaning of NSKs and safe storage of all paper documents).*

In this elaborate chain of command involving hundreds of people, this chapter brings forward arguments through my numerous interactions and observations with mostly LRCRs, CPSs and operators. I have also conducted a few interviews with the DPS and the DRCR. Considering my research is based in the Barpeta district of Assam, I have interacted with the lower bureaucracy in this district alone. Most of them have served in the char areas. However, I believe the observations

and arguments made in this chapter can be largely applied to the NRC Project and the lower bureaucrats involved in it at the entire state level.

The process began with awareness campaigns regarding the NRC with people being told about the concept of the Citizens Register, the documents one would need to prove their citizenship and the process of filling up the application forms. The nodal center at the grassroots level for coordinating the NRC process directly with the people was the NRC Seva Kendra or the NSK. In each district, these centers were set up where an LRCR, an assistant LRCR and an operator were appointed. When the NRC process began, these NSKs were the one-stop center to coordinate and conduct everything relating to the NRC at the ground or local level. Be it conducting awareness campaigns regarding the NRC, or helping people fill out forms or finding their legacy and linkage data, these centers assisted people with every step on the way. Though the legacy data was uploaded online and could be accessed by the public, for the poor, illiterate people living in remote places, they came to the NSKs where they were helped by the LRCR and the operator in identifying their legacy data and filling out the forms. Besides, some legacy data of certain villages were in no condition to be uploaded online and people then had to go to the NSKs to access their legacy data physically. Filled out forms could be submitted online or at the NSK manually. Besides being available online, forms were also distributed by these NSKs. After the submission of forms, people were given a copy of the form and a receipt copy.

Next, both online and field verifications were conducted of applicants, mostly by Verification Officers who were again gazetted government officers (often an LRCR or a Block Level Officer). The government then published the first draft of the NRC on 31 December 2017, after which any names excluded were given the opportunity to 'claim' for induction. Following which, re-verification of such claimants was done. On July 31, 2019, the government published the final

draft of the NRC. After the publication of the final draft, the excluded could again 'claim' for inclusion while individuals could also raise 'objections' to people or families who were included in the NRC. Those who had claimed and against whom 'objections' were raised were called for 'hearings' at the NSKs (which now became 'Hearing Centers') which were presided over by Disposing Officers (DO). The DOs submitted their reports, but the final decision remained with the State Coordinator. The final NRC got published on 31 August 2019 wherein 1.9 million people were excluded. They have been given the option of filing judicial cases challenging their exclusion. However, till then, they all equally run the risk of becoming stateless or remaining in state run detention camps. Assam already has six detention camps, all inside state run prisons. The government plans to build ten more detention camps. The living conditions are pathetic in these detention camps while the state continues to erode every basic human right of the detainees.

The NRC depended a lot on technology. Software tech giant WIPRO was taken on board to develop the software that enabled smooth data entry and storage of data of various applicants of the NRC. All the applicants' data were uploaded online. Verification was also done online by the officers and following the field verification, the online and field data were matched and uploaded. All NRC data were processed and uploaded online by using various software. WIPRO sub-contracted ISS (Integrated Systems and Services) to provide largely manpower for the everyday functioning of the NRC. Hence, all the CPS and operators were both recruited and paid by ISS. Apart from WIPRO and ISS, several other companies were involved at various stages of the NRC such as Bohniman Systems, Madoc Technologies, Trans Technologies Solutions, RJ45 Technologies etc. The NRC also stored biometric data of all those who were called for 'hearings' or who were not included in the final draft of the NRC. One is not clear as to how those data will be used, considering no privacy agreement has been signed by the applicants. But the large

dependence on technological infrastructure was widely publicized by the state to give the impression that the NRC project was ‘scientific’, ‘rigid’ and ‘error-free’. However, the involvement of the lower bureaucracy added interesting complexities to this exercise and brought in disjunctures to this entire narrative of NRC being ‘scientific, rigid and error-free’.

## 2. THE DISJUNCTURES AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

I am sitting with Pradeep da who is working as a CPS for a revenue circle in Barpeta district and Prasanna da who works as an assistant LRCR in an NSK where I had participated as an observer when the NRC ‘Claim and Objection’ hearings were going on in June 2019. By then, the final NRC list was released and both of them were busy preparing formal rejection letters to be sent to the excluded. It was only on the receipt of formal rejection letters that the excluded can approach the Foreigner’s Tribunals challenging their exclusion. We have been hanging out for months now and though the environment was still tense, they finally agreed on giving me an interview which they were clear I could not record in the tape-recorder. I was asked by them to sit in the restaurant that was very near to the Circle Office where Pradeep da worked. I cycled my way to the restaurant, instead of taking my car so that I do not attract much attention in the area and that no harm may come to them.

They knew that I was working with Bengali Muslim char-dwellers and Prasanna da immediately started our session with a question, “Acha *baideo*, tell me something, what is it with these [Bengali Muslims] people’s names and surnames? Why is it so confusing? How can a Halima become a Halmina in some documents? And how can an Ali become a Javed?” Interestingly, this came up in my discussion with Shahjahan da, a Muslim human-rights activist and a political leader in

Assam. He explained that many Bengali Muslims were left out of the NRC simply because of prejudices and the failure to understand the socio-political world of the Bengali Muslims by caste Hindu Assamese officers, including Muslim names.

The existence of different names in different documents largely happens because of Assamese Hindu officers' unfamiliarity and carelessness in documenting Muslim names during critical exercises such as the updation of the Voters List or making of the ration-cards, etc. "The language and accent are big barriers too," Shahjahan da had said,

"I mean these officers who come to update the voters' lists or make ration-cards are already in a hurry and when asked a name, the Bengali Muslim person can say the name correctly but the officer hears a slightly different name [Halima-Halmina?] or most Bengali Muslim women often being shy do not say their names out loud. Instead of house-to-house updation during the verification of voters' lists, often officers simply ask the Village Headman the names of the electorates in that village and the Headman might know the person through a different name, maybe the name that the person is known by in the village, but on paper his name is different. So, their voter cards show a different name but the name they wrote in the NRC forms is different. Also, Bengali Muslims, particularly in char areas, have a habit of changing their children's names too often, particularly when the child reaches high school. But that change might not be known to other people or it might not be reflected in other documents of that child. People have lost their citizenship for as trivial as these reasons, Bhargabi." – Shahjahan da.

I tried replicating as authentically as possible what Shahjahan da had mentioned in front of me to both of them. They were quiet for a while and then Pradeep da said with a sigh, “Well, time crunch has definitely been an issue with us too. We have often worked till 3 in the morning to meet the Supreme Court deadlines, so I guess it is very much possible that mistakes were made by us too.” Though, he said it casually, we all understood the gravity of the consequences of such ‘mistakes’, that such ‘mistakes’ were really structural violence for the marginalized and it is this which I explore in the next section.

### *2.1 The disjunctures*

I have extracted three disjunctures in the narrative of a ‘rigid’ and ‘rational’ NRC that brought in fresh structural violence for the already marginalized.

#### a) Training

Though the DPS of the district claimed that sufficient training for all people involved in implementation of the NRC were provided, my interactions and observations proved otherwise. Gazetted government officers who were appointed as the LRCR and later who worked as a DO were extremely confused about various clauses of the NRC. Many CPSs revealed that LRCRs would often call them at any point of time of the day or sometimes even at night and clarify the rules and guidelines given. While observing the ‘hearings’ at the two NSKs, I noticed that often a DO would approach other DOs in the NSK to clarify if the ‘claimant’ can be accepted or rejected. One such case was when a ‘claimant’ had used the ‘legacy data’ from his maternal side and not his paternal side. The appointed DO had no clue if claiming citizenship through one’s maternal side was possible and had to finally approach another DO who luckily had a better grasp over the

clauses. But one can wonder the consequences if that DO would have decided to not seek clarification. People's citizenship rights and often lives were depended on such critical knowledge and decisions of LRCRs/DOs, as in most cases, their word was taken as the final word. Assistants to LRCRs or DOs and operators would often joke with me saying how there always was a 'boss DO' among all the DOs in an NSK. By 'boss DO' they meant a DO who possessed better knowledge about the various clauses or who had waded his path through the maze of rules concerning the NRC. They would also add how his decisions were mostly taken as final without anyone questioning him. Such DOs were also often called for briefings at the district level or for workshops. So, the hierarchy and knowledge gap among the LRCRs and DOs increased. Most were clueless too because LRCRs who were gazetted officers of government departments would often miss out training by citing departmental work.

Though operators were trained considerably, some even in two phases, towards the end of the exercise when there was shortage of time and mounting work, most were recruited without training. In fact, these later operators were recruited often without them having the basic knowledge of computers. One CPS said that the circle area in which his NSKs were located was mostly a Muslim majority area. Hence, to avoid any conversations on the lines of '*Hindu boys were not given a chance*', he deliberately went over to the few Hindu households in the area and even though the young Hindu boys hardly possessed any knowledge of computers, he recruited and trained them himself by giving them daily 'tuitions'. Many operators informally asked their friends to help them share the workload. Many such informally recruited young men were not on state pay roll but their operator friends sometimes paid a part of their salary to them.

The extreme time crunch, that was partly contributed by the rigid deadlines set by the SC, was agreed upon by everyone that I happened to talk to. The Supreme Court hardly ever extended

deadlines for there was a lot of public scrutiny of the exercise. The dominant morality and the public sentiment wanted that the NRC be updated with little time wasted and the large number of 'illegal immigrants' be thrown out as soon as possible to relieve the burden on the economy and to 'save Assamese culture and language'. Hence for districts like Barpeta, where the population was extremely high, the lower bureaucracy involved worked round the clock. Many admitted working with just three hours of sleep as they pulled several all-nighters at the NSK. Hence, operators themselves have admitted to sometimes entering wrongly spelt names or dates or numbers into the system. It is important to underline here that many people's names were excluded from the drafts of the NRC due to spelling mistakes or when important numbers like the Legacy Data Code were entered incorrectly. They then had to face the harassment of 'hearings'.

The compartmentalization of the lower bureaucracy was very detailed with specific people handling specific functions of the NRC. They were hands-on with specific things that required to be taken care of by them as part of that position (often as discussed above, many were confused about many responsibilities that fell within their position) but had no clue about other functions of the NRC or the NRC in entirety. It is exactly how Taylorism worked in early capitalism when one worker specialized in one task without knowing anything about the product in its entirety. This seriously led to deskilling, turning everything into routine and mundane work. The operators had no clue how the data that they were entering would be used and to whom it would be passed on to. The LRCRs did not know how the verification was being done at the State Coordinator level or by the DRCR. This also reduced questioning and encouraged compliance. It was easier to handle the lower bureaucracy when they did not know how a machinery in its entirety was functioning. They were all tunnel visioned and were focused on just finishing the work assigned without really understanding the consequences.



## b) Objection process

As mentioned earlier, applicants whose names were included in the NRC drafts and against whom people had reservations, the rules allowed that ‘objections’ to such inclusions could be raised by anyone. Such people were then called for a ‘hearing’ to defend their inclusion. However, the rules also said that the objectees too needed to clearly reveal all information about themselves and submit documents revealing their identity. They too needed to be present on the day of the ‘hearing’ against whom they had made their objections. However, the on-ground reality was far from this.

My interviews with operators, CPSs and LRCRs revealed that objections were hardly made till just one night before the deadline to make objections. However, on the last night, more than double the objections were filled in, many coming from largely members of AASU<sup>126</sup>, the same organization that spearheaded the ‘anti-foreigner’ Assam movement and categorically declared that Assam harbored lakhs of ‘illegal immigrants’. They are also the organization that mobilize the dominant ideology of ‘*jatiyotabaad*’ in the state and keep alive the xenophobia against the ‘illegal Bangladeshi’. Objections were largely filled against Bengali Muslim applicants. Objectees neither submitted any information about themselves nor did they attach any document IDing them as per protocol. The software that took in ‘objection’ forms would not successfully upload any information until all blank information were filled and documents identifying the objectee were provided. But it is interesting how the objectees worked around it. Operators who experienced this firsthand later recounted to me how they were ordered by CRCRs and LRCRs to instead attach blank pages with ‘made-up’ names and addresses so that the system successfully uploads the

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<sup>126</sup> All Assam Students’ Union

information. They admitted how confused, bemused and aghast they were to see how the objection procedure worked. They also confessed that many objections were ‘allowed’ to be made long after the deadline had passed through back-dating, that is putting on paper and in records a date that is earlier than when it really happened. “They were creating Bangladeshis when there were none,” was what many operators had told me.

LRCRs revealed that how just weeks before publication of the final NRC, they were instructed to reject any name, but particularly any Muslim name that they had even the slightest doubts about. This instruction from the higher-ups was informally passed down because the exclusions from the NRC were not as much as had been claimed by the Assamese nationalists, particularly organizations like AASU or even the BJP state. Over several decades now, the Assamese nationalist organizations have been chest thumpingly declaring that Assam harbored more than 40 lakhs (4 million) ‘illegal immigrants’ and yet the final NRC showed otherwise. The NRC instead of proving and concretizing their claims, was beginning to puncture them and hence, illegal steps were taken by them to safeguard the tall claims that they had made.

Many operators and CPSs revealed that there was an acute shortage of diesel, printer ink and paper in many NSKs, particularly towards the end, when the hearings had started. Many people who came to submit applications could not be provided with all the pages of a receipt. Poor, illiterate people had no inkling what all they should even receive and never questioned the officers. This created major problems for many when they went for the hearings. Since most hearings happened in NSKs located in far-off districts and different than those where they submitted their application forms, the DOs conducting the hearings created problems for people who did not have all the pages of their receipt. Many applicants who travelled long distances spending substantial amount of money had to then again travel back to the NSK where they submitted their forms, request the

other pages and then reschedule their hearing dates. Officers who were anyway looking for targets to reject, particularly Bengali Muslims, often used non-availability of all pages of receipts to reject those names. Applicants faced a lot of harassment for such lack of material infrastructure on the ground to implement the NRC.

### c) Salaries

As per the Supreme Court directives, all operators were supposed to be provided with a salary of Rs. 14,500 per month. However, ISS who was tasked with distributing the salary to the operators, were only providing Rs. 5,050 per month. Interviews with several operators revealed how they had not received their salaries for months. Sweepers at the time of interview had not received their salaries for a stretch of upto eighteen months. Many started doing menial jobs to feed their families during the pandemic. The salaries are released by the government to WIPRO who then provides them to ISS. ISS then distributes the salaries to the operators, CPSs and the sweepers. This networked working of capitalist firms, which involved several parties, helped them in not being accountable while continuing to reap the profits. On being asked why operators and CPSs were not putting any pressure on ISS, a supervisor retorted that if they went to ISS, the later blamed WIPRO and if they went to Wipro, the government was blamed for the non-payment of funds. They had no idea whom they should even approach. And it is this ambiguity that is brought about by the involvement of multiple parties in an intricate network, which is how the capitalistic infrastructure runs away from accountability.

To protest against this and to bring it to the SC's notice, operators formed an informal union and made 'Whatsapp' and 'Facebook' groups. Later, some of them even met at a local activist's office in Guwahati to legally notify the Labour Office and formally place a complaint. When ISS and WIPRO got a whim of it, they at first asked the members to take down the complaint. Some were

scared and eventually signed a no-objection statement, but others stood their ground. Following this, ISS and WIPRO came out with a statement explaining the reasons behind the pay-cuts. Since then, the operators were kept at a close watch, and many were even over-worked so that they could not attempt unionizing in the future. Many operators believed that the training of operators of one district was always conducted within the district to prevent inter-mingling and networking attempts amongst operators from different districts.

Hence, many operators admitted of taking a token money from applicants to fill out their forms for otherwise they would not have been able to feed their families. The LRCRs and the CPS of the NSKs were equally aware of such practices and even though one could not take money for filling out forms, they largely chose to overlook them. The xenophobic and Islamophobic media even broke out rumors that most of the Muslim operators, particularly stationed in NSKs where the Muslim population was in majority, were taking money to illegally include 'illegal foreigners' in the NRC. The sentiment was so strong that there were police verifications of largely Muslim operators. One Muslim operator told me that he had been called thrice for police verification. And by the fourth time he was so frustrated that he complained to the CRCR who thankfully agreed to talk with the local police station to stop the harassment.

When the workload was tremendous, lower level bureaucrats were even called on Saturdays and Sundays. Most told me that at first when they entered the project, it was solely with the idea to serve the '*jati*'. It was to solve the age-old 'immigrant' issue. They thought they were getting involved with something nobler and bigger. In fact, their initial training sessions often had motivating speeches by the superiors. With the passage of years, those zealous systemic motivations stopped, and the NRC became a big-time routine, mundane and for many, a questionable exercise. Operators who were recruited later were not even given any contracts to

sign and hence, worked under extremely precarious conditions. Besides, the office spaces they worked in were extremely unhygienic, cramped, dingy and in tropical summers almost suffocating.

The LRCRs who were gazetted government officers were not paid any extra salary for their NRC work but simply a minimum token money, considering they were already getting their regular monthly salaries from the state government. However, many admitted that the NRC work was extremely exhausting, and they were working round the clock. This work was unlike the regular departmental bureaucratic work that they were accustomed to. Their regular bureaucratic work was much more relaxed, even bordering slow and could be pushed back to be dealt with later. The bureaucracy was not used to working with tight deadlines and tremendous public scrutiny. With increasing workload and no incentive to work that much harder, many in fact were doing it mechanically. Some reached late to the NSKs or asked their assistants or the operators to handle the work at times. Irregular payment of salaries was also one of the reasons why many LRCRs deliberately missed out on training sessions or were not very enthusiastic to learn about the basic rules and guidelines of NRC. This led them to commit mistakes or become more confused of the process. One of the LRCRs who happened to be with the Agriculture Department confessed how they continued doing departmental work along with the NRC work and it was exhausting. He said that mistakes were very possibly made, errors of judgment regarding people during the 'hearings' might have easily happened, and field verifications did not often go as claimed on paper. Many LRCRs who were also given the additional task of verifying the information that applicants filled in on the ground would not do a house-to-house verification but simply sit in one particular house, more often the local panchayat leader's and confirm the information of various individuals. This

largely created problems for freshly migrated and settled families (due to erosion-floods) who were often seen with suspicion by the local people and the village leaders.

## *2.2 Structural violence*

Johan Galtung (1969) in his seminal essay understands structural violence as that which hinders some people achieving their full potential in the real and somatic world as opposed to few others. His focus on outcomes as opposed to processes made him understand that wherever there are unequal outcomes, one can find structural violence. (Gupta 2012). “The reason such violence is considered to be structural is that it is impossible to identify a single actor who commits the violence. Instead, the violence is impersonal, built into the structure of power.” (Gupta 2012: 20).

The disjunctures that were brought about by the involvement of the lower bureaucrats in the NRC process introduced newer cycles of structural violence for the already marginalized. It restricted people belonging to certain communities (Bengali/Muslim/often lower caste Bengali Hindus) to obtain their potential achievements by making the procedure of the NRC arduous and harassing and in the process denying many their critical citizenship rights. The structural nature of it was apparent when factors such as time-crunch was systemically produced which resulted in incorrections by the lower bureaucrats. These incorrections led to exclusions of some people from the NRC. The fact that most lower bureaucrats or even people in higher ranks who controlled in varied ways the implementation of the NRC project were upper-caste, middle-class, Assamese Hindu men also indicate the fact why violence brought by such disjunctures can be called structural in nature.

These were men whose positionalities in society ensured that they were socialized in and believed in '*jatiyotabaad*' as an ideology, which in most cases, as I observed during my interactions with them, bordered on xenophobia and islamophobia. The casual and everyday stereotyping of Bengalis but more particularly Bengali Muslims in the NSKs or even in the conversations with me, brought out their strong belief on '*jatiyotabaad*' quite clearly. "NRC is an extremely needed and noble cause, to save our '*jati*', for our '*jati*'s future'. I, and many others I know, got into this project because we thought this would be the next big step for our community after Assam Movement..." These words by Pradeep da, were reflected by most lower bureaucrats that I talked to. Their prejudiced ideology facilitated by their positionalities, hence, introduced disjunctures such as incorrectly spelt Muslim names, suspicion over Muslim applicants and the quick rejection of them, in case of even slight errors. Besides, as discussed before, the NRC allowed the inclusion of 'indigenous' people without any documents through the clause 3(3). Now, though there exists no legal definition of an 'indigenous' in Assam, the officers were seen to be including people citing 3(3) based on a person's dress, the language that he/she spoke or even the surnames that he/she had, particularly when people were called for hearings.

This structural violence was most prominent in the arbitrariness that was attached to decisions taken by lower bureaucrats that had severe consequences on the marginalized, particularly those who got finally excluded from the NRC. That many people were called for hearings or were rejected from the NRC because of shortage of paper or printer ink for which people (often the poor minority who is illiterate) were not provided with receipts and subsequently harassed during hearings or names being mis-spelt by officers for reasons discussed - each of these had an arbitrariness attached to it, consequences of which were life-threatening for people at the receiving end of those decisions. Many operators incorrectly entered crucial data such as legacy data codes

from manual forms to the online system because of increasing workload and time-crunch which led to rejection of names.

Akhil Gupta (2012) while understanding the “production of arbitrariness” (pp. 14) by the bureaucratic state in implementation of the welfare schemes in India said that “officials made decisions on eligibility on the basis of guesswork and contingency. Such arbitrary decisions had no negative consequences for the officials who were satisfied that they were doing the best under the circumstances; however, for the clients of their programs these decisions mattered a great deal and may have made the difference between life and death...” (pp. 14). Thus, who got accepted without documents because of being ‘seen’ as an ‘indigenous’ or who got rejected, even with documents but due to “mistakes” of often exhausted, ignorant and biased lower bureaucrats were arbitrary decisions.

But the violence that such arbitrariness brought into the lives of the minorities was severe. Many poor Bengali Muslims went into severe debt when they had to travel repeatedly for hearings because of rejections in draft lists of the NRC. Lives were lost due to accidents while travelling to the hearing centers or when a few committed suicides fearing deportation.<sup>127</sup> Over 1.9 million people are looking at statelessness or more harassment and economic burden over new legal procedures as they would have to challenge those rejections in Foreigner Tribunals, rejections that were structurally produced and often were arbitrarily decided. There existed no rationale behind those decisions, or at least not what the formal guidelines had drafted.

This structural violence brought about by the new documentary state regime was possible because the minorities’ lives were in some ways reflective of Agamben’s (1998) ‘homo sacer’ lives -

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<sup>127</sup> See <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/aug/07/two-killed-40-hurt-in-bus-accident-on-way-back-from-nrc-hearing-in-assam-2015543.html>



meaning lives that can be killed without their killing being considered or imagined as a sacrifice. Gupta (2012) argued this in the case of the poor in India and how people dying due to poverty in India is normalized such that the state or the system is not questioned by the society. However, it is critical to avoid the minorities, particularly the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers in my case, being reduced completely to Agamben's figure of the 'homo sacer' or 'bare lives' since it dissolves the many tangents through which the NRC was tackled with by them in their everyday lives. Instead of being 'helpless victims', this documentary regime was negotiated and worked around with, particularly with the help of local NGOs and as we will see in the next section, with the help and understanding of the local bureaucrats.

### 3. AFFECTIVE 'ENCOUNTERS'

Traditionally bureaucracies have been understood to be 'rational'. Weber (2006) understands that 'rational-legal' bureaucracy functions in an objective manner – "Objective discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to *calculable rules* and "without regard for persons." (pp.58, emphasis in original). He even argued that the special characteristic of the bureaucracy which is considered as a virtue by capitalism is its ability to be calculative and be emotionally detached, that is, becoming dehumanized and removing from it any and all kinds of emotions – love, hate, etc. Weber believed the removal of anything that can be considered personal or emotional is necessary so that the bureaucrats' perceptions are not impacted and that they do not end up making any 'irrational' decisions. It is its dehumanized nature that make bureaucracy predictable and also efficient. (Weber 2006: 58).

However, studies have shown how in reality, bureaucracies are anything but ‘rational’ and ‘emotionally detached’. (Gupta 2012; Mathur 2016; Hull 2012; Bear 2007, 2015; Graeber 2015). In fact, bureaucratic states have used affect to control their populations. Ann Stoler (2007) while talking about the Dutch colonial politics in the Indies (Batavia) shows how rationalist colonial states were indeed about systematizing and dictating what and how much should the colonized feel and towards who. She picks up Janis Jenkins (1991) who believed that the colonial states wanted to standardize feelings while producing and harnessing them. Stoler was of the opinion that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century statecraft was about governing populations by controlling their sentiments and affective dispositions. “For [Francis] Bacon, the role of the state was...to curtail the dangerous and combustible passions of ordinary men. Statecraft was not opposed to the affective, but about its mastery.” (Stoler 2007: 10). Borrowing Williams’ (1977) concept, she understood that the colonial states created varied “structures of feeling” (pp. 6).

In continuation with the state control of affect, Jenkins (1991) has also shown how the state constructs and controls emotions of the Salvadoran people (fear, anxiety) towards the state’s enemies: the guerilla communists. This leads to solidifying of boundaries and othering processes. Affect is social, as has been argued by philosophers like Spinoza (2002) or feminist thinkers like Sara Ahmed (2014a). Ahmed, (2014a, 2014b) in fact, takes that a step further to argue how emotions are already present when one enters a socio-cultural or political world. They have an independent existence, and it is these emotions that create boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Thus, emotions create ‘the hated other’ and ‘the illegitimate life’. The NRC lower bureaucrats who were engaged with the project on the ground were mostly from the majoritarian community: upper-caste, middle-class, Assamese Hindu men and hence their ‘structures of feelings’, that is, how they should be feeling towards the other which is the linguistic and religious minority

(Bengali/Muslim/lower-caste) has already been defined by a state that is also dominated by upper-caste, upper-middle-class, Assamese Hindu men. In fact, their feelings towards the 'other' have been carefully crafted and sedimented over years of socialization. The hate, disgust, suspicion, and anger that they are supposed to feel for the 'other' are what that have kept alive the narrative of the 'other', as was mentioned by Ahmed. The structural violence that was seen in the many disjunctures of the NRC in the previous section pushed forward such racialized affectual narrative further.

This racialization of affect was explained brilliantly by Berg and Ramos-Zayas (2015) when they said that affect creates race and vice-versa. In fact, according to them, the racialized practices conditioning Latin American and Caribbean populations in the US "have relied on how their affective dispositions have been manipulated, represented, and stereotyped since the colonial period." (2015: 656). They go on to talk about how the racial bureaucratic post-colonial state produces "liable affect" resulting in "simplified, undermined subjectivity of populations racialized as Other" and "empowering affect" that results in a "privileged and nuanced affective subjectivity frequently reserved for whites in the United States and for self-styled 'whitened' elites in Latin America." (2015: 656). Thus, the superior subjectivity of caste Hindu Assamese male bureaucrats was drawn from their possession and expression of hate, disgust and other state approved affect towards the racial 'other' (Bengali/Muslim/lower-caste), whose affectual world was dominated by fear, hopelessness, etc., that kept alive their 'inferior' subjectivity. Thus, it is not surprising that the marginalized often imagine the state as an object of fear, fantasy and hope (Reeves 2011; Aretxaga 2003), all of which keep the 'magic of the state' afloat (Taussig 1997) while also keeping the marginalized in control.

However, as recalled by Pankaj da in the introductory part of this chapter, the NRC exercise provided an opportunity where the upper-caste, middle-class, Assamese Hindu men were exposed to the lifeworld of the Bengali Muslims be it while working at the NSKs located in the chars or in the Hearing Centers where they presided over the ‘claim’ and ‘objection’ hearings. The NRC allowed them a chance to finally see their supposed ‘other’, their disgusted and hated ‘illegal immigrant’ Bengali Muslims in flesh and blood. It gave them the space to interact with them, live with them and in the process opened up spaces of understanding and questioning of their long-held beliefs and ideologies. In my conversations with caste Hindu Assamese LRCRs who served in the chars, they understood how frequently people migrated because of erosion and floods and yet how their addresses on voting lists and other documents still remained the same. One of the LRCR said,

“65% of the people registered as part of my NSK were not physically living there but their vote was there. They had to migrate to nearby Goalpara, Dolgoma, and such. But most refrain from changing their address on voting lists because they fear that their names would be cancelled. So, they travel all the way to the chars when elections happen. Imagine the plight of these people! I mean, how can char-dwellers not migrate? When I was the LRCR, my own NSK was destroyed twice by the floods and we had to ourselves shift our NSK to another place, so how to blame these people?”

Instances would crop up when the caste Hindu bureaucrats even tried accommodating and negotiating with the Bengali Muslims, particularly in the chars since over-time they became accustomed to the people’s difficulties and the ebb and flow of their lives. Many admitted to

pushing hearing dates during floods or allowing extra days to arrange the documents, if they found claimants missed out on some necessary documents.

“Often most people in the chars would bring their entire families, even though it would be clearly written in the hearing notices that just the person called should arrive, so we did try and arrange for food and water and even asked if they have accommodation near the hearing centers. If a family had multiple hearings [of different family members] on the same NSK spread over couple of days, then we also conducted all their hearings on the very day, even though we had to stay up late. You see, char people have to otherwise rent boats and travel for more than five hours, plus lose out on days of wage labor or cultivation in their fields. They cannot afford to lose so much money and time.” – an LRCCR who served in the chars.

LRCCRs also admitted to frantically arranging for phone numbers of people in chars who had migrated and yet needed to be informed of hearings “And network is such a big issue in the chars! So, I in fact used to gather some of their relatives’ numbers too from the Village Headman and inform all of them as well. I mean, just in case.” Most also were taken aback by the supportive behavior of the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. An LRCCR recalled how during floods, when the NSK would be deep in water, char-dwellers would carry trunks containing documents and store in safer places, just at his one phone-call, sometimes even late at night.



*Image v. An NSK during floods in chars; courtesy: Ahmed da.*

Such affective relationships of Bengali Muslims, particularly char-dwellers, with documents were often repeated when officers would recall how during hearings they would encounter documents going as far back as 1910 –“The way they store and take care of documents is something we should learn from, *baideo*. I have seen char-dwellers having even a receipt of a radio that their great-grandfather bought during British times. Many here safely hoard documents, from restaurant receipts to land documents. During floods, I have seen people here first saving documents, then others, including people.” The affective relationship that char-dwellers exhibited towards documents also made the caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats see those documents in new light – acknowledging the Bengali Muslims’ history and their anxieties. Ethnographic studies have shown how documents are filled with affect not just for common people but also the bureaucrats involved. (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 2009; Mathur 2016; Hull 2012). Most admitted that almost all Bengali

Muslims who were even called for hearings had valid documents and the rejections were done not on lack of valid documents but because of “stupid” mistakes that they committed because of their illiteracy or lack of a better understanding of the NRC.

This was contrasted by them with how the objection processes were conducted, particularly with the involvement of the '*jatiyotabaadi*' organizations like AASU who they had grown up believing in. The NRC process made them witness the politics and workings of such '*jatiyotabaadi*' organizations from close quarters. These organizations have always made tall claims of the existence of a large number of 'illegal Bangladeshis' in Assam, particularly in the chars. But the bogus and 'illegal' way of filing 'objections' by such organizations made them question such claims of theirs. Besides, the exposure to chars and the char-dwellers also made them closely observe the very people such organizations have been framing as 'illegal immigrants'. An operator in an NSK recalled how the Disposing Officer (DO) at the center was asked to change some status of applications as 'rejected' from 'accepted' –

“The State level office would return some accepted files as 'rejected' and would ask DO sir to change the 'speaking orders', making up reasons for rejection. I remember Sir being extremely angry, asking us how does he create reasons even when an applicant had all the documents. So instead, he simply wrote that the claimant has all valid documents but in compliance with decision reached by the higher authorities as part of the Final NRC (FNRC), it has been 'rejected'.”

Many DOs admitted how higher authorities had categorically instructed them to reject Muslim names even if there was slight suspicion. “The priority was rejection than acceptance as we moved to the final phase of publication of the NRC”, as was said by one of the DOs. Thus, many were confused and were questioning several things – the motive and the implementation of the NRC,

the number of ‘illegal immigrants’ in the state etc., while their own perceptions of the Bengali Muslims and the chars were changing in the process.

Affect is imagined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as rhizomatic. “Rhizomes are about multiplicity; they cannot be sited, cornered, controlled, curbed, or located. Nor can they be given any shape, structure, or hierarchy...affect as the rhizome itself which is everywhere, in constant motion, and unsitabile.” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 13). Thus, affect can flow or move in any direction and multiply, which is why affective ‘encounters’ have been imagined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as transformative or that which can bring radical changes. Navaro-Yashin (2009) while talking about Turkish-Cypriots’ relation to ruins left in their homes that were earlier owned by Greek-Cypriots, notes how affect is produced relationally with respect to other nearby objects or people. The caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats encountered the Bengali Muslims physically when they interacted and lived with them over a course of five long years, gaining understanding of them and their lifeworld in the process. It is through such ‘encounters’ that feelings of understanding, pain, sympathy, negotiations etc. were being introduced and were invading their earlier perceptions and feelings of hatred, disgust and anger towards the Bengali Muslims, who in their heads were always the ‘illegal immigrant’. The fact that affect was rhizomatic, its flow not restricted to any fixed direction or hierarchy, allowed such affectual boundaries of how a caste Hindu Assamese ought to feel towards the Bengali Muslim ‘other’ as taught by dominant socio-political institutions, to be broken. Thus, one could easily sense confusion and disgust of caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats towards doyens of ‘*jatiyotabaadi*’ institutions such as AASU instead, while compassion and understanding for the so called ‘other’. And it is in this rhizomatic nature of affect where one can possibly locate the potentiality to break the defined ‘us’ and ‘them’ and to challenge the state’s controlling of affective narratives, that is, how one should feel towards the ‘other’.



Deleuze and Guattari (1987) picked up Spinoza's concept of 'affectus' to explain this rhizomatic nature of affect, wherein affect is in a continual state of becoming, "a continual inclining or declining slope or greater or lesser degrees of intensity or potentiality." (Seigworth 2011: 189). And it is in this formulation of affect that possibilities of change in one's subjectivity open up. For it ideates that affect can not only flow in any direction but it also is always becoming, meaning possibilities of change in how one feels towards an object always linger on. For the caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats, such possibilities of change of affective behavior and boundaries came with the daily affective encounters with the Bengali Muslims. The affective encounters allowed the invasion and existence of a different set of emotions along with the already defined emotions towards Bengali Muslims. This made most of their beliefs and positions ambivalent. However, such presence of ambivalence is welcome because I argue that it possibly has the potentiality of rupturing xenophobic-Islamophobic ideologies and othering narratives.

#### 4. AMBIVALENCE AND POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSFORMATION

As mentioned in the previous section, I argue here that the ambivalence brought about by the affective encounters possibly has the potentiality to bring about transformations in the politics and perceptions of dominant caste Hindu Assamese towards the Bengali Muslims. In fact, affective encounters, particularly with 'otherness' is called a "destabilizing moment" by Deleuze. (as quoted by Ruddick 2010: 23). Deleuze (1994), picking up from Spinoza, understands the affect ridden encounter as one that "perplexes the soul, forcing it to pose a problem" (pp. 139-140). Such encounters can lead to the birth of new political subjectivities. For Deleuze, new thought or subjectivities emerge through this "violence of the encounter." (Ruddick 2010: 36).

“It is not the harmony of the senses that marks the possibility for thought, but their discord. Thought emerges in a cramped space, forced and under constraint, beginning with an overwhelming visceral refusal, which is at the same time an affirmation, its ‘dark precursor’.” (Ruddick 2010: 37). And the ambivalence that the caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats experienced regarding their long-held beliefs and ideologies, brought about through these affective encounters with the Bengali Muslims, were such moments of cramped spaces where they were forced to think anew.

Affect theorists like Spinoza, Massumi, Deleuze and Guattari and Ahmed have repeatedly emphasized the transformational nature of affective encounters by focusing on the body, which in our case brings in changes of perceptions in the caste Hindu bureaucrats, leading to their ambivalence. “Emotions, in other words, involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected...” (Ahmed 2014a: 4774). Thus, the bodily impressions that are left once “bodies are pressed upon by other bodies” (Ahmed 2014a), leading to a change in feelings and values show how the bodily encounters were central for affect theorists while arguing for transformations. Ahmed (2014a, 2014b) understands that affect is learnt and this social affect is distributed unevenly. Meaning particular affect gets stuck to particular bodies and how then our bodies move towards or away from those bodies is decided by established social norms. However, her work also establishes that one requires close proximity where such bodies can have affectual encounters and newer affect can replace socially defined and older affect that get stuck on fixed bodies. She borrows Anna Gibbs’s (2001) concept of ‘affective contagion’ to highlight cautiously about how affect can transfer from one to another body. (Ahmed 2010: 36). Navaro-Yashin (2009) shows how varied emotions were engendered among Turkish-Cypriots while living around the ruins left by the previous owners to the point that such emotional encounters changed the occupants’

subjectivities towards the Greek-Cypriots, the community that they have been historically in conflict with.

Many operators, DOs and/or LRCRs recounted how pregnant Muslim women, women with young babies or even old men had pulled themselves to the ‘Hearing Centers’, many for ‘illegally’ made objections, and had lined up for hours. An operator at the Circle Office said,

“There was this woman who had two very young babies and she was pregnant with another. It was raining so bad that day and she somehow was almost wet. I told Sir [CRCR] and we finally made arrangements for people, particularly women to sit and brought water for them. That woman, I later heard had come to the Hearing Center travelling almost 10 hours on a bus. Imagine! I mean I have children too! And she had documents. No one knows why she was called *baideo*.”

From my conversations with lower bureaucrats, it was established that NSKs and Hearing Centers were littered with such affective encounters wherein the caste Hindu Assamese finally came face-to-face with their historical ‘enemies’. The narrative of the Bengali Muslim ‘illegal immigrant’ being dacoits and strengthening their own economic power by destroying the ‘Assamese’ culture and economy instead met the frail, old, pregnant and helpless bodies, right in front of their eyes and incited newer emotions – confusion, pain and understanding.

The critical part is to understand how such bodily affectual encounters are intricately related to thought or reason. Massumi (2002), differentiating between affect and emotions understands the former as more bodily, immediate and non-intentional while emotion to be cognitive and intentional, making affect more autonomous than emotion. This was critiqued by feminist affect

theorists like Ahmed (2014a) and Fischer (2016) who believed that such arguments not only project one being more ‘purer’ than the other but also bring back the body/mind dualism, such that affect, unlike emotion, is deprived of any consciousness and reason or thought.

Feminist affect theorists also questioned this distinction because it contributes nothing to political salience. “If affects are beyond judgement, culture, and the sociolinguistic, then what have critical theorists to gain by turning toward affect? How can affect be mobilized for social and political change?” (Fischer 2016: 820). Hsieh (2008) reflected the same sentiments while critiquing Massumi, “By providing an ontology of affect, and not a social theory that might explicate how affects can be manipulated, how they are culturally generated and transmitted, how they can be utilized for change, Massumi deprives affects of political salience.” (pp. 61). For feminist affect theorists, the distinction between affect and emotion is unreal in a world that is messy and one that hardly maintains such distinctions. Scholars like Ahmed who picked up ‘emotion’ to denote everything related to the affectual world strongly believed, as mentioned earlier, that emotions and emotional encounters are intricately connected to production, adherence and nurturing of thoughts. Additionally, unlike Massumi, for feminist affect theorists, emotions are political, they determine our current political behavior and can cause political transformations.

The possibility of a socio-political transformation exists when such bodily affective encounters make the dominant caste Hindu Assamese men ambivalent. Homi Bhabha (1994) noted how the mimetic colonized Indian made the position of the colonizer ambivalent. The colonial dominance that has been always premised on highlighting the differences between the colonizer and the colonized – hence, making one superior leading to justification of the dominance – was threatened by the mimetic colonized Indian, that is, the one who mimics the colonizer in terms of dress, language, living-style, food-habits, etc. or “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but

English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect...” (Bhabha 1994: 124-125). The mimetic men really make the colonizer ambivalent in their beliefs and ideology or even justification of colonialism since it makes the sameness, rather than difference between the colonizer and the colonized apparent. “...colonial authority secretly – rather, *unconsciously* – knows that this supposed difference is undermined by the real sameness of the colonized population...the tension between the illusion of difference and the reality of sameness leads to anxiety. Indeed for Bhabha, colonial power is anxious, and never gets what it wants – a stable, final distinction between the colonizers and the colonized.” (Huddart 2006: 3-4, emphasis in original).

Though I argue that in our case, bodily affective encounters between the dominant and the dominated community bring about an ambivalence for the dominant caste Hindu Assamese, the Bengali Muslims present themselves, in some sense, as Bhabha’s mimetic men figures, for in these affective encounters over years in the NSKs, in the chars or even in the Hearing Centers, what becomes apparent to the dominant caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats that was either refused or was not allowed by the majoritarian ‘*jatiyotabadi*’ sentiments to be seen is how the Bengali Muslims share vast traits of sameness with the caste Hindu Assamese. The affective encounters were highlighting those traits of sameness over differences that otherwise never are underlined by the majoritarian state and society. When their own NSKs were destroyed by the floods and they had to migrate, they understood why Bengali Muslims have been doing the same for decades. From the travails of pregnant women in Hearing Centers (“I have children too!”) to the daily travel of long hours via boats, often followed by buses, etc. they were exposed to continued living and understanding of the lifeworld of the Bengali Muslims, which made them identify things that were never captured by the majoritarian ‘*jatiyotabadi*’ narratives.

I am remembering a conversation I had with one of the TET teachers<sup>128</sup> who taught in the primary school of the char where my fieldwork was based. He was a caste Hindu Assamese who was appointed to the school as part of the government's TET scheme. For more than a year, he lived in the char and taught and later on rented a small room in the nearby village and would cycle his way to the char. He said, "Bhargabi, all children are the same. They never saw me as Hindu. They got so attached to me. Every fortnight when I had to go to my native home, they would get very upset and not let go of me. And then on my arrival, they would start shouting from a distance and carry my bag too." It is sameness like this which continued living and interacting with the Bengali Muslims allowed the caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats to notice.

The mimetic figure thus raises questions on the authority of the colonial domination or in our case the majoritarian domination. (Bhabha 1984: 131). For, the mimetic figure opens up the narrative that historically opposed groups who have always emphasized on 'differences' are not so different after all – it shows that people are made of 'mixed-up' or hybrid cultures, that the 'us' can have traits from 'them'. The NSKs, particularly in the chars, and the Hearing Centers provided the perfect location for these to be identified with. The continued living and interaction with the 'other' in the NSKs and the Centers allowed the dominant to locate and acknowledge the sameness and understand and sympathize with the differences. These spaces allowed continued glimpses into how supposedly 'opposed' cultures and people are in actuality hybrids. Bhabha (1984) understands hybridity as a 'third space' "which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives..." (Rutherford 1990: 211). The closeness and physicality or the corporeal nature of those encounters

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<sup>128</sup> TET or Teacher Eligibility Tests are examinations conducted by the Assam Government based on which teachers are appointed to government schools in Assam.

that were provided by the NRC exercise for more than five years allowed affectivity of understanding and pain to develop; and made their positions ambivalent. Bhabha (1984) highlights the importance of the visual in the politics of ambivalence. The intensity with which affect hits a body is amplified with physical and intimate encounters. Ahmed (2014b) in an interview to Sigrid Schmitz talked about surfacing and how the skin “becomes a border that feels, about the role of the feeling in making that border” (pp. 100) but I show here how the feeling on the skin has a possibility of breaking established borders instead.

Thus, the affective encounters that bring in ambivalence for the dominant caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats open up possibly the potentiality to transform the politics surrounding two historically opposed communities and one of its many beginnings is the ability of the dominant caste Hindu Assamese state agents to understand in some sense (or locate partly) that instead of extremely opposed cultures, cultures, in reality, are hybrid or mixed up. While talking about political change in the Pacific, Roberts et. al (2007) notes how definitional ambivalence of ‘governance’ allowed different dedicated actors to make it inclusive and diverse. “...the ambivalence of the term, its never-completely-settled definition, works to secure certain possibilities for groups dedicated to political change.” (Roberts et. al. 2007: 981). The ambivalence faced by dominant caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats working as part of the NRC process also possibly opens up the potentialities of transformation of current xenophobic-Islamophobic politics ruling the dominant caste Hindu Assamese and the marginalized Bengali Muslims or those seen as the ‘other’ (Bengali/low-caste Hindus/tribals).

## CONCLUSION

The final NRC that was released on 31 August 2019 has left out around 1.9 million people who in the lack of having any international agreements, now stand to remain state-less or kept in detention centers. The procedure for the appeal against the exclusions in the Foreigner's Tribunals would have started, however with COVID, things were delayed, and the excluded people still have not received their receipts justifying their exclusion reasons. Without those receipts, the excluded cannot appeal in the Tribunals.

As of now, the entire project is in limbo and that itself is a structural violence for the excluded whose fates lie hanging. The right-wing state at both the federal state and the national level have refused to accept the final NRC citing reasons of inclusion of 'illegal immigrants' and have demanded a fresh round of re-verification of the NRC.<sup>129</sup> This would further economically pauperize the already marginalized, not to mention the tremendous psychological pressures that they would be forced to go through all over again. A report published by the Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP), a human rights organization, has noted over 51 suicides due to anxieties and trauma that was caused by the NRC.<sup>130</sup> The numbers have only increased since 2019 when the report was published. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022, Manik Das, committed suicide following the harassment and mental torture that he had to face throughout the NRC process, though his name was finally included in the NRC. Almost all suicides, as with exclusions, have been of linguistic and religious minorities in the state. Though the NRC has still not been accepted as 'final' by the state, the excluded are facing a lot of violence already. Most have been unable to avail government

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<sup>129</sup> See <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/we-want-re-verification-of-nrc-assam-govt-to-move-supreme-court-article-90430304>

<sup>130</sup> See <https://cjp.org.in/assam-suicide-fearing-loss-of-citizenship/>



welfare schemes like housing<sup>131</sup> while some have been facing public scrutiny and violence<sup>132</sup>. Besides, the exclusions are very arbitrary, which as discussed in the chapter is a characteristic of the structural violence imposed by the bureaucratic state.

It is no secret that the lower bureaucrats, given their positionality and socialization have engaged in structural violence. They committed errors while spelling Muslim names, they included ‘Original Inhabitants’ or ‘indigenous’ people through biased ways in the NRC and they put Bengali Muslim applicants through extra layers of scrutiny and questioning. And such violence that was committed by them was arbitrary and this arbitrariness was systemically produced. The fact that lower bureaucrats were not paid regularly or worked under extremely tight schedules while battling with power-cuts or floods with little help from higher authorities was how this was systemically produced. Critical decisions surrounding citizenship were taken by people with little to no training regarding rules of the project. The state’s infrequent training sessions or the fact that most officers also had to take care of departmental work besides NRC work (which paid them nothing) also left officers with no time to attend trainings. Thus, decisions were arbitrarily taken, and this arbitrariness is a marker of structural violence that this project inflicted upon the minority.

However, my fieldwork in the Hearing Centers, at the NSKs in the chars and from my conversations with several lower bureaucrats involved with the NRC, it was also revealed how the NRC that started in 2015, exposed the caste Hindu Assamese bureaucrats to their supposed ‘other’ – the ‘other’ (Bengali/Muslim/lower-caste) who they have always considered as a figure deserving of hate and disgust. The difference with this project was the intensive, continued and exhaustive

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<sup>131</sup> See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/apw-moves-sc-to-unlock-biometric-data-of-27-lakh-people-for-aadhaar/articleshow/90553608.cms>; <https://www.newsclick.in/over-27-lakh-people-deprived-aadhaar-benefits-assam-exclusion-NRC>

<sup>132</sup> See <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/assam-mob-thrashes-muslim-man-beef-force-feed-pork-1497292-2019-04-09>

bodily interactions and encounters with the Bengali Muslims. These bureaucrats spent almost five years visiting, living and interacting with the lifeworld of the Bengali Muslims. There were bureaucrats who spent their free time even teaching the children in the primary schools of the chars. An LRRCR said, “towards the end, it became very informal; they would call me and keep a track of where I have reached and accordingly plan their journey to the NSK.” The affective encounters brought in an ambivalence to their long-held beliefs and ideologies and their perceptions of the ‘other’. The dominant caste Hindu Assamese community who has always defined the narrative of how one should feel towards the Bengali Muslim was challenged. For, the daily, continued encounters with the Bengali Muslims allowed the experiencing of emotions such as sympathy, understanding and care by the caste Hindu Assamese lower bureaucrats. The ambivalence in their positions and beliefs was brought about by such affectual encounters. And the experiencing of such ambivalence, I believe, can create the potentiality of possibly transforming current politics between two historically opposed communities, the beginning of which we already saw in they noticing the sameness within people and communities, who they have always hated or stereotyped about.

Besides, most operators and assistant LRRCRs in the NSKs (mostly in char areas) were Bengali Muslims. Working and living with them over years also provided opportunities of extensive and immersive interactions and knowledge of the so-called ‘other’. Those encounters were also critical in changing their perceptions and them questioning the narratives of the dominant ideology and the majoritarian state. One of the CPS while talking about documents said, “Bhargabi, even if the state pushes the new cut-off date [for identifying an illegal immigrant; the present cut-off date for Assam is 24 March 1971] to 1951, it is not going to matter. All the people I have interacted and whose applications I have dealt with have genuine documents.”

However, it is important to underline here that the char-dwellers cannot count on the state's understanding as a *matter of right*. There is greater chance of them being dependent on the goodwill of caring individuals rather than receive systemic protection of their rights by the state. The latter looks particularly difficult with the current state regime for poor Muslims. Besides, it also remains to be seen how persistently these affectual encounters impact the dominant community, particularly the state representatives in varied other contexts, so that such experiencing of care and understanding by the Bengali Muslims do not remain simply short-term episodic tales or moments. This also creates the need for a longitudinal follow-up ethnographic study with the state functionaries such as TET teachers or the Boat Clinic staff who continually are exposed to and engage in intimate affectual encounters with the world of the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. Such research would understand in greater detail the strength, durability and consistency of affectual exchanges that bring in ambivalence for the state functionaries. It will also help understand the impact of affectual bodily encounters in other spaces where the majoritarian state intimately engages with the marginalized population. The conclusions from such research will help to review my own observations of lower-level bureaucrats engaged with the NRC project. It can also contribute to discussions surrounding the change in subjectivities of the caste Hindu bureaucrats. Can there be a change in subjectivity of the state functionaries? If yes, what does such a change in subjectivity of state functionaries mean for the politics between two historically opposed communities? Can it lead to the dissolution of many established boundaries? Or, can it lead to the emergence of a new community, with renewed principles, foundations and ideologies? While this chapter does not engage with such questions in any detail, it has definitely raised them. My ethnographic fieldwork involving the NRC's lower-level bureaucrats and the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers has in fact triggered such questions.

The NRC has and continues to haunt the minority in Assam and is part of and has forwarded xenophobic-Islamophobic narratives of Assamese nationalism. This chapter is not to belittle the violence that this project has imposed on the already marginalized. However, as Ahmed (2014a, 2014b) noted that the real world is messier, and separation is an analytical activity. While the NRC is in its design and implementation a violent project, my ethnographic fieldwork showed that other narratives co-existed and those too have to be seen and analyzed *in conjunction* with narratives of violence. The narratives of love, sympathy and understanding that were displayed by caste Hindu Assamese lower bureaucrats cannot be ignored; in fact, these narratives that confused and pained them need more re-telling, for it is in these narratives or moments of ambivalence that one can expect possibilities of transformation, of a potentiality probably of change in the existing politics between historically opposed communities and the formation of, what Bhabha (1994) understands, newer political communities. And I am hopeful, to say the least.

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## CHAPTER 9: MIYA ALONGSIDE THE ASOMIYA

When I first began my fieldwork in the chars, the minute I would introduce myself, char-dwellers would smile and say, “We have people from your community in Baghbar Pahar (*apnalokor manuh ase Pahar’ot*) – *Asomiya manuh* (people). Earlier all these lands, when these weren’t chars, these were owned by all *Asomiya manuh*. Then our ancestors came, and many bought these from them. Now most villages in Baghbar are inhabited by us *Miya manuh*.” I noticed how they would distinguish they (*Miya*) from the *Asomiyas*, who I would come to realize during the course of my fieldwork were often used to refer to the Assamese Hindus. When women from the chars would gossip with me and suddenly curiously ask, “How come *baideo*, you *Asomiya* people are so fair? Fairer than us *Miya* people? Tell us what fairness cream you use, you have to!” or when my key informant Abdul da during my initial days hesitantly asked me if I would eat lunch at his house because generally “*Asomiya manuh* do not wish to eat at our, *Miya* peoples’ houses”, this distinction drawing of the *Miyas* from the *Asomiyas* came out starkly and rapidly. This confused me at first because *Asomiya* (Assamese) as a community technically does include the Bengali Muslim *charuas*. Though, discriminated and mocked at by the caste Hindu Assamese society, the discourse surrounding them continually returning their mother-tongue as ‘Assamese’ in the decadal censuses or sending their children to Assamese-medium schools have led the official narrative to include them as ‘Assamese’ or as ‘*Na-Asomiya*’ (New Assamese). Thus, this distinction creation stood out for me. However, it is important to underline here that this distinction is drawn by them with no intention of drawing strict religious boundaries, inflame religious tensions or project themselves as outside the larger Assamese community.

This creation of distinction in their everyday life by the char-dwellers instead highlights their awareness of being a marginalized community as opposed to the Assamese Hindus (*Asomiyas* in their terminological world), with whom they co-exist within Baghbar and outside – it is them imagining themselves as always being in a peripheral position, be it geographically or structurally. Besides, it also indicates their acknowledgement of having cultural, historical and social worlds that are distinct to them. This exist alongside their continued pursuance to be seen as Assamese and an Indian. Such discourses of distinction lurk around in the background of their lives because of the continued historical and contemporary politics of assimilation which has been fiercely propagated by the caste Hindu Assamese leadership and carried forward diligently by leaders and organizations within their own Bengali Muslim community, more so in the chars. For chars were always seen by the caste Hindu Assamese leadership as geographies which sheltered people of questionable loyalties.

Unlike ‘indigenous’ tribal communities like the Bodos, Karbis, etc., the Bengali Muslims in Assam have never asserted and engaged in larger discussions of having a distinct ‘Miya’ socio-cultural identity. Thus, the continued everyday use of ‘*Miya manuh*’ to denote themselves should make us understand that there is consciousness and recognition of their distinction. This became more apparent when I witnessed a massive political controversy surrounding ‘Miya Poetry’ while I was in the middle of my fieldwork. The ‘Miya Poetry Movement’ was a poetry movement wherein young educated Bengali Muslims, who either traced their roots to the chars or lived in the chars started writing poems that expressed their anguish against the caste Hindu Assamese state and the dominant society’s violence and harassment of them for years. They, while writing poems mostly in the ‘Miya’ dialect, were both making appeals to be accepted by the larger Assamese society while also talking about their distinct socio-cultural, ecological and political worlds. Though not

intended, the poetry movement caused a stir, particularly gaining negative attention from the Assamese nationalists and assimilationists who feared that the Bengali Muslims were now making attempts to move away from the larger Assamese community. The tensions were such that accusations were made of it being funded by bigoted international organizations while police complaints were lodged against several ‘Miya’ poets.

The reactions to the poetry movement were what that helped me contextualize and understand better the ‘Miya *manuh*–*Asomiya manuh*’ distinctions that my participants in the chats were constantly engaging in, in their everyday lives. Though not making any attempts of moving away from the Assamese (instead they very much wish to be accepted and be part of it), Bengali Muslims were now being increasingly seen as engaging in discussions and bringing to light their own distinct ‘Miya Muslim’ identity within the larger Assamese identity. In this chapter, I will understand such explorations within this community. Firstly, I will explore the historical contexts because of which one can see this new assertion of distinctness by this marginalized community before moving on to look at some of the contemporary political moments wherein the Bengali Muslims publicly explore their distinctness of being ‘Miya Muslims’. I will then move on to look at such political moments through the concepts of recognition and belongingness. In fact, the chapter has been hinged around these concepts and will explore and reflect them throughout the pages as I continue to understand the growth of ‘Miya Muslim’ identity assertion. I will particularly dive deeper into the importance of recognition for belongingness and will espouse for Nancy Fraser’s model for status-based recognition. I will show how this growth of a distinct ‘Miya Muslim’ identity and the call for recognition adhere to Fraser’s model while also moving away from it, which is where, I believe, lie the dangers. For I understand that this growth displays to

some extent the potentiality to distort Bengali Muslims' historical understanding of a fluid sense of belongingness.

## 1. HISTORICIZING THE GROWTH OF DISTINCTIVENESS ASSERTION

For a community that has historically shied away from publicly celebrating or engaging in with their specific socio-cultural histories, narratives, festivals, traits etc., it is encouraging to witness the slow unraveling of moments when this community is talking about their distinctiveness. For decades they have lived under the fear of violence if they publicly even hinted of having a distinct socio-cultural identity while also living under the tremendous pressure of proving their 'Assameseness'. The mounting pressure to be assimilated existed in a way that talking about their distinct existence was not an option. It is not a surprise then, that the distinct culture of this community such as the celebration of *Ghassi* or *Pushura* or singing of '*Magon Geet*' or even conducting boat races are at a tremendous decline now. This was highlighted to me by the char-dwellers themselves along with people like Hafiz Ahmed, the President of Char-Chapori Sahitya Sabha (Char-Chapori Literary Association).

Interestingly, during my fieldwork, I would notice how the char-dwellers would be eager to host Bihu functions. A local primary school took out a procession where young kids were dressed in *muga-paat* (muga silk) '*mekhela-sador*'<sup>133</sup> and *dhoti*<sup>134</sup> and *gamusa*<sup>135</sup> while also inviting speakers

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<sup>133</sup> Traditional Assamese dress

<sup>134</sup> a garment worn by male Hindus, consisting of a piece of material tied around the waist and extending to cover most of the legs.

<sup>135</sup> Traditional Assamese towel, carrying cultural significance. Though there exist varied types of 'gamusas' in Assam that are worn by different tribal communities, the red and white striped gamusa, popular amongst the caste Hindu Assamese, dominates the imagination. This gamusa, in fact, is symbolically used as a cultural



from ‘mainland’ Assam who were big proponents of assimilation of Bengali Muslims into the larger Assamese identity. Their constant ‘proving’ of being ‘true Assamese’ is very public and visibly so, something that came out overtly during my fieldwork. Thus, this growth of assertion and discussion of their socio-cultural, ecological and political distinctness are peculiarly new and require the understanding of the historical grounds because of which one is able to see such assertion at present times.

I propose and explore two factors – firstly, how the colonial political tools of fixity and boundary creation such as census, maps (drawing and re-drawing of boundaries), etc., contributed to the politics of ‘othering’ of the Bengali Muslims and secondly, how violence, including symbolic and everyday violence of the Bengali Muslims has led to this systematic development of organizing and asserting the distinctiveness of the ‘Miya Muslims’.<sup>136</sup>

### *1.1 Rigid boundary creation: cultural differences become legal boundaries*

It has been noted how colonial political tools like maps of a nation-state create new realities and though imaginary, they can reshape people’s sense of belongingness and spark off new demands of recognition. (Ludden 2003, Anderson 2006, Thongchai 1988). The colonization of Africa and the distribution of power by re-drawing the territorial boundaries or the partition of India into two nation-states, all of these have shown us how colonial political tools that rigidify, or re-shape territorial boundaries can dictate very real realities of the colonized, even in the post-independent

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representation of the Assamese community. See <https://thewire.in/society/is-the-gamusa-a-symbol-of-insecurity-within-assamese-identity>

<sup>136</sup> I use the terminology ‘Miya Muslims’ specifically to refer to situations when their distinctiveness is asserted. But the expression of it is placed in single quotations because of the lack of unanimous agreement amongst the Bengali Muslims on what terminology to be used to refer to their distinct identity. In all other places, Bengali Muslims is used when talking about them in general terms.

times. The introduction of tools such as maps by the British administration, where new boundaries were being drawn for purely administrative convenience and economic gains, detached connected geographies, cultures, people and attached dis-connected ones and in the process, gave birth to new conflicts.

The Bengal Partition of 1905 when a new administrative province of East Bengal and Assam was created with Dacca (now Dhaka) as its capital, it changed the politics surrounding identity and belongingness, repercussions of which are being faced by the minorities of post-independent Assam. The new administrative territory not only encouraged the rapid migration of Bengali Muslim peasants from the highly populous regions of Sylhet into Assam, but it also led to the occupation of most administrative posts in colonial departments by educated Bengali Hindus.

The conflicts in the coming days between upper-caste Assamese Hindus and Bengali Hindus and the caste Hindu Assamese and Bengali Muslims were made more stark because the new administrative unit had merged four geographically and culturally disconnected territories together – “the five Assamese-speaking districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, known as Assam proper, which was congruent; the Goalpara district of the same valley where Assamese and Bengali cultures overlapped; the ‘pre-literate’ hill districts where different dialects were spoken; and finally, the two populous and Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar.” (Hossain 2013: 261).

Sylhet from where most migrants were entering Assam had always culturally and economically felt more connected with Bengal. In 1912, the partition was suddenly annulled by the British but Bengali majority Sylhet was still kept as part of the now new province of Assam (another re-drawing of lands and people). This meant that Bengali Hindus of Sylhet continued dominating the administrative ranks of the British government even within the new Assam province. In a report showing the communal representation in various government departments in March 1923, 50% of

vacant posts were held by Bengali Hindus as opposed to 19% by Assamese Hindus. (Kar 1990: 155). This was deeply resented by the middle-class, upper-caste, English educated Assamese Hindu youth. The formulation and the rise of Assamese nationalism were led by such caste Hindu Assamese youth wherein the Bengali became the ‘enemy other’. Ironically, such mobilization and formulation of Assamese nationalism by the educated caste Hindu Assamese youth were happening in mostly Bengali dominated Calcutta. (Sharma 2011, Sengupta 2016).

During 1947, the caste Hindu Assamese leadership fought tooth and nail to not include Sylhet within Assam and independent India. The British once again created new boundaries of East and West Pakistan and finally Sylhet, through a suspicious and divided referendum was over-night made part of East Pakistan, a new nation-state. Hossain (2013) shows how over-night, crucial economic, cultural and historical links of communities such as the Sylheti sea-farers with the Indian side of Bengal, particularly Calcutta, were permanently cut-off. Ludden (2003) talks about a “water-view” (pp. 6) of the world and shows how such views can never be accommodated in national territorial maps. Thus, connected water histories, routes and communities were invisibilized and torn apart by colonial administrative lines on territorial national maps. This has severe effect on people’s notion of belongingness as the Bengali Hindu and the Bengali Muslim become the ‘enemy other’ for the Assamese Hindus. It also drew sharper divisions between the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims. Talking to Hossain, Nurul Islam who had witnessed the Sylhet referendum, reflected deeply on how colonial political tools affected senses of belonging for the governed:

“I was born in 1930, and till 1947...we were British subjects...Our identity was then Indians. Our second identity was that of Bengalis. At that time we used to live in greater Bengal or Assam. Although we were in Assam, we never called ourselves Assamese. The

Assamese people used to call the Sylheti people Bengali. The Bengali people used to call us as Assamese. So we were Bengalis, we were Indians, we were Assamese; then we became Pakistanis. Then with the creation of Bangladesh we became Bengalis or Bangladeshis.” (Hossain 2003: 258).

The partition also concretized Assam’s position as a ‘frontier’ or a ‘borderland society’ (van Schendel 2005) such that the enemy figure of the ‘immigrant’ was created. In Assam’s politics, this figure of the ‘immigrant’ would always be imagined as the Bengali Muslim of the neighboring East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This imagination would continue to rule most of Assam’s post-independent politics. But the Bengali Muslim as a ‘disgusted other’ was not only created through the colonial politics of territorial re-drawing but also through new tools of population registration, classification, and control such as the census.

In 1911, the census Commissioner in regard to the large scale migration of peasants from East Bengal into Assam calls it, “....a peaceful invasion of Assam by the advancing hoardes of Mymensinghia army...” (Kar 1990: 17). In reference to the census figures of 1931, then census Commissioner, C. S. Mullan made some sensationalist comments. Calling the East Bengal migrant peasants as ‘land-hungry’, Mullan notes this event as far more dangerous than the Burmese invasion. He writes how this large-scale immigration of ‘land-hungry’ East Bengali peasants had the potentiality to destroy Assamese culture and society. Using military metaphors, he writes, “...by 1921 the first army corps of the invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army corps which followed them in the years 1921-31 has consolidated their position in that district and has also completed the conquest of Nowgaon...” (Hossain 2008: 23). The evocation of images through these military metaphors is intended to arouse and embed deep fractures between the Bengali

Muslims and the dominant Assamese Hindus. His other metaphors where he calls the East Bengali migrant peasants as “vultures” waiting for wastelands and “ants” flowing incessantly have been used by the post-independent state in Assam such as the S.K. Sinha Report to describe the ‘immigrants’ and explain the danger of ‘immigration’ to the Assamese community.

Over time, the introduction of numbers and percentages by the census and the careful selection of facts, concretized the narrative of the Bengali Muslim as the ‘threatening immigrant’, which imposed what Mahmood Mamdani calls a “native subjectivity”. (2020:18). Census figures would be frequently used by native elites, that is the caste Hindu Assamese, to push forward for policies that would safeguard the natives’ interests. And one such policy was the Line System wherein the colonial political tool of redrawing territorial boundaries was once again introduced, and this contributed to concretizing already-present fissures.

“J.C. Higgins, Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong in his order dated 16 May, 1923, officially inaugurated the Line System though it had already been implemented and was in operation in 1920. Villages were grouped under different categories such as, Assamese villages, Muslim villages, mixed villages, unsettled villages, those reserved for Assamese and unsettled villages reserved for the Muslims.” (Kar 1990: 20-21). This drawing of territorial boundaries and segregation of population did not stop the ‘native’ Assamese to sell lands in areas reserved for them to the migrant East Bengali Muslim population. But it did turn existing differences into rigid communal and racist boundaries, aggravating the feelings of ‘othering’ in the process. (Hilaly 2016, Kar 1990, Pegu 2004). Kar (1990) writes how the introduction of the Line System led to colonial reports and orders replacing the term Mymensinghias with ‘immigrant’ to include all people from all districts of Bengal and Surma Valley. In fact, the Line System, which was pushed

forward by the middle-class caste Hindu Assamese intelligentsia, introduced the category of the ‘immigrant Assamese’. (Pegu 2004).

Mamdani (2020) writes how the policy of ‘protection of ‘native’ culture’ by the colonial power, ended up creating new rigid boundaries. “By identifying distinctive local customs and histories and incorporating these in the imperial historical narrative, census, and law, the British transformed existing cultural differences into boundaries of political identity that fragmented and fractured those they governed.” (Mamdani 2020: 18). The violence that the deepened fractures spilled over was becoming more apparent. The Assamese nationalist organization ‘Asom Sangrakhini Sabha’ (ASS) led by the upper-caste, middle-class Assamese Hindu men threatened violence against Bengali Muslim ‘immigrants’, including cancellation of funding of Bengali medium schools, if they did not take up Assamese language and culture and if they wanted cancellation of the Line System. (Pegu 2004).

The census that started concretizing differences, particularly through recording languages, religions, castes, tribes etc. brought in a rigid identity consciousness that is directly responsible for the violence that the linguistic and religious minorities continue to experience even today in Assam. In 1836 when Bengali was made the official language of Assam by the British, Assamese nationalists engaged in a process which fiercely projected and repeatedly highlighted the distinctiveness and superiority of Assamese as a language. This was also largely how Assamese nationalism grew in opposition to Bengali. The introduction of the census fastened that process. Assamese caste Hindu nationalists, in the process of making Assamese distinct, engaged in a purification and standardization of the language. This resulted in linking Assamese history and language with the greater Aryanized imagination of India such that Assamese language was claimed to have traced its roots to Sanskrit, an elite caste Hindu language. (Mahanta 2021, Sharma

2011, Sengupta 2016). The languages of the ‘non-Aryan’ tribes and castes were ignored when caste Hindu men engaged in standardizing Assamese language. (Sharma 2011: 194). Rules of grammar and ‘correct pronunciation’ were periodically released by upper-caste Assamese Hindu led periodicals of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. (Asam Sahitya Sabha *Patrika* 1927). It’s first President, Padmanath Gohain Barua in his keynote address compared languages that did not possess literature, as a dialect, so inferior that hierarchically he considered them to exist just above cries of animals and birds. (Sharma 2011: 203). Thus, ‘non-Aryan’ tribes, including Adivasis working in tea gardens and lower castes were inferiorized, making Assamese nationalism extremely chauvinistic in the process.

It is critical to understand that this nationalistic turn of making Assamese distinct than Bengali also was very Hinduized. Histories written by nationalists like Gunabhiram Barooah and Holiram Dhekial Phukan tried to establish links of Kamrupa (present-day Assam) with the larger ‘Aryavarta’ (greater Aryan nation) and showed “cultural ties with a pan-Indian epic-Puranic tradition symbolized among others by an adherence to Brahmanical forms of worship.” (Sengupta 2016: 186). Thus, the Bengali Muslims faced double ‘otherization’ – linguistic and religious. During the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement (1979-1985), when the Bengali Muslim became the figure of the ‘illegal immigrant’, the periodic journals of the Sahitya Sabha, that openly supported the Movement, carried various articles of Hinduized history of Assam and the Assamese while noting down cultures of ‘indigenous’ tribes like Kacharis, Tiwas etc. They, however, carried nothing that recorded the cultures of the ‘Miya Muslims’. The memorandums carried by it of the Movement instead wrote extremely vitriolically of the East-Bengal origin peasants and the

community's history. (Brahma 1979, Terang 1979, Shastri 1979, Rajguru 1980, Hazarika 1980, Assam Sahitya Sabha *Patrika* 1979).<sup>137</sup>

The Movement, in fact, was premised on figures and numbers provided by colonial political tools such as the census regarding the population increase of Assamese/Bengali and Hindus/Muslims, based on which nationalists have continually claimed the number of 'illegal immigrants' to be around 40 lakhs (4 million) in Assam. Scholars such as Meiron Weiner (1983) projected the number of immigrants to be 10.4 million between 1901-1981. (Borooah 2013). Sudipta Kaviraj (1988) notes how censuses that listed out characteristics into tight-neat categorizations made belonging transform from 'fuzzy' to enumerative and rigid. These colonial political tools that introduced numbers, new categories to belong to, define oneself and benefit from along with random re-drawing of boundaries pitted the Bengali and more so the Bengali Muslim in the coming decades as the 'disgusted other' against which caste Hindu Assamese nationalism grew and this nationalism was violent against this other. The contemporary trend of assertion of distinctiveness by the 'Miya Muslims' is a response to such otherization and violence.

### *1.2 Perpetuation of violence*

The Bengali Muslims in Assam have faced violence, including symbolic violence for decades now. Assamese nationalist and chauvinist organizations led by upper-caste Assamese Hindu men such as the Asam Sahitya Sabha and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) have directly or indirectly continually inferiorized, stereotyped and harassed the Bengali Muslims, particularly those living in the chars. Sahitya Sabha Presidents in their various speeches on numerous occasions have

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<sup>137</sup> See Assam Sahitya Sabha *Patrika* 1979 Issues III and IV; 1980 Issues II and III.



vilified and framed the char-dwellers as ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ and ‘dacoits’. (Hossain 2008: 27, 36-37).<sup>138</sup> Dr. Lakhinandan Bora, a popular Assamese novelist and the President of the Sabha in 1996-97 had written about the char-chapori Muslims as ‘Bangladeshis’ in his novels such as ‘*Akou Saraighat*’ and ‘*Modar Gosor Paan*’. (Hossain 2008: 41).

Though the Bengali Hindus have seen enormous violence, particularly during the Language Movement of the 1960s when they were being openly massacred in places such as Goreswar, the caste Hindu state has always treated them as ‘refugees’ which is clearly reflected in the various state policies. (Mahanta 2021, Rajkhowa et. al. 2018). The Bengali Muslims on the other hand have always been treated and seen as the ‘illegal immigrant’ and have been subjected to violence that is being justified or often forgotten by the majority. They faced violent anti-Muslim riots in the 1950s, following which many, including many char-dwellers in Assam, fearing death escaped to then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). K M Sharma (1980) shows how “before or during each decennial census, there have been widespread riots in Assam.” (pp. 1323). Just before the 1951 census, Sharma (1980) writes, Bengali Muslims facing riots were given the option of death or returning their culture and mother tongue as Assamese. In fact, even before independence, this tactic of violent threatening has been used against the Bengali Muslims when Assamese nationalists threatened a nation-wide agitation against them if they did not take up Assamese as their language and culture. (Pegu 2004: 591). It was in fact Bengali Muslims’ returning their language as Assamese in the 1951 census (as with subsequent censuses) that kept (and has been keeping) Assamese as the majority language of the state. Interestingly, Asam Sahitya Sabha, an

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<sup>138</sup> In 1929, the President of Sahitya Sabha at the Jorhat Annual meeting, Shri Komolakanto Bhattacharyya called the Mymensinghias ‘dacoits’; In the 1988 Sahitya Sabha’s Annual Meeting, then President Kirtinath Hazarika openly suggested that ‘illegal immigrants’ from Bangladesh enter Assam through South Kamrup’s hills with weapons and start living in the chars with the intention to attack Assam’s districts. (Hossain 2008: 27, 36-37).

organization that has otherwise been negligent and oppressive towards the Bengali Muslims, has conducted their Annual Meetings in Bengali Muslim dominated areas in years preceding the census.<sup>139</sup> The fact that the Indian federal structure that is division of states, was made on linguistic lines (majority language), the tension and pressure were always directed towards the Bengali Muslims to continue to prove their loyalty to Assam by returning their mother-tongue as Assamese and any drop in Assamese speakers was used to question this loyalty and also their citizenship, following which there would be further violence. Fearing their numerical majority and census influence, between 1961 and 1971, Bengali Muslims were increasingly framed as ‘Pakistani infiltrators’ and were violently evicted and deported back to then East-Pakistan. (Hussain 2000, Sharma 1980). However, it was the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement that unleashed unprecedented violence upon the Bengali Muslims. The brutal massacres of Bengali Muslims in Nellie and Chawolkhua Chapori are reminders of that.

“Massive pogroms against the religious minorities and unprecedented violence against all dissenting voices from the left and secular camps were combined with the façade of peaceful mass movement...this façade could be erected and maintained for such a long time because the over-whelming majority of native Assamese-speaking Hindus was mobilised behind the movement. And this mobilised mass lent active and passive support to the despicable violence planned and engineered by the leadership.” (Nandy 2001: 2616).

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<sup>139</sup> The 1927 and 1928 Asam Sahitya Sabha Annual Meetings were held in Dhubri and Goalpara, areas which are dominated by Bengali Muslim population. The decadal and final census under the British was being conducted in 1931. The figures of this census were particularly important for several factors that would be manifested later: one being Assamese a dominant community and two, as will be seen later on, to keep Assamese dominated Assam within India in 1947 and prevent Assam to be made a part of Bengali dominated East-Pakistan. The meetings were important to pursue and build a sentiment of trust among the Bengali Muslims so that they would return their mother tongue as Assamese instead of Bengali in the censuses which would fulfill the above mentioned two aims of the caste Hindu Assamese leadership.

Interestingly, the majoritarian caste Hindu Assamese state and society have systemically and consciously forgotten such brutal violence on the religious and linguistic minorities conducted during the Movement. And this non-remembrance and non-acceptance of violence, itself constitutes a kind of violence upon the minorities. As written by Hannah Arendt in the context of the post-Holocaust world, the feeling and expressing of collective guilt are important markers of undoing past violence and recovering humanity, not just for the perpetrating community but also for the healing of the victims. (Schaap 2001).

Caste Hindu Assamese organizations like the Asam Sahitya Sabha had openly supported the Movement. Its chauvinist, Islamophobic and xenophobic character have been displayed in the past, be it in its active role in movements supporting the official imposition of Assamese language in 1960 and 1972 or the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement of the 1980s. (Dey 2018). Nazir Sarkar, a professor in a local college in Assam and a Bengali Muslim, in an interview with me had noted how he had cut off all ties with the Sahitya Sabha during the Assam Movement when he witnessed the Sabha’s silence as char-chapori people in colleges were being daily harassed. Hafiz Ahmed too noted how on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1972 two Bengali Muslims gave their lives for protecting the Assamese language and neither AASU nor Sahitya Sabha had remembered them once. “Why should we then not form our own literary organization? Who will otherwise remember them? Remember us?” In fact, several ‘indigenous’ tribes have formed their own literary organizations because of the chauvinist and exclusionary character of the Asam Sahitya Sabha.

Rose M. Kim (2002) while talking about racist violent attacks on Korean Americans during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, shows how violence goes on to shape collective identities. Decades of witnessing or being subjected to physical and symbolic violence have led to ‘Miya Muslims’

understanding, evaluating and asserting their distinct collective identities. Hafiz Ahmed in the same interview went on to elaborately describe his experience of the Bansbari massacres in 1994, when Bodo militants had brutally murdered Bengali Muslims. They even burnt and attacked the relief camps set for victims – “I had just entered Higher Secondary [School] when Bansbari happened. I took some money and left immediately for Barpeta and for days kept on simply roaming around, visiting these villages, camps. I saw dead bodies floating on the river. But no newspaper would cover it properly. I mean look at Nellie, do people even talk about it? Or Bansbari?”

The narration and the repeated remembrance of incidents of violence over many years provide a sense of the self and also of the ‘other’. (Kimura 2003). The formation of the electoral party ‘Assam United Democratic Front’ (AUDF; later All India United Democratic Front or AIUDF), a party that is led by and is for largely addressing the issues of the Bengali Muslims in Assam, is a classic example of organizing collective identity as a response to violence by majoritarian forces<sup>140</sup>. Kim (2002) uses Jeffrey Alexander’s (2004) concept of ‘cultural trauma’ to show how events of violence deeply impact a group’s memories, consciousness and inevitably end up shaping future group identity. The riots led to the emerging of several Korean American organizations and a new bunch of leaders who wanted to represent and protect the interests of Korean Americans. The growth of several political moments, through which such distinctiveness of ‘Miya Muslims’ are established or explored will be looked at in the next section. However, unlike Kimura (2003), who looks at the victims of the Nellie Massacre to argue that it is selective contextual situations

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<sup>140</sup> AUDF was formed in 2005 by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, a rich Bengali Muslim businessman as a response to (at least officially) the Supreme Court’s ruling of scrapping the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act 1983, [IMDT Act]. The scrapping of the IMDT Act meant that the burden of proof of citizenship in front of a Foreigner’s Tribunal (FT) fell on the accused who in most cases in Assam was the poor Bengali Muslim.

that define which violence or violent events are used by the minorities to formulate their distinct identity, I argue that it is violence of all kinds, regardless of situations of the minorities, that go on to shape the minorities' identities and collective consciousness. For the Bengali Muslims, it is violence that has been transferred to them since colonial times and has been carried forward by a majoritarian caste Hindu Assamese state and society which has led them to understand and assert themselves. Keramat Ali, a school teacher and a learned member of the community told me,

“When the government declared five Assamese Muslim communities as ‘indigenous’<sup>141</sup> and did not include us, then we are forced to question, who are we then? Even after living all our lives here, if we are not Assamese, ‘indigenous’, who are we then? After Assam Movement too, I specifically questioned about who are we and how are we different? For the state, for this society, how are we different?”

Bengali Muslims being frequently framed as ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ are even evicted more frequently and violently by the state with moral support for such actions from the caste Hindu Assamese society. (Mukhtiar et. al. 2018). Eviction drives at Gorukhuti even led to the loss of two lives, injuring 18 others in September 2018 and such violent drives have only increased under a right-wing Hindutva state. Thus, the witnessing and experiencing of such violence will only lead to the concretization of their quests to understand and assert their ‘Miya Muslim’ distinctiveness. Frantz Fanon (2005) had noted how violence shapes the identity of the colonized and how it is

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<sup>141</sup> See <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-who-are-assam-indigenous-muslims-8022121/>; Assamese Muslims in Assam comprise of the descendants of those Muslims who arrived in Assam much prior to Bengali Muslims as part of the Mughal invasion of Assam and settled down in Assam. There lie deep divisions between Assamese and Bengali Muslims, such that the former always claim distinction from the latter. Besides, Assamese Muslims believe to be ‘more Assamese’ than the Bengali Muslims.

through violence that the colonized regain their renewed identity. In the case of Bengali Muslims, it is not through violence, but political moments based on dialogue that such renewed identity is being explored and appropriated. Let us now look at these political moments where they are exploring and asserting their distinct socio-cultural, ecological and political identities.

## 2. THE POLITICAL MOMENTS: *Jonogoshthi naamkoron*, Miya Poetry, Miya Museum

### 2.1 *Jonogoshthi naamkoron*

In January 2020 when I had met Nazir Sarkar sir, Assam had turned into the epicenter of a countrywide protest surrounding the new citizenship law called the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the Indian legislature. At a time, when issues surrounding immigration and identity were gripping the nation and once again the Bengali Muslims were put under the scanner by the dominant caste Hindu Assamese state and society, Nazir sir talked about how several members from the community were actively looking to have a name of their '*jonogoshthi*' (community) that most members of their community agree upon. "What is the identity of our community? What should we be called? We are having several meetings regarding this at Darrang, Nagaon, etc." was what Nazir sir had informed me.

However, this exercise of '*jonogoshthi naamkoron*' is not very new, though it is being sought after more publicly and actively now. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, the man who made the first Assamese feature film, called them '*Na-Asomiya*' (New Assamese). In fact, the name '*Na-Asomiya*' was again re-iterated by the distinguished Assamese writer, editor Homen Borgohain in the newspaper '*Nilachal*' in 1970. However, scholars from the Bengali Muslim community such as Khabir Ahmed, Hafiz sir etc. have often written and discussed how humiliating it is for the community to

still be considered ‘New’ and not simply ‘Asomiya’ (Assamese). Khabir Ahmed in an elaborate article titled ‘*Miya Asomiya Jonogoshthi-r Naamkoron (Miya Assamese community’s naming)*’ published by ‘*Dainik Gana Adhikar*’ on December 5<sup>th</sup> 2020, shows how names such as ‘*Pamua*’ (migrant), ‘*Mymensinghia*’ (someone originated from then East Bengal/ today’s Bangladesh district of Mymensingh), etc. have been doing the rounds and have been used in formal literature and informal talks as well. However, he understands all the terms to be insulting for the community since they are used with the intention of putting the community socio-culturally lower than other communities. Besides, most terms still have a connotation of the community being ‘migrants/immigrants’ even after generations of this community have lived on this land and accepted Assamese language and culture as their own.

Ahmed (2020) in the same article goes on to vouch for the term ‘Miya’ as a name for the community. “As far as I remember, there were several rounds of discussion at the Asam Sahitya Sabha’s auditorium regarding the naming and though most of the scholarly members of the community agreed on ‘Miya’, there were still a few who did not and hence nothing was officially declared.” He also mentions about several rounds of write-ups and responses to those write-ups at the Assamese newspapers ‘*Amar Asom*’ and ‘*Gana Adhikar*’ by scholars of the community in 1995. The discussions were so feisty that the Editor, after a while, had to end the series, without any conclusion. Ahmed (2020) gives several reasons for choosing ‘Miya’ as a name for the community. Some of which are:

- A) The name ‘Miya’ encompasses every member of the community, regardless of the person’s geographical location.

- B) The word ‘Miya’ means ‘Sir’ in Urdu, which is a respectable title. Though in Assam, it is being used by the majoritarian community in a derogatory sense, it is an opportunity to turn around and elevate the meaning of the term and instead take pride in it.
- C) The term is being actively used by the community in their everyday life, there is a colloquial usage to it – hence it would be a term that comes from the people, breaking the class barriers within the community.

This re-appropriation of the term ‘Miya’ was consciously done even by the ‘Miya Poetry Movement’ that will be shortly discussed. Scholars like Ismail Hossain (2020, 2008) were opposed however, to terms such as ‘Miya’ or ‘Miya Muslims’ since they give the sense that the Bengali Muslims were trying to set themselves apart from the Assamese. Criticizing writer Homen Borgohain, who in his Presidential Speech of the Asam Sahitya Sabha in Dibrugarh had used the term ‘Miya Muslims’, Hossain said that instead the term ‘*Asomiya Musalmaan*’ (Assamese Muslims) would have been apt. (Hossain 2008: 50-51). Hafiz sir in his interview had noted how ‘Miya Muslims’ can be better Assamese by practicing, appreciating and understanding their own distinct culture first. “Can we not be Assamese while also being ‘Miyas’?” he had asked me. Scholars like him and Khabir Ahmed (2020) believe that Assamese Muslims who trace their lineage to Mughals and had migrated and settled long before ‘Miya Muslims’, have never considered them as Assamese Muslims. They have joined the majoritarian caste Hindu Assamese state and society in mocking them and see them as ‘Bangladeshis’ or those who trace their ancestry to Bangladesh – the class and caste differences also add on to the fractures – “When Nellie happened, except for a few Assamese Muslims, no one either wrote or raised concerns at all about it. The few who wrote, wrote in a very passive, watered-down way.” – Hafiz sir had confessed about the Assamese Muslims’ apathy towards Bengali Muslims.



Hossain also objected to the use of the term ‘Miya’ saying that the word has no history – “The word ‘Miya Muslim’ has no usage history in censuses, government records, Presidential speeches of Asam Sahitya Sabha etc.” (2020: 64). Khabir Ahmed (2020) in the same article had responded by saying that instead of dominant majoritarian narratives dictating what they should be called, new histories could be created, new narratives from the bottoms-up could be woven.

Hossain (2008) remarks that naming a community is not the main issue. Instead, the main issue is whether the community has been recognized and accepted as Assamese by the larger Assamese society or not. This makes me wonder are they not mutual? Does ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ not lead to concretization of one’s own identity, being sure of who one as a community is, which leads to statist and societal recognition? Does ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ not lead to feelings of belongingness? Naming, labelling and boundary drawing, of course, have their own politics and problems and I will come to those in a later section but unlike Hossain, I do believe that it is important to recognize how naming adds to a person’s communitarian identity, a sense of pride and understanding of a community’s own culture and place. It also helps the community to collectively seek statist benefits and recognition, particularly economic, which are critical for marginalized communities. Naming allows marginalized communities to concretely organize their socio-political demands better and hence should not be trivialized.

Though I do argue the importance of recognition and belonging in a latter section, it is important to highlight here that naming of a community, particularly of a marginalized community, is a beginning of their understanding and relating to their distinct identity. It leads to recollection, repetition and archiving of their distinctiveness be it historical, cultural, ecological or/and social knowledge (tangible and intangible). It leads to an emotional sense of feeling belonged, of fullness, which is critical. As Khabir Ahmed wrote,

“I am an Indian. But if someone asks me where within India am I from, I will say Assam, and being a Muslim, I will call myself an Assamese Muslim. If someone can recognize and accept me as that, I will be extremely happy but if my own state is doing a census on Assamese Muslims and excluding me and my community from it or someone else says that only people like Mominul Awal [BJP Politician] and Syed Abdul Malik [writer] are true Assamese Muslims, then I would say, if you are differentiating between them and me, then let me be called differently – let me be called *Miya Asomiya*, *Asomiya Miya* or *Miya Muslim*.” (Ahmed 2020: 7).

## 2.2 *Miya Poetry*

In 2016, Hafiz Ahmed wrote a poem titled, ‘*Write Down, I am a Miyah*’ and published it on Facebook. Shalim Hussain, then a doctoral student at New Delhi’s Jamia Milia Islamia University, and a ‘Miya Muslim’ himself replied to that poem by writing another poem titled, ‘*Nana I have written*.’ This led to several ‘Miya Muslim’ young people to write poems on topics such as ‘Miya Muslims’ decade-long neglect and harassment, their on-going citizenship crisis, their ecological and socio-cultural world of boats, festivals, folk songs, floods, erosion, fishing, etc. The poetry movement soon spread through the creation of the Facebook page and the Youtube channel ‘*Itamugur*’, where people, mostly educated youth, often belonging to char-chaporis, regularly exchanged their grief, pain and anger faced by them as a community since decades.

When he wrote the poem, Hafiz Ahmed was himself inspired by a poem written almost three decades ago by Khabir Ahmed<sup>142</sup>. It was titled, ‘*I Beg to State That*.’ However, unlike the former,

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<sup>142</sup> Different than the Khabir Ahmed discussed in the previous section.

Hafiz Ahmed's poem is written in a more confrontational and assertive tone. (Mehra 2021). The movement while expressing grief and anger over their in-humane treatment, thus, is also a way to bring about a discussion surrounding naming. In fact, it fiercely propagated that the community and those belonging to it be named a 'Miya'.

Chan Miyah in a poem written in 2017 writes:

*I don't know my name today*

*Lost; its lost in misspellings, taunts, jeers*

*And the quagmire of your office papers, closets, cabinets.*

*From Fazr Ali born at dawn*

*To Fazal Ali the class captain*

*To Fazal Miya singer of Magun songs*

*To a nameless Bangladeshi labourer in Guwahati*

*I have lived many names, many lives*

*But none of my own.*

Shalim (2016a) had written how the meaning of the word 'Miya' had to be re-appropriated as the word itself is not derogatory. "Under Articles 19 and 21 of the Indian Constitution, a person should have the dignity to tell the world 'Yes, I am Miyah. So what?'" (Hussain 2016a). Then identifying as 'Miya' and naming the poetry movement as such then is a conscious political decision of asserting and accepting their distinctiveness of their identity as 'Miya Muslim' while also equally

claiming to be Assamese. The fact that the term ‘Miya’ comes from the ‘Miya Muslims’ instead of the majoritarian community, already is an act of empowerment and a self-defining moment. Katya Guenther writes, “The act of naming is an act of power. Parents naming children, conquerors naming new lands, and organizations naming themselves all involve the assertion of authority and control. Names allow us to communicate through the development of shared meanings.” (2009: 419).

Resistance poetry by the ‘Miya Muslims’, writes Urmitapa Dutta (2021), is thus a way to destabilize established hierarchies and “disrupt dehumanizing master discourses...a means to turn the gaze to the absent present – to the pain, indignities...and desire of Miya communities and to the indifference and pernicious silence that preclude signification of collective harm.” (pp. 599). The poems that have remembered forgotten narratives of violent massacres such as Nellie (*Everyday on the Calendar is Nellie* by Abdul Kalam Azad) are also underlining the community’s crisis of belonging and its deep desire to belong. Rehna Sultana (2016) in a poem titled, ‘*My Mother*’ writes:

*I was dropped on your lap, my mother,*

.....

*And yet you detest me, my mother*

*For who I am,*

*Yes, I was dropped on your lap as a cursed Miyah, my mother.*

.....

*I am tired, tired of introducing myself*

*To you.*

*I bear all my insults and still shout,*

*Mother! I am yours!*

Shalim Hussain (2018) writes in another poem,

*Poetry will be dadi's<sup>143</sup> cracked hands*

.....

*Poetry will be mobil, poetry will be grease...*

*Poetry will learn its aukaat<sup>144</sup>*

*Ma kasam<sup>145</sup>, poetry will belong.*

Thus, it is through poetry that the 'Miya Muslims' are seeking ways to feel belonged to the land and to the people. It is also the choice of language in which this poetry was written in, that enabled 'Miya Muslims' to assert their distinctiveness and feel belonged. Though written in Assamese, Bengali and even English, most poems were also written in their local 'Miya' dialect. "The use of a local dialect specific to a community – especially a marginalised community – does not aim at exclusion, but at weaving through its usage an experience that might otherwise have been neglected or even unknown." (Mehra 2021: 83). Shalim (2016a) understands that the use of the

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<sup>143</sup> Grandmother

<sup>144</sup> Status

<sup>145</sup> Mother promise

‘Miya’ dialect is also to add “vibrancy and volume” to the narrative considering many expressions and imaginations cannot be expressed through translations.

But I understand their decision to express in ‘Miya’ dialect as a way to counter narratives by the majoritarian community which made their adopting Assamese as a language a pre-condition to be considered Assamese. It is to free their tongues from domination while continuing to speak Assamese as well. It is to assert that speaking Assamese is a choice that they have made and is made out of love, while they also take equal pride in speaking a tongue that is spoken in their immediate, everyday spaces: their homes and families. That their tongues can be home to both is an assertion by such an act. As Nazir sir had confessed to me, “In what language do I write about my dreams?”; writing in ‘Miya’ dialect is being true to the world in which the ‘Miya Muslims’ have sung, dreamt and understood their world but till now had only expressed those in their private spaces.

It is no surprise then that the Movement caused a massive controversy and stir amongst the caste Hindu dominant state and society. In July 2019, an Assam-based journalist, Pranabjit Doloi, filed a police complaint against ten ‘Miya’ poets saying that they were engaged in “criminal activities to defame the Assamese people as Xenophobic in the world.” (Mitra 2022: 314). In fact, eminent public intellectual Hiren Gohai, who in the narratives of Hafiz sir and others had in the past supported the formation of a separate literary organization for the char-chaporis due to the chauvinist and exclusionary nature of Asam Sahitya Sabha, had strongly condemned the movement, citing use of ‘artificial language’, and fearing outside influence to separate the Bengali Muslims from the larger Assamese community. Writer Ismail Hossain (2020) raised several questions against the intentions of the poetry movement – if the poets were trying to project Assamese people living in char-chaporis as Bengalis? Or encouraging them to write in Bengali?

Fearing that the poetry movement would instead push back the community's efforts of assimilation by several years, Hossain was clear that it will only hamper or increase the harassment and violence against the community. Hossain ends the chapter in the book with an interesting appeal for assimilation, defying religious and ethnic lines. (2020: 67). The critics mostly had issues in the use of the word 'Miya' for the poetry movement and the poets' usage of 'Miya' dialect to express their voice.

The poets responded that the movement in no sense encourages separatist sentiments – instead it is an appeal to the larger Assamese society to recognize their pain and violence that they have experienced for decades, while accepting them as their own: an Assamese.

“When I went to a TV interview, one of the panelists said that I should not call myself Assamese since I write Miya Poetry. So can we not ever write about our own culture? Can we still not be Assamese?...In 1917, Osman Ali Sadagar donated Rs. 10 for the conduction of the first Asam Sahitya Sabha *Adhibekhon* [Assembly] but has the Sahitya Sabha ever spoken about our pain? Has Hiren Gohain ever visited the chars? Has he gone to any char-dweller's home during floods? Has he seen and heard their cries when one is declared a 'D-Voter' or left out of the NRC? Has he? The problem is they have been abusing us using this word 'Miya', telling us that we are '*suwarer bacha*' [pig's kids]. Now we looked into their eyes and said, 'Ok, we are 'Miya', we are '*suwarer bacha*', so what? So now they cannot even abuse us or harass us, and that is where the problem lies.” – Hafiz sir.

The 'Miya Poetry Movement' while celebrating and embracing the violent, distinct and beautiful worlds of the 'Miya Muslims', proposes a belongingness that is fluid, diverse, equal and non-

unitary. And it is through this that the marginalized ‘Miya Muslims’ are refusing to be recognized as a hyphenated being: Bengal-origin-Muslim-inhabitants-of-Assam and trying to be whole and at the same time plural. This is how they are reclaiming back their lost humanity, and this is why the poetry movement is so radical – for the marginalized regains their humanity without using violence against the majoritarian.

### *2.3 Miya Museum*

On October 18, 2020 Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Baghbar constituency (predominated by chars) Sherman Ali Ahmed, proposed and enquired to the Director of Museums about establishing a museum showcasing the socio-cultural world of the char-chaporis inside the premises of Kalakshetra, a cultural institution of Assam. He also referred to the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Art and Culture presented to the Legislative Assembly on 24 March, 2020. “As the people living in chars are mostly referred to as Miya, I have proposed to the government to establish a museum that would highlight and reflect the culture and heritage of the Miya people”, he said. (The Hindu 2020)<sup>146</sup>. He believed that since majority of the people who live in char-chaporis are ‘Miya’, hence it should be named ‘Miya Museum’.<sup>147</sup>

In a letter<sup>148</sup> sent by the Director of Museums to the Commissioner and Secretary, Cultural Affairs Department, Government of Assam on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2020, elaborate plans of groundwork and concept design were listed keeping in mind the recommendations of the Committee. The memo

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<sup>146</sup> See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/miya-museum-proposal-stirs-debate-in-assam/article32943993.ece>

<sup>147</sup> See <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/10/31/assam-demand-for-a-miya-museum-and-the-politics-behind-it/>

<sup>148</sup> Memo No. DMA.6P/2017-18/Pt-III/02-A



read, “the presentation of the Char-Chapori Museum shall comprise a distinct study of the socio-cultural lifestyle and pattern of the community and in the process identify, document and collect the cultural artefacts, both tangible and intangible including objects used on day-to-day activities and associated with the mankind.” The memo acknowledged the socio-cultural practices of the char-chapori community as different from other communities in Assam, particularly their farming and other livelihood activities.

It elaborately lists out various tangible practices such as traditional ornaments, dresses, utility objects, house designs etc. and intangible practices such as folk songs, oral narratives, festivals, rituals, traditional games etc. This is particularly interesting because the existence of such a museum with those artefacts over-turn or return the gaze back to the majoritarian community. Artefacts like *lungi* (sarong/lower garment of males), *tupi* (skullcap), etc. were predominant frames or reference points through which the majoritarian community used to project the Bengali Muslims as ‘Bangladeshis’. Talking about the role of aesthetics and visibility in dominating the already marginalized, Shofiul Alam Pathan and Munmun Jha (2022) write, “...it becomes an act of typification or labelling of people as “illegal immigrants” with certain visual features like wearing a *lungi* (sarong), a *dari* (beard), or a *topi* (skullcap). Thus, the unfamiliar bodies which do not resemble the dominant cultural symbols’ Assamese identity, becomes an object of doubt and a potential category of “illegal immigrants”.” (pp. 151). The objects of doubt or disgust are now being proposed to be displayed in a museum and are being embraced with pride, be it by Miya poets or others who use these objects as symbols of resistance, reclaiming their identity and the right to belong to an Assamese community that is re-defined by them as plural, diverse and fluid in the process.

“Wear a *lungi*

*And there where no one can hear you scream,*

*Thunder*

*I am Miyah*

*I am proud.” – Shalim Hussain ‘Nana, I Have Written’ (2016b).*

In fact, Sherman Ali Ahmed was in the midst of a political controversy when he, wearing a ‘*lungi*’ took a picture in front of Assam Bhawan, a state government owned property in Delhi and posted it on Facebook.<sup>149</sup> Talking to the media, the MLA from Baghbar once again made it amply clear that to take pride in being ‘Miya’ and to have a distinct ‘Miya’ identity were important.

Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra was established in 1998 as part of Clause 6 of Assam Accord. The Accord is a product of the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement, that assures constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect the socio-cultural and linguistic heritage of the Assamese people. Now since the Movement itself projected and imagined the ‘Bangladeshi’ to be the ‘*lungi-dari-tupi*’ clad *charua* Bengali Muslim, the displaying and preserving of such artefacts as cultural heritage of not just ‘Miya Muslims’ but also of the Assamese people, would inevitably mean accepting the ‘Miya Muslims’ as finally Assamese and the Movement to be xenophobic and Islamophobic in that sense. Thus, the proposal of the ‘Miya Museum’ built a narrative of resistance and present counter-narratives of belongingness, particularly about ‘who exactly is Assamese?’. It contributes to the narrative of how one can celebrate the distinctiveness of being a ‘Miya’ while also being Assamese. It replaces an assimilationist way of being Assamese for marginalized groups

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<sup>149</sup> See <https://scroll.in/article/1019584/from-history-to-lungis-how-this-assam-politician-is-battling-for-a-distinct-miya-muslim-identity>

like the ‘Miya Muslims’, wherein Bengali Muslims no longer need to give up their own socio-cultural identities to be recognized as Assamese.

Thus, the vitriolic and xenophobic reaction by the caste Hindu Assamese state and society to the proposal of a ‘Miya Museum’ should not be surprising. Making the letter by Sherman Ali to the Director of Museums public in a Twitter post, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, a Brahmin Hindu, ridiculed the proposal by calling the ‘Miya Muslims’ as those who had come from Bangladesh and immediately rejected such a proposal. “It is not a Hindu-Muslim (matter). It is a fight between two cultures. The so-called migrants - Bangladeshi Muslims – have started a new concept in Assam. They call it Miya culture, Miya poetry...Miya language...We have to protect the composite Indian culture and more particularly Assamese culture...And Assamese Muslims are firmly by our side.” (The Indian Express 2020).<sup>150</sup> Calling the Kalakshetra an “epitome of Assamese culture”, Sarma found displaying artefacts of ‘people from Bangladesh’ a distortion to Assamese culture. Thus, the minute any assertion or celebration of their distinctiveness is made, the caste Hindu Assamese state re-iterates the dominant imagination of the Bengali Muslim as an outsider, an ‘illegal Bangladeshi’ and not someone who is part of the Assamese community.

The ‘Miya Muslims’ assertion of their own distinct identity and culture while also being Assamese is being dismissed by Sarma as an act of aggression. “At some point in time, they (Miya Muslims) will say that their poetry is the real Assamese poetry or their culture is the real culture because they are gaining a majority. So, ours is a defense mechanism...We apprehend that at some point in time the Miya language will become the official language of Assam...” (The Indian Express 2020). The Hindu majority’s tactic of using fear and majoritarian anxiety of the marginalized over-

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<sup>150</sup> See <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/himanta-biswa-sarma-nrc-cao-no-longer-the-discourse-issue-now-is-conflict-of-cultures-this-claim-of-miya-identity-7061653/>

throwing them has been an age-old one. It is important to note that the letter was made public by Sarma, just when Assam Elections were nearby in 2021. Ajit Bhuyan, an independent Rajya Sabha member from Assam, questioning the intention of the Chief Minister behind this vilifying attack on the Bengali Muslims, showed how the Museum was already approved by the Committee, majority of whose members belonged to the BJP and its allies.

Even opposition party members, including political leaders from the Congress (the party to which Sherman Ali belongs to), were opposing Ahmed's proposition saying that no such proposition was approved by the party and that 'char-chaporis' are home to other communities beside the 'Miya Muslims'. Additionally, they asked the MLA to refrain from constantly repeating the word 'Miya'. Thus, caste Hindu Assamese power structures were largely angered regardless of party loyalties because marginalized people celebrating and asserting their own identities were proving as a challenge to the hegemonic structures and narratives.

Sherman Ali has been the lone politician to assert a distinct Miya identity within a larger Assamese identity. Glimpses of it were seen when in an oath-taking ceremony at his constituency in 2020, he declared his pride to be both a Miya and an Assamese or when he talked about Nellie and questioned the official narrative of the Assam Movement. He pointed out how Dayanath Sharma, a declared martyr of the Movement, had himself killed several Bengali Muslim char-dwellers at Chawolkhua Chapori and was killed by the Bengali Muslims as an act of self-defense. For this, he was also arrested by the Assam Police.

The political moments be it the active engagement in the naming of the community, the Miya Poetry Movement or even the demand for the establishment of a Miya Museum, are critical moments of not simply resistance but also moments that are weaving a complex tale of belongingness and the desire for recognition and acceptance. These moments allow us to see the

‘Miya Muslims’ varied strategic, emotional and political engagement with a majoritarian state and society by asserting their distinctiveness to recover their humanity. In the next section, I further explore the importance of belongingness and recognition, understanding how the ‘Miya Muslims’ assertion of distinctiveness largely follows Nancy Fraser’s model of status-oriented belonging and how it deviates from it, arguing that it is here, then, where lies possibilities of dangers of distorting the traditional sense of belongingness of the Bengali Muslims.

### 3. BELONGINGNESS AND RECOGNITION

#### *3.1 Belonging and Recognition: The importance*

Elsbeth Probyn (1996) talks about how belonging is a term loaded with emotions, for it is termed as not just ‘be-ing’ but longing. (Bell 1999). Anthias (2006) understands that the politics of belonging not only involves identification with the already established groups or people but also the creation of new social places and emotional bonds that are woven around such places. Thus, to belong and to feel belonged are necessary for satisfying our deep emotional needs that one derives from identification with the old and from creation of new social collectivities. Hence, belongingness is not simply about cognitive stories that include rights-based narratives surrounding identity, there is a deep emotional yearning for attachments – wanting to belong, desire to become, to be recognized. (Yuval-Davis et. al. 2006, Shneiderman 2015).

Belongingness and recognition feed into one another – one feels belonged when one is recognized as part of that collectivity and vice-versa. In our case, as was explicitly highlighted by the ‘Miya Poetry Movement’ too, the ‘Miya Muslims’ while showing their belongingness and identification with the Assamese, continue to celebrate their own distinctiveness. They, in turn, desired

recognition as respected ‘Miya Muslims’ (as a community in equal terms) and as ‘Assamese’. However, their desire to feel belonged, the emotional needs are not fulfilled by the caste Hindu Assamese state and society as they are not recognized as either respectful ‘Miya Muslims’ or as Assamese. The inequality was visible because while Assamese Muslims were recognized as Assamese, even ‘indigenous’ now, the ‘Miya Muslims’ culture and language were mocked at, trivialized and not recognized by the caste Hindu state or society. In fact, even after several assimilation attempts, the Bengali Muslims have not been recognized as Assamese either.

The fact that recognition enables belongingness was noted by Floya Anthias too when she remarked that, “Belonging and *social inclusion*...are closely connected...It is, however, through *practices and experiences* of social inclusion that a sense of a stake and acceptance in a society is created and maintained.” (2006: 21, emphasis in original). Sara Shneiderman (2015) in her historic study of the Thangmi (Thami) ethnicity production in Nepal, understands how the Thangmi over years have used state mandated criterion to be recognized as an authentic Scheduled Tribe, instead of evading the state (Scott 2009), and created a sense of trans-national belongingness.

Scholars like Charles Taylor who uses Rousseau (1964) understands that ‘misrecognition’ or the refusal to recognize not just shows “a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.” (1994: 26). Thus, misrecognition or unequal recognition can distort the image of the self as well as the image of the community. For decades, the Bengali Muslims have suffered from shame, pain, fear and hatred towards their own self and their communitarian identity of being a ‘Miya’ due to the majoritarian state and society’s refusal to recognize their community as equally Assamese, as much as ‘Miya Muslims’ with equal dignity. Taylor (1994) talking about the ideal of authenticity implies that in the politics of equal dignity comes an extremely important element

of recognition of distinctive identity. He believes that dignified and equal recognition of difference or distinctiveness is a necessary condition of realizing universal equality for all – “The universal demand powers an acknowledgement of specificity.” (Taylor 1994: 39). What the political moments of naming, ‘Miya Poetry’ or demand for a ‘Miya Museum’ have done is that they have started narratives wherein being ‘Miya’ and having distinct ‘Miya’ culture and an identity are celebrated such that they have now turned the narrative from complete assimilation to being accommodative. They want to be recognized as Assamese while *also* being respectful and celebratory of their distinctiveness. They demand Assamese identity to be accommodative instead of being assimilationist. The celebration of their distinctiveness is not in opposition to they being Assamese, instead it is exactly the opposite. This recognition of their distinctiveness as ‘Miya’ while also being recognized as Assamese then, is important for their restoration of a sense of self as much as for universal equality values.

Rousseau (1964), as argued by Taylor (1994), is seen to be one of the first people to philosophize about the discourse of recognition and he understands that this dependence on others’ opinions to feel belonged is because people care for esteem. He believes that this caring for esteem can only lead to a healthy and whole society when each’s desire for esteem is reciprocated equally by each other. Then, he believes that one actually senses liberty, otherwise it is replaced with a sense of isolation. Hegel (1976), following Rousseau says that there lies only one satisfactory solution for the struggle for recognition – a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals. What Taylor (1994) adds to this is to recognize “the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their worth.” (pp. 64).

Mamdani (2020) shows how colonial authorities exploited and rigidified already present differences and recognized some communities as more ‘authentic’ or ‘indigenous’ than others and

provided them with economic benefits. Thus, recognition has been sought after by groups and communities for gaining respect, self-dignity but also for economic justice and benefits. Colonial political tools such as the census were used to identify more ‘authentic’/ ‘indigenous’/marginalized communities and socio-economic rights such as reservations etc. were provided to them. In South Africa and the United States, natives whose ancestry could be traced back to the tribal homeland were given customary rights such as the right to land while depriving others whose ancestries were traced to other homelands. (Mamdani 2020: 38). Israel had used politics of ‘de-recognition’ of Palestinian villages and stripped them off their legal status, depriving these villages of infrastructure and even clean water. (Mamdani 2020: 321, 338). Consequently, this leads to groups desiring to be recognized by the state to avail such benefits, furthering colonial tactics.

In 2021, an organization started a first-ever online-census for counting Assamese Muslims to differentiate themselves from the Bengali Muslims. This move was supported by the state when in July 2022, the right-wing state approved the identification of five Assamese Muslim sub-groups – Goriya, Moriya, Deshi, Julha and Syed – as ‘indigenous’ and the Chief minister declared that the next step would be conducting a census of them and providing these groups with more socio-economic benefits.<sup>151</sup> Interestingly in 2019, the Assam government passed the ‘Assam Land Policy 2019’ wherein landless ‘indigenous’ farmers would be provided with three *bighas* of agricultural land and half a *bigha* of land for constructing their houses. This policy was particularly directed towards farmers who had lost their lands to natural calamities such as erosion, floods, etc. Being earmarked for ‘indigenous’ farmers, the Bengali Muslims, as opposed to Assamese Muslims, become ineligible to be recipients of this scheme, even though they are the worst victims of

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<sup>151</sup> See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/online-census-of-assamese-muslims-launched/article34325747.ece>; <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-to-carry-out-census-of-native-muslims-sarma/articleshow/92710503.cms>



landlessness caused by erosion and floods. As opposed to Assamese Muslims, this social exclusion or non-recognition of Bengali Muslims by the state as ‘indigenous’ has hastened and brought back discussions and demands by Bengali Muslims to be recognized as ‘indigenous’ Assamese by the state so that they too can enjoy equal economic benefits.

“Who are we then? We, as a community have faced tremendous violence – natural or man-made, every year, in fact every month, we lose lands to erosion, floods. So many families, including many in my own family, have been rendered landless and are now simply laborers. But we cannot avail the benefits of the Land Policy because we are not ‘indigenous’. So, if that is the only way for us to get our rightful economic benefits, then why should we not fight to be recognized as ‘indigenous’ as well?” - Keramat Ali.

After 2019, discussions surrounding ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ intensified amongst the Bengali Muslims. In fact, in 2001, an application was filed to the Assam Government by the Samajwadi party’s Nagaon District Committee for Bengali Muslims to be recognized as an Other Backward Class (OBC) but following severe controversy, the issue was never taken up. (Hossain 2020). Thus, the desire to be recognized as distinct and to organize a group’s culture and characteristics more concretely are also driven for availing state-sponsored socio-economic benefits.

Shneiderman (2015) in her book shows the agentive nature of the Thangmi community and how they re-organized, documented, even produced sometimes their own history, cultural traits, etc. to establish themselves as a tribal ethnic group for the ‘recognizing agents’ – state, social scientists (including anthropologists), non-governmental organizations, etc. For this, they build new networks, organizations and connected with older ones. In fact, organizations are important sites

for both ethnicity [identity] production and pushing demands of statist recognition for availing economic benefits. “By the 1990s, classification as an ST had become the primary objective for Thangmi activists in India.” (Shneiderman 2015: 144).

Performances of objectified practices by the community seeking recognition from the recognizing agents then become important. Shneiderman (2015) talks about ‘*sakali*’ practices (‘real’ practices) and ‘*nakali*’ performances (staged performances) wherein the Thangmi through ‘*nakali*’ performances re-objectified the already objectified ‘*sakali*’ practices catering to the rules that have been listed by the state, who is one of the recognizing agents, consuming this re-packaged ethnicity. Vikki Bell (1999) shows the entanglements of visibility and knowledge such that lines of light can produce lines of knowledge – performativity, such as visible rituals and repetition of those rituals become important to produce new histories (or curate old ones) and document cultures to be established as a recognized ‘*jonogoshthi*’ or community. Thus, naming of a community or preserving tangible or intangible cultural objects in a museum are performative steps to be recognized as a community who can then avail state provided benefits.

Though it leads to reification and rigidification (which I discuss in detail in the next section), Shneiderman (2015) cautions against vilifying this objectification process that the ethnic groups, often marginalized communities, engage in for it is through this that their political futures are shaped, and accordingly socio-political and economic benefits are gained. The Thangmi too, used the state’s system to wriggle out benefits for them as a community and achieve economic justice since it presented as the only way to do that for them. Besides, such projects of seeking benefits from the state or other recognizing agents through objectification lead to, as in the case of both the Thangmi and the ‘Miya Muslims’, a renewed sense of pride in their distinct identity and

documentation and understanding of histories, narratives, cultures etc. of otherwise marginalized and less-recorded communities. These in themselves can instigate an empowered sense of self.

### *3.2 Identity versus Status model of recognition*

Nancy Fraser (2000, 2001 – co-authored with A. Honneth) critiques Taylor's (1994) and Axel Honneth's (1995, 2001 – co-authored with Fraser) model of understanding recognition as she believes that their analyses of recognition have been uni-directional, focusing simply on cultural importance of recognition without giving voice or attention to socio-economic redistributive justice which is intricately connected to recognition. Taylor (1994), while using Hegel (1976), fleshes out two poles of recognition – dignity and authenticity and while dignity is based on politics of recognizing one as an equal (citizen/public), it is authenticity on which he puts importance. He argues that one's authenticity is derived from one's recognition as a unique cultural self. (Lash and Featherstone 2001). In this Hegelian notion, one's sense of self as both an equal person as well as a distinct being is derived from recognition from others. "To be denied recognition – or to be 'misrecognized' - is to suffer both a distortion of one's relation to one's self and an injury to one's identity." (Fraser 2000: 109). In this perspective, a call is made to marginalized identities to reject images of insult by majoritarian identities and create new images for themselves by re-grouping, re-appropriating their own cultures, giving up negative identities and self-affirming cultures of their own – "which publicly asserted, will gain the respect and esteem of society at large. The result, when successful, is 'recognition': an undistorted relation to oneself." (Fraser 2000: 110).

This is what Fraser terms as an 'identity model' of recognition and calls it "theoretically and politically problematic" (2000:110), because it reifies identity and fails to address questions of

economic redistributive justice. I understand that the politics of recognition brought forward by the various political moments of the ‘Miya Muslims’ engage in reifying the ‘Miya Muslim’ identity. And in the process, they are changing the communities’ historical sense of fluid belongingness. However, with regard to economic redistributive justice, such political moments of assertion of their distinct identities and call for recognition do engage with redistributive injustices and demand to correct it.

The ‘identity model’ for Fraser, focusing simply on cultural change encourages marginalized and misrecognized identities to create identities or groups of their own, and in the process ends up reifying it. Fraser (2000) fleshes out how the identity model imposes a “single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people’s lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations.” (pp. 112). Thus, she understands that the identity-model ends up engaging in misrecognition itself since the intra-group power hierarchies and the struggle against internal dominant structures are slyly covered or are not recognized under the garb of presentation of a single-unitary identity. Secondly, she also sees the Hegelian identity model that scholars like Taylor (1994) propagate to be based on dialogues and yet it fails to do that the minute it espouses for marginalized identities to form their distinct group-identities on their own. “Seeking to exempt ‘authentic’ collective self-representations from all possible challenges in the public sphere, this sort of identity politics scarcely fosters social interaction across differences...” (Fraser 2000: 113).

I believe that as much as needed, political moments, particularly the ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ or even the proposal for a ‘Miya Museum’ will or in some capacities already have ended up reifying the identity of Bengali Muslims in Assam. The Bengali Muslims in their journey of being recognized as a distinct group perform for the recognizing agents by abstracting a few identifiers

of clothing, language, folk-music, ornaments etc. from a vast range of diverse cultural materials and in the process objectify and put these materials as sole markers of identification. Once established – be it the naming of the group or the various cultural materials to be displayed in the museum, identity would become more concretized, rigid and carpet over dissenting voices within the group or maybe voices that never had or never will have a chance of giving their public opinion. For example, how many ‘Miya Muslim’ women or men from the lowest class backgrounds were involved in discussions surrounding ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ or identifying materials to be displayed in the museum? In fact, the ‘Miya Poetry’ movement itself lacked voices of ‘Miya Muslim’ women and people from lower classes with little to no education (and hence who could not write) or who had no access to the internet or mobiles/computers to be aware of its existence or be part of its social-media groups.

Following the identity model of recognition, these political moments of assertion of distinction by ‘Miya Muslims’ then gloss over these absences or differences to present a unitary face and hence, as reminded by Fraser (2000), engage in misrecognition itself. Shneiderman (2015) asks this important question regarding ethnicity – “Is ethnicity a rock or a river? Fixed or fluid?...” (pp. 3). In her ethnographic work on Thangmi, she shows how though the Thangmi are aware of their ethnicity being produced processually, they still desire their identities to be objectified for being recognized by the state. Just like the Thangmi, the Bengali Muslims, particularly those living in the chars of Assam being a historically migrant community, have always had a fluid sense of identity and belongingness. As discussed in the chapter on boats, the boats as objects for water-dependent communities like the Bengali Muslims allowed them to be fluid beings, defy statist borders of land and settle and conduct economic exchanges in lands of other cultures – thereby

acquiring new cultural elements while contributing some variants of their own culture to the other communities. Their cultures thus, have always been syncretic and hybrid.

Such fluid sense of belongingness does get propagated by the ‘Miya Poetry’ movement. Shalim Hussain, a Miya poet, in an interview says,

“Let us look at our history of loss. We are a community descended from impoverished low-caste Hindus who converted to Islam. Our ancestors moved to Assam with little else but just clothes on their back. Even before the borders were drawn, we began losing touch with Bengal. We are not a diasporic community with a nostalgic attachment to our place of origin. We have no standing monuments, no venerable ancestors, nothing. This might sound bleak but I consider it quite liberating because minus the baggage of chauvinism and jingoism, we have the freedom to be as hybrid as we want.” (Das 2016).

The poetry movement that uses Miya dialect which in itself is hybrid in nature (having inculcated words/accents from varied languages and dialects), thus espouses for the Bengali Muslims’ historical sense of fluid belongingness – one that is radically inclusive, non-essentialized and acknowledges the complex and shifting nature of the communities’ identities. (Dutta 2021, Dutta et. al. 2022).

However, political moments such as the ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ and ‘Miya Museum’ are engaging in making ‘Miya Muslims’ as a group identity rigid, objectified and hence, disrupt this fluid sense of belongingness. Just like the colonial political tools such as the census and maps that rigidify categories and encourage a politics of separation while attaching a particular fixity to places, people and their identities, the political moments of the ‘Miya Muslims’ under discussion

can lead to ‘museumification’ (Baudrillard 1994) of their culture and identities. Consequently, their culture and identity can both become fixed objects, unchanging in time and failing to engage in varied intersecting processes of new additions, disruptions or even contestations that are occurring on an everyday basis for a community that is historically mobile. Ludden (2003) shows how national maps are unable to accommodate spaces that shows over-lapping and intersecting histories, economies and socio-political orders and ultimately such spaces stop getting imagined in such fluvial terms. In fact, Assam being a border-state with Bengali Muslims (particularly char-dwellers) living on the edges, they have historically inhabited such spaces, cultures and political orders. Misra (2011) notes how the regional elite in the borderlands subverted the colonial spatial imaginations and “produced the idea of the ‘Goalparia’, a spatialized conception of a borderland cultural collective” (pp. 15) that had elements from both Assamese and Bengali and hence were both and yet none at the same time.

The political moments of ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ and ‘Miya Museum’ are contributing in disrupting such imaginations of belongingness that are relational and fluvial and have the potentiality of making identities monolithic. The processual understanding of belonging breaks away from John Crowley’s (1999) politics of boundary maintenance to conceptualize belonging as becoming, interacting with various forces, contexts and locations and through the continued processes of exclusion and inclusion. (Bhambra 2006, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Anthias 2006). Kannabiran (2006) calls belonging as a politics of becoming that is a transformative process which “forges a larger community of belonging beyond borders.” (pp. 57). Thus, following what Fraser terms as the ‘identity model’, political moments of distinction assertion and call for recognition by a marginalized community such as the ‘Miya Muslims’ lead or can lead to further reification of

identities, with identities becoming rigid, monolithic, non-intersectional or dialogical, changing their fluid sense of belonging and also their cultures in the process.

However, such political moments do engage in attempts to correct economic redistributive injustices and displacement, which are intricately related to the politics of recognition, as has been identified by Fraser. Fraser (2000) understands maldistribution as when “economic structures, property regimes or labor markets deprive actors of the resources needed for full participation.” (pp. 117). One of the many intentions of initiatives such as ‘*jonogoshthi naamkoron*’ is to highlight the discriminatory statist economic policies and reservation schemes that do not cover the ‘Miya Muslims’ in Assam and hence deprive them of economic opportunities. The 2019 Land Policy is a case in point. The scheme does not identify the landless Bengali Muslims as ‘indigenous’ and as opposed to ‘indigenous’ landless peasants, they are not provided with land. Platforms actively engaging in naming of the community are doing it with the intention of being recognized by the state as a marginalized community, even indigenous, so that censuses can be conducted, and subsequently economic security is provided to them by the state, as was done with the Assamese Muslims. Naming of the community is also the first step towards collectively demanding for economic reservation and to be recognized as an ‘Other Backward Class’ (OBC) community. Poets through ‘Miya Poetry’ have amply highlighted the discriminatory pay and working conditions of Bengali Muslim landless laborers, particularly in urban economies where they provide cheap labor. This, besides the harassment they daily face on account of being Bengali Muslims are often written about. I am quoting a few lines from the poem ‘*Write Down, I am a Miyah*’ by Hafiz Ahmed which he wrote in 2016 to exemplify this:

*“I am a Miya*

*I turn waste, marshy lands*



*To green paddy fields to feed you.*

*I carry bricks*

*To build your buildings*

*Drive your car*

*For your comfort*

*Clean your drain*

*To keep you healthy.*

*I have always been in your service,*

*And yet you are dissatisfied!”*

Thus, I understand political moments where the marginalized Bengali Muslims have asserted their distinction while wanting to belong, to be seen as Assamese, have picked up traits from the identity-model as well as from Fraser’s proposed alternative of the status-model. Unlike the identity-model, Fraser’s status model does not prioritize group-specificities but looks for institutional remedies that can allow people to participate equally as peers. And sometimes to do that she believes that subordinated parties need to be unburdened of their “excessive ascribed or constructed distinctiveness” (2000: 115). Thus, the status model places importance on identifying institutional patterns or structures that propagate misrecognition and maldistribution of resources and correct them so that everyone is provided with the status of a full partner in social interaction. For the status-model, the politics of recognition is intricately related to the politics of redistribution and hence it avoids reification and redistributive injustice.

However, as can be identified with the political moments of the ‘Miya Muslims’, while they do address and highlight issues of redistributive justice, they also end up engaging in reification of identities in the process. As a result of this, I fear, ‘Miya Muslims’ historical fluid sense of belongingness can be distorted. Thus, in my understanding, while they do adhere to some parts of Fraser’s alternative status-model of recognition, these political moments are still embedded in varied extent to Hegelian ideas of identity-based understanding of recognition.

## CONCLUSION

Mrinal Miri (1973) talks about how memory is a distinctive part of personal identity and yet in the case of the Bengali Muslims in Assam, we have seen how their sense of personal identity is being continually eroded by the dominant community and the state through continuous acts of forgetting. The refusal to remember acts of violence on Bengali Muslims (Nellie, Chawolkhua Chapori massacres), refusal to acknowledge their distinct culture, refusal to propagate a history or narratives where the Bengali Muslims are shown as humane, etc. are examples of such acts of forgetting. In fact, the dominant community wishes to erase the memories of this cultural community with all their distinctiveness and complexities and reduce them to the only narrative of being an ‘illegal Bangladeshi’. The public memory of ‘Miya Muslims’ is distorted. The greater violence is when the descendants of this community are not provided with memories of their glorious histories, cultures and are fed the memory and image of the dominant community. This results in an immediate distortion of their sense of self and personal identity.

The political moments discussed in this chapter reflect how this community is finally responding to such dominant community’s violence, wherein instead of hiding their distinctiveness, they now

are openly accepting and celebrating it, while expressing their pain and grief over decades of violence encountered. They desire deeply to finally be recognized as Assamese, a citizen and also as a respected 'Miya'. This is a radical political turn for this community because this disgraced and marginalized community for the first time is actively and systematically re-appropriating their narratives and talking about their worlds, their sorrows, desires and gains through their own mouths. They are publicly recounting forgotten memories, histories and showing to the dominant community the self-image and identity that they would like to be known with.

This has become more active and prominent with the right-wing state's politics of rising violence against this community such as violent eviction drives, closing of madrassas<sup>152</sup>, NRC-CAA citizenship projects while appeasing the non-Muslims, the 'indigenous' tribes and the recently declared 'indigenous' Assamese Muslims. In fact, it would be particularly interesting to see how this assertion of distinction as a political moment gains ground as five Assamese Muslim communities are declared 'indigenous' and will go on to become beneficiaries of statist socio-economic welfare schemes. At this point, I am remembering what Hafiz sir had flagged during an interview with me. He said, "What about the children Bhargabi? So many of our men and women have married into these so-called indigenous Assamese Muslim communities – Goriyas, Moriyas, Deshis...what would their children be termed as? Will they be '*khilonjiyas*' (indigenous) or 'Bangladeshis'?"

Hafiz sir's question then brings me to the idea of fluidity and instead of being unitary and fixed, I understand cultures and identities for people in their everyday lives criss-crossing into various tangents, surpassing boundaries and remaining fluid. Thus, as warned by Fraser, it is important to

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<sup>152</sup> An Islamic religious school, See <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/gauhati-high-court-assam-law-abolish-state-funded-madrasas-7757606/>

keep in mind that political moments of distinctiveness assertion by ‘Miya Muslims’, particularly community naming and demands for a ‘Miya Museum’, have the danger of fixing and reifying identities, without acknowledging how cultural boundaries are fluid, messy (Miri 2000) and that belongingness is processual, dialogical and acknowledges various complexities and contestations. This ‘Miya’ distinctiveness assertion is extremely needed though for the marginalized to reclaim back their humanity and for their socio-economic progress. Thus, it does address issues of maldistribution and redistributive injustice and demands that they be corrected.

This growth of the sense of self through self-assertion, celebration and desiring recognition is an important political moment for the community in Assam and I, hence conclude, borrowing a few lines from the poem, ‘*Nana I Have Written*’, by Shalim Hussain (2016b) wherein the community’s transition from begging to belong to now carving out their own distinct space within Assamese identity is starkly visible:

*“Now see me rise*

*From flood waters*

*Float over landslides*

*March through sand and marsh and snakes*

*Break the earth’s will draw trenches with spades*

*Crawl through fields of rice and diarrhea and sugarcane*

*And a 10% literacy rate*

*See me shrug my shoulders curl my hair*

*Read two lines of poetry one formula of math*

*Read confusion when the bullies call me Bangladeshi*

*And tell my revolutionary heart*

*But I am a Miyah*

*See me hold by my side the Constitution*

*Point a finger to Delhi*

*Walk to my Parliament my Supreme Court my Connaught Place*

*And tell the MPs the esteemed judges*

.....

*Well I am Miyah.”*

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## CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

At the end of an almost two-hour long interview, the retired District Commissioner (DC) of Barpeta who shared strong connections with the char-dwellers of Baghbar area recounted an incident. He remembered how two young college graduates from the chars in Baghbar had waited an entire day to meet and invite him as a guest for opening of a school in the char. Though he accepted, when the day came, he was tired from attending back-to-back meetings and called the men to inform them.

“You will not believe me Bhargabi, but they drove miles in their motor-bikes to convince me. After I continually declined their offer, one of them quietly said that many older people in their char, including their parents and grandparents, had never seen a DC before. They had never heard of a term called ‘DC’. They wanted me to come because they wanted people in the chars to understand that a DC is very much a person. We live in the same district and yet our worlds are so apart, so distant. Ah! It was then when I decided to go.”

He said he was welcomed like never before. The field in front of the school was jam-packed with people. There was a feast organized and old women touched him and smiled in disbelief. “Most higher officers have never really set foot on the chars, nor do they wish to. The intention is that their time should pass without much doing or trouble...” he trailed off as we concluded the interview.

The state in the chars works at various levels and often in contradictions. While state presence is scanty when it comes to ‘developmental’ work or ‘welfare’ for the people, its presence as a

surveilling entity remains strong since state officials often see the chars as ‘troubled’ lands. The gaze of the state on the borderland chars with a large Bengali Muslim population is always through the lens of suspicion and criminalization. The presence of Border Security Forces or the River Police is far greater as compared to a DC in char-lands. Thus, it is through such state-initiated exercises of gaining legitimacy and control that the visibility of the state in such areas is the highest. The char-dwellers develop a relationship with the state primarily through such aims of the state. But as can be seen in the incident recounted above, young, educated people, including NGO workers, members of student organizations such as AAMSU<sup>153</sup>, Chatra Mukti Sangram Samiti (CMSS)<sup>154</sup> etc. are increasingly providing helpful mediation between the state representatives and the *charuas*.

Interestingly, char-dwellers have learnt the language of the state and have also tried to use it to their benefit. The continued exposure and experience of the state through violence – the Foreigner’s Tribunals, Border and River police, confrontation with revenue officers because of eviction politics, and more recently during the NRC among many others, has forced them to observe and learn the functioning and mechanics of the state, which they use to open up spaces of negotiation, dialogue and welfare for themselves. This was evident to me when following floods in 2019, I had visited several relief camps in the chars. Incidentally, besides Bengali Muslims, there were a few Bodo families housed within the same camps. However, as opposed to the Bodo families, the Bengali Muslims including women, were more vocal and knew what words to use, what body language to put on, etc. when government officials came to provide relief materials or when opposition leaders or the media visited. The distinct and different physical and verbal

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<sup>153</sup> All Assam Minority Students’ Union

<sup>154</sup> (translation) Students’ Freedom Revolutionary Committee

language embodied by them with the change of audience was interesting to me. The Bodo families on the other hand were mostly quiet or haphazard in their formulation of loss and grief.

It is through the violent and exploitative dealings with the state that the char-dwellers have learnt the importance of documents – any kind of documents – to their very existence. The existence of ‘trivial’ documents such as yester-year’s radio purchase slips that they presented to NRC officials is a point in case. This gradual learning of the state’s language has also enabled them to confront the state and its principles as was seen in the Weekly Bazar chapter. The prolonged dealings with judicial institutions allowed the char-dwellers to confront claims of ownership of the state by using the courts – the very institutions that the state often uses to oppress and threaten them.

However, despite the state-char-dweller relationship being marked by exploitation, it is also characterized by a feudal, parental relation of a ‘*mai-baap*’<sup>155</sup> nature wherein the char-dwellers desire the state’s care and recognition and want to increasingly be part of it. They either feel betrayed or disappointed when the state fails in taking care of them or recognizing them which was evident with the boat-makers or *ghat* lessees who, despite not being recognized by the state, have been engaged in their respective businesses for years. One of the reasons why the retired DC (the man who I began my chapter with) was popular among char people was because he remembered most of the char-dwellers by their names – “Sir would recognize me and call me out even if I was hidden in a crowd”, was what most young *charua* men would claim in front of me. An act as small as a high-ranking state official remembering the char-dwellers’ names made them feel seen and hence cared for.

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<sup>155</sup> Mother-father (often to denote the relation between serfs and lords/zamindars in the Indian context)



Thus, though the char-dwellers imagine the state as overarching, rigid and violent, they do not experience it simply as that. They never experience the state as unitary or linear but at various levels - from the Circle/Revenue Office to NRC officers, Border Police, Foreigner's Tribunals etc. On the ground, the state is experienced through real-life faces - the local agents, with whom they share more than a victim-perpetrator relationship. They experience the state as stories whose complexities and layers they are often all too well aware of. From the *Mandals* or a TJ sir in the BDO Office to the Boat Clinic staff or more recently the NRC officers working in the chars, the state is experienced by them through dynamic dimensions of corruption, understanding, hope etc. wherein the char-dwellers are well aware of such state representatives' constraints, personal stories, routines etc. Thus, the state becomes more humane and flexible, and it is because of such relationships that pockets of bargaining and dialogue exist allowing the char-dwellers to continue to thrive despite the mounting violence of a majoritarian state. The relationship defining the state and the char-dwellers in borderlands is affectual in nature. This allows it to be non-linear or non-binary in character. That the relationship goes beyond mere violence is important to be highlighted.

I have argued here that the affective relationship defining the state and the *charuas* is not merely aimed for control or surveillance (though it is marked by that). In some cases, it is also genuinely marked with the intention of care and welfare which was evident in the chapters on Boats or Mobile states, particularly while discussing the Boat Clinic and SPV Standalone Solar schemes. While the schemes introduced char-dwellers to new regimes of governmentality such as record-keeping, they also have substantially improved health and electricity provision systems in what otherwise were always neglected areas. But most importantly, it shows the state's attempts to adhere to the rhythms of a migratory community, bringing several caste Hindu Assamese officials closer to the lifeworld

of the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. In the process of doing this, these officials now understand this world much better.

This brings me to my next conclusion, that, as much as the majoritarian state has changed or impacted the char-dwellers' lives, the state too has seen changes with the char-dwellers impacting the state in the process. This is made possible because of the affective nature of the relationship guiding the state and the char-dwellers. Affect, as understood in this research, is rhizomatic. As argued by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Spinoza (2002) or even Ahmed (2014), the politics of affect lie in the fact that affective 'encounters', particularly bodily affective 'encounters', are transformative in nature. Thus, just like a rhizome, affective 'encounters' do not follow hierarchy, linearity, fixed structure/patterns but can move in any direction, opposing established structures and patterns and help develop new politics. This could be seen with state officials at the BDO Office, the Boat Clinic staff, bureaucrats at the APDCL Office at the Barpeta Division carrying out the Solar scheme and the NRC lower bureaucrats, who by and large were mostly caste Hindu Assamese working in Bengali Muslim dominated char areas. The change in perceptions and feelings of such state officials towards both chars and char-dwellers was reflected in their deepened understanding of the dwellers' socio-cultural and political world through continued affective encounters between the state and the char-dwellers. I have argued here that these encounters have exposed caste Hindu officials to ambivalence, making them question their age-old beliefs and feelings towards the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers. I believe that it is in such ambivalence that there lie possibilities of change in the politics of immigration and citizenship in Assam.

However, it is important to underline here that the char-dwellers cannot count on the state's understanding as a *matter of right*. There is greater chance of them being dependent on the goodwill of caring individuals rather than receive systemic protection of their rights by the state.

The latter looks particularly difficult with the current state regime for poor Muslims. Besides, it also remains to be seen how persistently these affectual encounters impact the state functionaries belonging to the dominant community in varied other contexts. As suggested in the chapter on the NRC, longitudinal ethnographic follow-up research with state functionaries who intimately continue to engage with the world of the char-dwellers need to be conducted to understand the strength, durability and consistency of affectual exchanges and the larger ramifications it can have for the politics between communities, but also for the relationship between a majoritarian state and a marginalized community.

Having said that, the majoritarian state has significantly impacted and changed the char-dweller's socio-cultural, economic and political world. The violence inflicted on the marginalized char-dwellers is arbitrary and the arbitrariness attached to this violence is systemically produced. Thus, the violence of the state is both arbitrary and structural. This came out clearly in the state's decision to use (or not use) its political tools such as conducting a revenue settlement exercise (jorip), updating of maps, etc. as was shown in the Weekly Bazar chapter. This structured arbitrariness is making char-dwellers illegible and depriving them of legal land ownership while making them more prone to be evicted and called 'illegal immigrants'. Thus, 'illegibility' resulting from such arbitrary usage or non-usage of political tools is making the char-dwellers face further state violence.

This was particularly evident in the recently concluded documentary and bureaucratic exercise of the NRC when Bengali Muslims were either excluded or faced the harassment of hearings due to arbitrary decisions and reasons of the bureaucrats. Muslim names being misspelt or legacy codes being wrongly entered by operators or the way 'Original Inhabitants' were decided are all clear examples of this. This arbitrariness again, was systematically and structurally produced. The fact

that most officers were caste Hindu Assamese or that lower bureaucrats were not regularly paid or that they worked under extremely tight schedules are examples of how this was systemically produced. Critical decisions surrounding citizenship were taken by people with little to no training with regards to rules of the project. The state's infrequent training sessions or the fact that most officers, besides NRC work, also had to take care of departmental work, left them with no time to attend trainings. Thus, decisions were arbitrarily taken, and this arbitrariness is a marker of structural violence that this project inflicted upon the minority.

However, the violence of the state is experienced by the char-dwellers not simply through events such as the NRC but also on an everyday basis and in more mundane ways. Violence is braided into the char-dwellers' lives. It is reflected in the continued functioning of the Foreigner's Tribunals, workings of the Border Security Forces, boat accidents and the continued economic and socio-cultural pauperization of the char-dwellers losing their land, homes and lives to floods and erosion as the state goes on abruptly constructing embankments or allowing mining and deforestation in the upper reaches of the river.

The state brings with it a regime of fixity that it has tried to impose on the chars and the char-dwellers since colonial times. This obsession with fixity has changed the lifeworld of char-dwellers to a great extent. Scholars like Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013), Saikia (2020), Gilmartin (2003, 2015), etc. have extensively looked at the colonial state's obsession with strict land-water separation and making land productive by building embankments or by installing modern scientific irrigation schemes. While hybrid landforms (mud, clay or half-submerged lands) were deemed unproductive, water was only deemed as 'resourceful' when it served sedentary land, the site for permanent cultivation. Building on these arguments, I have proposed here that since colonial times, the principle of fixity was celebrated in the state's prioritization and celebration of land over water

in ecologies surrounded by water. Land as opposed to water was seen as sedentary, predictable, legible and generating a fixed revenue while also being an ideological-cultural category for the colonial state. Land symbolically became a site of culture and civilization – the site where colonial ideologies of ‘state of nature’ (temporary cultivation, ‘wastelands’, etc.) can be transformed to ‘state of culture’ (permanent cultivation, private property ownership, etc.). Land in colonial imagination was largely seen as economically productive and hence, all lands were tried to be separated from water by building embankments, etc. to make it more productive. This imagination is continued by the post-independent, majoritarian state. This has distorted char-dwellers understanding of land and water too. Their appreciation of hybrid, fluvial understanding of land-water wherein land and water held more than economic value is rapidly getting distorted. Char-dwellers had value for hybrid landforms such as clay, mud, swamps etc. where land and water needed to be part of each other instead of being separated. They needed them for fishing, retting of jute, etc.

The celebration of fixity displayed through land prioritization policies has continued post-independence with the state still focusing on building roads and embankments instead of improving water transportation. Boats as a transport industry are dying with the state investment in it being minimal. Boats allowed char-dwellers to access hybrid spaces and also to have a hybrid existence as they became homes during floods. Boats resisted fixity and allowed char-dwellers to continue to practice mobility, making use of river-routes to continually migrate and build newer homes. Boats allowed char-dwellers to have a fluid sense of belonging. However, with a state that is obsessed with fixity, boats have become objects of precarity, surveillance etc. This has resulted in char-dwellers’ desiring road or land transportation over water transportation. This is significant

for a community that has historically appreciated water and boats as objects that allowed them to migrate, go fishing and survive floods.

Char-dwellers' subjectivities have changed as they too have started appreciating fixity. One such example was the change in their sense of belonging – from fluidity to fixity. This is reflected in their political moments of expressing distinctiveness: naming of the community (jono and the Miya Museum projects). Both of which can lead to reification of identity, wherein instead of having a fluid sense of who is a 'Miya Muslim' or an 'Assamese', these moments can lead to fixing these identities through strict definition and established museumification. Interestingly, in October 2022, Mohar Ali, the President of a Goalpara based organization called Asom-Miyah (*Asomiya*) Parishad with the help of a few others opened a 'Miya Museum' at his private residence. The museum was sealed after a few days of its opening and Ali and two others were arrested under the non-bailable, anti-terrorist law Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act [UAPA]. The state police claimed that the three were linked to terror outfits.<sup>156</sup> The arrests led to more xenophobic comments from Chief Minister Sarma against 'Miya Muslims' and their efforts to celebrate their distinct culture, including 'Miya Poetry'.

There is also a strong sentiment among the Bengali Muslim char-dwellers to give up their own hybrid cultures, festivals such as *Pushura*, *Ghassi* or languages like the 'Miya' dialect and singularly take up festivals – such as Bihu - or languages – such as a purified Assamese - of the majoritarian community.

However political movements like the 'Miya Poetry' movement are trying to counter such fixed, bounded and reified notions of belongingness. These political movements are consciously trying

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<sup>156</sup> See [Why has Assam arrested three men linked to a museum showcasing a Muslim community's culture? \(scroll.in\)](#); ['Miya' Museum: The controversy around Assam's 'Muslim' museum - BBC News](#)

to bring back the hybrid, fluvial and relational world of the ‘Miya Muslims’ – from writing in ‘Miya’ dialect to writing stories of their cultures, of their experience of discrimination, while continuing to be wanting to be accepted as Assamese. These have opened up a fluid sense of belongingness: that one can be celebrating one’s ‘Miya’ identity without reifying or defining it while also being Assamese.

Though the state has helped a lot to improve health and electricity issues through the Boat Clinics and the SPV Standalone Solar schemes, this mobile state has introduced new fixities for the char-dwellers that has further contributed to their marginalization. The fixing of routes, the requirement of household numbers, the need to maintain strict records and fulfill targets etc. to avail or continue these schemes have all been, I have argued here, ways for the state to dictate mobility to the char-dwellers – defining where they can move, when they can move and with what frequency. I have argued that this imposition of new fixities has changed the subjectivities of char-dwellers, particularly of the women, as the state targets their bodies through the Boat Clinic scheme. This is largely achieved through the use of affective infrastructures by the state.

It is important to understand that the relationship between the state and char-dwellers is constantly mediated by the environment, particularly the river and its activities. The state through its inaction aggravates the river’s violence on the *charuas*, resulting in their continued political precarity and landlessness. The state systematically uses environmental racism, creating in the process politically precarious, landless Muslim bodies who go on to contribute cheap labor to the urban economy. It is precisely this that makes the functioning of such economies racial as it is deeply dependent on inequities produced by environmental racism. Despite this, the char-dwellers use their intricate knowledge of the river, its shifting nature, and the ephemerality of land to counter the state’s violence and exploitation. This was clearly visible in the Weekly Bazar chapter where

I show how the char-dwellers claimed ownership of the bazar land by proving that the state-owned bazar land had submerged. Additionally, state-making tools such as an updated map, concrete posts or even an updated revenue settlement did not exist to back the state's claims.

Despite the state-imposed fixities, the char-dwellers continue to move, often as the only means of escape from state violence or state encouraged violence of floods-erosion among others. Their memories of mobility, however, have become more precarious and violent and have stripped them of their earlier migration memories of finding new lands, homes, cultures, etc. The char-dwellers have developed unique ways of working around state-imposed fixities to avail state benefits – such as continuing with older names of villages and schools on new lands after old lands get submerged, or the way in which char-dwellers' built houses in a single day including vegetation to show permanent habitation for the Solar scheme officials. The lower-level state officials are aware of such practices and adjust to such rhythms of char life, allowing char-dwellers to move and survive. Thus, as discussed before, the relationship between the state and the char-dwellers in many ways is affectual and this exists alongside the arbitrary and structural violence. The state's representatives understand the perils of the river and the community's ways to survive as much as the state also enables the violence of the river to continue.

However, this is getting affected by the coming of the right-wing Hindu state at both the national and the state level.<sup>157</sup> The affective relationship of the state and Bengali Muslim char-dwellers that is marked by negotiation, bargaining, understanding, etc. is being slowly challenged by the right-wing state. This is not to say that violence and harassment did not exist earlier, however, being supported by the Hindutva ideology, the caste Hindu Assamese state has directed violence of all

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<sup>157</sup> India has a federal structure. The right-wing Hindu BJP state rules at both the national level and in the legislative assembly of Assam (federal state level).



kinds towards the Bengali Muslims alone and this violence is total and more brutal. This is evident in the eviction exercises, the introduction of the new cattle protection bill, the closing down of madrassas, etc. This state has strategically mixed ethnic, linguistic and religious categories. It is evident in its policies that have supported Bengali Hindus<sup>158</sup> and Assamese Muslims<sup>159</sup> and in the process have projected the Bengali Muslims as the only enemy ‘other/outsider’, while it continues to remain majoritarian in every sense. This was also evident in the politics of the Pahar where the ethnic divisions and tensions between the caste Hindu Assamese and the Bengali Muslims have become more visibilized, rigid and binary. One can see similar patterns all over Assam. In fact, this is largely the case with the rest of the country, where divisions, particularly religious divisions, have become more defined, non-dialogic and volatile, changing in the process, the nature of democracy and state-society relations in India.

This violence will only get worse with the impact of climate change that can rapidly be seen affecting the lives of Bengali Muslims living in fluid ecologies like chars. Responding to an Assembly question in September 2022, the Science and Technology Minister, Keshab Mahanta noted that Assam is the fifth most vulnerable state to climate change in India.<sup>160</sup> The Assam State Action Plan on Climate Change report (2015-2020)<sup>161</sup> revealed that there has been a 0.01 degree Celsius increase in temperature per year in the state. From 2021 to 2050, it has been projected that rainfall could increase by 38% compared to base lines. This steep increase in rainfall will increase violent flooding, make erosion frequent and lead to more violent, frequent migrations of char-dwellers. The effect of climate change is already seen when char-dwellers talk about the decreasing

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<sup>158</sup> The BJP passed the CAA in 2019 that grants citizenship to non-Muslim residents in India who stayed continuously for more than five years.

<sup>159</sup> The BJP recognized five categories of Assamese Muslims as ‘indigenous’ in 2022.

<sup>160</sup> See [Assam Ranks Fifth Most Vulnerable State To Climate Change In India \(guwahatiplus.com\)](https://www.guwahatiplus.com)

<sup>161</sup> See [climate change assam report.pdf](#)

depth of the river, ‘over-floods’ that no longer bring silt or fish and lead to rampant destruction of homes and land. Mitul Baruah’s (2023) ethnography on the twin menace of flood and erosion in Assam’s Majuli island<sup>162</sup> shows how historical, everyday floods and erosion have turned themselves into ‘slow disasters’. Baruah successfully captures the haunting nature of the climate crisis on island ecologies of a valley state like Assam by focusing on floods and erosion not as spectacular events but slow, quiet, everyday and persistent processes that have triggered severe consequences for the people living there. He shows this by extensively looking at violent displacement of people, people giving up traditional livelihoods like fishing, etc.

Chars will no longer be imagined by char-dwellers as fertile fluvial lands but as volatile, ‘disaster-prone’ zones which most char-dwellers have already started fleeing from. In a conversation with Rehman da, he said that the main motive of char-dwellers at present is to save enough money to buy land far away from char-lands in ‘mainland’ Assam – “*Charua manuh* (people) are tired now. Tired of moving at this frequency, settling in new places, buying temporary lands, losing agriculture to floods almost every year. We are losing so much money! So better to save enough and buy land where we don’t have to move this much. But today land is also so scarce.” Many char-dwellers have thus ‘illegally’ bought government lands from middle-men. If the government evicts them, they are once again homeless, not to mention the money that they lose under these circumstances.

In a phone call with Ahmed da in December 2022, he informed me how the land near the ME School in Ramapara Pam char has been eroded and many families have shifted. Ahmed da has already ‘illegally’ bought some land in ‘*khas*’ land. Such char-dwellers when they settle in ‘*khas*’

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<sup>162</sup> Majuli is the world’s biggest river-island and has been recently declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

land or move further into ‘mainland’ Assam are often suspected of being ‘illegal immigrants’ and face harassment or eviction. Char-dwellers have often been tagged as ‘D-Voters’ by election commission officials or BSF forces because of their constant migration to new places due to loss of lands after floods and erosion. This has been discussed in detail in the thesis. Chandrani Sinha in an important article for *The Third Pole* writes about how minority people living in chars who lost their lands to the river through floods and erosion have been left out of the NRC because they could not produce any land documents.<sup>163</sup>

The right-wing Hindu state has made life worse for internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are in every sense climate refugees, by exploiting the narrative of Bengali Muslims in ‘*khas*’ land being ‘illegal immigrants’ and carrying out several violent evictions. My key informant in Baghbar, Abdul da, sent me an array of Whatsapp messages on 29 December 2022 sharing news of how 45 households in Baghbar were evicted over-night on 26 December 2022<sup>164</sup>. When I called him the next morning, he sounded panicked. “Do something *baideo*, these people have absolutely nothing!” he told me. He said that the families were all people who had shifted to the Pahar almost 20 years ago after they lost their land to the river and had settled on that ‘*khas*’ land. On paper, they had settled on a part of 400 *bighas* of Bodo Cooperative land. According to Abdul da, the families had paid some token money to some of the committee members of the cooperative land who were local Hindus of Baghbar. I knew most of the members. In my conversations with people from the Hindu *suba* in Baghbar, such arrangements would come up. The Hindus recognized the contextual necessity of Bengali Muslim families settling in ‘*khas*’ land. Such arrangements allowed co-existence. However, what the right-wing state has done is dissolve such arrangements

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<sup>163</sup> See [Climate refugees stripped of citizenship in Assam | The Third Pole](#)

<sup>164</sup> See <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/assam-eviction-drive-frees-400-bighas/cid/1906274>;  
<https://www.guwahatiplus.com/assam/assam-baghbar-mla-detained-for-protesting-against-eviction>

of co-existence. The possibilities of co-existence of Bengali Muslims and Hindus in Baghbar, that had existed in the past despite some tensions, are being erased systematically and singular identities (Hindus/Muslims or ‘indigenous/immigrant’) are being highlighted by the state. I worry that this event will further complicate people’s relationships in Baghbar. After all, one could already feel the repercussions after the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 and the recently passed Assam Cattle Protection Act, 2021.

Following the passing of the CAA, protests had erupted all across the country and Assam was the epicenter of those protests as the resistance started from there. However, unlike the rest of the country that was resisting the CAA because of its anti-Muslim and non-secular nature<sup>165</sup>, Assam was resisting because the CAA violated the Assam Accord which was signed following the ‘anti-immigrant’ Assam Movement. For the people of Assam, the CAA granted citizenship to immigrants who had migrated to India after 24 March 1971. Hence, protests in Assam were against inclusion of immigrants regardless of religion as opposed to ‘mainland’ India’s, which were against exclusion of immigrant Muslims alone. In Baghbar however, during my fieldwork in February 2020, the sentiment among the Hindus revealed yet another interesting dimension. “We support the CAA. We want more Hindus to come here. If necessary, we will empty places here so that they can be settled here. We will petition the government to open up nearby grazing reserves so that they can settle here. This is the only way we can resist them and can become a majority once again here.” This was told to me by one of my key informants in the Hindu neighborhood during a conversation. The right-wing state’s politics are bringing unitary religious identities and

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<sup>165</sup> The law did not grant citizenship to persecuted minorities who were Muslims from the neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan

making people forget histories of other kinds of relationships that they shared with other communities.

The passing of the Assam Cattle Protection Act 2021 has significantly disturbed the ethnic fabric in Muslim majority areas, particularly in char-lands. During Eid in July 2022, many households chose an alternative animal as opposed to the cow for ‘*qurbani*’ (ritual sacrifice). In fact, the leader from the minority party AIUDF, appealed to the Muslims to choose an alternative animal instead of hurting religious sentiments. Abdul da had mentioned that cattle traders in the Baghbar weekly market, that houses one of the largest cattle markets in Barpeta district, recorded the lowest sale during Eid in 2022, suffering enormous loss. There are numerous reports that such laws will adversely impact Assam’s rural economy. The livestock sector is the biggest sector in Assam next only to farming and most people engaged in it are minority communities – both religious and caste minorities. Such laws have directly targeted these communities.<sup>166</sup>

Climate change and the coming of a right-wing state have complicated relationships and politics of a borderland state like Assam where ‘anti-immigration’ and anti-minority violence have always headlined people’s lives. In the Baghbar revenue circle, which comprises predominantly of chars, 17334 *bighas* of land amounting to a value of Rs. 229,049,963 have been lost to erosion between 2009 to 2019, affecting more than 6000 families.<sup>167</sup> And this is simply the recorded data. These numbers have only increased since then. As climate change induced floods and erosion make more and more minority population living in now ‘vulnerable’ ecologies migrate, they will face renewed violence and hatred that is being continually fed by a majoritarian state. The state-society relations between minority communities from char-lands and the BJP ruled state machinery will turn uglier

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<sup>166</sup> See [Assam’s cow protection law could devastate the state’s already-stressed rural economy \(scroll.in\)](#); [Eid: In Assam, a new cattle protection law make it harder for many to offer qurbani \(scroll.in\)](#)

<sup>167</sup> Data from Disaster management division at the Baghbar Circle Office, Mandia

in the days to come. In a recent article, Rokibuz Zaman argues that evicted Bengali Muslims in Assam have stopped resisting against the evictions because this state has unleashed a new variety of violence on them.<sup>168</sup>

Thus, it is important to understand that issues of state-society relations and experiences in the fluid ecologies of borderland India are intricately tied to the context of Assamese nationalism, ethnicity, citizenship, and immigration among others. Sanjib Baruah (2003) had argued that questions of citizenship in Assam are linked to questions of ethnicity. Thus, whenever the question of ‘who is an Indian?’ is raised, this also simultaneously raises the question of ‘who is Assamese?’. In such arrangements, where citizenship gets involved with questions of ethnicity and ethnicity is linked to notions of ‘homeland’ or ‘sons of the soil’ arguments, some political communities are imagined not only as permanently ‘non-citizen/immigrant’ but also as permanently ‘non-Assamese’. In borderlands, these imaginations get heightened with suspicions lurking always close-by.

Baruah (1994) suggests that alternative imaginations of community and belonging have to be based on ideas of inter-relationships rather than boundedness, developing “a different relationship to culture and history than that of cultural property that is owned by nations and nationalities.” (pp. 671). The socio-cultural and political world of the char-dwellers has already shown us how boundedness and fixity can be countered by fluidity, relationality, and respect for hybridity. How belongingness can be fluid and non-linear or non-rooted, away from notions of ‘fixed homelands’. The state’s role is to respect and recognize that and instead of destroying it, allow it to develop in its own directions, just like a rhizome. Having said that, though there is a larger abstract, authoritative and often violent macro entity of state presence, the state on the ground is also

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<sup>168</sup> See <https://scroll.in/article/1040558/why-eviction-drives-in-assam-are-no-longer-facing-resistance>

affectual and functions in patchwork, allowing spaces of negotiation and understanding to exist. The state-char-dweller relation is not binary or linear, but a mesh, with many threads being woven together not in neat braids but entangled lines. This is why I see possibilities and hope – this creation of spaces of negotiation and co-existence may potentially replace majoritarian xenophobic and Islamophobic relations with those of love and understanding.

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## **Chapter: Methodology**

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## Chapter: Conclusion

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