Living with the politics of floods:  
A study in the Dhemaji district of Assam  
(An abstract)

Events caused by natural forces or natural disasters as these are more commonly known account for major destruction the world over. The past year of 2012 witnessed an estimated 32.4 million across the world being affected by floods, earthquakes, cyclones, tropical storms and forest fires; 98% of which were weather-related. Natural disasters in that sense are ubiquitous. Of all the physical, geological and natural phenomena that affect the earth, floods are the most widespread. There is no place in the world which has never experienced a single event of flooding. Floods are so intertwined with human history that myths about floods abound in all civilisations. Ubiquitous as they are, floods can however be classified depending on their occurrence. In some regions of the world characterised by heavy, albeit seasonal rainfall like the monsoons in the Indian subcontinent, cyclone-prone coastal areas, or in major river valleys, floods are a regular occurrence. Floods in this case, then, are perennial in nature. This perennial nature ensures some sort of predictability to the event. People living in such areas are equipped with a degree of preparedness such that they are not caught unawares. However, floods in such and other areas can also be episodic. Floods can be both normal and pathological if understood within the context of the ubiquitous nature of this hydrological phenomenon. But the dominant understanding and discourse on floods is often polarised. Governments and policy makers often adopt a lens to look at floods as unexpected, and almost always destructive. Their emphasis is primarily on macro level and technical solutions to control floods. This is demonstrated by policies on flood control which aim at controlling rivers, construction of embankments and dams on the river with far reaching implications for people living in flood prone areas and often away from them. Floods are portrayed in official parlance more as a pathological than a normal phenomenon.

Contemporary flood research is rich in the results of scientific enquiries. The bulk of social science research in natural hazards in general and floods in particular has reinforced the reductionist approach of the dominant or macro view. In that sense, the natural science-technological approach is state and institution centric and considers people as 'victims'. Studies, carried out, in this perspective are unable to include people’s perceptions primarily because people do not appear important in the larger scheme of things. There is almost total neglect of the ethno discourses on floods; over a more technical approach to floods. This results in a knowledge base which is lopsided, highly skewed towards structural interventions and macro level solutions and hence, found wanting in multiple ways. This thesis strives to contribute towards a socio- anthropological understanding of floods. It does so because it perceives a lack of literature which looks at floods as a socio-cultural and political

1IDMC Norwegian Refugee Council report 'Global estimates 2012: People displaced by disasters'. 
process rather than as an one off event. It challenges the existing definitions of 'natural' and 'disasters'. The study argues in favour of a nuanced and everyday understanding of floods which affects communities, nature and the State. In doing so, it looks at the dialectics of people's knowledge of floods and contrasts it with the knowledge that the state propagates. The thesis is focussed on the people who live with floods in the state of Assam. The fundamental concern was to understand what people's experiences of floods in a perennial flood prone area are. In an effort to gain a better insight into this concern the study sought to:

Locate floods in the history of Assam and link it to the socio-economic implications it had for people
Examine the governmental policies and approaches vis-a-vis floods and people/community affected by floods.
Locate groups who were most vulnerable to the socio economic gradient of floods
Capture the everyday encounter between nature, the State and the people who are affected by floods on a recurring basis

Based on these, the thesis is organised into seven chapters. The introductory chapter introduces natural disasters and questions the notion of natural and man made in the context of disasters. It problematises floods as a socio-political-historical event that affects the very existence of the people. It also introduces the theoretical perspectives of the study and the statement of problem. The thesis takes forward this in chapter two which describes the field and the position of the researcher. This chapter takes up the methodological concerns of the study in detail. Chapter three through six build upon the analysis of the objectives of the study. Chapters three and four include a historical and policy analysis respectively, primarily based on secondary literature from a variety of sources. Chapters five and six are analyses of the relationship of the state and the people on everyday basis in flood times as also during the non-flood times. Chapter seven interprets the findings within the realm of cultural adaptation to risk and the notion of the everyday state in the context of floods. It also discusses the lack of relevant theory to include people's discourses in the context of the disasters which could be an area for further research in the field of indigenous knowledge, cultural ecology and disaster research.

Assam is one of the most flood prone states in the country. The state faces annual flood fury during monsoons. In the recent years Assam, being a lower riparian state, has begun to experience flash floods due to release of water from the dams being constructed in Arunachal Pradesh. Riverine erosion has induced rampant landlessness and caused forced migration and are rampant. Despite the acute conditions, there is a dearth of studies on the plight of the people. Assam is located in a high risk seismic zone. Large scale seismic disturbances from time to time upset the rivers of the entire region and keep the drainage system in a perpetual state of flux. The assessed flood prone area in Assam alone is estimated at 31.5 million hectares or 92.6 percent of the cultivated land. While there are a plethora of studies on the geomorphological and the hydrological aspects of floods, there are hardly any which have considered people's experience of floods. The lack of the people's
perspective has led to an unilateral comprehension of the complexity of floods in the Brahmaputra valley.

Assam has several indigenous and non indigenous riverine communities. Communities such as the Mising have lived in the Brahmaputra valley for generations. They have rich knowledge of the river and its surroundings. This knowledge is often unwritten and passed on orally from generation to generation. The Mising have lived with and adjusted to the floods on the river. To capture this experience of living with floods, this ethnographic study was carried out with the Mising (an indigenous community) and the Hajongs (a non indigenous community) in the Dhemaji district.

The primary site for this ethnographic study comprised several villages of Dhemaji district. My key informants included community members who were men, women, girls and boys of all ages, youth leaders from the communities, elected members to the panchayat, wards, health workers and members of the local disaster management committees. The secondary site for data collection were the district headquarters of Dhemaji and the state capital of Guwahati. The data thus collected largely as narratives and as archival material were analysed and interpreted keeping in mind the objectives and the research questions.

Historically floods had been a part and parcel of life in the Brahmaputra valley. Based on the narratives from the members of the community, and the archival sources, it was clear that Dhemaji had always experienced flood. The Mising socio-cultural calendar and agricultural activities were planned keeping the floods in mind. Availability of land meant that low lying land could be kept fallow for the river waters to flow into. The British had cultivated tea on the higher grounds on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra which were not inundated. Hence, they did not introduce flood control structures on the northern banks. Flood resistant varieties of paddy were sown when floods were higher and the other varieties were sown later. Floods were welcomed for their silt. There were cases of unnatural floods in some years, but this was more of an exception than a norm.

The earthquake of 1950 changed the geomorphology of the Brahmaputra. The height of the river bed rose such that erosion became more rampant. The geomorphology of the mountainous tributaries of the Brahmaputra also changed. Floods became longer, more intense and erosion very severe. While the communities such as the Mising had adapted to the floods for generations, their adaptation to erosion was limited. The government was unprepared to handle these changes. The immediate response was to construct embankments which were seen as a temporary solutions. Embankments have a lifespan of thirty years at the maximum. Dhemaji district has many such embankments which have outlived their prescribed time frame. Embankments brought with them a sense of false security for the people who lived within the embanked areas and an aftermath worse than floods for those outside of these. Communities such as the ones included in the research had lived for almost thirty years within the embankments when these gave way. This changed the face of once prosperous villages to ones which grow very little now. Having lived within an embankment also made people forego some of the adaptive measures to floods which hampered their coping ability when the
embankment ceased to exist.

Erosions and sandcasting have become problems far greater than floods. Erosion means a permanent loss of land. Such a loss in the face of ever shrinking land holdings has serious implications for an agrarian community. Multiple displacements and forced migration of people have changed the socio-cultural fabric of the communities. Migrating into another area in an ethnically sensitive state like Assam has the potential for rivalry which can lead to violence. The constant fear of erosion and loss of land has made people feel vulnerable for their future. The steady migration from rural to urban locations impacts gender relations and changes work life balance.

The study found that it is impossible to regulate a transboundary river such as the Brahmaputra unless the neighbouring riparian states are involved. A lack of information sharing hampers initiatives such as flood forecasting which will minimize damages in case of a severe flood. The competitive dam building exercises by China and India in a seismic and ecologically fragile zone have made communities in lower riparian Assam even more vulnerable. Their adaptive mechanisms are unable to cope with the longer and more destructive floods every year. A hydrological phenomenon like flood has become a socio-political disaster which affects certain communities in areas such as Dhemaji which have been on the margins of the state. Natural disasters occur in a political space. They are not driven by politics, nor are they immune from politics (Cohen and Werker 2008:795). Initiatives taken by human actors can promote the prevention and mitigation of the damage caused by natural disasters, even if they cannot affect the likelihood of rainfall in a specific area or seismic activity along a particular fault line. These initiatives can also cause the situation to worsen if the phenomena is not understood in its entirety. Hence, disasters are neither natural nor are they apolitical.

References