

A Home of Our Own? Lived Human (In)Securities and Experiences of Home in Disaster-related Displacements in Assam, India

Abstract

The yearning to belong and the wish to feel at home are basic human emotions. Yet, geopolitical realities and changing laws impact these emotions materially. Political processes such as disasters and related displacements can transform what follows, including the nature of belonging and a sense of security for those affected. Communities living close to the Brahmaputra River in Assam (India) have been affected by recurring riverbank erosion and floods for many generations. Their effects include internal displacements and the many complexities surrounding erosion-related rehabilitation.

While there is policy recognition of the problem of riverbank erosion (RBE) in Assam in the Northeast of India, there is ambiguity in the political recognition and an inadequate policy implementation regarding the long-term rehabilitation of the communities displaced by erosion. Erosion-related displacements, therefore, continue to be a major issue in Assam. Unlike flood-affected communities in Assam, permanently erosion-displaced families have no homes to return to when the floods recede, and the temporary shelters are closed. Erosion-related displacements, then, can become defining moments in people's lives wherein their home is lost – not only as a physical entity but also as an emotional space. Thus, the central query of my thesis is: *given the recurrent nature of riverbank erosion and floods and the policy-political ambiguity of erosion-governance, what does home mean for disaster-displaced communities and how does this shape their human (in)security?*

I take a historical-structural approach to disaster-related displacements, contextualising their after-effects within the simultaneity of the long-term crises in the region and their governance. I investigate the lived psychosocial and political (in)securities that accompany experiential communities, within the contextual-analytical background of Assam as part of a borderland region and use a three-pronged approach to home: as imaginative and material, as the nexus of collective power and identity, and as an entity governed at a multiscale level. What is of critical interest to me here are the roles that power, community identity, agency, and collective actions play in diverse home-making processes. Such an approach centres a political-emotional conceptualization of home.

I returned to Assam to examine the questions posed in this thesis. My familiarity with the region, its peoples, and cultures, and repeat encounters with erosion and flood-affected communities during my growing up years as well as working there as a researcher for over a decade before this study, made me a researcher-at-home, albeit with a few ethical and practical challenges. The research participants in this thesis are two disaster-experiential communities and members of government and government-aided institutions at multiple levels in Assam's disaster governance labyrinth. The two communities I worked with self-rehabilitated in the early 2000s in unused and/or government land following erosion-displacement and repeat experiences of floods and erosion. They belong to the Koch-Motok community in Chabua (Dibrugarh district) and the Mising tribal (indigenous) community in Guwahati (Kamrup metropolitan district) respectively. Within a reflexive methodology, I employed an ethnographic approach to the fieldwork and a reflexive thematic analysis. Metaphors, acts of remembering, engaged observations, ethnographic content analysis, fieldnotes, and political

discourse analysis helped me revisit the memories of the participants and narrate their experiences. I especially draw from 30 in-depth (multiple) interviews, 21 structured interviews, 117 texts of Assam State Assembly Questions and Answers, and 5 policy documents related to disasters and land rights of India and Assam respectively, as well as a range of grey literature.

Self-rehabilitated communities try to recreate homes by bringing memorabilia such as plants, furniture, cultural practices, and rituals from the displaced homes to the respective new locations. Such memorabilia hold emotional but also economic and social values. Perceptions of the home across different generations are different, and an incremental consequence of the combined processes of displacement, resettlement and self-rehabilitation that last over generations. Home, therefore, implies a diverse range of meanings and experiences for different members of a family and a self-rehabilitated community. It is a function of factors such as the displaced person's age, gender, social background, time lived in and the level of attachment to the displaced and self-rehabilitated places, and so forth. Further, the research participants have a dichotomous relationship with their disaster-displaced status. While the disaster-displacement centric identity is an anchor to claim rights post-displacement, such an identity is perceived in their everyday life as lacking dignity.

The experiential communities engage in a range of processes for navigating the labyrinthine erosion governance. Despite power imbalances within a community, such processes are key in home-making practices during and post-displacement and are reflective of collective yet situated agency. Key features include attachment to popular discursive practices such as the term 'sons of the soil;' strategic (in)visibility; anticipatory disaster solidarities such as formation of search parties for finding land before becoming permanently displaced; and using ethnic community identities jointly with a disaster-related identity (such as 'indigenous-disaster-affected-people'). Repeat disaster experiences lead displaced groups to take risks, such as living in environmentally vulnerable areas of a city and with a looming fear of being evicted from their current places of residence as illegal occupants of the land. All such strategies aid the communities in dealing with the everyday psychosocial and political insecurities. However, these innovative strategies also underline their vulnerabilities as individuals who possess less visibility within formal disaster governance structures.

Self-rehabilitation is an act of situated agency that provides interim forms of human securities instead of a lasting sense of security.

State discourses around erosion-related governance overemphasise the physical nature of the hazard. The State, as I observe, plays an active role in deciding who owns the home post erosion-displacement. There exists a priority rehabilitation for "indigenous" landless erosion-affected communities which implies the exclusion or lesser focus on communities perceived as non-indigenous. That is, an affected community's identity plays a key role in determining their access to rehabilitation and support from the State following erosion-related displacements. Therefore, long-term disasters such as erosion and floods in Assam's case tend to contribute towards diverse forms of disaster ethnonationalism.

While long-term disaster-experiencing communities display an acute disaster impoverishment and fatigue resulting from multigenerational living with erosion and floods, this also pushes them further to exercise their agency, to push their traditional gender roles, and engage in actions to move away

from perennially disaster-affected regions. Such processes are accompanied by an aspiration for an urban life perceived as bringing better livelihood opportunities. In doing so, disaster-affected communities from Assam's rural regions are increasingly adding to an emergent disaster-affected urban lower (and sometimes lower-middle) class group that is integrated in the informal economy of India's urban centres. That is, chronic disasters and displacements lead to disaster-related dispossession and intergenerational disaster impoverishment. This results in producing a class of semi-urban and urban poor people, who enter and contribute to India's urban economies as semi- and unskilled workers.

The thesis makes the relationship between emotional and psychological experiences of home and the practices of human(in) security more explicit. It shows that the conceptualisation of disasters must include informal displacements such as those studied in this thesis, that often fall outside of formal systems of governance. What these observations then show is that the diverse meanings of home as felt and lived by the self-rehabilitated communities are shaped intimately and continuously by power relations between the state, the power elites and the self-rehabilitated (disaster-experiential) communities; and by the community's situated agency vis-a-vis its location in the hierarchies of the pre-displacement social structures; turning post-displacement home (un)making into a political act. These power relations and exercise of agency together shape, reduce or increase the lived human insecurities and securities of the communities.