

### **‘Char’red for a lifetime : Internal Displacement in Assam Plains in India**

For a country as large and populous as India, the problem of internal displacement<sup>1</sup> assumes a greater significance in the post-colonial years than that of refugees, though the latter continues to occupy centre-stage in academic discussions and much of national level policy-making. While issues such as the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* or the departure of the Kashmiri *Pandits* from Kashmir have drawn world attention to internal displacement in India<sup>2</sup>, there are other lesser known corners in the country where massive internal displacement has been going silently and unremarked for almost a hundred years. One such remote corner is the North East Indian state of Assam, which has witnessed large-scale internal population displacement following internal ethnic wars and environmental changes<sup>3</sup>.

Characterized as “miniature Asia” by scholars because of its astounding demographic mix, Assam had historically been on the migration interface of diverse population streams. This in-migration trend has continued into current times, with Assam receiving a large number of refugees from East Bengal/East Pakistan, Tibet and Burma professing different religions, speaking different languages and bearing different cultures. Lucien Febvre once said “France’s name is diversity” and after him we can say the same about Assam, for in Assam one continues to find a dazzling triumph of the plural and the heterogeneous rarely matched elsewhere in India. And it is this dogged plurality that has given rise, in the post-colonial years, to a number of militant identity movements and ethnic strife in the state often resulting in ‘cleansing’<sup>4</sup>. This has led to an immeasurable sorrow, both in terms of lives lost as well as population displacement. In case of Assam it is in-migration over the longer period of time that has led to violent upsurge of reaction and displacement. Often, it was the descendants of the in-migrants who were displaced.

But while conflict-induced displacement is of more recent origin, an older problem that continues to engage attention is the perennial flood-induced internal displacement of tens of thousands of people from the riverine villages to Assam’s mainland plains. Every year, the gushing waters of the river Brahmaputra, originating in the Himalaya and flowing across three different Asian countries, inundate and erode the river-

banks and river islands on which thousands of Muslim farmers of East Bengal origin live carrying out subsistence agriculture. Powerful and swift-flowing, the river Brahmaputra carries with it a great rolling mass of sand and clay which makes its flow a powerful force for erosion: it meanders hollowing out the concave banks, creating troughs of deep waters there, while leaving *chars* (midstream sand-bars) and river-islands on the opposite side. The region's tectonics and geology, as well as the climate of the Brahmaputra basin combine to generate high erosion rates and river-channel changes, making the valley extremely flood-prone. It is because the river basin is so densely populated that the population here is so vulnerable to natural disasters, and so easily displaced.

There are two critical aspects to the problem of internal displacement from the Brahmaputra river-bank and *chars* to the Assam Plains. Firstly, even at the best of times, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are unwelcome in any society anywhere in the world, and this is true of the *char*-displaced as well, as they try to rebuild a life in the mainland of Assam. Secondly, the problem of IDPs in this instance is intrinsically linked/overlapped with the politically touchy issue of illegal immigration into Assam from Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the IDPs of Assam suffer double-jeopardy because some of them are under suspicion of being 'illegal migrants' from Bangladesh. Therefore, besides being neglected as IDPs, they also have an 'image' problem, while other IDPs within India at least do not have this additional problem.

Most of the IDPs from the *chars* of the Assam plains are Muslim farmers of East Bengal origin settled in the river islands and banks of Assam by the British since the last decade of the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. Their appearance in the mainland towns, following large-scale floods and erosion, is at times accepted as simple proof of fresh illegal immigration from across the leaky international border in south Assam. There was mass internal migration of East Bengal Muslims into Assam plains in the first few decades of the twentieth century and there is a belief that such in-migration, now across an international border, still continues. It is possible that illegal immigration does take place across the leaky Assam-Bangladesh border but in the absence of serious governmental investigations into this issue, rumors and fears abound within the indigenous communities of being over-run by such continuing illegal immigration. A rise in the number of Muslims in Assam in the Census of 1991 from 24% to 28% of total population in the state has further added to this

suspicion. The refrain in Assam throughout the five decades of postcolonial politics has been the threat the state's indigenous people are facing from a steady and illegal immigration of impoverished fortune-seeking Bangladeshis. Significantly, in spite of protracted anti-immigrant social movements (and backlash) over the last two decades, there has been little movement by the Indian State towards a political settlement of the "Bangladeshi" problem in Assam and new dimensions are added to this fear when thousands of poor, *sarong*-clad Muslim peasants from the far-flung riparian areas spread into the predominantly Assamese hinterland.

The political elite of Assam adds a political 'overtone' to what is primarily a humanitarian and socio-economic problem, which perhaps explains the lack of effort to acknowledge and address the extent of riverbank and *char* displacement in the state. The state government has no long term strategy to cope with this problem and central government responsibility extends only to providing relief to the internally displaced. The records at the Land Settlement offices and the crowded daily wage labour market in different parts of Assam are testimony to the shrinking land and living space in the *char* areas and coastal villages. In the absence of a vibrant civil society intervention in this issue, the old doubts and political considerations still abound. This 'overtone' also reflects the gut-fear of a small, economically weak community – of losing political power and land to a continuous inflow of illegal immigrants<sup>7</sup>. At a macro-level, the point has also to be made that the fears of the indigenous population derives from the non-resolution of one of the many un-finished businesses of India's Partition: the inability of the nation-states to address the matter of what to do with the those who illegally cross the 'new' boundaries of the Subcontinent. It is the absence of a head-on policy and non-resolution of this matter which has led to a suspicion of the "outsider" in Assam, a suspicion that spills over understandably to the issue of internal displacement as well.

### ***History of East Bengal peasant migration into colonial Assam***

The problem of internal displacement in Assam has to be understood within the broad framework of large-scale colonial immigration of Muslims of East Bengal origin into the province in order to bring its sprawling unpopulated fields under the plough and to raise its revenue potential. The 1826 colonial conquest of Assam opened up the province as a land

frontier, attracting large-scale immigration of both labour and enterprise from the neighbouring provinces of the *Raj*, especially Bengal. Back then, the Assamese middle class welcomed this entry of productive labour and skills into the Brahmaputra Valley, and it was commonly understood that such migration was beneficial for the sparsely populated Valley and that no economic progress was possible otherwise.

The new peasantry filled the Valley's western frontier as well as the *char* lands—the low-lying, flood-prone islands in the midstream of the flow of the Brahmaputra. Energetic and enterprising as migrants everywhere are, the impoverished Muslim arrivals led the way in rice-farming and multiple cropping; for the first time, jute became an important item of export. By the 1930s, the East Bengal peasants had turned their new homeland into the rice-bowl of the Indian Northeast. But as row after row of little thatched huts began to appear along the riverbank, the indigenous politicians began to demand regulation and containment of the influx in order to, as one government report of 1938 put it, "save the forests and to reserve sufficient uncultivated land for the future generations of Asamiyas"<sup>8</sup>. The response of the British was to enact the Line System<sup>9</sup>, whereby native settlements were separated from the crowded migrant *bustee*. Small enclaves or ghettos of East Bengal Muslims emerged along the riverine districts and the *chars* of Assam, where no native wished to set up home. These lands, connected to the mainland only by the country-boat, hosted the speakers of various dialects of the East Bengal countryside.

In the first few decades of the nineteenth century the landless Muslim peasants from East Bengal were grateful for what land they could get in the Brahmaputra Valley, and there was no demand for a loosening of restriction imposed upon them by the Line System. But with an increase of human settlement in the *char* areas and the erosive activities of the river Brahmaputra, the condition of the settlers became increasingly precarious<sup>10</sup>.

About this time, in the 1920s, a furious debate was on within and outside the Assam Legislature on the need to put some restriction on the hitherto unrestricted flow of East Bengal migrants – in order to preserve some land for the “future generation of the Assamese”. On the other hand, it was also unanimously accepted that the East Bengal peasants would be allowed to enjoy all the rights, including the right to hold land anywhere in Assam, if they were willing to accept the Assamese language as their mother-tongue. Thus, towards the end of the 1930s, the Muslims of East Bengal origin in

Assam were faced with two different kinds of pressures: one, the whims and fancies of a turbulent, unbridled river, and two, the pressure to accept the Assamese language as their mother-tongue in return for land rights.

The main bone of contention between the Congress Party and the Muslim League in Assam in the 1930s and 1940s was over the question of whether the Line System should stay or be abolished. There was an urgent cry among the migrant Muslims, under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhashani<sup>11</sup>, for the relaxation of the Line System as more and more *chars* and riparian villages were being washed away by the river every year leaving thousands homeless and pauperized. While it is true that the Muslim League Premier of Assam Sir Syed Saadullah did actively encourage the settlement of Muslim migrants from East Bengal in order to strengthen the Muslim League demand for inclusion of Assam in a proposed “six province” Pakistan, it was also true that he was responsible for a large number of ruthless eviction cases where internal displacees had over-stepped the restrictions of the Line System. Letting loose elephants or setting fire to the shacks to drive out the illegal settlers were common eviction tactics adopted by the government.

It was only when the loss of the Muslim League cause in Assam became apparent in the mid 1940s that the Muslim migrants, under the direction of the Assam Muslim League leaders, including Maulana Bhashani himself, gradually began to consider adopting the Assamese language officially, and to dissolve the Muslim League in Assam and join, *en bloc*, the Indian National Congress. It seemed, for a while, that the mixing up of the land issue with that of the language was now moving towards a solution after years of mistrust and uncertainty. This was in 1951.

The next significant date as far as the migrant Muslim population, now called Na-Asamiyas (New Assamese) of Assam are concerned, is 25 March 1971, when Bangladesh was established. This date became significant because soon the problem of IDPs began to be overlapped with that of illegal immigration from across the border. It was easy to confuse second or third generation settlers for fresh illegal immigrants because both groups shared the same origin, ethnicity, language and culture. A leaky part-river border, corrupt border security elements, border touts on both sides, as well as a demand for cheap labour on Assam side kept such fears alive. In post-1971 years, these IDPs thus became objects of suspicion by the receiving society. The state government became increasingly lackadaisical in its attitude

towards providing a long term solution. Having to fend for themselves, this large displaced population naturally moved in to the neighboring towns and villages in search of jobs.

### **Tribals Versus Muslim Internal Displacees**

There is an additional challenge to the Muslim settlers in lower Assam which is not normally considered, and that is the sense of deprivation felt by the newly politicised tribes who have been the original inhabitants of the sparsely populated areas colonised by the East Bengal Muslims. A large number of Assam's plains tribals, particularly the Tiwas or Lalung tribes in Morigaon district, have also been displaced following regular floods and river-bank erosion, along with the Muslims. Significantly, there exists a lot of tension between these two groups of internal displacees. On the one hand, the tribal demand that the Muslim settlers evacuate the land that rightfully belonged to the former, and on the other, the determination of the Muslim settlers not to vacate an inch of the land they had been farming upon for years, has led to an aggravation of an already complicated scenario. In this way, the widening of the bed of the Brahmaputra, the twin processes of erosion and inundation and the resultant shrinkage of cultivable land continue to create new avenues of ethnic tension and conflict in the Assam plains. It was no coincidence that the infamous massacre of hundreds of Muslims in the locality of Nellie, during the height of the Assam Movement in 1983, was carried out by disaffected and dispossessed members of the Tiwa or Lalung tribe in Morigaon<sup>12</sup>. There have also been recent instances of attacks on Muslim settlers in the Bodo dominated areas of lower Assam where they have been suspect of illegal squatting on tribal lands.

### ***Floods and internal displacement in chars***

The extreme deprivation of the *char* population becomes obvious when the floods begin to peak, around June-July. Along the riparian areas of Assam, thousands of the internally displaced from the *chars* and the river-bank areas are seen huddled together in temporary shelters on bunds, by the side of the highways or in the shacks and schoolhouses of the neighbouring mainland villages. These *bustees* become the source of cheap and ready labor for all of Assam's towns and cities. According to published newspaper reports, in 1991, the going daily-wage rate for the internal displacees 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 much relief and rehabilitation from the government, many of the Muslim IDPs begin to move out further afield, including Upper Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Low wages, back-breaking labour, exploitation of women and children are harsh facts of life for these internal displacees. Children often die of water-borne diseases at the relief camps, as this researcher observed in camps organized by the district authorities at Mairabari and Nagaon. A volunteer from a local NGO informed that some inmates from these camps had died from eating poisonous objects out of sheer hunger. Human beings die or are displaced; animals starve or are washed away; crops and homes are destroyed; whole square miles of land are washed away. Such is the dimension of the annual floods of the Brahmaputra in the *chars* of Assam.

Besides Morigaon and Lahorighat districts, Dhubri and Goalpara districts are two other areas of Lower Assam that experience very high rate of erosion and floods every year. In Dhubri, most of the IDPs find shelter on tops and sides of the hillocks along the river, such as Rakshashini Hills, Kosutola Hills, Shonamukhi Hills and Dudhnath Hills<sup>13</sup>. Many from here spread out to the neighbouring district of Meghalaya, especially into towns like Shillong and Tura, the Garo Hills districts, and even as far as Agartala in Tripura. In these urban settings, they eke out precarious livelihoods as rickshaw-pullers, *thela*-pushers and as lowly paid daily wage labour. In 1989, out of a total of 7000 rickshaws in Nagaon town in middle Assam, no more than 2450 were licensed, the rest un-licensed and illegal<sup>14</sup>. Most of the unlicensed rickshaw-pullers are IDPs from the neighbouring *chars*<sup>15</sup>.

The powerlessness of the Muslim *char* internal displacees makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. For some, the towns and cities are a source of alternative income only in times of floods and therefore their migration is seasonal. Once the waters recede, the migrants slowly trace their way back to the *chars* and respective villages. But over the years due to a growing environmental degradation and the increasing wrath of the Brahmaputra, large numbers of permanent migrants are being attracted to the cities. These are the people whose lands are permanently claimed by the river and lost for all practical purposes. Most of them never return to their *chars*.

Slow rates of accretion of viable agricultural land, sterility of land often due to excessive sand deposition and salinity, unnecessary delay of survey and settlement by the Land Revenue Department, and, above all, political inequalities arising out of the use of power and violence associated with the resettlement process, hinder the relocation of landless and displaced population. For the poor peasants who lose their land to erosion, the process is irreversible. Very few poor peasants have ever received their due share in the re-emerged lands. On the contrary, the use of violence, dispossession, murder, and confiscation of crops and animals have almost become established patterns of *char* life. The selective use of violence by the local *Diwanis* (*char* landlords) who act as the patrons of the *lathials* (armed retainers) are the ultimate arbiters of dispute over *char* land. When a patron succeeds in the violent fights resettlement takes place usually with this support groups, kin or dependents and the patron remains the virtual lord of the entire *char*<sup>16</sup>. Relocations are sometimes followed by triangular fights between the local *Diwanis* who want to grab land, people who held the land prior to erosion and the new settlers<sup>17</sup>.

### ***What happens then?***

Why a problem of such overwhelming human dimensions – the displacement of the *char* population – has not been adequately addressed is not difficult to guess. The inaccessibility of many of the *chars* make it difficult to intervene even where administrative will to do so exists. Again, as a result of the annual southward drift of the river Brahmaputra, many *char* and revenue villages which were earlier located along the south bank, suddenly find themselves on the north of the new embankments. According to government rules, the villagers are then asked to maintain administrative links with the north bank though they continue to be voters in the south bank. In such a situation, standing uncertainly between two districts, these areas are often left out of administrative concern, land surveys and population enumeration. Prevailing social and political attitudes also affect the state's approach towards the issue. But how long can such a scenario continue? What happens to the thousands of families that are uprooted every year and are thereafter scattered all over the North East, some even finding their ways to the slums of Delhi and Rajasthan, far to the west? And as more and more *sarong* clad men fill the gaps in the town economies, the fears of the host society within Assam receive a fillip.

Movement of populations have taken place for as long as one cares to remember from the pages of history or even myths and fables. The difference in present times is that, firstly, there is more population and so more proclivity to out-migrate as the land cannot sustain, as well as the possibility of inundation of new lands by a larger influx than in earlier times; secondly, there are more rigid boundaries, some of them re-drawn, so that it is now possible to call some more people 'outsiders' even if one were to only speak of inter-state and not necessarily international boundaries. During colonial times, the over-arching power of the Centre made possible mass migration of ethnically different peoples (tea plantations, lumber, rubber, tin mining, etc.) by giving it a cover of power, without which, the territories ingesting the migrants would possibly have blocked them. In the absence of such colonial power, a symbiotic relationship may well have evolved between the migrant and indigenous peoples. In the meantime, as the local people became more educated in the post-colonial years and the politics of numbers began to matter, the situation was ripe for a backlash. This kind of backlash following the departure of the colonials is not unique to Assam or India's Northeast, but also in Southeast Asia, Africa and many parts of the developing world.

One possible way out of the situation would be for the powerful Centre to continue to remain protectors of the IDPs, but this is not a viable or secure solution given the vicissitude of Centre-state politics. So, a complex period lies ahead, when more autonomy could be granted to smaller units of the Indian Union. This autonomy can lead to an unravelling of the security situation for the weaker communities – including the Muslim *char* population in the case of Assam. To prevent mass misery and violence, the emerging autonomy of the various part of the Indian Union must come with guarantees extracted from the new elite so far as IDPs and other vulnerable minorities are concerned. This requires a certain amount of intellectual evolution in each of the autonomous areas and an understanding that is well publicized and agreed upon.

In the case of Assam, an unambiguous policy approach towards the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh has to be made if one were to address impartially the issue of IDPs. A clear-cut legal mechanism acceptable to all communities for detecting illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, however big or small their numbers may be, has to be created in order to separate the Muslims of East Bengal origin who are Indian citizens from the more recent arrivals

who are not. The existing piece of legislation for detection of illegal immigrants, The Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983 (amended in 1985), as the past 17 years have amply demonstrated, is not equipped to deal with this complex process of detection. So, the political parties of the state, particularly the ruling Congress (I), have to move beyond mere considerations of the ballot-box and address the issue directly. The legal status, or non-status, of the internally displaced makes them totally dependent on the local governments for redress unlike the refugees who are able to draw upon international aid and the debate re-focuses itself around the responsibility of the national governments towards the internally displaced persons: what happens to those IDPs who do not have the privilege to turn themselves into refugees?

For a country like India, the main concern of policy makers should be IDPs. Since it is such a large country that it is the IDPs who represent a larger volume of mass misery than those who are termed 'refugees'. Facts on the ground prove it, from Kashmiri *Pundits* to the 'development refugees' all over, to the *char* displaced of Lower Assam. There are so many critical issues that remain to be sorted out, but there is not yet a serious body of opinion in India looking at IDPs, nor are there institutions in place to look into the problem. Since international social organizations are not really welcome in India, this might be the case of an out-of-government organization to look into the critical problems of IDPs in India, given that this is one of the major problems of the population groups in the modern era of India after 1947. Such an institution certainly would not be the beloved of either the Centre or the state governments in question, but it would be necessary for the sake of the deprived communities in question.

*The author is teached at the Department of History, Cotton College, Gauhati University, INDIA.*

#### ***Notes and References:***

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper, internally displaced people are , "...persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave

their homes or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” , *Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, The Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement, (Washington DC, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Lama points out that there are four categories of internal displacement in India : Those displaced due to  
 a/ Political causes, including secessionist movements  
 b/ Identity-based autonomy movements  
 c/ Localised violence  
 d/ Environmental and development-induced displacement. See Mahendra P. Lama, August 2000, “Internal Displacement in India: Causes, Protection and Dilemmas”, in *Forced Migration Review* of the University of Oxford/Norwegian Refugee Council, No. 8 [\[Internet\]](#).

<sup>3</sup> “ North-east India has been facing severe internal displacement since it entered into the postcolonial phase over the past five decades...Besides conflict, environmental factors like the Great Earthquake of 1950, perennial flood and river-bank erosions too, have caused displacement of tens of thousands of people in Assam’s plains every year.....” Monirul Hussain, “State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the North East”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (India, December 6, 2000) p.4519.

<sup>4</sup> Few academic publications exist on such displacement. Some information may be had from Hussain, 2000 and Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself : Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, (OUP, 1999) Chapter 8, pp.173-198.

<sup>5</sup> See Anindita Dasgupta, “Political Mythmaking in Postcolonial Assam” in *Himal South Asian*, (Kathmandu, August 2000), Amalendu Guha, *Asom Nomore, Amiyu Nomoru* (Gauwahati, 1997). This point has also been made by Monirul Hussain, Amalendu Guha and Abdul Mannan from time to time. This point was further acknowledged in a recent ICSSR seminar directive on IDPs in North East India.

<sup>6</sup> They are commonly called “Charua” Muslims (Muslims living in the *chars*), “Pamua” Muslims (Farming Muslims), ‘Mymensinghiyas’ or simply as “Miyas”. Some scholars have called them “Immigrant Muslims”. For an ethnographic study of migrant Muslim communities in Assam’s *chars*, see Anindita Dasgupta, *Emergence of a Community : Muslims of East Bengal Origin in Assam in the Colonial and Postcolonial Period*, unpublished thesis, (Gauhati University, India 2001).

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement : Class, Identity, Ideology*, Manak Publications, (Delhi,

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1993), Amalendu Guha, “ Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist : Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Movement, 1979-80, *Economic and Political Weekly*, (India, October Special Issue, 1980), Sanjib Baruah, *India against itself : Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, (OUP, 1999) and Anindita Dasgupta, “Political Myth-making in Postcolonial Assam” in *Himal South Asian*, (August 2000).

<sup>8</sup> **Report of the Line Committee System** (Government of Assam Press, 1938).

<sup>9</sup> The Line System was first introduced in 1920 in the Nowgong district of colonial Assam where there was a rush of East Bengal in-migrants. A line was drawn on the map of the district separating the settlements of the natives from the new migrants as the natives wished to keep a social and physical distance from them.

<sup>10</sup> *Char* formations and riverbank erosion have been especially frequent since the earthquake of 1950 in Assam which resulted in a heightening of the river-bed in Dibrugarh in Upper Assam by 8-10 metres. This led to the weakening of the original discharging capacity of the river and since then the Brahmaputra has been frequently changing its course. The constant erosion of the river-bank has widened the river and all these together have resulted in immense deposition of silt by the river, or what has come to be known as *chars*. Compared to other major rivers of the world, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries bring down some of the highest discharges of water and sediments per unit area of the basin. The channel of the Brahmaputra, thus, undergoes major changes every year. As the river flows increase, the sand-bars or *chars* begin to move. When flows recede, sediments get deposited again as sand-bars and islands and the river takes on a new profile.

<sup>11</sup> Abdul Hamid Khan, better known as Maulna Bhashani, was born in a poor family of East Bengal. He was involved in the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements and finally emerged as a leader of the Muslim peasants of East Bengal where he organized them to fight the zamindars. Soon he became influential among the Bengali Muslim immigrants in Assam and was elected a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937. Bhashani led the immigrant Muslims in a movement against the Line System in Assam and demanded that belts and blocks reserved for the tribals be opened up for occupation. As the president of the provincial Muslim League, Bhashani had, with support from the Muslim League leaders of Bengal, planned a series of marches in Lower Assam in February 1947 against the Line System but the move fizzled out when the possibility of Assam being included in East Pakistan receded. After partition, Bhashani became an important leader in East Pakistan and later on played an important role in the creation of Bangladesh.

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<sup>12</sup> The massacre of descendants of Muslim migrants from East Bengal during the anti-foreigner Assam Movement (1979-85) at the village Nellie remains one of the most horrifying memories of ethnic cleansing in India. According to local sources, the number of casualties was not less than a thousand and a half.

<sup>13</sup> Jyotirmoy Jana, Bhangon Jiboner Somosya O Char Jiboner Alekhho, **Ninth Column** (Guwahati, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid ; 10.

<sup>15</sup> The government Revenue Department informed this researcher that in the period 1964 to 1988, in the Bhuragaon circle of Nagaon district alone, 42 villages have fallen victim to the forces of erosion. In a press release the department stated that, of these, in 21 villages a total of 20,120 bighas 1 katha and 10 lessas of land have been washed away by the mighty Brahmaputra. The government was yet to ascertain the level and area of destruction in the other 21 villages. Again, in the Lahorighat and Mairabari mauzas of the Lahorighat revenue circle, Nagaon, the extent of loss of land has been estimated at 12,041 bighas, 3 kathas, 15 lessas and 14.994 bighas 1 lessa respectively in the last 10 years (Dasgupta, 2001 ; 267).

<sup>16</sup> All this was summarized by two separate groups of 40 males each in Kochmora *char* in Nagaon district .Later it was also verified by encounters in several *chars* in Lower Assam. One of them, Tazimuddin, was an agricultural labourer who had lost his land to the river abut ten years back. Two years back the land had emerged but the local *Diwani* had blocked his way to it. Tazimuddin has two wives and six children. For the last ten years he has been working as an agricultural labourer in someone else's land. 'Lathi jaar, maati taar, This is the law of our land. I shall never get my land back', he said.

<sup>17</sup> .See for details, Dasgupta, 2001, pp.275-285.