Dreams and disasters on the banks of the Brahmaputra: dwelling and aspiration in Majuli, Northeast India

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Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

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Abstract

Dreams and disasters on the banks of the Brahmaputra: dwelling and aspiration in Majuli, Northeast India

The University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences, Social Anthropology
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Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities, 2021

Popular representations of the riverine district of Majuli in Assam, Northeast India, oscillate between depictions of a calm spiritual hub and as a land possessing a bleak and melancholic future owing to annual inundation and riverbank erosion. Glancing out across these increasingly amplified transcreations, this thesis drawing on 15-months of ethnographic fieldwork examines residents' aspirations for work and dwelling along the banks of the Brahmaputra. It traces how the quotidian comes to be shaped by them but also the new horizons that they point towards as well as push away from. Attending to the contents of residents' ambitions and dread through existing and speculative projects of infrastructure and dwelling provide surfaces for a multiplicity of imagined forms of future flourishing to come into view. This approach not only opens up and enlivens the relationship between "remote" places and the state but also the ambivalent orientations on the part of residents towards the forging of new connections with the region, country and international neighbours. Amidst shrinking lands, an entrenched rural livelihoods crisis and a vitalist politics of belonging and inclusion, I argue that an analytical concern with aspirations (and their discontents) as they rise up, permeate and are framed through the above affective objects affords crucial nuance in how scholars understand and re-present the lived complexity and contradictions for those who live on the banks of protean rivers and neglectful states.

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To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Some of their biographical details have also been changed.

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Introduction

Majuli:

the centre of *xotriya* culture;

the world's largest river island;

Assam's pride;

flood-prone Majuli;

erosion-affected Majuli;

but, Majuli's identity is not only limited to these expressions. Life in Majuli is colourful. Amidst a myriad of challenges, Majulials do not simply live life, but celebrate it.

(Anupam Kaushik Borah 2018, source's own translation from the original Assamese)

i.1 Glances from Fieldwork

As the dramatist and filmmaker Anupam Kaushik Borah recently put it, prominent media portrayals of Majuli allow for a plurality of constructions of his birth place. The multiple iterations circulating around Majuli that Borah draws on oscillate between depictions of a calm spiritual hub of the state and as a land possessing a bleak and melancholic future owing to annual inundation and riverbank erosion. The reification and increasing amplification of these popular tropes he listed, as presented above, however only serve to limit and obscure alternative stories and the divergent voices of residents. Borah is critical in particular of how outsider accounts (i.e. non-Majuli natives) tend to exoticize this location as a peaceful idyll under threat, with events framed through the lens of romantic tragedy (Agarwala 2018). As Borah so eloquently demonstrates in his recent Majuli-centred film *Bornodi Bhotiai* (2019), life is just as wonderfully and painfully complicated for Majulials as for anyone else.

I wish to anchor what follows in this thesis within such a sentiment (Majuli as neither idyll, nor flooded hell but a place where people live, struggle, hope and plan), or at least something that may be approximate. We see Majuli here not as a doomed monastic oasis, but through glances typical from my fieldwork that form openings in these stories told about it and the rigid classifications through them that come to be attributed to this place. The following glances are not meant to comprise neat examples of the "challenges" and "celebrations" Majuli residents face

but rather to serve as representational fragments that resist the master narratives mentioned above and which now so readily stick to Majuli:

uruka

on the night of *uruka* and eve of *Magh Bihu*, singing and dancing around the fire amidst the (largely) permitted mischief and tradition of "stealing" (*sur*), with recently "liberated" fencing leading to wandering animals being sought by their sour-faced owners

harass

lengthy delays at the *ghat* due to a ferry being commandeered following a VIP arrival, forcing returning passengers to mill around the adjacent *hotels* and drink tea against the sound of jostling motorbikes and accusations that "they are always harassing us"

timepass

men playing games of three-hand *tascard* atop the corrugated roofing of the ferry as it slowly meanders its way towards Jorhat, with women and older passengers inside the cabin below urgently fanning themselves during the hot months

mar, mar, mar (beat, beat, beat)!

an officer from the Assam State Power Distribution Company Limited being jeered when addressing a demonstration in the wake of 48 hours without power at the end of a stifling July, with two employees later that evening found and beaten in the market place before/precipitating the reestablishment of electricity in the area several hours later

tension

appeals to relatives, friends and acquaintances in-person, by phone and social media for funds to help cover the hefty costs of lengthy hospital stays for

a sick young family member being treated within the better health facilities in Dibrugarh Town on the south bank

bhaona

late nights for all ages in a village prayer hall to watch the dramatic form *ankiya bhaona* as male teachers, carpenters, farmers and tea stall owners take to the stage and hold the attention of an audience for hours

My fieldwork was truly cluttered with countless occasions of exuberant joy and shaped by a place teeming with creative activities and energies. If I was only allowed several words to describe what guided my fieldwork, then I would say principally experiences of festivity and waiting, which were punctuated by sporadic moments of tension. I have tried to reflect this within these “glances”. Much of this thesis will discuss the various aspects of flooding and erosion, but they are deliberately not mentioned here in making a beginning. Whilst not wishing to diminish the acute hardships regularly faced by many residents, my intention is instead to disrupt the tropes commonly invoked with reference to Majuli (referenced in the epigraph) and the complications, excesses and contradictions that they occlude for lives in this location.

i.2 Locations and processes of locating

Majuli in the margins

> There is a dream that somewhere out there—in the space of marginalia and ex-centricity—there are "places" still caught in the ongoing density of sociality and desire. Places to which "we" might return—in mind, if not in body—in search of redemption and renewal.
>
> (Kathleen Stewart *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* 1996:5).

Kathleen Stewart’s writing of the “texture” of precarious life amidst the ruins of coal camps in West Virginia does so in “fits and starts” (1996:7). “Appalachia” as an “object”, Stewart tells us, has its place within the American mythic imaginary, which comes accompanied with a variety of atmospheres. The associated traits of “poverty region” and “backwater” sit alongside its

"heroic status in the master narrative of American labor history" (1996:4). As Stewart notes, the easy assumption of its essential otherness that then follows means that it often stands in relief as real, timeless and authentic to another America that is fast, disenchanted and atomised. The distance maintained here in the relation between marginal places and the centre of things allows "traits" of backwardness and poverty to turn in on themselves and inspire a "romantic, antimodernist dream of escape" (1996:4). Stewart does not seek to offer a relativist retelling of *how things really are* as corrective to a master narrative, but instead wishes to open "gaps" in these popular representations and inclinations towards generalisation and abridgement. She seeks "a space on the side of the road" or a narrative space that approaches these repeated collisions of ways of knowing and storytelling that holds culture as processual, immanent and on which the last word can never be had. This approach is significant not only for what it allows for the "re-presenting" of the everyday cultural poetics unfolding in West Virginia but, more generally, the possibilities it affords for narrative to create gaps in the ordered accounting of things.

Sarah Green in reviewing how marginality has featured in anthropological studies finds that, in many instances, it "implies a difficult and ambivalent relevance to the heart of things" (2005:1). Green speculates that the preoccupation with marginality in Euro-American anthropology is underpinned by a belief that a focus on the makings and consequences of people and places in the margins, "might help to make the implicit explicit, might draw out the hidden cogs, wheels, or (cob)webs of what we know to be central" (Green 2005:1-2). Of significance here, is how marginality is anticipated to contain a challenge to normative ways of knowing and being. As Green describes, some studies have shown how forms of exclusion that are intrinsic to marginality can actually be highlighted and deliberately centred by those who are marginalised as a means of undermining central authority (see also Tsing 1993). Marginality under the auspices that Stewart considers, functions however as a device for others (i.e. those not *of* or located *in* the margins) to reflect upon what they imagined has been lost through conditions of contemporary life and who have become nostalgic for a return to an imagined former/other way of being. As Green delineates, this still serves to foreground the periphery vis-à-vis a centre, but instead comprises an exploration of "(Euro-American) modernity in its self-pitying mode" (2005:3) rather than as a strategy deployed by disenfranchised populations who live in these locations. It appears then that an interest with marginality, in large part at least, hinges upon important specificities peculiar to "Euro-American modernity" and, by extension, Euro-American anthropology, as pointed out by Green. Nonetheless, this framing finds an important resonance in efforts to locate Majuli's place within a mythic imaginary of Assam.

As in the case of Stewart's Appalachia, Majuli possesses multiple guises or "expressions", as described by Borah above. Its importance however to the state and wider publics is powerfully grounded through its position as the "cultural capital of the state" (Sengupta 2016) and even, in more excitable accounts, as the "cradle of Assamese culture" (Tourism Department Government of Assam 2017:5). This has mostly been underpinned by its status as a centre of Vaishnavism and *satra* institutions (priestly colleges) that trace their lineage to the bhakti movement in the Brahmaputra Valley as propagated by the 15th and 16th century socio-religious reformer Srimanta Sankardev and his disciples. However, in more recent years this brochure image of Majuli has also come to increasingly, if perhaps still to a lesser extent, incorporate the "multiplicity of ethnic tribes, which have contributed immensely to [Majuli's] rich and colourful cultural heritage" (Majuli District, Government of Assam 2021).

The continued centring of Majuli as a unique cultural centre and emerging travel destination in the state is imagined as dependent on its longstanding remoteness. As Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti outlines in the introduction to his edited volume *Majuli: Resources and Challenges*:

> [Srimanta Sankardeva's] spiritual influence can still be seen in the island, much more than in other places lived in and explored by the saint in his life-time. Possibly, the geographical isolation of Majuli has made that possible. Noticeably, the people of Majuli have preserved the culture propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva *in its original form*. The great Sattra institution, founded by him has unwaveringly flourished in this river island and several Sattras which practice the religious and cultural ethos taught by the saint are flourishing till this date. The local people on Majuli should be known by the world now *as preserver and multiplier* of the Vaishnavite culture. Majuli showcases both folk and classical treasures in the cultural arena, *both preserved in pristine form* - and is naturally a nerve centre of Assamese culture. People from different parts of the globe visit the island throughout the year to see this wonder of nature… So for that matter, Majuli is very important for Assam and for the entire humanity as it preserves *a living tradition for centuries*. Hence, there has been continuous effort towards getting this island declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.
>
> (2017:16-17, my emphases)

Majuli's isolation is not only historicised as one of the key attributes that led to it becoming a key base of *satra* institutions from the 16th century onwards (Neog 2008:313), but

also as a *continuing condition* that allowed for "folk and classical treasures" alike to be "preserved". Diversity and discord are sacrificed for an emphasis on harmony. Residents in turn are positioned as custodians of a centuries old "living tradition" and evangelists for "Vaishnavite culture". Located in the margins, Majuli becomes prized as "pristine" and a "wonder of nature".

Attempts since the 2000s for the river island to receive the status of UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) have at times stalled but are ongoing (Dutta 2021). The request by UNESCO in 2006 for additional information to the nomination dossier submitted for "River Island of Majuli in midstream Brahmaputra River in Assam, India" was telling in what else, besides flooding, fell under the heading "Risk analysis":

> - Development
>
> One of the benefits of World Heritage status is seen as the possible development potential of the island through increasing tourism and the market for goods. The dossier mentions upgrading roads and the construction of two bridges to link the island to the mainland. *How these can be achieved without threatening the qualities of the island needs considerable thought*.
>
> (International Council on Monuments and Sites 2006:67, my emphasis)

It is precisely this distance *from* things that sets Majuli as special, which is only assured by its remaining outside of the rush of activities that make up the workings of mainstream state life today. Plans for enhanced connectivity with the rest of the state are thus considered from this standpoint as a potential threat to the "qualities" that confer Majuli Outstanding Universal Value, as defined by UNESCO. (Another contributor to the above volume on Majuli when discussing this WHS bid actually downplays this perceived risk as "[the] island is more under threat by flood and erosion by the Brahmaputra River than external and modern influences, *because of its limited accessibility (only by ferry)*" (Murthy 2017:57, my emphasis). If Majuli as periphery to the activities of the rest of the state is to be undermined as a contemporary condition, then other mechanisms will be required for the ongoing maintenance of things as they are. With all the trappings and fame that would follow World Heritage Site status, may also be new forms of discipline under the guises of cultural heritage.

Fig. 0.1. Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal features in an advertising board promoting Majuli as part of the 'Awesome Assam' campaign by Assam Tourism Development Corporation. Garamur Tiniali, Majuli. January 2018.

As is the case with many marginal places and peoples as Green mentions, charting the relationship Majuli holds to the heart of things amidst these recent heritage conservation and promotion efforts betrays a sometimes fraught ambivalence. Yet, it is the distance (in both time and space) inherent to this relationship, that holds much of this ambivalence at bay when viewed from afar. A lack of industry, employment opportunities, transportation infrastructure and high-quality public service provision - all powerful indicators to many Majuli residents of its ongoing status as a "backward place" - here turn in on themselves and are transformed into qualities of

"wonder", "pristineness" and "living tradition". As Stewart found for Appalachia, these visions of Majuli conjure romance and magic for urbanites in cities across the state and country, encouraging increasing visitor footfall each year until the abrupt shutdown of tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Abandonment becomes tradition and authenticity, abandonment becomes nature (Green 2005:8). The latter point sees other sleights of hand, as historical state neglect is attempted to be recast into sustainable tourism and carbon neutral initiatives (see Fig. 0.1).[1] Who draws upon this marginality (under whatever guise) and for what purposes are vital political questions. Much of what follows in this thesis will comprise responses (sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly) to these questions through following resident claims upon the types of inclusion (and exclusions) they seek in the contemporary social and economic life of the state and country. Whilst zooming out from Majuli, the next section will nonetheless still be concerned within unpicking the relations between centre and margins. This will however now involve tracing important historical contours in the connections between the region and important elsewheres and, significantly, how this propels and animates a contemporary politics for fostering new connections and material transformations within an Indian "periphery".

Centre and Periphery: Relations Reconsidered?

The centring of Majuli as a key heritage and tourism location comes amidst other recent reconsiderations of the relations between the region, the rest of the country as well as international neighbours. However, before discussing further these trajectories and their potential effects, it is important to first consider how "Northeast India" emerged as a somewhat strange and troublesome conglomeration (see Fig. 0.2.).

The historical geography of the Ahom Kingdom (1228-1826), which at its height covered much of the central and eastern Brahmaputra Valley, does not neatly overlap with what now is known as Assam (see Fig. 0.3.). (The latter having undergone hugely significant border alterations, possessing hugely significant effects, throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods, as I will discuss shortly). However, this area has previously been referred to as "Assam Proper", which included the synonymous five colonial districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur (Guha 1991:139).

[1] The state government announced plans in 2016 for Majuli to become the country's first carbon-free district with a goal that this be achieved by 2020. Alongside "[mitigation] through forestry activities and biodiversity conservation" (Kalita 2016) was a heavy emphasis on sustainable tourism (Baruah 2017).

Fig. 0.2. Contemporary Assam highlighted within northeast region of the Republic of India (Image: Wikimedia Commons).[2]

Fig. 0.3. Satellite imagery of the Brahmaputra Valley, including superimposed contemporary state and national borders. Majuli is shown "pinned" (Image: Google Earth).

Military incursions into the region by the neighbouring Burmese empire in the early 19th century, saw the Ahom kingdom being taken by a Burmese commander in 1822 and the Ahom aristocracy fleeing to British territories who then sought the latter's assistance (Baruah 1999:21). Alarmed by the expansionist ambitions of the Burmese empire which bordered East India Company territories, the exiles and British saw a convergence of interests. This ended a policy of

[2] Original source of image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India_Assam_locator_map.svg (Accessed 22nd September 2021).

indifference towards the region by the British, who had previously seen little economic incentive in annexation of these sparsely populated territories (Guha 2006:1). The signing of the Yandabo Treaty in 1826 ended the first Anglo-Burmese war and included the renouncement of Burmese claims upon Assam. As Baruah notes, "[when] the Ahom kingdom passed into British hands, it was the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation" (Baruah 1999:21).

"Fringed on three sides and intersected in the middle by high mountain ranges, the northeast region of India was never entirely cut off from the currents of historical change that shaped the subcontinent" (Guha 1991:21). However, as Guha notes, the hilly and heavily forested terrain and treacherous and lengthy river travel did however limit these connections, even if not precluding the movement of goods, people and ideas from South Asia as well as across the narrow mountain passes that led to Tibet, China, Burma and the rest of Southeast Asia from times immemorial (1991:1-2, 9).

The final years of the Ahom dynasty had seen decades of disorder and violence, beginning with the Moamoria rebellion (1769-1805) and culminating with Burmese occupation (1817-1824). The arrival of the British in Assam "in the guise of saviours of the people" was thus within the context of a Valley that had been ruined and massively depopulated by these conflicts (Guha 2006:2). This characterisation of British rule within the region however was short lived after it "soon dawned on the people that the Raj had come to stay" (Guha 2006:2). Shortly after annexation, speculations among the British over the viability of what would be highly valuable tea cultivation in India gathered pace, which were spurred on by long circulated reports of indigenous Assamese tea plants (Chatterjee 2001:55). This quickly propelled a colonial project that sought to transform Assam from an unproductive "wild" frontier into an ordered landscape of export-producing tea plantations (Sharma 2011). Whilst, the period that followed on from annexation thus slowly abridged the political isolation of Assam vis-à-vis the rest of South Asia (Guha 1991:2), the establishment of the Valley as a resource periphery meant it remained far from the heart of things.

The advent of British occupation brought with it a common policy employed throughout the Himalaya of administrative separation between plains and hills.[3] The introduction of the Inner

[3] As Leo Rose writes concerning colonial policy along the Himalayas, the British considered the foothills "the natural boundary between India and the hill principalities, and that all plains areas belonged by right to whoever ruled northern India" (1977; cited by Baruah 1999:28). With colonial authority concentrated within the plains, a policy of depriving hill rulers of the revenue they received through any adjacent lowlands they had previously controlled nonetheless weakened them and in consequence made them more dependent on the British (Baruah 1999:28).

Line in 1873 had sanctioned the colonial administration to draw a boundary along the foothills, which restricted non-residents from crossing into the hills as well as trading or possession of land without license beyond this line (Baruah 2005:94). This had been enacted partly in response to unchecked land grabs by British tea planters and speculators in raw rubber who had attempted to enclose as much land as possible, which was deemed by the colonial administration as posing a threat to British political relations with hill populations (Baruah 2005:94). As a result of this policy, hill areas were in effect cordoned off from other parts of the Valley, and, with the exception of matters of general law and order, the colonial administration took little active interest in issues of health, education and general welfare of these populations (Sharma 2011:61).

The severing of relations between hills and plains marked a significant break from the past (Baruah 1999:29). In medieval Assam prior to annexation, important and longstanding economic, political and cultural interconnections existed between the plains and hills. Guha describes the economies of both as being "very much integrated" and even reflected a "symbiotic relationship… maintained through a chain of foothill marts and fairs where both sides met. This trade between the plains and the hills appears to have been no less important than what passed between the Assam plains and the rest of India, because of the limited scope of navigation on the Brahmaputra" (1991:23). As in the case of Assamese-Naga relations, Baruah references Nagas fighting in Ahom armies and the former sheltering Ahom princes during court crises (1999:31). Folk tales also speak of intra valley-hills royal marriages and land grants, and "[in] a number of myths, the Nagas and the Assamese are imagined as siblings. An Ao Naga tale speaks about the quarrel between two brothers, one choosing the plains as his inheritance and the elder going to the hills. The former was the ancestor of the Assamese, and the latter of the Nagas" (Baruah 1999:30-31).

The colonial policy of administrative separation of Assam's hills and plains solidified perceived points of difference between these places and people over time. Political, economic and racial boundaries hardened, and the extensive precolonial ties that had once existed withered away following prolonged restrictions of movement (Sharma 2011:61). As the historian Arupjyoti Saikia reflects on the legacy and present effects of the Inner Line (as it is still in place across many locations in the Northeast today), "[i]mages of these binaries have entered deep into the current everyday narratives in Assam" (2019:xxix). This dichotomy is thus not only maintained through the continuing enactment of cultural, legal and political vocabularies that were devised in the colonial period, but is also thoroughly engrained in how we understand the relations between hills and plains within the present moment.

As Baruah has excavated, these experiments in colonial geography followed British administrative convenience and paid no heed to existing historical and cultural continuities (1999:26-27). He argues that two aspects of these experiments continue to possess lasting and highly significant implications for a contemporary cultural politics in Assam: first, administrative segregation of hills and plains, as already discussed; second, the notion that Assam is an extension of Bengal. I will now examine this second aspect with reference to colonial policies concerning language and demographic change within the Brahmaputra Valley.

The British had first ruled Assam as a "division of the unwieldy Bengal Presidency" (Guha 2006:22). The language of the courts and educational institutions in Assam was quickly established as Bengali in 1837, which was a policy underpinned by the view of early colonial administrators that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali (Baruah 1999:39). This favoured a migrant Bengali clerical class, who in addition to language proficiency had the advantage of earlier initiation in English education and the British-Indian administrative system in neighbouring Bengal. Soon, this created a "conflict of interests between immigrant Bengali babus and the indigenous *dangariyas* for administrative jobs" (Guha 2006:19). However, over time demands grew from an emerging Assamese intelligentsia that Assamese replace Bengali as the language of the administration, which in their eyes would rightfully reflect that the Assamese "were a distinctive people with a distinctive language and culture" (Baruah 1999:39).[4] They were ultimately successful after Assamese was recognised as the language of Assam in 1873 having convinced British colonial officials that it was a language in its own right, and *not* a dialect of Bengali.

Yet, the idea that an apparently sparsely settled Assam could serve as an extension - indeed "land frontier" - for a densely populated East Bengal continued to endure in the minds of colonial officials (Baruah 1999:39-40). The partition of Bengal and creation of an amalgamated Eastern Bengal and Assam province was ultimately a brief (and failed) experiment (1905 - 1912). However, the inclusion of the East Bengal district of Sylhet within Assam after it became its own province in 1874 up until independence, "produced a demographic balance that kept Assam's language question a highly controversial one throughout the entire colonial period and beyond" (Baruah 1999:39). As Guha explains, Sylhet was incorporated within Assam in order to make the new province, with its otherwise low revenue potential, financially viable, even though the populous Bengali-speaking district "historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of

[4] As Baruah notes, Assamese public intellectuals were boosted in their efforts to establish Assamese as the language of the courts and educational institutions through the unexpected allies of American Baptist missionaries, "who at that time were writing grammar and dictionaries of Assamese for their own reasons" (1999:39).

Bengal" (2006:22). Aside from the hill areas of contemporary Meghalaya and Nagaland that were also included in the new province, the majority of the population were concentrated in the predominantly Assamese Brahmaputra Valley and predominantly Bengali districts of Sylhet and Cachar in the neighbouring Barak Valley. The later colonial policy of inducing cultivators from East Bengal to settle lands in the Brahmaputra Valley for profitable jute cultivation that gathered pace in the early twentieth century was another migration stream that added to the demographic composition of the state, as I discuss in Chapter 1. Guha argues that, "'[t]he population mix of the province was such that, given the limited opportunities of development, the ugly face of valley-ism was bound to arise in due course in Assam politics. Perhaps no better administrative arrangement could have been devised to 'divide and rule' the province than a white Chief Commissioner maintaining the balance of loaves and fishes - not power certainly - between two rival valleys jealous of each other" (Guha 2006:23). The colonial euphemism of "inter-valley rivalry" (Baruah 1999:40) came to stand for increasingly bitter Bengali-Assamese conflicts, which, as I describe in Chapter 5, continue to animate a contemporary politics in Assam over issues of settlement, enfranchisement and belonging.

As Baruah argues, these two elements of a colonial geography - the separation of plains and hills and the idea that Assam is an extension of Bengal - "remained the most important determinants of Assam's troubled postcolonial history" (1999:43). Subsequent to independence, with Sylhet district now included within a new East Pakistan, efforts to formally align the state of Assam with a cultural and linguistic Assamese identity gathered pace. The successful movement to make Assamese the official language of the state in the early 1960s, and the violence that surrounded it, as well as the decision by Gauhati University to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in its colleges in 1972 were important moments within an Assamese nationalist project (Dutta 2012:50). This is also true of the more comprehensive, and ultimately more significant, Assam Movement (1979-1985), as I discuss in Chapter 5. As Dutta describes, the anti-migrant agenda and demands for the "protection" of an Assamese people that propelled the Assam Movement inadvertently raised important questions of the position of tribes within a "greater Assamese identity" (2012:173), or at least one put forward by Assamese nationalists who articulated the uniqueness (and independence) of Assamese language and culture. Efforts to define a post-colonial Assam - a complex multicultural/multi-ethnic society emerging through many older and newer migrations - as *Assamese* alienated many in the state who did not necessarily agree with their position, or wish to subsume their own perceived distinctiveness or aspirations, within a composite Assamese identity. As Baruah argues, "[t]he contradiction between the Assamese subnationalist vision of an Assamese Assam and the reality of [multi-ethnic] Assam

may have greatly facilitated the breakup of colonial Assam" (1999:91).[5] Although, he maintains that the more significant factor in the creation of new states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, in the post-independence era was the agenda of a central government that viewed such a strategy as a means to minimise, if not forestall, insurgencies in the region.

In recognising that patterns of political violence taking place in Northeast India can no longer be considered anomalous, Baruah seeks to understand the accommodations that militant and state sponsored violence have (sometimes awkwardly) found within formal and informal structures of governance and development programmes (2005:3). The present "durable disorder" (Baruah 2005) has thus been shaped by decades of counterinsurgency operations that have just as much (if not far more) to do with the dysfunction of democratic institutions and perceived pervasive corruption as any militant outfit with ambitions of secession or greater political autonomy.

Reflecting upon how "[e]verything happened here a little late" (2012:xv), Dutta finds that Assam, as a distant and marginal state within the Indian Republic as she herself defines it, either to be largely absent from a pan-Indian national conception or constructed as an exotic (and often foreign) location. However, in recent decades it is events of explosive violence that have captured the most sustained attention from national media outlets and formed the basis of the most visible reports that represent the region to a mainstream national audience. The recent exchange of fire between Assam and Mizoram police following clashes between residents in a disputed area along the Assam-Mizoram state boundary, leaving seven people dead and more than sixty injured (*The Hindu* 2021b), both shows the continuing relevance of colonial and post-independence borderworks as discussed above and, as a media object, that feeds into narratives about the region as violent.

In attempting to look beyond the quandaries of durable disorder in the Northeast, Baruah saw potential in the Look East Policy that was initiated in the early 1990s by the central government and the agenda it aspired to set of opening up the region towards Southeast Asia (2005:222). He suggested that the benefits of fostering greater transnational flows with neighbours in southeast Asia through the Northeast would bring not only needed economic development but perhaps even a reorientation in the articulations of regional identities that

[5] Baruah employs the terms "subnational" and "subnationalist", "to refer to a pattern of politicization and mobilization that meets some of the criteria of nationalism, *but is not committed firmly to the idea of separate statehood*" (1999:5, my emphasis).

emphasised interdependence and equitable resource use, rather than pursuing directions towards further political and territorial fragmentation.

The recent entrance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into Assam as a dominant political force raises other pressing questions. In a state that has historically been a bastion of the Congress, the BJP have achieved electoral successes in Assam in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections and in forming the state government since 2016. This followed the successful efforts by the party to successfully modify a Hindutva agenda to resonate with local concerns about migration and a provincial identity politics (Saikia 2020). The BJP have been keen to position themselves as the one party able to effectively smoothen connectivity between the Northeast and the rest of the country, announcing in the run-up to each election the green light for a dizzying array of infrastructure projects to be built in the region (Kashyap 2016; Agarwala 2021). As Union Home Minister Amit Shah at an election rally in Barpeta district on the last day of campaigning for the 2021 Assam state elections asserted, only the National Democratic Alliance's "double-engine" government helmed by the BJP (at centre and state-level) can assure a prosperous and developed Assam (*The Hindu* 2021a). Despite this flurry of new infrastructure projects in the transportation and energy sectors throughout the Northeast and the assertively rebranded Act East Policy, the continual tendency to view the region through a national security paradigm, or as a strategic border area with China, by policymakers in New Delhi inhibits efforts to establish it as a "Gateway to Southeast Asia" or foster the types of cross-border flows of people and things that may be desired by local populations (Zulfiqur Rahman 2019). As Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman (2019) describes, this rush to address the "development lag" of the Northeast means that infrastructure projects, including large hydroelectric dams, are fast-tracked without proper environmental impact assessments or consultation with affected communities, which invites colossal social and ecological costs and risks. Resonating with the work of Baruah as discussed, Zulfiqur Rahman argues that this forgoing of democratic decision-making processes in large development projects is "directly linked to a larger sense of democratic deficit that characterises the space of Northeast India and its communities within the larger national space of India" (2019, n.p.).

Does the capture of Assam as well as much of the Northeast by the BJP and the recent expensive spending on development and infrastructure projects, as apparently motivated by smoothening connectivity with the rest of the country, suggest a reappraisal of historic centre-periphery relations? Whilst current prospects appear far from offering the type of renewal of democratic participation as hoped for by Baruah, there have been other ventures which do suggest new directions. The recent lavish "Awesome Assam" tourism campaign, fronted by Bollywood star Priyanka Chopra, and the high-profile international trade expo "Advantage Assam"

held in Guwahati in February 2018 both in different ways provided visions of an Assam that offered a significant break with the past. They resonated strongly with a desire by many in the state to move away from images of the region as a place of militancy and instead as a location that could support greater economic opportunity. Whether these ultimately prove more about the imaginative horizons that this event and campaign point towards, rather than ushering in significant material transformation is yet to be fully understood. What may prove more challenging in the longer term is how the BJP's pan-Indian majoritarian agenda responds to points of resistance with the diverging interests and aspirations of various nationalisms in the Northeast. The recent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill (now Act) at the end of 2019 and early 2020 show how such sites of friction can prove highly volatile.[6]

i.3 Environmental entanglements, dwelling and aspiration

A reworking of relations between centre and periphery, and the types of interventions (and impediments) that might cast these connections anew for those in the region, matter to Majulials for a multitude of reasons. Embedded within the ebbs and flows of the Brahmaputra, Majuli's location emplaces it within the riverine source, whose awesome power, animates many of the discussions and initiatives about transformation in the region. These plans include construction of interbank road and rail bridges and gigantic hydroelectric power stations upstream, reviving the river as a conduit for international trade as well as sites for pleasure and tourism. Following the appropriate interventions, Majuli thus stands in the eye of the storm of the many things that are apparently poised to be "unleashed" within the Northeast, inclusive of proposed economic development as well as devastating inundations and disasters.

As this thesis will show, the connections Majuli holds with the rest of the state and the problematic flows, sometimes of people and goods and other times water and sediment, afforded by them comprise matters of concern for residents. An ethnographic attention to such concerns, whether with regards to residents' doubts concerning the efficacy of flood protection infrastructure works or longstanding demands for smoothened connectivity, makes visible the important relationships that exist between people, places and things that go into (re-)producing these flows, however consistent they may or may not be. Entities of various sizes become linked as residents' reflections (and my analysis) move between muddy roads, foundation stone laying

[6] The CAA offers citizenship to individuals fleeing religious persecution from neighbouring countries. It also provides routes for non-Muslim undocumented migrants already resident in India to regularise their immigration status.

ceremonies, the office of the Prime Minister in New Delhi and back again to grains of silt. Attending to state-led interventions within the riverine environment, in efforts to control the excesses of flood, secure lands and connect Majuli with regional and state centres, reveals the promises contained within these existing and proposed infrastructure projects by the state to the publics that are to be touched by them (Anand, Gupta & Appel 2018). Whilst the announcements of these projects are often welcomed by residents, occasionally to much fanfare, doubts relating to unfilled commitments and past failures by the state leave many residents unsure what to expect. This thesis explores how amidst state indifference and the production of increasingly disastrous geographies Majuli residents make efforts to lead lives worth living.

In many ways, my attempts to understand this question have been guided by how the ebbs and flows of the river, the coming and going of flood, brings with it for residents a plurality of favourable and unfavourable things. Increasing anthropogenic interventions in riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley, namely embankments and dams, are producing more destructive forms of flooding. This thesis asks, how is the vulnerability of residents shaped by a *changed* flooding, or altered resident expectations of seasonal rhythms, and what greater risks does this involve for residents? Acknowledging that whilst erosion is indelibly tied up with the same dynamic processes as flooding, I came to recognise through living in Majuli that it possesses distinct ramifications due to the ways it marks lands and leaves markers for memory. This thesis asks, how does the loss of lands and a diminished agricultural prosperity shape residents' conceptions of aspiration? In a related vein, which livelihood trajectories do residents now orientate themselves and their families towards? What types of novel objects are conceived of as "aspirational" or as embodying prosperity? Many residents argue that Majuli's inconsistent communication flows, most notably with regards to the ferry service connecting them with the south bank and the enhanced services and jobs to be found on that side of the river, is one, if not the main reason, that prevents desired development and leads to their suffering. This thesis asks, how do residents imagine smoothened connectivity will reconfigure the daily rhythms of their lives? And, what type of claims are residents making upon the state through demands for infrastructure works that attempt to bring these futures into being? This thesis is structured by examinations of these central questions with the aim of understanding what it is for residents to pursue lives in Majuli in which they can flourish.

i.4. Ways of coming to know

Like the majority of visitors to Majuli, my first stay in March 2013 occurred during the dry months of the year. The river appeared calm and was low lying. Fields inland were dried out after months with only the occasional rain shower and packed earth roads were firm, entailing a bumpy ride for passengers. Yet, from what I came to understand from speaking with residents during this visit many were still reeling from the disastrous floods of the previous year. (The 2012 floods are remembered as being particularly severe, as I discuss in Chapter 2). I was struck by resident accounts of the pronounced seasonal changes in Majuli and, having at that point not experienced it, struggled to envisage the types of changes that residents were telling me would soon take place with the coming rains and increased humidity, as lands went underwater and riverine areas of the Valley would emerge transformed.

These resident accounts of seasonality in the wake of the 2012 floods held my attention long after I had left Majuli. However, far from being left with an impression of a place saturated by melancholia, I instead was stirred by countless encounters that were guided by the creative energies, forms and awesome festivities pursued by the people I met (and who often, with grace and warmth, invited me to participate). It was, and is, a location simply teeming with singers, dancers, poets, writers and actors.

Reflecting back on Majuli's bustling creative scene, it was perhaps fitting how my research project was shaped by the meeting of a charismatic individual at a theatre event shortly after my fieldwork had started. Many people had turned out on a January evening in 2017, hats drawn down and jackets buttoned up against the biting winter cold, to attend that year's All Assam Ankiya Bhaona Somaroh festival, which was devoted to the plays (*ankiya nat*) and staging (*ankiya bhaona*) begun and propagated by the religious reformer Srimanta Sankardev in the early 16th century. Whilst standing beside a tea stall a short distance away from the main marquee during a break in the performances, Raju came over brightly and introduced himself. In his early thirties, Raju was amicable and was to play a king of yesteryear in a *bhaona* to be staged the following day.

A few days later I found myself travelling to Raju's village Ximolupuria, a short distance from the market town of Kamalabari and a mere stone's throw from the Brahmaputra. Raju had invited me that night whilst we sipped tea, after hearing about my research project that I said was interested in livelihoods and home beside the river. Raju had been keen to show me his village and I found his infectious enthusiasm from the other evening to carry over into this visit. My introduction to Ximolupuria, began with walking with Raju beside the geobag revetment works

built into the river bank and which were designed to stem erosion. Staring out at the river, he told me in English that “this is like a temporary place, a temporary livelihood” as we stared out at the river. Following many further questions and seeking of permissions of others, Raju and I eventually both decided that I centre my work within Ximolupuria. Whilst this location was thoroughly entangled with many of the processes that intersected my research interests, I often reflect on how Raju’s charisma played a central component in how I emplaced myself in Majuli and consequently how the argument of this thesis unfolds.

Chapter 1: Following the river: dwelling, (dis)locations and new connections

1.1. Introduction

This chapter begins by taking the Brahmaputra River as a guiding focus. Following the river, both with and against its flow, allows us to sift through the layers of sand, silt, and histories that are bound up together within this riverine landscape. In foregrounding the river, we will traverse not only the locations through which the river runs and holds within its effects and affects, but also bear witness to the transformations wrought through time to these places and the highly fluid boundaries of land and water that go into reproducing them.

Privileging these spectacular hydrological processes and effects will be used as a jumping-off point to then consider the emergent and relentlessly morphing landforms known regionally as *char*, *chapori* as well as the compound word *char chapori* that are created and unceasingly reworked within this river system.[7] Moving with the river will involve unearthing and sieving through the accumulated histories of dwelling and migration that have shaped the Valley. Such histories and present realities of those who live and make a living by the river need to be understood as highly entangled within these fragile environments and as comprising locations that occupy the barely lit fringes of society and state care. Geomorphology, legacies of a colonial economy based upon resource extraction and a continually relevant identity-based politics intersect to make for precarious living. Having established the cyclical emergence and submergence of *char chapori* will then be a helpful vantage point to bring Majuli into focus.

Today, Majuli is frequently touted in popular news and tourist accounts as the largest inhabited river island not only in Assam, but in the world (India Today 2016, 3rd September). Yet, the perceived exceptionalism of Majuli runs deeper than its significant longevity and size. Despite being embedded within the same riverine environment and embroiled in the same cyclical throes of inundation and erosion, the ascendant profile of Majuli stands in marked contrast to attempts at erasure of a distinctive *char chapori* dweller experience within Assam today.

Unpicking how Majuli came to stand apart as a prized river island, rather than a series of indiscriminate *char chapori*, will require historicising its emergence through the centuries,

[7] A distinction is sometimes made between *char* that refer to mid-channel sandbars, and *chapori* which encompasses these mid-channel sandbars as well as land formed by deposited silt adjacent to river banks (Kumar and Das 2019).

including how it was shaped by several colossal flooding and earthquake events. Drawing on the accounts of a historian in the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's court (1658 - 1707), colonial records, as well as critical histories of state interventions on the river made in an independent India, I shall examine the flows, forces and assemblages that have gone into re-producing Majuli and riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. This long view is not only for the purpose of chronologising the recent construction of flooding as calamitous rather than as an assurance of prosperity (Das 2014), which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. It will also chart the promise and new connections that run through Majuli (as well as the wider region), which suggest possible trajectories towards alternative horizons for residents.

My aim is to destabilise the givenness of currently snowballing popular media and tourist representations concerning Majuli Island, which depoliticise significant social transformations occurring here and establish the *doxa* for future development trajectories and possibilities. Critically exploring the interplays between geomorphology, technical assemblages and the texts and narratives that stick to them, this chapter will fruitfully carve out space for the interventions that are to follow in this thesis. This serves not only to consider the interlinked promises and crises to be found enmeshed along the river, but will also "make room" for the negotiations of new possibilities by residents that may deviate from these master accounts.

1.2. ***Char chapori*****: land, water and ambiguity**

The Brahmaputra River, after tumbling down steep Himalayan slopes, on reaching the flat plains of Assam widens and slows as it weaves its way southwest towards Bangladesh. It is this sudden change of incline from the hills to the flat plains of Assam that dramatically lessens the rate of flow of the river. It carries tremendous amounts of sand and silt mostly as a result of denudation of the eastern Himalayas further upstream, which is notably brittle due to its relative geological youthfulness. This high rate of denudation is thus, "probably attributable to rapid uplift of the mountains, steep slopes, high monsoonal precipitation, and recurring earthquakes" (Goswami 1985:976).[8] With this sudden loss of momentum on reaching the plains this river and its tributaries, like others within the broad sweep of the Indo-Gangetic plains, then cast off their great burden of materials, "spreading their sediments and choking on their own silt" (Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta 2013: 9).

[8] Previously it had been argued that the high sediment load carried by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries was mostly a result of deforestation and agricultural activities upstream, but recent research (included above) has concluded otherwise (Saikia 2019:11).

The slow-down of the river and depositing of these materials thereby comes to characterise the distinctive braided channels of the Brahmaputra. These materials are unceasingly being reworked and rewoven by shifting water channels into continually varying sand bars, or *char chapori*. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta have described *char chapori* in neighbouring state West Bengal, "[a]s pieces of accumulated sand and silt, *floating on and rising above the water* of the riverbeds, they are literally embedded in water, enmeshed into the riverine environments" (2013: 7, my emphasis). This mixing in *char chapori* of land and water provides descriptive and, as Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta are clear to emphasise, theoretical challenges. Of importance is to hold in mind the ephemerality of *char chapori* that is conjured up by Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta. This is rooted in the transient form and potential duration of *char chapori*, as they rise, shift and fall back again beneath the river from year to year. But, it also draws on the movement, settlement and use of many *char chapori* by people, often landless migrants with few resources, and the marginal status these populations occupy in relation to the state.

Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta who worked with *char chapori* dwellers in the lower basin of the Damodar River in the western part of the Bengal delta emphasise the ecological fragility of these locations and the instability, risks and dangers for those who reside on them. As places of human dwelling, *char chaporis* require constant modifications in the strategies of residents in order to live and make a livelihood amidst the ebbs and flows of the river. Existing only as high as the highest flood (Coleman 1969), the fluidity and impermanence that characterise *char chaporis*, existing somewhere between land and water, mean that they defy easy classification. As a *char chapori* dweller to "*dance with the* river", as Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013) have titled their book, is not only to inhabit ecological "edges" or "environmental borderlands" (2013: 14,17) but also to build one's home and forge one's livelihood on uncertain ground. Importantly, the emergent quality of *char chaporis* in the riverine landscape, and the frequent relocations, movements and migrations obliged by this, occlude *char chaporis* in the main from being made legible by the state. Primarily not constituting political units or incorporated within the land revenue system, *char chaporis* exist as liminal areas on the fringes of the state and state care. Thus *char chaporis* comprise ephemeral ecological and social entities, which inspire classificatory disorder and an ambiguous status of political (il)legitimacy. They can quite reasonably be thought of as part of a riverine "hinterland" (Chakraborty 2009).

Moving now upstream along the Brahmaputra and into Assam it is important to note that the permanent settlement of *char chaporis* is a relatively recent phenomenon. There are historical sources that describe *char chaporis* being used for temporary habitation during winter cultivation as well as for sheltering livestock (Chakraborty 2012a). However, it was only following British

colonial policies designed to create and increase revenue generation from so-called "wasteland" from the late 19th century onwards that these areas began to be settled permanently on an increasingly mass scale. [9] During this period, jute became hugely important in the history of the Brahmaputra Valley, due to the significant ecological and demographic transformations occasioned by the large-scale adoption of this type of commercial cultivation. Jute had become the highest export earner for India by the early twentieth century and with cultivation and factory production of jute products well-established by then in neighbouring Bengal and Kolkata respectively (Sethia 1996:72), Assam was seen to offer plentiful land that was suitable for being extended to the valuable cash crop (Das and Saikia 2011:76). However, as Das and Saikia (2011) describe, the colonial administration perceived the Assamese peasantry as apathetic towards commercial jute cultivation. As a result, colonial state officials eventually recommended inducing peasants from East Bengal, who were primarily Muslim, to settle and cultivate jute in *char chapori* areas.[10]

In the Bengal Census Report for 1901 it was noted that, "these hardy and prolific cultivators were gradually working their way northwards, and the movement has now spread beyond the limits of that province [Goalpara]. These people are accustomed to the risks arising from… diluvian and devastating floods, which other cultivators are unwilling to face; and as the *chars* already occupied fill up, the surplus population finds no difficulty in securing land in the higher reaches of the river" (Gait 1913: 60). Whilst there are no separate demographic or land settlement records kept that relate specifically to *char chaporis* for this period, this shows how the arrival and labour of these reportedly hardworking cultivators from East Bengal initiated a profound transformation of the demography and agricultural economy of the state of which settlement and cultivation of *char chaporis* played a key role (Chakraborty 2012a).[11]

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[9] As Judith Whitehead has written, "[t]he concept of wasteland began its career in India not as we understand it today as a natural category applied to infertile, barren lands or rocky outcrops. It was a social category that applied both to the supposedly unproductive uses that lands were put to, to lands held in common, and to land left idle" (2012: 7). As a colonial category it not only constructed particular landscapes as unproductive, but therefore also compelled the identification by the administration of stable and crucially extractable alternative revenue-generating purposes that were to be encouraged in such areas. Jute cultivation being a good example, as discussed. This not only led to profound transformations of the environment and agricultural economy, but also to the exclusion of populations and practices that did not meet these particular criteria of value, ownership and priority of yielding revenue for the administration.

[10] In fact, the colonial administration followed the precedent that had been set in Goalpara District where zamindars had already encouraged the settlement of peasants from East Bengal in char areas (Das and Saikia 2011).

[11] This included dramatically increasing the acreage under cultivation and productivity of crops (Chakraborty 2012a) as well as the area under jute cultivation by 3.6 times between 1903-04 and 1919-20, which was so lucrative to the colonial administration (Das and Saikia 2011).

As discussed in the Introduction, a critical history remains important not only as a prerequisite for a grounded understanding of contemporary identity politics and related conflicts within the state, but also as a counter to scholarly and lay accounts alike that instead place a greater emphasis on the motivations of individuals, described as "land-hungry migrants" (Weiner 1978: 100, 105, 109), eviscerating the ordering of this migration along the lines, and as rooted in the legacies, of colonial interests. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, at stake in this are the contemporary moral claims of these migrants and their descendants in their right to continually dwell and prosper without discrimination or intimidation within Assam.

To consider the histories of dwelling and migration of the *char chaporis* of Northeast India, and more specifically Assam, is to see how they are fundamentally intertwined with the flow and unique characteristics of the river. Geomorphology, legacies of a colonial economy based upon resource extraction and a continually relevant identity based politics intersect to make for precarious living. The point is not only how vulnerable populations come and continue to reside in equally fragile and volatile environments, but also how these risks are co-produced and often exacerbated through state-led interventions on the river, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. Having briefly sketched the perpetual reworking of land and water through the seasons and across the years within the expanse of this alluvial flood plain, I now turn our focus to the riverine district of Majuli in Upper Assam. Whilst of course paying attention to the specificities of the location of my fieldwork, it is nonetheless vital not to lose sight of the historic and present (dis-)connections Majuli holds with the rest of the state, South Asia and international neighbours. Tracing its emergence and rise as a prized location within the state, far from backgrounding these significant histories, legacies and relationships, will instead provide a crucial vantage point from which to understand what presently enlivens the colossal transformations taking place in Majuli and wider region.

1.3. Emergence of Majuli in time: accounts of visitors, great floods and exceptionalism

The emergence of Majuli involved not only incremental shifts in the assemblages of water, soil materials and biota over time, but also sudden and dramatic seismic and flood events that significantly altered the course of the Brahmaputra River. When delving into this environmental history in efforts to construct an origin story, it is helpful to first root these transformations of land and water alongside the attachment of names to these places through, or rather *in*, time. Dambarudhar Nath (2009) devotes considerable space to exploring the

etymological roots of the name “Mājuli”. He notes that in the early Assamese chronicles, the terms “Mājuli” and Mājāli were used indiscriminately to refer to *any* island within the Brahamputra. However, by the mid-sixteenth century the appellation “Mājuli” (and sometimes “Mājoli”) came to refer specifically (and eventually solely) to an area that shares a direct lineage with the Majuli we know today (Nath 2009:11).[12][13] Nath argues that the reference to “*Luitar Majuli*” (literally “island of the Luit/Brahampautra”) in the chronicle *Ahom Buranji* in 1562 and the subsequent tendency for this location to be referred to by the shortened “Majuli” is indicative of “the conversion of a terminology to a nomenclature” (2009:11). He finds of significance that no British account relating to the geography or topography of the area from the 18th century onwards have used any name other than Majuli (even if the spelling does occasionally alter due to non-standardised transliteration).

The most detailed and vivid early account of Majuli was written in Persian by Mirza Muhammad Kazim, who served as the biographer and court historian of emperor Aurangzeb. In *A Description of* Assam, Kazim (1799) relates the impressions and experiences of those soldiers involved in the ultimately unsuccessful Mughal military campaign led my Mir Jumla of 1662 in the Brahmaputra Valley. To the “native Hindustani”, these lands comprised a distant and inaccessible location, associated with impenetrable forests, treacherous rivers and under the malign forces of witchcraft and savagery. Kazim deemed this country so difficult to travel across and so full of peril, “that the obstacles to the conquest of it are more than can be described” (1799:138). The prejudice characteristic of Kazim’s account against many of the peoples in the region, whether with respect to their food habits, dress or lack of “virtues” (1799:134), is absent when he writes of Majuli. The description instead is sparse and confined to geographical features:

> *To the northward is the plain of Khata [Tibet], that has been before mentioned as the place whence the Brahmaputra issues, which is afterwards fed by several rivers that flow from the southern mountains of Assam. The principal of these is*

[12] It has been argued that earlier references to a place or area called “*Habung*” (a word derived from the Bodo root meaning low-lying and extensive flood-affected region) point to the existence of an island in the Brahmaputra Valley, which either comprised or at least included the area of Majuli from as early as the 13th century (Nath 2009:7-8).

[13] One of these early references to Majuli was recorded in the Assam chronicle *Ahom Buranji* in original Tai (translated into English by Golap Chandra Barua in 1930), which details the arrival of the Koch King Naranarayan into the Ahom kingdom during this period. “The Koch King entered into our country and stopped in Majuli. Chaopha Shukham ordered Chao Phuphrang Ikhek to go to the Koch King to negotiate peace with an offer of two gold vessels, two silver vessels and a large silver jar. Chao Ikhek came to the Koch king and gave him those things” (Barua 1930:87). Another reference is contained within the Assam Chronicle *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, which mentions that the Koch King Naranarayan made his camp at “Luitar Majuli” (island of the Luit/Brahmaputra) and it was here where he received tribute from the defeated Ahom King Sukhampha (Nath 2009:9).

the Dhonce [Dihing]… It joins that broad river at the village of Luckeigereh [Lakhaugarh]. Between these rivers is an island well inhabited, and in an excellent state of tillage. It contains a spacious, clear and pleasant country, extending to the distance of fifty coss [150 kilometres]. The cultivated tract is bounded by thick forest which harbours elephants, and where those animals may be caught, as well as in four or five other forests of Assam.
(Kazim 1799.:131)

A little over a century hence, the British doctor J. P. Wade in his *A Geographical Sketch of Assam* (1800) calculated the "great island" to have a slightly improved length (in relation to Kazim's account) of 160 miles and utmost breadth of 60 miles (1927:32).[14] Writing in the twilight of the 18th century, Wade deemed Majuli to be of such geographical distinction that he classified it as the "third division of Assam", alongside "Outrecole" or "Outreparh" (northern bank of the Brahmaputra) and "Deccancole" or "Deccanparg" (southern bank of the Brahmaputra) (1927:40; see also Nath 2009:20). Importantly, between the accounts of Kazim and Wade in the mid-16th and late-18th centuries respectively, there was a significant change in the course of the Brahmaputra. At the time of Mir Jumla's campaign in Assam in 1662 the Brahmaputra River flowed to the *north* of Majuli through what is now known as the Lohit River, and the Dihing River flowed to the south along what is the present channel of the Brahmaputra, before uniting with the Brahmaputra at the western extremity of Majuli (Gait 1905:132). This is supported by biographical works of the *satradhikaras* (guru and head of each respective *satra*) of Auniati and Dakhinpat *satra*, two of the most well-known *satra* in Majuli. Both institutions were established in the mid-17th century, and contemporary records state that these *satra* were positioned to the *south* of the Brahmaputra and not to the north as they are today (Nath 2009:14).[15] J.N. Sharma and M.K. Phukan in their paper on the geomorphological origins of Majuli describe how the abandoned channels of the Brahmaputra along its old course to the north of Majuli have been observed by recent satellite imagery (2004:4).

It is not known exactly when this dramatic alteration in the flow of the Brahmaputra occurred, but there appears consensus that this was precipitated by a great flood or series of floods and significant seismic activity (Sharma & Phukan 2004; Nath 2009; Lahiri & Sinha 2014).

[14] In the role of medical surgeon, Dr. J. P. Wade accompanied the East India Company military intervention (1792-94) into the state at the invitation of the (then deposed) Ahom ruler Swargadeo Gaurinath Singha due to the ongoing conflict of the Moamoria rebellion (1769-1805). Employed as a medical officer, "with the skilfulness, patience and shrewdness of an investigator he was able, within a short period of eighteen months, to collect a requisite number of informations – both historical and geographical" (1927:viii-ix).
[15] *Dakhinpat* means a settlement area (*pat*) in the south (*dakhin*) (Sharma 1977:5).

The colonial administrator-cum-historian E. A. Gait writes, "[a]ccording to common tradition in Assam, the change in the course of the Brahmaputra was caused by a flood brought down by the [Dihing/Dihong] river in 1735, *or more than half a century earlier*" (1906:192, my emphasis). The power and scale of this event (or at least one like it) in the mid-17th century was captured by another colonial officer Lieutenant Neufville in 1825, who evocatively paraphrased the historical account(s) related to him, detailing how, "a sudden and overwhelming flood poured from the Dihong [Dihing], inundating the whole country, and sweeping away with a resistless torrent, whole villages, and even districts: such is described to have been its violence, that the general features of the country, and the course of the river, were materially altered by it" ([1828] 1980: 335-336). Nath contends however that whilst flooding was essential for the sudden migration of the river course, that this alone would not have proved of sufficient force to divert the Brahmaputra to flow to the south unless it was also accompanied by a higher magnitude earthquake (2009: 19).[16] He notes that no powerful earthquakes are recorded in any of the Assam chronicles for the year 1735, as mentioned above by Gait. Nath argues that there are however mentions in the chronicle *Tungkhugiya Buranji* of two great earthquakes which were also accompanied by floods in the years 1691 and 1696 (2009:19; see Bhuyan 1933).[17] He provides no further evidence to support this deduction, but does assert that this would fit the time-frame set-out by the historical sources as discussed and the, "tradition kept alive by the Assamese people" (2009:19). In either case, it can be said that a significant change in river course occurred at some point between the end of the 17th century and middle of the 18th century.

Nath is keen to emphasise that the *demarcation* of Majuli as an island following the "turning points" of this colossal flood(ing) was a slow process and involved the dying out of the old Brahmaputra channel and, "for the making of its old bed into a landmass attached to the mainland Majuli on its north" (2009:19). As a point of distinction, "the process of creation of this

[16] Lieutenant Wilcox when surveying the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries in 1825, during the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26), also records the account related to him in which a great flood in 1735 precipitated the divergence in course of the Brahmaputra. Like Nath nearly two centuries after him, Wilcox acknowledges that whilst he encountered considerable evidence of the Brahamputra changing course he nonetheless remains highly sceptical that an isolated flood event alone could lead to this happening so dramatically and suddenly, concluding, "from this wild story as a specimen, it might be inferred, that the [Assamese] account of the singular rise of the Dihong [Dihing] in 1735 (?) is not well authenticated" ([1832] 1980:326).

[17] Here are the two brief passages in the *Tungkhugiya Buranji* detailing these earthquake and flood events: "Just at that time [1691] a panic was caused by the scare that some mysterious being was going to devour and destroy men. There were two floods that year in the month of Sravan within three days of each other. The five lower rungs of the main ladder of the *Holong-ghar* (king's palace) were submerged under water" (Bhuyan 1933:26); and, "[i]n the same year [1696] there was an earthquake which continued for six months in an abortive fashion… The earth went asunder at Sadiya and *magur* and *kawai* fish [known for dwelling in deep burrows] appeared in the breaches. As sands and waters appeared that place the sides of hills crumbled down" (Bhuyan 1933:29-30).

historic island testifies to the fact that the island was born not by siltation alone, but that a major part of it was formed with a sliced out portion of landmass lying once to the south of the old Brahmaputra" (Nath 2009:20). The exceptionalism that creeps into Nath's historical account, as well as that heard earlier in J. P. Wade's sketch of the "great island" at the close of the 18th century, could now be thought of as typical of increasingly wide-spread narratives revolving around Majuli that privilege its remarkable singularity as a location. In the case of this geomorphological origin story, Majuli as an assemblage of sand, clay and water bodies, or as an amalgam of ongoing processes of siltation and remnant of harder soil of the former north bank respectively, is distinct (and distinguishable) from the much more transient and *simply* sandy *char chapori* of the river system. However, as Nath concedes, much of the original land that was "sliced out" by the divergence of the Brahmaputra has to the present day been eroded and washed away, with the majority of remaining lands constituting Majuli comprising the dead river course, old reed beds and dried up smaller streams that previously criss-crossed former *char chapori* lands.

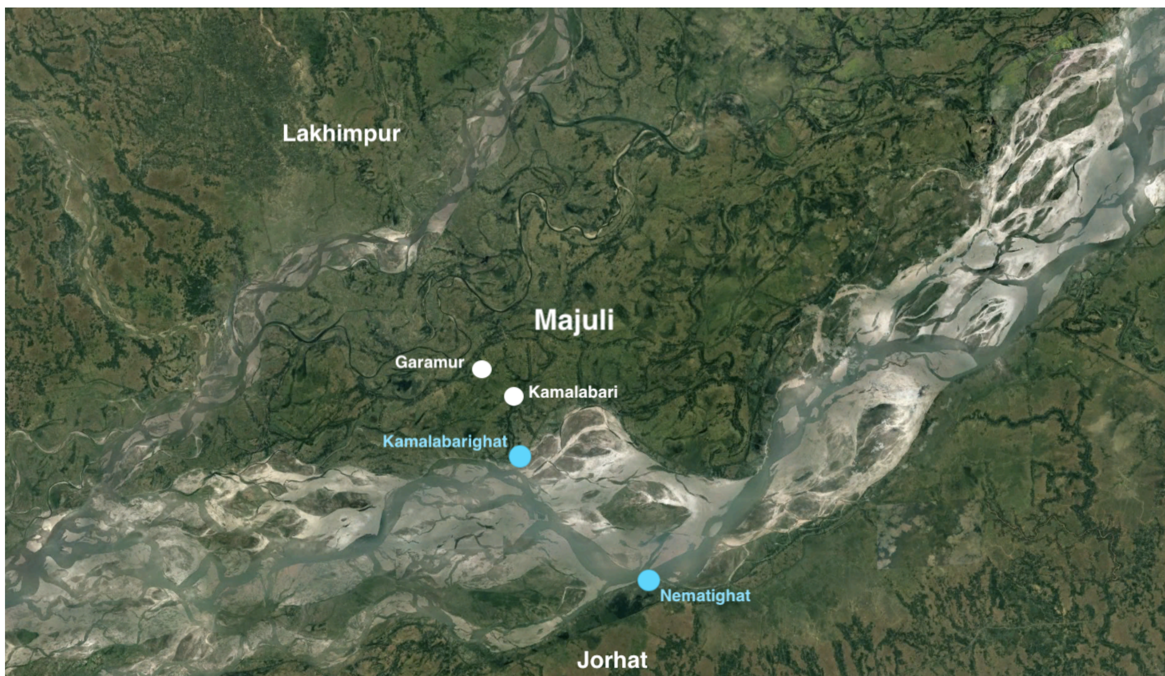

Fig. 1.1. Satellite map of Majuli (source: Google Earth).

By the 1790s of J. P. Wade's account, the main branches of the Brahmaputra formed a junction at the upstream extremity of Majuli, providing it with the "island qualities" with which we are familiar. However, as Wade points out, streams and channels of communication existed between these branches of the Brahmaputra to the north and south, "which in reality convert

[Majuli] into a cluster of islands" (1927:32).[18] Today, the eastern tip of Majuli is marked by a small channel or anabranch diverting to the north from the Brahmaputra, known as the Kherkutia Suti. This is then later joined by the Subansiri River, which at the western fringes of Majuli again re-joins the Brahmaputra main channel (Fig. 1.1.). These rivers to the north can grow to a width of several kilometres and possess a strong current, covering agricultural fields, filling homes and erasing roads when water levels rise significantly during the time of flood. Yet, in the dry winter months, the shallow depth, absence of strong currents and narrow width allow for an easy crossing. In certain areas during the dry winter months, it can feel that it wouldn't take much more than a run-up and jump to arrive into neighbouring Lakhimpur district.[19] (This is in significant contrast to the average 5.46km width of Brahmaputra River that flows to the south (Water Resources Department of the Government of Assam 2019a). Nath suggests that construction of an embankment at the north eastern point of Majuli at the mouth of the Kherkutia Suti in 1979 that subsequently restricted a vital draining point arguably brings Majuli's island status into question (2009:23). I however didn't hear much discussion of this during my fieldwork. Rather than establishing the criteria to assess such a claim, I instead wish to explore the exceptionalism that imbues processes of locating Majuli as a river island (*nodi dwip*) and the effects that stem from maintaining/producing this island status.

The Majuli of today both is, and is not entirely, the Majuli of historical accounts. The emergence of Majuli as an "island" hinged upon significant seismic and flood events which altered the river course and led to a drastic re-ordering of the assemblages of water and sand in the Valley. Having charted these apparently singular geomorphological histories from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, will be helpful as we move forward in disentangling the socio-political agendas and discourses that are bound up in the layer-upon-layer of soil materials, biota and water that make up Majuli.

[18] Wade observed that the numerous islands that existed along the entire length of Majuli, yet which were not included within the general appellation of Majuli, were indiscriminately referred to "chapori" and, "[s]ome of these are always overflowed in the season of inundation, others occasionally only" (1927:32). Whereas, the smaller islands that were included within the Majuli archipelago were referred to as specific "chapori" and prefixed by a place name (i.e. "Roopei-chapori") (1927:32).

[19] At present, one permanent road bridge connects Majuli to Lakhimpur District on the north bank in the eastern extremity of Majuli, with several temporary bridges made of bamboo and wood (re-constructed each year) in other areas, as well as multiple informal ferry crossings by small unmotorized boats.

1.4. “Land of the *Satras*”: Vaishnavism and Majuli

The brief entry for Majuli in the 1905 *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-east India* testifies to the picturesque impression offered up to the colonial officer by its streams and lakes, patches of jungle cover as well as thick reed beds and habitat for a plethora of bird species and large wild animals. The officer concludes the encyclopaedic style reference, “[t]he island has but one road and no town and *an old-world air pervades the place* which savours more of the eighteenth rather than the twentieth century” (Allen, Gait, Allen & Howard 1979:159, my emphasis). It was this isolation that had in part led to the development of Majuli as a central hub of *satra* institutions (priestly colleges) and Vaishnavism faith movement within the state, which is also known as neo-Vaishnavism and Assamese Vaishnavism. The prefix “Assamese” relates to a fiercely held aim of many proponents of the faith in the state who wish to highlight the distinctiveness of Vaishnavism within this region of south Asia and refute that “this movement is only an offshoot of Bengal Vaisnavism” (Neog 2008:viii).

The Vaishnavism movement within the Valley initiated by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) and propagated by his disciples and their ancestors centred upon *ek xorono dhormo* or “taking shelter in one” or “surrendering to one deity” (Cantlie 1984:258). Deciding that the sanskrit text *Bhagavata Purana* had no peer (Neog 2008:107), Sankardeva propagated *bhakti* (devotion) towards Krishna, which was a state he preached as best actualised through the cultivation of acts of listening (*sravana*) to, and the chanting (*kirtanna*) of, the names and activities of the Lord in the presence of other devotees (*satsanga*) (Neog 2008:218).[20] This was not only the one path towards *mukti* or *moksha* (salvation), but also a final goal in itself (Cantlie 1984: 259). The prohibition of animal sacrifice, the apparent openness of the faith to all irrespective of caste barriers and the rendering of the *Bhagavata Purana* into vernacular Assamese posed a radical break from Brahmanical sacerdotalism. From the outset, this

[20] Audrey Cantlie has argued that, whilst *ek xorono dhormo* forbids the worshipping of deities other than Vishnu, the label of monothesism attributed by many to Assamese Vaishnavism is a mischaracterisation of the movement. For the other gods within the Hindu pantheon are not denied or perceived as false gods by Vaishnavas, but rather it is through the worshipping of Vishnu that they too are worshipped (Cantlie 1984:259). Quoting the Bhagavata Purana, Sankardeva apparently put it to his chief disciple Madhavadeva in Dhuwahat (near Ahatguri in present day Majuli) as follows, “[a]s the branches, leaves, and foliage of a tree are nourished by the pouring of water at the root of the tree, as the limbs of the body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Acyuta [Vishnu]” (Barua 1960:115).

precipitated hostilities by the Brahmin priesthood against Vaishnavas as well as periodic brutal crackdowns by the then ruling Ahom state over the centuries that followed (Neog 2008:111).[21]

Despite this atmosphere of enmity from the priestly class and periodic campaigns of brutality by the state, proselytising efforts nonetheless proved highly successful through the 16th and 17th centuries in the Valley. The spatialization of centres of Vaishnavism (i.e. the establishment of *satra* institutions) in the state through the efforts of early charismatic disciples charged with spreading the faith, followed significant considerations of, "availability of food-stuff (grain, vegetable crops and fish) in the locality *and some sort of inaccessibility*, although an eye was kept on the nearness of approach to the water-routes, afforded by the Brahmaputra and its feeders" (Neog 2008:313, my emphasis).[22] Majuli proved highly suitable by such criterion, and possessed a resonant history of having provided the meeting place for Sankardeva and his chief disciple Madhavadeva in Dhuwahat (near Ahatguri in present day Majuli).

Majuli's "inaccessibility", or relative remoteness from worldly affairs, would have proved attractive for matters related not only to religious practice but also politicking vis-à-vis a volatile relationship with the state. An important, and marked, change in policy of the Ahom state occurred during the reign of Rudra Simha (1696-1714) who sought to reverse the persecution of *gosains* (spiritual guide; head of a *satra*) carried out by his father and predecessor, Gadadhar Singh (1681-1696), restoring those who were Brahmins to their previous positions, but on condition that they based their headquarters in Majuli (Gait 1906:165).[23] Rudra Simha's favouring of the Brahmin sect of the movement, who were more conservative in ideology and practice and thus more palatable to state interests as well as restricting some of the larger of these institutions to the "inaccessible" Majuli, allowed the Ahom state to partially co-opt and curtail what was by this period a powerful (and subversive) movement (Sarma 1966: 186). This stabilised and solidified the position of the four main *satra* of eastern Assam (also known as the *sari-satra)* of the *Brahma samhati* (sub-sect), which includes Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur Satra in Majuli. These *satras* grew rich and influential through the patronage of the Ahom state, including large

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[21] The policy of the Ahom state towards Vaishnavas was not consistent over time and appears rather to have rested with the temperament of individual monarchs and political exigencies of the moment (Sarma 1966:180).

[22] It is important to note that institutionalisation of Vaishnava congregational meetings within the *satra* structure occurred subsequent to Sankardeva's death. As Maheswar Neog has described, "in Sankardeva's days the daily sittings of the monks and such lay disciples, as used to attend them, were held in the open or under the shade of trees. Such meetings, independent of any construction whatsoever, probably formed the nucleus of a Sankarite sattra with the 'Kirtana-ghar', and the residences of the Superior and the monks only came later to be associated inseparably with the notion of a sattra" (2008:312).

[23] A successionist dispute occurred soon after Sankardeva's death and this led to a schism within the Assamese Vaishnavism movement. Four *sanghati* or *samhati* (sub-sects) soon emerged, including *Brahma samhati*, *Kal samhati*, *Nika samhati*, and *Purus samhati* (Cantlie 1984:170).

grants of revenue-free land (Sarma 1966:186-187). The ensuing closeness of the Ahom state and *satra* institution, particularly of the *Brahma samhati* variety, has often been argued as leading the later history of the *satra* institution to reflect a growing conservatism and orthodoxy in place of the original revolutionary aspirations as propagated by Sankardeva (Sarma 1966:194).[24] One of the most poignant illustrations of this deviation from the teachings of Sankardeva, who, as it is understood today, fostered an egalitarian approach, is that practices of untouchability can be presently found within certain *satra* in Majuli. However, my purpose here is to disentangle the various interests that presently jostle to represent Majuli, rather than further explicate theological ruptures and developments. Attention to such struggles, images and discourses (and the manner of their circulation) can help us understand how prospective development agendas and interventions are pursued in Majuli.

Audrey Cantlie (1984) argues that the declining power of *satra* institutions since the end of the Ahom dynasty and beginning of British rule in 1826 can partially be attributed to changing relations with the state. Whilst the British allowed most lands previously allotted to the *satras* by the Ahom state to be retained, Cantlie describes how the "institutional support [of the Ahom kings] ceased with the advent of British rule and as the avenues of advancement now lay through Western education the social relevance of the satras diminished" (1984:179). Nonetheless, these institutions still remain highly influential. This is particularly the case in Majuli, due to the high concentration of *satras* in this location. *Satradikhars* of the largest *satras* are regularly solicited by state news organisations for their opinions on issues of local and regional relevance, which are given considerable space in both broadcast and print pieces. Their status as a powerful collective interest is best indicated through the patronage they frequently receive from state politicians. As Nath has noted, at the time of his writing, no Member of the Assam Legislative Assembly or Member of Parliament from Majuli, "have ever participated in any election without seeking the

[24] Other streams of Vaishnavism however did also establish a presence in Majuli. As Nath (2009:256-262) has described, the Moamoria sect, of the *Kal samhati* order, first established itself in Majuli in the 17th century. This sect retained and propagated a more socially radical and equalitarian practice, at least within a socio-religious context, and disavowed restrictive caste distinctions. The movement became incredibly popular among those occupying low caste positions both in Majuli and across the state through the 17th and 18th centuries. Wary of the belligerent threat posed to them by this movement, the Ahom monarchy increasingly favoured and patronised institutions and adherents of Brahmanical Vaishnavism that retained allegiance to the state. Relations deteriorated between the Moamoria faction and Ahom monarchy in the second-half of the 18th century, eventually leading to open revolt in 1769. The conflict that ensured for the following four decades was a period of corresponding successes and retreats on both sides, involving profound violence, destruction and, eventually, significant depopulation. Nath depicts the revolt as taking, "the form of a civil war of Majuli" (2009:262). Whilst this served to fatally weaken the Ahom state prior to the Burmese invasion and ultimately the establishment of British rule in the early 19th century, it is important for our present purposes to note how the revolt nonetheless ended with the consolidation of the position and influence of the *Brahma samhati satras* in Majuli (Nath 2009:261-262).

blessings of the principal Satradhikaras of Majuli" (2009:46). Large numbers of devotees both within Majuli, as well as across the state, visit the *satras* for religious festivals and as places of pilgrimage.

Engagement and inclusion with the *satra* system has varied between different communities in Majuli. *Satradhikars* are invariably Brahmin and, at the time of Nath's research in the early 2000s, *bhakats* (inmates of residential monastic *satra*) were only recruited from families who occupied higher positions within the caste hierarchy, with none recruited from lower caste families or from Mising or tribal families (2009:187). Caste distinctions remain important within the *satra* relating to seating arrangements within the *satra namghor* (prayer hall) as well as in matters of commensality, with *bhakats* not taking food prepared by a fellow *bhakat* of a lower caste. Casteism and untouchability have always been a feature of the *satra* system, which grew and developed subsequent to the death of Sankardev and the splintering of the movement (Nath 2005:708). Acknowledging a few exceptions, Nath has described how the *satras* resisted the movement for the abolition of untouchability as well as movements organised by oppressed communities and castes in the state, including by the Kaibartas and Suts, for their own social upliftment and mobility during the twentieth century (Nath 2005:707). The type and degree of caste distinctions and accompanying forms of exclusion and prejudice is commonly described by many residents to have lessened over time, but in no means to have disappeared. Today entry to the *satra namghor*, which had previously been barred to those of low caste or tribe, is now granted to all. However, *bhakats* are not recruited from all sections of society as mentioned and women are not initiated as *bhakats*. As is clear, relations today are far from free of casteism and prejudice.

In many ways, the *dharma* that has shaped much of Majuli in the profoundest and most self-apparent ways is Vaishnavism, as propagated by the *satra* and *namghor* institutions (acknowledging differences in practice of the various sects that sit under this umbrella term). This is apparent in daily rhythms of prayer and religious practice, such as in the singing of *namkirtan* (congregational prayer) or periodic performances of *bhaona* (religious drama), the absence of licensed wine shops and durga puja festivities across the district. It is also evident in arrangements of land ownership, particularly with regards to the richer *satras* that previously received royal patronage and who received large grants of revenue-free land (Nath 2005:705-706). However, the ascending national and international profile of Majuli, positioned as synonymous with the *satra* institutions in many contexts, erases the presence of others and the right for plural ways of being here. In short, there is far more to Majuli than *satra*s and Majulials, whether they are meaningfully engaged or not in these institutions, live a wide array of lives.

Demographically speaking, Majuli is made up of communities of both caste and tribe. The largest ethnic constituency in Majuli is Mising, who along with Deori and Sonowal Kacharis communities possess Scheduled Tribe status and together form slightly under half of Majuli's total population of 170,000 (Census of India 2011).[25] Majuli also has a significant Scheduled Caste population, of whom Kaibartas comprise the largest group. There are also Marwari traders, Bengali, Bihari and Nepalese communities across Majuli as well as a small Muslim population. Inter-caste, caste-tribal and migrant-autochthon dynamics are complex, and cannot be captured through a crude breakdown of essentialist demographic categories. However, it is vital to begin with an appreciation that difference and multiplicity in subjective position and experience is *flattened* by the dominance of such narratives that portray Majuli as the "place of the preachers and pontiffs" (Nath 2005-2006:717).

For Majuli does support a pluralistic religiosity. Significantly, this includes the revivalist movement of *donyi-polo* (literally meaning "sun" and "moon") amongst the Mising and greater group of Tani people of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. *Donyi-Polo* as a movement since the second-half of the twentieth century has sought to institutionalise indigenous religious practice and oral traditions, which were seen by its founders and main proponents as being increasingly weakened due to an absence of literary culture, as well as Christian and Hindu proselytising efforts (Chaudhuri 2013:264). Whether or not a majority of Mising residents of Majuli are committed revivalists, Mising religious and ritual practices as well as forms of sociality and livelihood hold as distinct in important ways from caste Hindu society. Nath has described how in Majuli, "[b]arring very few, most *satras* did not undertake any serious and systematic attempt at sankritising the tribes and other depressed people in the island which in fact left best opportunities to the Christian missionaries to make good of their footholds in the island in recent decades" (2009:186). Current Christian missionary efforts in Majuli began in earnest in the 1970s and 1980s (Nath 2009:94) and the Christian presence, including missionary schools and churches, is mainly centred around the Mising dominated area of Jengraimukh in the northeast of Majuli, which is geographically distant from the central belt occupied by the more powerful *satras*. The latter oppose the activities of the former and there is conflict, sometimes violent, between some *satra* institutions, Hindu organisations and their followers and the missionaries and converts, with disputes said to centre upon issues of conversion and land ownership (*Pratidin Time* 2019, 12th September). As well as comprising a strong vested interest, the strength of the influence the

[25] Majuli as a constituency of the Assam Legislative Assembly is a reserved seat for Schedule Tribes (ST). Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are officially recognised as marginalised groups as per articles 341 and 342 respectively of the Indian Constitution. SC and ST status provides protections, reservations and additional benefits within specified areas under state policies of positive discrimination.

satras hold across Majuli should thus also be understood as emanating spatially out and away from these institutions in concentric circles across the island, lessening with distance. Acknowledging the presence of Christian missionaries as well as followers and revivalists *of Donyi Polo*, for many Mising Vaishnavite and "tribal" practices and conventions exist and are engaged in syncretically. They are not opposed or incompatible categories, but rather are mutually shaped, marked and influenced by the other.

1.5. Dynamic histories into timeless heritage

> *One of India's oldest forms of theatre mixes animals and people into a world famous spectacle… To witness it, I've travelled to Assam in the northeast of India, where thanks to their isolation, the island communities of the Brahmaputra maintain age-old traditions… 150,000 people live on Majuli. It is a place where time has stood still. And all over the island people are looking at ways to work with the natural world… This unique culture is under threat, not by man but by the very thing that gives it life, the Brahmaputra River itself. Since the 1950s, Majuli has lost a third of its landmass due to erosion from the river. In 15 to 20 years Majuli and her neighbouring islands could cease to exist, unless something is done.*
>
> (Actor Frida Pinto narrating on 2015 BBC documentary *India: Nature's Wonderland*).

In this 2015 BBC documentary's sometimes uncomfortable blend of India's "natural" and "cultural" wonders, actor Frida Pinto nonetheless effectively manages to capture a sense of enchantment that is typical of contemporary visitor and tourist accounts of Majuli. This segment follows Pinto first on her visit to Samaguri Satra in Majuli, internationally renowned as a centre for mask-making used in the performance of *bhaona* (religious drama), and subsequently as she interviews forestry worker and national treasure Jadav Payeng who single-handedly planted a 550 hectare forest on a nearby *chapori*.[26] There is a repeated emphasis placed on the religious art forms featured not only as "ancient" but as an exemplar of an apparent continuing close affinity

[26] Beginning in the late 1970s, Payeng single-handedly planted a 550-hectare forest on a sandbar in the Brahmaputra near to Majuli, which is now recognised as the Molai Forest Reserve (Kannadasan 2019). Whilst Payeng worked unnoticed for most of this period, over the course of the last decade he has since received prestigious national and international awards for his forestry work.

between people and animals in south Asia. This connects classical Hindu texts, such as the Ramayana, and, as we are told, contemporary practices and interactions between animals and (an assumed homogenous Hindu) people in the present. In a land “where time stands still” - at least as Pinto would have it - Majuli gives us, as viewer or visitor, an opportunity to experience a seemingly unbroken continuity with primeval art forms, traditions and, perhaps most alluring of all for nature documentary audiences, more equitable relations between human, animal and environment. Whilst there is much to unpack in this representation of Majuli produced for an international English-speaking audience, what is crucial is how the depiction of Majuli as an untouched idyll is removed from contemporary theatres of action. Locked inside a time capsule, Majuli endures not only as a pristine “natural” location, but also as one presently free from “cultural” contamination. The reason Majuli endures as it does, we are told, is because of its “isolation” or limited connectivity as a river island, being separated by the Brahmaputra from, presumably, the active forces of modernisation and globalisation.

Remoteness here has allowed for cultural and artistic preservation. In many ways, this is in keeping with a mainstream discourse within the state, principally propagated by sections of the caste Assamese middle-class and elites, typified in this example by members of the Majuli Island Protection and Development Council (MIPADC) that positions Majuli as, “the core of Neo-Vaishnavism and a mosaic of the ethnic cultures of the State” (*The Assam Tribune* 2019, June 27th). This centring of Majuli as a longstanding pivot within religious and cultural spheres in Assam is also increasingly taken up by the state government who are keen to grow the state’s tourism sector and push Majuli as a key tourism destination, given its role as, “the cradle of Assamese culture” (Tourism Department Government of Assam 2017:5).[27][28] The cultural hegemony that underpins this representation claims Majuli as not only an important centre of the *satra* institutions and for Vaishnavas in the region but also of the many tribal groups across the state. Majuli here is an incubator of an inclusive, and in some ways all-encompassing, “Assamese culture” writ large.

[27] The BJP state government launched the costly and ambitious “Awesome Assam” tourism campaign featuring Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra under the role of “brand ambassador” on the 1st of November 2017 (Singh 2017).

[28] The rise and rise of tourism in Majuli can be traced back to the mid-2000s, with a series of interesting entrepreneurial partnerships between residents and keen foreigner visitors who together sought to fill the gap of comfortable tourist accommodations in Majuli in the Garamur area. Both domestic and foreign visitor numbers steadily grew over time, as did the number of travel features and amateur video blogs highlighting Majuli as an appealing destination. More recently during the period of my fieldwork, the state became more attentive to the potential for tourism in Majuli and the state as a whole, awarding tenders for an operator of sustainable tourism cycle tours and adjoined cycle café as well as government subsidies for the building of tourist lodges in Majuli.

As mentioned in the Introduction, it is important to note how Majuli's environmental crisis is increasingly framed within the guise of modern heritage conservation, which both includes and is indicative of a 2004 application for UNESCO World Heritage site status (*The Times of India* 2017, 4th May). Accounts by state-based concerned civil society groups, travel journalists and documentary producers, such as the BBC programme discussed above, all construct the processes of flooding and bank erosion within a narrative of poignant loss. This includes frequent media editorials lamenting the plight of Majuli and the threat posed to these unique cultural assets (Paul 2015; Eilers 2015; *The Assam Tribune* 2019). These evocative descriptions of a "disappearing world" (see Fig. 1.2.) fuel orientalist portrayals of an exotic and mystic Assam for a (distant) domestic and international audience (Dutta 2012:xv).

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Majuli island, Assam: a disappearing world

Richard Eilers
Sat 14 Feb 2015 07.00 GMT
80 0

▲ Fishing in a lagoon on Majuli Island, Assam. Photograph: Alamy

Lying between two channels of the mighty Brahmaputra in north-east India, Majuli island seems a picturesque watery idyll. But mighty rivers don't always make good neighbours

Fig.1.2. Travel feature article 'Majuli Island, Assam: a disappearing world' (Image: Eilers, R. *The Guardian* [online], 14th February 2015).[29]

[29] Original source of Image: https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2015/feb/14/majuli-island-holiday-assam-india (Accessed 15th April 2020).

Even if it doesn't quite live up to the image of a last Shangri-La, Majuli's ascendant profile as a "must-see place" of contemporary tourist literature and national and international media features is nonetheless perceived not only as a unique refuge for "intangible cultural heritages" (Borkakoti 2017:33), but also *from* the franticness and disenchantment of modern urban life (see Fig. 1.3.). The added jeopardy of its being under existential threat from erosion also fits the increasingly familiar narrative, for environmentalists and a privileged class of mobile tourists at least, of comprising another location enjoying a fragile twilight. The island status of Majuli helps create this sense of an enchanting remote location, bounded by the river, with all things and ways of modern life that would disrupt such an experience kept away. The need to travel by ferry to reach the "mystic island" reinforces this movement as a transfiguration from the mundane. In a general sense, the invitation to "slow down your life" in this pop-up advert on the Assam Tourism Development Corporation website, and as seen on posters and billboards in and around Majuli during the time of my fieldwork, most obviously draws on the growing appeal of "slow travel" (Molz 2010:277), and the apparent environmental and experiential benefits that are meant to flow from such an approach to tourism. More specifically however, the stress placed on tranquillity and slowness within the tourist literature also plays on, and supports, the image of a "peaceful" (*xanto* or *xantipurno*) Majuli, befitting of its position as the "land of the *satras*". Any activities that are perceived to disrupt a normative Vaishnava dharma, whether that be Christian missionary efforts in Majuli as already discussed or forms of political protest deemed too "uncivil" (Baruah 2016:117), have been frequently discouraged, if not outright resisted, by many *satradhikars* and their followers.

The emphasis on peace, calm, and remoteness is further accentuated by these qualities being located in and stemming from, at least partially, the *satra* institutions and the legacies of Sankardev, which in turn helps to maintain the hegemony of the *satra* in Majuli. As Mitul Baruah (2016:117) has described in his PhD thesis, the "fetishization" of cultural heritages in Majuli serves to set the terms for public conversations in the state on how to "save" Majuli in its many guises, which include as a location of unique ecology and endemic flora and fauna, invaluable tangible and intangible cultural assets and of the land and livelihoods of nearly 170,000 residents. Of course the notion of protection is not simply an issue of means, but also of identifying and defining what it is exactly that needs to be protected and from which forces. As is now clear, it is not therefore simply a question of building effective flood and anti-erosion protection works - although residents often lobby for these measures - but also a question of how residents *should* live in this fragile location, both presently and in the future.

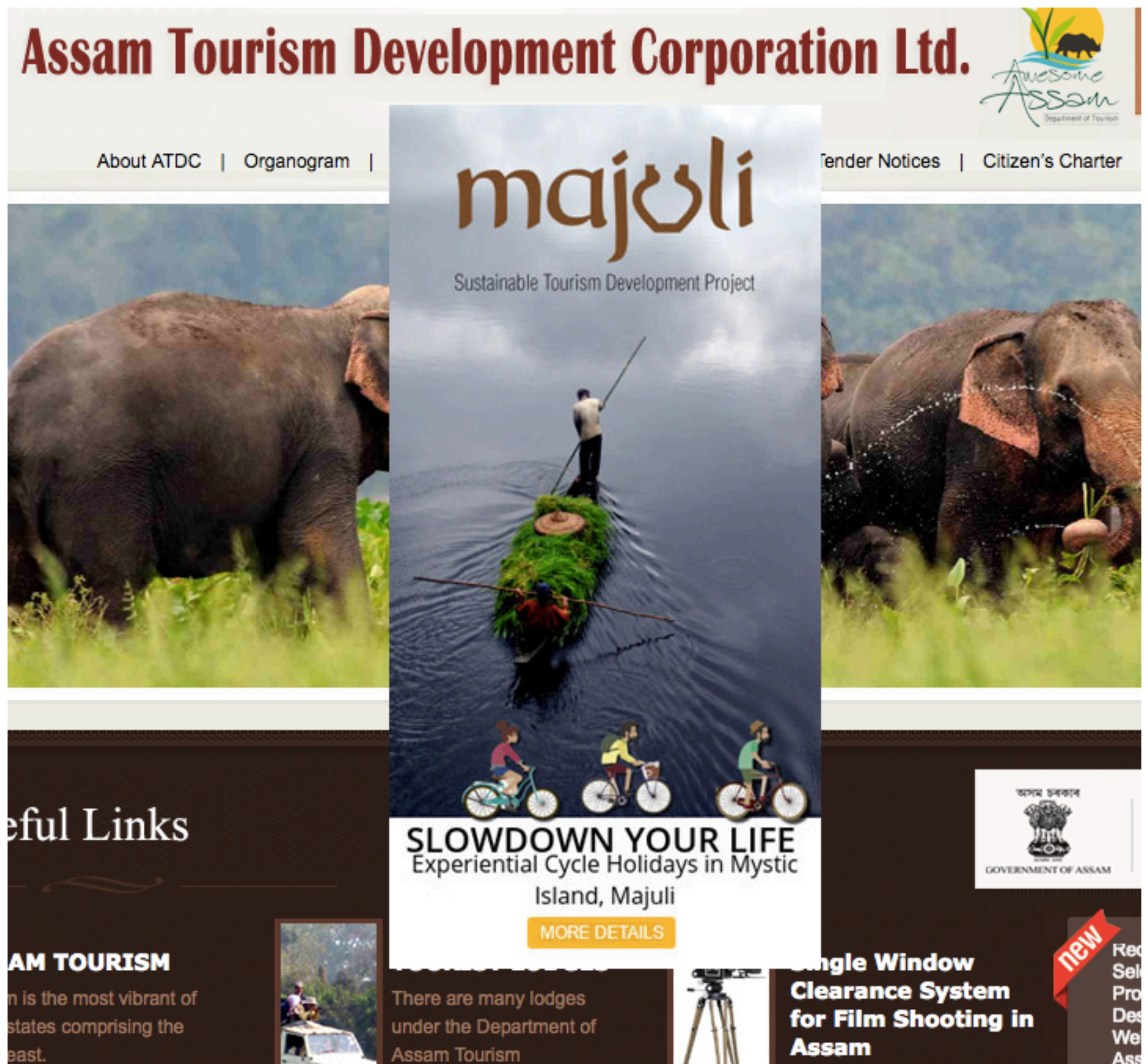

Fig. 1.3. "Pop-up" web advert for "Experiential Cycle Holidays in Mystic Island, Majuli" (Image: Assam Tourism Development Corporation Website).[30].

Whilst the peacefulness of Majuli was enjoyed by both visitors and residents, for the latter life was far from harmonious. Other than the harm and anxiety caused by erosion and severe flooding, it was common throughout fieldwork to hear lamentations of the hardships residents faced, including poor access to healthcare; pervasive joblessness and lack of employment opportunities; extremely bad roads and frequent brown and blackouts; as well as the limited and at times problematic connectivity to nearby regional centres. In contrast to narratives of peacefulness and slowness, many residents were adamant in their desire for further acceleration and smoothing of all sorts of flows across Majuli. Whilst visitors were being invited to

[30] Original source of image: http://www.assamtourismonline.com/ (Accessed 18th October 2018).

“slow down”, many residents wished for important flows to *speed-up*. Although, the latter proposition didn’t come without qualifications, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

The recent amplification and marketable transcreation of Majuli as a must-see tourist and historical location ignores this messiness. Even when the threat posed by erosion and flooding was taken up in such media and tourist accounts, it was mostly framed as a powerful nature threatening a pristine landscape and unique cultural and craft traditions. The untidiness of the above politics (and aspirations of residents, if inconvenient) were cut out and discarded, like the scales and fins of fish sold at the evening bazaars. Ethnographic fieldwork in Majuli reveals the importance of destabilising the givenness of currently snowballing popular media and tourist representations of Majuli. This fetishization of cultural heritage removes residents as active agents within the now of political and social possibility. It depoliticises the occurrence of significant social transformations in Majuli and establishes the *doxa* for future development trajectories. These accounts need to be unsettled in order to carve out space for exploring other possibilities that residents may imagine for themselves, vis-à-vis dwelling, mobility and the hopes and fears that stick to the potentials of new connections.

1.6. Conclusion

Following the river through this chapter has grounded an examination of the flows, forces and socio-political assemblages that make up Majuli and riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. As we have witnessed, Majuli has likely never comprised a timeless idyll, let alone is it the case that apparently in only recent decades Majuli has seen disruption to an unbroken continuation of primordial peacefulness through a, nonetheless very harmful, erosion of lands and environmental degradation. By contrast, and despite appearances, Majuli possesses a history of profound and sometimes violent geomorphological, social and political transformation. From repeated earthquake and flood events that have significantly shifted the course of the Brahmaputra River, to becoming the centre of once-revolutionary-later-turned-conservative Vaishnava institutions and now presently emerging as an increasingly well-known world tourism destination. Majuli, in ways other than the migrating river, cannot be said to stand still. Sifting through these silty layers of history uncovers the events, processes and interests that distinguished Majuli as an “island” and a not unremarkable *char-chapori*. This classification was not based on a distinction of physical geography alone, but was also a narrative choice, embedded within a social-historical milieu, that centres particular places, people and cultural heritages over others. It is not only the ebbs, flows and occasional violence of the river that holds certain populations, such as *char-chapori* dwellers,

within the margins of the state and state care, but also the policies and priorities of state governments and discriminations of a majoritarian politics. Taking the long view through this chapter has allowed for the excavation of the historic and present (dis-)connections Majuli holds with the state and wider region, unravelling these strands as they emerged through a confluence of geomorphology and socio-political upheavals and movements. The more recent proliferation of text and imagery that promotes Majuli as an unique site of threatened cultural and ecological heritages (as well as a temporary haven to be enjoyed by the urban middle-classes desiring renewal) mines elements of this narrative and emphasises appealing experiential elements that draw on an often noted enchantment to life here beside the river. Destabilising the latter at the close of this chapter cracks into this edifice of material, exponentially increasing with each feature article and Youtube vlog, and allows for potential glimpses of alternative stories to shine through. In other words, positioning, examining and critiquing these representations of Majuli affords space for the interventions that are to follow in the thesis that attend to how these histories and present realities enliven resident imaginaries for life, dwelling and the fostering of new connections.

Chapter 2: Seasonality on the banks of the Brahmaputra: rhythms and ruptures

2.1. Introduction

The Brahmaputra River and its tributaries are characterised by hugely varying water levels through the seasons. These seasonal transformations emerge out of an entanglement of multiple actors and the interaction of their dynamic behaviours: geomorphology, regional tectonic activity, timing and intensity of monsoon rainfall, the presence of increasing amounts of hydroelectric infrastructure and the agendas of companies who operate them, as well as anthropogenic interventions within and along the river.

In the previous chapter, I historicised and gave a necessary critical reading of the narratives that have stuck to the silty environmental and socio-political entanglements that make up Majuli and riverine areas within the Brahmaputra Valley. In this chapter, I will focus on residents' attempts to coordinate their daily activities with the ever-ongoing flow, mingling and percolation of social and ecological rhythms of their surroundings. Eschewing an explicit (or implied) environmental determinism, I instead engage with these phenomena, and the coupled human activities and other-than-human processes, through a dwelling perspective of seasonality (Harris 1998). I follow Franz Krause's (2013) assertion that conceiving of seasons as comprised of rhythmical dynamics is well suited to the constantly morphing nature of riverscapes.

Paying attention to the interplays of various socio-ecological rhythms emphasises the *in-motionness* of how environments are constituted in and through time. Considerations of an emergent seasonality of riverscapes therefore allows for stories that need not privilege human, ecological or other, acknowledging that each is not equally influential. It is important to prevent a flattening of the distinctiveness of component parts, such as atmospheric trends and state infrastructure budgets. This approach, by centring the dynamic relations at play with each other, allows for analysis to move across scales. What residents of the Brahmaputra Valley are coming to expect from their rivers with each monsoon cannot be separated from the ambitious plans and security agendas of a New Delhi political class hungry for large-scale hydroelectric projects in the region, nor from the continuing preference for embankment construction following the priorities, patronage and whims of state government as well as local administrations and contractors.

An emergent seasonality for residents on the banks of the Brahmaputra does not, therefore, refer to grouped characteristics emanating from distinct temporal blocks following one

after another as dictated by a formal calendar. Rather, it unfolds through the ebbs and flows of social and practical activity as residents monitor, adjust and attend to their surroundings. Such an approach not only allows for greater nuance in our accounts of embodied perspectives of seasonal variation, but also privileges an emotional and affective liveliness within these interactions, without which any account of dwelling along the river cannot be meaningfully situated. As I explain later in this chapter, it also poignantly frames how drastic alterations in recent years of the flows, shifts and movements that constitute such rhythms are leading to greater disruption and harm being caused to residents and with increasing frequency.

I begin with a description of a fish swarm (*uzan*) that I witnessed during fieldwork, to put flesh onto the bones of the approach outlined above. I will then turn to anthropological works that have explored seasons analytically and their bearing upon social life. This will principally involve revisiting Marcel Mauss and Henri Beuchat's (1979) work on seasonal variation among Inuit populations, amidst a renewed interest in this text (Harris 1998; Krause 2013) in light of relatively recent revisionist approaches to the relationship between environment and society (Descola & Palsson 1996). I make the case for the conceptual benefits of a theoretical interest in seasonality by discussing the rhythms of social and practical activity in Majuli through seasonal periods of wetness and dryness, with a particular emphasis on the former. This focus shows how these periods bring a plurality of transient advantageous opportunities as well as potentially adverse prospects for residents.

The second section of this chapter will begin with a vignette of an embankment breach that occurred in Ximolupuria during August 2017. I analyse a video made of this event through techniques of photo elicitation with the creator. I argue that the types of flood events that come to be recorded, namely those with spectacular and abhorrent effects, reflect a *changed* flooding in the Brahmaputra Valley. Significantly, hydroelectric dams upstream and anthropogenic interventions on the river are leading to more unpredictable flows, with increasingly disastrous effects. As we see, it is less that residents must get to know their rivers again through becoming familiar with alternative rhythms, but rather with *arrhythmia* and rupture.

2.2. Rhythm

2.2.1. Fish swarms and wet monsoon mornings

The usual unhurried nature of activity in Ximolupuria early one Sunday morning in July 2017 was further accentuated by rain. From what I could hear in our own and neighbouring households, this had further slowed the general rush into the day. Some of those not engaged in home or other work were enticed to remain between the sheets, on what was generally the only and main rest day of the week for many. Roads would be slippery and, if it could wait, best not to encourage the catching of a cold, as I had been told on other rainy days. My roommate Dhruba was in his late-twenties and would not normally miss such a gracious opportunity for a lie-in on his day-off from duty; these were two of many characteristics that made us similar. Yet there he stood at the end of my bed on an overcast wet day, enquiring affably as ever, "do you want to go fishing?". At my look of puzzlement following this uncharacteristic suggestion, he explained "The fish have started *swarming* today" (*aji uzan uthise*) .

We walked along past several neighbours' residences, each of which faced the inner side of the embankment, before turning towards the fields that stretched out and away from the rear of these households. The fields were arranged in small intersecting rectangular plots used for paddy cultivation.[31][32] The low earthen barriers between plots were, however, barely visible above a sheet of water that now covered these lands, well-fed at that point by monsoon rain which was their only form of irrigation. The greyness of the reflected sky was only interrupted by the thick green of weeds that clogged the plots yet to be "cleaned" for cultivation or those being left fallow that year. However, where we stood at the fields' edge, the water only reached just above our ankles.

We walked towards a group of around ten children, who were crowded excitedly around the earthen bank of one plot. They had carved several wider and deeper holes into the side of the bank to increase the volume of water that overflowed and poured into the lower adjacent plot. Household mosquito nets were held outstretched, a little haphazardly but no less eagerly by the small hands that held them, over the opening in the bank. Looking down, we tried to follow the flicks and ripples as a large shoal of small fish swam near towards the nets. Whilst many were able to sense the danger of the nets or were spooked by the laughing and occasional foot stomping of

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[31] Most of the plots comprised a *kotha*, which in Assam equates to 2880ft². In Assam five *kotha* equal one *bigha*, which equates to 14400ft².

[32] Both *xali* (transplant variety cultivated between June/July - November/December) and *bao* (sown broadcast April/May - December/January) paddy varieties were cultivated in this area.

water, many nonetheless fell prey and tumbled into the tangle, subsequently to be grasped and chucked into nearby plastic buckets which gradually filled with the morning's catch. The children were soaked, but the fun was only dampened 15 minutes later when the steady rush of fish slowed to barely a trickle and everyone began to disperse back towards their homes.

I was unsure about how people had come to know that the *uzan* was happening that morning. On asking, I learned that a neighbour had noticed the conducive weather conditions and gone out to check around 4.30-5am. Seeing that she was correct in her prediction, she then returned with her net and fished alone quietly in the early morning, managing a catch of around 10kg. This was far in excess of what was caught by, as I now understood, us latecomers. The majority of this larger catch was sold to those who would then re-sell it in the nearby fish market in town, with the remainder given to the more immediate kin living in separate households nearby as well as some that was kept for the household table.

The swarm or *uzan* that monsoon morning was of the small, slightly lop-sided oval-shaped *puthi* fish (*puntius sarana sarana*).[33] The *uzan* occurs during the flood season when freshwater fish begin to breed following the first or early monsoon showers. This involves mature fish swimming to the surface of water bodies en masse, making them easy to catch. Whether one opts for a dedicated fishing net or those normally employed to keep out mosquitos, high yields are often assured. As the writer and well-known translator of Assamese language literature Aruni Kashyap wrote on the difficulty of translating *uzan* into English: "[l]iterally, it means the river/pond is swarming with fish because when they want to breed, they come to the surface, making them look voluminous. But "*uzan uthise*" means not just the swarming of a large number of fishes to the surface, but also their behaviour during breeding" (Bhargava 2017).[34] As Kashyap is keen to emphasise, there is an expansiveness in the meaning of *uzan*, which makes it hard to boil down. It references an intersection of particular phenomena that arise when certain seasonal conditions occur and which subsequently invoke human expectations of (and orientations

[33] *Uzan* of other fish species also take place, such as that of the larger *kuhi* fish (kuria labeo) as occurred on the banks of the Brahmaputra several weeks before the account narrated above. I was told it made apparently for a comical sight, watching people rushing around grasping for the incoming fish. The greater abundance of fish during these periods also leads to lower fish prices in the nearby markets.

[34] In the short story *The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms* by Arunchali writer Yeshe Dorje Thongchi translated by Kashyap to English, the phrase *uzan* was used not in relation to fish, but rather to describe the increase in the population of rats in Arunachal after the bamboo flowering. As Kashyap explains, "after consuming bamboo flowers the rats were reproducing in enormous numbers… forcing them to cross the river in thousands in search of food and consume everything on their way. The opening sentence describes this phenomenon of rats crossing the river en masse" (Bhargava 2017). This event is known as *mautam* in Mizoram, where this phenomenon is most associated, occurring roughly every fifty years and historically has led to famine and hardship (Nag 2008).

towards) sudden bounty. Particular climatic and environmental conditions thus come to index distinctive animal behaviour. Based on this relational understanding, people then position themselves accordingly within such events. Thinking with this example of *uzan* allows us - with an enhanced clarity due to the polyvalence in the meaning of the phrase - to appreciate the dynamic relationships that exist between these phenomena, flows and expectations. It emphasises that the intermingled rhythms that lead to an emergent seasonality are known and experienced by us very much as beings-in-the-world, whether we are as fish or human. The continual unfolding of seasonality is also thus characterised by a plurality of transient advantageous opportunities, as in this instance, as well as adverse prospects that may come to be harmful. In addition, we see too that an affective and emotional liveliness is immanent to land/waterscapes, whether through re-presenting the exhilaration of fishing on wet monsoon mornings or, as I will come to shortly, a restless disquiet concerning how to keep things going as best as you can with the coming of flood.

2.2.2. Seasonality, rhythm and resonance

Anthropology has a long-standing interest with the seasons and the bearing they have upon sociality and social institutions. Mauss and Beuchat wrote in their early and influential essay *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology* (henceforth referred to as *Seasonal Variations)*: "[s]ocial life does not continue at the same level throughout the year; it goes through regular, successive phases of increased and decreased intensity, of activity and repose, of exertion and recuperation" (Mauss & Beuchat 1979:78-79).[35] The tempo of sociality is thus not uniformly monotonous, but rather is characterised by periodic ebbs and flows in energy and languor. Mauss and Beuchat were particularly concerned with how these oscillations in the pulse of social life were related to the annual changes in weather and climate encountered through the seasons. They make clear that their study was centred specifically on Inuit populations for the reason that the variations they experienced were "exaggerated and amplified" (1979:19); this, due to the stark contrast evident in many features of social life between summer and winter, afforded their argument greater clarity despite it also being generally applicable.

[35] Many authors only cite Mauss when referencing *Seasonal Variations*. As Beuchat is a credited author of the text, I include him in my references and discussion. However, I have left direct quotations as they are, and so this means occasionally only Mauss is mentioned. Despite this confusion and in either case, it is the same text that is being discussed.

In elucidating the kind of relationship that existed between seasonal and social rhythms, Mauss and Beuchat were explicit that the former was not a strictly determining factor for the latter. Indeed, the causal power of climatic and environmental factors must be appreciated “in relation to a social context *in all its complex totality*” (1979:21, my emphasis). Of significance is the reorientation this allows in how we understand the relations *between* environmental and societal forms as being contingent and working in dynamic interaction.[36] As Michael Bravo puts it, “Mauss understands seasonality in its essence to be forces acting in concert together… The key to Mauss's essay is that he has redefined seasonality in terms of symbiotic mobility. The social effects are synchronous responses to the many physical and social causes” (2006:43). As Bravo interprets, Mauss and Beuchat rather strikingly employed the word “symbiosis” when characterising the synchronisation in the seasonal rhythms of the winter concentration and summer dispersion of Inuit settlements in conjunction with the seasonal movements of the animals they hunted. However, this was not a simple cause-effect relationship. The seasonal movement of seals with the opening and closing of the sea ice did not account in isolation for the marked differences in social life and location of Inuit settlements/camps through the seasons. If taken alone, they only explained when were the most opportune periods for these distinct “phases” (1979:78). Whereas to approach an understanding of the “total phenomena” (as phrased by Mauss and Beuchat, 1979:56) requires understanding these geophysical components, such as the conditions in which sea water freezes and thaws, as being in dynamic relationship with the joys, collective affirmations, obligations and the ultimate costs and gains to minds and bodies that were involved in Inuit religious and moral life.

Writing decades later, Mary Douglas acknowledged that running through *Seasonal Variations* was “an explicit attack on geographical or technological determinism in interpreting domestic organization. It demands an ecological approach in which the structure of ideas and of society, the mode of gaining a livelihood and the domestic architecture are interpreted as a single interacting whole in which no one element can be said to determine the others” (Douglas 1972:513-514). It is true that, in noted contrast, many contemporary commentators have seen in *Seasonal Variations* a confirmation of historical materialism and the preeminent importance of environmental and technological factors for determining social structure (Mauss & Beuchat

[36] Mauss and Beuchat are clear in his targeting of “anthropogeographers” who they depict as exclusively concerned with land, to which, he says, they have attributed “a kind of perfect efficacy, as if land were capable of producing effects on its own without interacting with other factors” (1979:21). The polemical nature of Mauss and Beuchat’s accusation of crude environmental determinism inherent in the work of his anthropogeographer contemporaries, assisted not only in constructing a straw man in which to distinguish and enhance the strength of his own argument but also more fundamentally in carving out a distinctive disciplinary space for his own sociological enterprise (Bravo 2006).

1979:11). However, in a similar interpretation to the one I offered above, the translator James J. Fox points out that Douglas's reading was far more in keeping with the original spirit of the text as intended by Mauss and Beuchat (1979:11). This remains the case even if we are cognizant that Douglas imbued it with a sensibility for ecological holism that was neither available to Mauss at the turn of the 20th century nor accurately captured his thinking on the relationship between physical and social causation (Bravo 2006:37). Yet as Fox makes clear, important ambiguities do exist in the text, which provide (even if partial) legitimation for these seemingly paradoxical interpretations. Whilst Mauss and Beuchat argued that it is seasonal transformations in the material that gives rise to important changes in the arrangement of social life, they nevertheless were mindful not to assign an unmediated role to environmental or technological conditions in determining the rhythmical nature of social life in its ebbs and flows through the year. These ambiguities (and the multiple interpretations they have given rise to) can thus be traced to a contradiction that cuts through Mauss and Beuchat's analysis, concerning how we understand the relationship between environment and society; through the course of *Seasonal Variations*, this alternates between an apparent strict determinacy and attempts at outlining a nuanced contingency.

Mark Harris locates this tension within Mauss and Berchat's inability to reconcile their own personal investment in a Durkheimian theory of society on the one hand, and the need, as they well understood, to be attentive to the co-dependency of social and natural rhythms on the other (1998:67). Seasons (to use dramaturgical metaphor) were not merely rotating set pieces that either determined how the social drama would be played out (reductive environmental determinism) or alternatively served as marginal, largely monotonous backdrops that, whilst known to the players through their interactions on stage, were never of too great importance to the central drama (classical social constructionism). By contrast as Harris argues, the distinctive contribution of *Seasonal Variations* (not withstanding its theoretical flaws) was that it offers an excellent early attempt "to treat seasonality as inherent in the stream of social life rather than as part of a framework of external environmental constraint" (Harris 1998:65). Harris revisits Mauss and Beuchat nearly a century later to reclaim this work and emphasise the salience of this approach. For despite the influence of this essay on subsequent anthropological analyses of seasonality (for a notable example see Evans-Pritchard 1940), the full extent of Mauss and Beuchat's analytical approach has been largely ignored and remains unrealised (Harris 1998:65).[37]

[37] E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) in *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* explicates, through attentive ethnographic observation, how social structure is conditioned by environment and seasonal variation, most notably in the changes in the level of water courses and bodies, flooding and rainfall through the year. However, Evans-Pritchard in a manner that

The timing of this return to Mauss and Beuchat was crucial. By the late 1990s, the division of environment and society into separate domains within anthropological thought had become not only problematic (as an assumed universalism that was in fact underpinned by relative European folk understandings), but simply refused to hold *anywhere* (Descola & Palsson 1996). Harris argues that the diverging set of assumptions that followed a rethinking in the discipline in the relations between "Nature" and "Culture" from this period onwards offered fertile ground for anthropologists to draw usefully on Mauss and Beuchat's insights on the dynamic workings of seasonal change, social institutions and sociality. Crucially, contemporary scholars would simply be able to side-step a reified and deterministic Durkheimian conception of Society and the ensuing theoretical quagmire that had hamstrung *Seasonal Variations*. In short, we now have new-found capacity to "build on Mauss's important and original project, namely the elucidation of the periodicity of social form, in the light of current thinking on the relatedness of people and environment" (Harris 1998:67).

Harris (1998) explores the interplay between sociality and seasonality in his work with Portuguese-speaking floodplain dwellers (*caboclos*) in the village of Parú on the lower middle reaches of the Amazon River. He distinguishes his own position from two other approaches to engaging seasonality that he has found common to anthropology, which can be respectively understood as comprising "outsider" and "insider" portrayals. The first refers to accounts that aim to convey empirical information about social and environmental processes as they would be captured by a so-thought "objective observer". This is often achieved by invoking numerous scientific metrics and diagrams, such as graphs displaying annual rainfall or statistics about seasonal disease incidence. By contrast, the latter "insider" portrayal concerns indigenous representations and classificatory schema of seasonal variance. Harris acknowledges the importance of an emic perspective, but rather than principally focusing on indigenous categories of recurrent weather patterns, he instead takes as his focus a "lived experience of seasonality" (1998:69). People, no doubt, form representations based upon interpretations of collective cumulative experiences he says, but the point is that they do not do so by removing themselves to an *outside* of the flow of life, somehow impossibly floating above their own experience. Rather, as they must and as we all do, it is as "beings-*in*-a-world" (1998:69, original emphasis) that such representations are formed. Franz Krause (2013) picks up the conversation over a decade later in his own work with river dwellers along the Kemi River in Finnish Lapland and distinguishes the two latter approaches as respectively interested in seasons and seasonality. Krause discriminates

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eschews the nuanced contingency attempted at by Mauss and Beuchat in *Seasonal Variations*, positions an "outer world" of ecology as a limiting factor, or container, of a distinct "inner" societal domain (1940:85).

the strand of anthropological thinking that focuses on classificatory systems and linguistic concepts that identify returning weather and environmental patterns as one principally concerned with seasons (2013:25-26). The temporal implication of these approaches is that the seasons come to comprise discrete temporal blocks that divide up the year.[38] By contrast, Harris and Krause advocate for the analytical benefits of a concern with seasonality. Harris is explicitly making the case for a "dwelling perspective of seasonality" (1998:66). This builds on the work of Tim Ingold who defines a dwelling perspective "… [as one] that treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence. From this perspective, the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity" (2000:153). From this standpoint, recurring seasonal social and ecological processes are understood as they are lived by people, in active interaction with their surroundings. Seasonality here is fundamentally *rhythmic* and emerges through the ebbs and flows of social-ecological life from which it cannot be separated.

Ingold draws out the theoretical and practical underpinnings of employing a dwelling perspective in the study of social life through an analogy with an orchestral performance (2000:196-198). Orchestral musicians in the pit observe the conductor and listen to those players beside them. This is how they are able to tune to the same pitch or find resonance and, as a result, play together successfully. Ingold maintains that the same is true more generally of social life. People attend to their quotidian activities not as individuals in "hermetic isolation" (2000:196), but in close attendance to others nearby.[39] In short, we watch, listen, and feel in the presence of others and continually adjust our own actions and movements as they are shaped through such intimate attention of proximate others within our environment. (Whilst Ingold does not say so, there is no reason why proximate others cannot also include those who are geographically distant, but known through the aid of social media and other communication technologies).

Ingold refers to the cumulative pattern of dwelling activities as the "taskscape" (2000:190,194-198). The taskscape is not intended as a neatly delineated cousin to landscape,

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[38] Krause illustrates this strand of anthropological interest through examination of the work of Ben Orlove (2003) who he says "appears to be interested in the seasons as conceptually bounded temporal phenomena. 'Summer', for instance, is significant to Orlove's approach as a block of time with particular start and end dates, and with a clearly defined content, for example the weather being warm and bright. It is followed by 'autumn', again a particular block with particular characteristics" (2013:25).

[39] Ingold is keen to avoid a separation being made here between domains of social and technical activity, which, he laments is "[o]ne of the great mistakes of recent anthropology" (2000:195).

which might ultimately simply serve as refashioned terms for culture and nature. In repeatedly emphasising the dynamic intra- and interrelations between dwelling activities (taskscape) within respective landscapes, Ingold positions these totalities as interdependent, emergent and under perennial construction.[40] Such a perspective, rooted in a phenomenological tradition, is important not only for centring the relatedness and permeability of what we term the social and practical as well as the organic and inanimate (which again allows for a side-stepping of a problematic nature-culture dichotomy that hindered Mauss, Beuchat and others after them as discussed). Additionally, it also places an emphasis on everything that is said to be contained within the taskscape and landscape as being forged through *movement*. The conceptual work Ingold wants the taskscape to perform (and inclusive of how he understands its relation to landscape) is thus to allow recognition of how time, as it can be said to be meaningful to us as beings-*in*-the-world, is immanent to the pace of activities that make up the everyday.

Despite henceforth not employing the concept of the taskscape, I will nonetheless draw throughout on Ingold's point that the cycles and repetitions encountered through music, as in social life, are not metronomic in their recurrence. Social time, or rather time as being fundamentally social in the way Ingold advances, is not chronological and cannot be said to be structured by the arbitrary divisions of the clockface.[41] As Harris argues, the rhythmic character of economic life for residents of Parú, as they move from one activity to another through the year, "is governed not by a formal calendar, but in their observable relationships to each other" (1998:74). To offer a simple example, Harris relates how residents planted crops at a specific moment, not because it was September but, as they explained, because certain seasonal conditions such as soil hardness or the appearance of a particular species of bird had been monitored and seen to be met. Discussions concerning the most opportune time were frequent amongst residents who drew on these references of seasonal transformations to debate how best to proceed to allow a good harvest. As we heard near the beginning of this chapter with the example of the *uzan*, drawing on knowledge gained through past experience and paying close attention to their nearby surroundings and to shifting weather patterns, meant individuals were

[40] Ingold (2000:198) defines landscape as an assortment of related coagulated features.
[41] Harris argues that Mauss and Beuchat, in a similar vein to himself, were attempting to describe a type of social time whose rhythm was not undifferentiated, such as the movement of a clock, but that of the rushes and slow-downs inherent to life (1998:67). However, as Harris argues, Mauss and Beuchat were unable to connect the above observations of seasonal rhythms whilst simultaneously remaining invested in a Durkheimian perspective that, "society is itself a clock, whose moving parts are individual human beings" (Ingold 1993:159).

well-placed to land a large catch. Others such as the children, Dhruba and myself, as Ingold suggests, paid attention and coordinated our actions with those near to us and followed their lead. In line with Harris, "to understand what people do, and when, we have to regard their activities in context as attempts, which may succeed or fail, to co-ordinate their own movements with their ongoing perceptual monitoring of seasonal variations" (1998:74).

The most important seasonal change in Parú, similarly to riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley, is the height of the river, which is used to measure the progression of the year. As waters recede and the mud dries out, the dry season affords a far greater degree of mobility and sees a vast increase in social activity. Joy and spontaneous parties mark this initial time of greater movement and widening social circles. Lands become suitable again for growing crops and herding cattle, migrating fish in shallower waters allow for more profitable catches and hunting is once again feasible. During this period the majority of residents earn the most money and eat the most food. The months of low water levels are characterised by abundance and are also marked by a greater degree of festivities, including large lively community parties as well food sharing. In short, "[it is considered] a beautiful time, when people are happy" (1998:75). Yet, the seasonal expansion and greater intensity of sociality in Parú, whilst enacting a renewal of communal ties, also leads to growing tension as, inevitably, gossip flares, occasional fights break out at larger gatherings and reciprocal exchanges flounder and collapse. In stark contrast, the lean months of the wet season are a time of scarcity. Economic opportunities are greatly reduced and people can no longer wander. There is a contraction in collective social life, with the focus shrinking to immediate kin and neighbours. Bored, growing thin and anxious of the dangers brought with the flood, residents during this season, "virtually live in their hammocks" (1998:73). The good life for Parúros may be confined to only part of the year, during the low waters of the dry season, where people can eat well, enjoy themselves and renew bonds of kinship and community. However, as Harris argues (echoing Mauss and Beuchat), the relative inactivity and calmness of flood season, whilst boring and anxiety-ridden, serves as, "a regenerative process which prepares for, and makes possible, a later intensity in collective life, full of agency and energy" (1998:78). Harris eloquently describes how the rhythm of activities shapes the space and tempo of communal life. Poignantly we see how the periodicity of social life, as paced by people's active engagement with their surroundings, includes consequences of both practical and aesthetic aspect. This focus goes against approaches that, either explicitly or implicitly, position environmental rhythms as external to the social forms that arise in a given place. It counters the notion that environmental conditions comprise the limiting factor on social life, or the means by how duration of activity is measured as Harris argues, but that nonetheless remain all the while

outside of the stream of life as it is lived. A dwelling perspective thus privileges the "sympathetic attention" (Harris 1998:79) of residents as they attempt to achieve resonance with the ever-ongoing flow, mingling and percolation of social and ecological rhythms of their surroundings. Arising from these movements is the constitutional stuff of environmental and societal transformation. Simply put, seasonality is immanent to our being-in-the-world.

In the next section, I will approximate an emergent seasonality for Ximolupuria residents by describing the ebbs and flows of social and practical activity through the contrasting seasonal periods of dryness and wetness. This will follow an examination of virtual categories of seasons and what they are ideally said to afford or involve. Through the coming and going of flood, we shall see how a plurality of transient advantageous opportunities, as well as potentially adverse prospects, emerge for residents. This focus on seasonality shows how residents engage with the arrival of the favourable and unfavourable as emplaced agents who use skilled techniques (as well as simply bearing the hardships) in their attempts both to seize these occasions most successfully and to limit the harm they may cause.

2.2.3. The coming of flood

Wetness and dryness

Like the areas of North America or those of the lower middle reaches of the Amazon River settled by Inuit populations and Parú residents as respectively described by Mauss and Beuchat and by Harris, the Brahmaputra Valley undergoes profound seasonal variation. The meeting of the southwest Indian monsoon winds with mountain ranges across South Asia during the summer months occasions tremendous rainfall, with Northeast India receiving particularly heavy downpours. For present purposes, it is important now to draw out how changing levels of precipitation, humidity and temperature through the year become implicated within rhythms of activity for Majuli residents. To say the monsoon profoundly shapes the ecology, economy and society of South Asia is both so obvious and so broad as to appear inane. However, it is fruitful to frame what follows in this section by paying attention to the contrasting annual periods of wetness and dryness within the Brahmaputra Valley. Whilst there are many other seasonal changes that contour everyday life in important ways, it is these changes that have some of the most significant implications for residents.

Through the course of my fieldwork, I heard the word *ritu* and the English translation of "season" on many occasions. These terms indicated many different finite periods of weather *as*

well as activity. Whereas *ritu* as a category generally confined itself to referring to seasonal weather and climate, the term "season" was more expansive in meaning. The range of applications of "season", principally as a suffix, included but was not limited to, "tourist-", "storm-", "rainy"-, "Bihu-", "fishing-", "festival-", "flood-", "summer-", "wedding-" and "dry-". The range and scale of these phenomena being referenced was vast. "Fishing season", as a formal period, is a bureaucratic category ostensibly based upon protecting fish stocks with reference to the timing of spawning and maturation. Tourism season (October through April) refers to the influx of domestic and international travellers to the region. This virtually entirely stops during the rains, when the weather is thought to be unpleasant and travel becomes more arduous. However, the main broad point to be made is less by way of interrogation of these words or concepts, but rather that the majority of economic and livelihood activity of Majuli - whether in relation to agriculture, fishing, tourism, larger festivals such as *Raas* and *Palnaam*, civil and private construction, as well as craft industries - differs markedly by season.

When I spoke with residents about seasonal weather, it was not uncommon for many to begin with telling me of the six seasons: *grismo*, *borxa*, *xorot*, *hemonto*, *xit* and *boxonto*. Each of these *ritu* comprised equal two-month blocks of the Assamese/Hindu calendar and were defined by several qualities such as temperature, relative wetness or dryness as well as cycles of plant life. How much of each aspect was elaborated on differed from person to person. They variously drew attention to the increasing heat through *grismo* before the downpours, and the respite of dropping temperatures albeit accompanied by increase in humidity, of *borxa*; the vivid greenness of *xorot* after the monsoon rains and the cooling temperatures and rice harvest in *hemonto*; and the coldest months of *xit* before the warming up and growing of new leaves in *boxonto*. Of course, these qualities listed are not exhaustive and many others are attached to each category; this is a crude sketch only. However, this characterisation is not dissimilar to how young children in Assam (or equally those in Manchester or London) are taught about the seasons within their formal curricula or through learning aids such as picture books or, increasingly, YouTube videos.[42] Several key traits of weather, behaviour of flora and fauna as well as agricultural activity were highlighted and described as characterising that seasonal block of the year. As representations of changing weather (which index particular human activity) these are virtual categories of ideal seasons.

[42] On reflection it was not surprising that I was being engaged on this topic as children are in school, as I was often wilfully positioned as a student to be taught by experienced protagonists, which, as I have discussed earlier, formed a central methodological component.

On consulting my fieldnotes, however, the most common distinctions that were made about seasonal weather through interviews and conversations did not relate specifically to these six seasons, or at least not as two-month periods. At its broadest, a distinction was often invoked between the dry (*khoralikal*) and wet (*borxakal*) periods of the year and between “winter” and “summer”. These two sets of binaries did not completely map onto each other, and the latter pair of summer and winter were not thought together to cover the whole year. Winter may be cold and dry. Summer begins dry and hot (but for the occasional “early” monsoon downpour), but was frequently discussed as also inclusive of the later wet and humid conditions that accompany the monsoon rains. We see that precipitation, humidity and temperature through these categories were referenced in different combinations – though it should be said that they were only several important references amongst many others for these periods.

As mentioned above, and as described by Krause for Kemi River dwellers (2013:34), these seasons were also characterised by the activities they enabled and the meanings and emotions that are attached to them for residents. The dry winter months were often noted by residents for the more congenial weather and the greater mobility and more expansive modes of sociality this affords. The humid wet months, by contrast, were often noted for the onerous climate, greater time spent inside or nearby the household, as well as the concern or “tension” that emanated from risks linked to flooding and the need for enhanced care for people, animals and possessions. The point is that whether it was a discussion of two, four or six seasons, their framing was contextual and contingent upon the focus of attention.

I have so far traced seasons as virtual or linguistic categories, which resonates with a particular theoretical interest within anthropology as outlined earlier in this chapter. Of course, categories of seasons are far from insignificant, and important fixed calendar dates (that occur irrespective of terrestrial syncopated rhythms) such as the three agricultural festivals of Bihu, add their own beat to the flow of social life and are grounded and interwoven with these activities. In addition, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, there have been significant changes to livelihoods through time, which make many residents, to greater or lesser extents, beholden increasingly to rhythms other than those discussed above for their principal source of livelihood. (These may include, for example, the rhythms of educational institutions, professional services, private enterprise and daily labour). However, even for such individuals and families, whilst they themselves might not engage significantly in farming, fishing or other rural livelihood pursuits, or might do so only occasionally, they are still very much emplaced within a rural area and so adjacent to a majority who remain so. (Equally, this is not to deny the inverse could be said of famers and fisherman, many of whom were and continue to be heavily implicated within the rhythms of non-agricultural

livelihood and revenue streams). However, to produce an account of seasonality on the banks of the Brahmaputra requires exploring the coming and going of advantageous and detrimental prospects as encountered by residents *through* changing seasonal conditions. An interest in these seasonal affordances is thus to consider residents' attempts within the everyday to monitor, adjust and respond to the host of social and ecological rhythms of their surroundings. I will do this with a particular emphasis on the wetter months of the year, that is the period that extends through the arrival, peaks and lessening of the monsoon rains.

Turning towards affordances

The first rains are said to follow the extensive socialising, merry-making and extravagances of *Bohag Bihu*, which marks the beginning of the Assamese New Year (commencing mid-April). The cooling effect that immediately follows any rain shower is welcomed as a respite by many, following as it does several months of increasingly hot temperatures. Rainfall across the plains and surrounding hills widens rivers, bringing flows again along what were dry sandy channels in winter as well as forging new paths through the riverscape. Low-lying lands including fields and marshes, that were cracked and furnished with course dull grasses through the dry months, eventually become boggy and are periodically completely submerged. The rhythms of these flows, water bodies and inundations through the months of wetness varies each year with the timing and intensity of rainfall, schedules of hydro-electric projects and fallibility of so-called flood-defence infrastructure.

Many residents expressed joy, even delight, concerning aspects of this seasonal change, whether relating to "bursting" (the first rains following high summer temperatures, giving a profound cooling effect) or in offering opportunities to rest at home with family due to a rain enforced immobility. However, this is also a time of year that, for varying durations, generated a sense of profound unease for many. Whilst not as acute as Harris describes for Parú, the wet season is marked by a restricted mobility and a related limited sociality. Rains and rising flood waters make moving around and out from Majuli slower and more treacherous. Disruptions as well as periodic suspensions are common to the ferry service. Road travel also becomes more hazardous and some routes become impassable, in places blocked by flood waters or with country roads bogged down in thick and slippery mud. It is a period when otherwise more mobile young people and adult male residents spend more time either near or at home and the calendar is punctuated by fewer large festivals. More pressing is the increased risks endured by those who must travel in these more perilous conditions, and the long existing resident concern about their

capacity to seek timely access to essential services during the time of flood, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

Greater time at home came amidst the more frequent electricity brown and blackouts that were characteristic of the season, as demand for air conditioning in urban areas during the hot months further outstripped supply, increasing discomfort (and irritability) for residents who wished to charge their mobile phones, watch tv, use fans for respite from the heat or to allow for better sleep and forcing countless students to complete their homework by candlelight or kerosene lamp. Microbes and other parasitic infections also thrived in the general damp conditions and there were greater instances of contaminated drinking water during flood season.

During periods of particularly high river water levels, I encountered many distressed residents in situations of what they described as "*tension*". Most frequently, this related to residents' attempts to attend to their livestock as scarce grazing lands and cow sheds went underwater. For those who owned cattle, this necessitated either buying grass as feed at some expense in the market, or alternatively making arduous and dangerous boat journeys to cut grass on *chapori* lands further upstream. There was also great concern that stemmed from animals getting sick during this period due to the damp conditions or for their welfare if flood waters increased suddenly.

All residents in Ximolupuria had experienced flood waters entering their homes and were well-versed in strategies to limit the harms this posed to themselves and their possessions. These included using a *sang* (raised platform) inside the home to keep belongings dry and the erection of *sali* (temporary shelter) on nearby high ground, most commonly on an embankment. Usually made from several bamboo posts and tarpaulin, with an area inside for cooking, *sali* could be inhabited for anything from a few days to weeks at a time. Whilst some residents played down the impact of flooding due to its regularity saying "it happens every year" (*proti bosore hoi*), many residents described the concern (*sinta*) or fear (*bhoy*) they experienced when this occurred.

Pronounced changes in seasonal water flows gave rise to *tension*, *sinta* (concern) and sometimes *bhoy* (fear) as part of residents' efforts to simply keep things going during flood. However, these seasonal transformations in turn brought with them a shifting array of affordances for residents. In Ximolupuria, like most areas of Majuli, this allowed for a once yearly cultivation of the region staple rice in the fertile alluvial soil. It should be said that the number of households who cultivate in Ximolupuria has markedly declined in recent decades, which is due in large part to the erosion of village arable lands, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. Yet, for a not

insignificant number of residents, farming remains both a source of livelihood or occasional auxiliary income as well as being culturally important.

Whilst pumped groundwater irrigation infrastructure has grown through Majuli in recent decades, allowing for cultivation of water intensive crops in drier periods and thus twice or thrice annual harvests, few farmers in Ximolupuria have access to these forms of irrigation. In most instances, residents used the nutrient rich wetness of river and water bodies to irrigate their fields for paddy cultivation.[43] The low earthen barriers that mark out a patchwork of small plots not only distinguish ownership of land, but also channel rain and river water slowly from high to low ground, as well as subsequently maintaining individual plot water levels both to supress weeds and for optimum crop growth.

Particular soil and climatic conditions favour a heterogeneity of paddy types. *Xali* paddy (comprising transplant varieties) is suitable for the more central areas inside the embankments which retain water for long periods, whereas *ahu* and *bao* paddy types are sown broadcast (*ahu* is occasionally cultivated and allowed to germinate before sowing in the fields) in low-lying (or *da*) lands. Accompanying neighbours when planting the transplant variety of *xali* paddy at the beginning of the season *borxa* in early July 2017, I noted that the water level in the fields were assessed on a daily basis to decide when planting should take place. This followed the puddling, or tilling with a bullock and harrow, by male household members and relatives when sufficient water had entered a plot, and the subsequent "cleaning" of any surviving weeds. That year, heavy downpours delayed the planting. Each morning a short chat between householders and neighbours confirmed there was still "too much water" (*besi pani ase*) in the fields for planting to commence, which opened up the morning for other pursuits. This morning ritual continued for nearly ten days until the water level was decided to have subsided sufficiently and seedlings could be transferred from the nursery to the fields to be transplanted. Close attention was thus paid to ensuring there was neither too much nor too little water before paddy saplings were planted. Female householders and relatives then made quick work of dotting the watery mud of the plot at short intervals with small, brilliantly bright, green plants.

This activity took place following sufficient rains falling within the first part of *borxa*, as it should have, but not on a set date. Rather, people acted on their situated knowledge and observations to decide which day would be best for planting. Echoing Harris and Krause, an emphasis on seasonality rather than seasons, is to follow the actual monitored adjustments of

[43] Some residents also grow mustard as a *rabi* or winter crop in the same area and a smaller number of residents cultivate kitchen gardens, mostly on the nearby *chapori*.

people within their surroundings. The above example of planting paddy saplings may seem to make this point simply. However, as a starting and an orientation point, it reveals the web of highly contingent relations between people, weather and plants within which these activities are embedded.

Fishing too is a context-specific activity, where context expands to include seasonal conditions, aquatic environs and type of catch. In the oscillating periods of wetness and dryness, water bodies grow and retreat, new channels emerge and disappear again, and lowlands are completely submerged at intervals.

A plethora of net, trap, hook, filtering and dewatering fishing techniques is practised by this Kaibarta community, as well as by their Mising and, to a lesser extent, their non-tribal neighbours. After the end of the state fishing ban in late July 2017, I accompanied my neighbour Jyoti early one morning before he travelled to his work as a day labourer at the nearby *ghat*. Along with many other residents, Jyoti was not one to miss taking advantage of the opportunities that submerged grazing lands offered to catch newly accessible fish populations.[44] Like other fishers, he had filled the area with plastic fishing nets from the confines of his small boat. As we smoothly floated across what for most of the year comprised grasses dotted with small paths, Jyoti explained that the varieties and size of catches when checked after being left overnight depended on whether the nets happened to be fortuitously obscured by a low turbidity level as well as whether the fish, in turn, had followed the currents through the waiting nets and become snagged. That morning his catch was light as there was a "*rong"* or colour to the water, which had alerted the fish to the presence of the nets. The previous day. However. had been a good one. He had landed 86 of the more expensive *kuhi* fish, which would fetch a high price at market. As I came to understand, nets were arranged through trial-and-error, left in place or retrieved and deployed elsewhere based on what they had yielded, and on where the fisherman anticipated were the routes by which the fish would come and go. Several days later, the water retreated and with it so did the fish, leaving Jyoti his early mornings for other activities, or at the very least, extra sleep.

As we also saw with the transplanting of paddy, and earlier in the case of the *uzan,* these activities necessarily closely followed changing water levels. They occurred within *borxa* or

[44] Other fishing techniques that are used to take advantage of the appearance of seasonal water flows includes the visibly impressive *khora jal*. The net of a *khora jal* is held over the width of a narrow stream, or section of river bank, by two long poles of thick bamboo in a horizontal V-shape. Positioned on a pivot, sometimes several metres above the water, the net is immersed at intervals by the fisherman who stands at the rear and uses his weight to control the movement in a seesaw action. A *khora jal* once made, can be with relative ease dissembled and reassembled across locations.

monsoon, and, unsurprisingly, were characteristic for the season. The fields were irrigated and enriched and fish would have migrated along with the annual inundations from the main river channels and tributaries and, in turn, increased the inland populations.

As discussed, the actual timing of activity, whether with regard to planting or fishing, followed the situated observations of residents. In realising these affordances, it is not that people are simply responding to a melody of environmental rhythms. Rather, residents are acting as emplaced agents within their surroundings, using skilled practice to attune themselves to what is around them, and in turn orientating themselves towards greater abundance. These efforts can be exploratory, as residents attempt to coordinate their actions toward greater success to avoid failure and, as we saw more keenly within the fishing examples, they may be engaged in a spirit of spontaneity.

However, as I will now turn to discuss, the rhythms that residents both depend upon and are implicated within are being increasingly disrupted by environmental denudation and anthropogenic interventions within the riverscape. The work of Mauss, Beuchat and Harris has been helpful in establishing rhythm as an important guiding principle to structure ethnographic attention. However, the seasonal *arrhythmias* that residents are presently encountering invite different questions. A dwelling perspective (Ingold 2000:196-198) argues that people, in concert with each other and their surroundings, are able to attune themselves or find resonance, just as musicians do in the orchestra pit in order to play successfully. But what happens when the music suddenly changes mid-concert, introducing the unfamiliar as well as uncertainty? Can players again pick up the beat?

I will argue that an emphasis on seasonality is all the more significant in locations where expectations of seasonal variance, already pronounced and regularly comprising sudden movements such as rapid inundation and erosion, has become *changed* through time. These ever more complex entanglements between human and other-than-human actually further demonstrate both the porousness of these categories and the multiple scales they work across. With this in mind, I wish to suggest a reorientation, drawing upon a discussion at a recent graduate conference. Following Perry Maddox's (2021) thoughtful presentation on place-making, climate change and associated arrhythmia for cultivators in the Comarca Ngäbe-Buglé in rural Panama, the discussant, Anand Pandian, asked as an intellectual provocation, "How do we stay with these arrhythmias? How do we stay with the conceptual and, even, ethical challenge of attuning to these moments of temporal rupture?". In this spirit of holding our attention on how residents negotiate the flows to increasingly *arrhythmic* beats, I will now describe an

embankment breach and the subsequent inundation that occurred in Ximolupuria during my fieldwork.

2.3. Ruptures and arrhythmia

2.3.1. The breaking of our road

In August 2017 a group of residents stood together on a small road at the edge of their village of Ximolupuria. It was the wet season. As is typical in the region, the road also served as an earthen embankment.[45] It was raised from the surrounding area by between 1.5 and 2 metres, with steep slopes on either side, and had a flat top of around 3 metres across. This embankment ran roughly parallel with the Brahmaputra River, which at that time had swelled. The water level had also further increased due to heavy rainfall in the Himalayan foothills and plains upstream over the previous 24 hours. River water had in fact now submerged the nearby *ghat*, adjacent trees and vegetation along the bank and, nearer to home, had over the course of the last day quickly inched up the outer edge of the embankment.

There was an air of both excitement and agitation amongst the gathered residents. Those assembled on this overcast monsoon morning stood in two groups set slightly apart from each other. In the space left between them, it appeared as if a neatly cut segment, of around 0.5 metres^3 of earthy materials had been removed. Peering in, one could see dull brown river water swiftly cascading down into this recent gash in the embankment, disappearing into the mound, before then gushing out into the “inner-side” and onto a dry grazing field that quickly backed onto more than a dozen homes on this side of the village. This “inner-side” was all low-lying land that stood in many places at more than a metre beneath the present water level. The small indent had appeared on the “outer-side” of what was serving as a barrier against the rising river waters and so preventing this area of the village and surrounding lands from inundation. If taken as a snap-shot, the fissure in the embankment could almost resemble a sluice gate, controlling the flow of water from one area into the other. However, this was a breach, and it was the reason the crowd had gathered that morning.

“Oi, cross it. Oi, cross it!” shouted a teenage boy. “Oi, jump over and cross it!”, his friend called excitedly from their side to those who stood a few metres away, just beyond where the relentless flow of water continued to burrow into the embankment. Amidst much laughter and

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[45] The twin role they play is reflected by residents referring to them as both roads (*ali*, *rasta*, etc.) as well as embankments (*mothauri*, *bandh*, etc.), depending on context.

these encouragements to perform dares between the boys present, the young headteacher of the village government school walked nearer, to what was still a small breach in the embankment, and threw a branch from a banana tree into the hole. The branch immediately seemed flimsy and weak once hitting the water, taking barely a moment to swirl into the dark passage under the force of the water.

“That side has collapsed”, a young man said pointing to the inner-side where water continued to gush out onto the field from the base of the embankment. Another resident beside him followed the man’s finger, and after a few moments clocked where his attention was being directed, adding exclamation to the previous comment, “bah, this side is collapsed!”. Just then, along with the sound of a rush of water, a torrent burst forth. The pressure of the water as it discharged itself onto the flat surface of the field formed a small crested wave that arced back towards the embankment. Acknowledging an escalation, a resident raised his voice to carry above the general conversation to suggest everyone find themselves on the correct side of the breach and nearer to their homes. The excited laughter continued unabated, if not intensified, by the growing proportions of the breach. Pulou, who was sitting class 10 and in the year of his matriculation exam, was again beckoned to cross over, despite standing with his mother and father near to his home and decidedly on the right side of the breach. “Oi Pulou, come over!”, the other boys jovially urged him. Pulou’s uncle, a teacher in a lower-primary school close to the nearby market town, thwarted the fun to be had with a quiet but assertive instruction to stay put (*nahibi lora*), his tone revealing concern at the risk of crossing the section of embankment as it was being hollowed out from below.

A few more moments passed, as residents gazed on or joked amongst themselves, before the top section of embankment above the breach suddenly collapsed in on itself (see Fig. 2.1.). Unobscured by the now fallen embankment, the flow of water a metre in width continued unwaveringly, pulling at the now exposed roots that streamed out from the rippled walls of earth on either side of the breached embankment. The water burrowed ferociously into the embankment in both depth and width. Residents who stood nearer to the edge traced out with pointed fingers cracks as they appeared within seconds in the top of the earthen embankment. They exclaimed repeatedly “this part is going!”, before those sections of soil fell into the gushing water moments later, rapaciously expanding the size of the breach. Several residents insisted that those near the front stay back from the edge, concerned that the earth might without warning give way underneath them.

Fig. 2.1. A few moments after the top of the embankment caves in on itself (source: Papu).

Everything so far described occurred in under three minutes. Within the next several minutes, the breach grew to in excess of five metres, precipitating a dramatic increase in the flow rate of water into “inside” the embankment (see Fig. 2.2.). Within twenty minutes, this side of the village, including many of the two dozen homes that back onto this grazing area, were flooded.

Fig. 2.2. Residents look on and take photographs as the breach expands and the inner grazing lands, and this side of the village, is rapidly flooded (source: Papu).

For the majority of my fieldwork I lived in the village of Ximolupuria, including for the period during which these events took place. However I was not present in Majuli on that day, so I first observed this scene not in person but from the screen of my smartphone. The creator of the video, Papu, had phoned me a short time later that day to tell me that the embankment had breached and parts of the village had flooded. Shortly afterwards he forwarded to me the video he had recorded via the messaging platform WhatsApp. The video lasted 2 minutes and 43 seconds and formed the basis for the written interpretation of events offered above.

The short length of the video, if anything, emphasises the rapid speed at which flooding occurs when embankments breach, and why such events are potentially so dangerous. However, employing video as an object of research of course has greater implications than simply as another means of becoming privy to events at which the researcher was not present. I take for granted that such a reductive positivist position remains problematic. As Otto et al have written, "[c]ritical photographic or filmic analysis starts at the very moment a camera is brought into the

field or existing images are engaged. The framings, distances and interactions between cameras, researchers and filmed subjects *inscribe analytical perspectives* into photographs and film footage, whether we are conscious of this or not" (2018:308, my emphasis). The view from the camera lens does not constitute a view from nowhere or a passive form of description.

Video as a document, whilst not allowing a direct or unproblematic return to the event, can nonetheless allow important spaces for discussion and reflexivity regarding its contents. Douglas Harper in his article on photo elicitation argues convincingly how the process of ethnographer and participant talking together through research-relevant images shows, "how photographs can jolt subjects into a new awareness of their social existence" (2002:21). This can offer a means to elicit greater reflexivity on aspects of daily social life that may well be taken-for-granted for by participants, but that are nonetheless unclear or obscure for the researcher. As Harper catalogues and discusses, elicitation studies draw on a variety of media types, including video, and may use images created by the researcher and/or participant(s) as well as those created prior to the research project, such as in the case of photo archives.

Whilst not planned in advance as an object of research, Papu had his own reasons and intentions for dissemination of the video, as we will come to shortly. For myself, I found the video and subsequent discussion with the creator regarding its content and motivations - in line with methodological approaches to photo elicitation mentioned above - instructive in unravelling greater nuance within residents' perceptions of flooding. As Otto et al also have advocated, "[a]udiovisual media may extend the moment of analysis and transform it into an experimental zone for both transcultural imagination and dialogue" (2018:308).

Two weeks after the flood, I stood with Papu looking at the ugly gash left in the side of the embankment and village road (see Fig. 2.3.). The majority of the water had since receded. Water hyacinths clogged some of the inundated land, motionless now with the absence of current, and floated alongside recently submerged vegetation and trees. In contrast to the events depicted in the video, this scene was one of stillness.

After I had returned to Majuli following the flood, I had asked Papu if we could visit the site of the breached embankment together. I had hoped that standing beside the breach and discussing what had happened on that and subsequent days might help trigger further insights and breathe new life into these events, especially given my absence. Standing there beside his motorbike shortly after breakfast, with a few minutes remaining before he would need to travel to his school to begin class, Papu told me that he had come to check on the road that day after he had seen that a crowd had gathered. On arriving at the scene, residents pointed out to him how

water had risen up through the ground in sections of the then dry grazing field inside of the embankment. He had never seen this happen in this location before. After a few minutes, the river water broke through the embankment as described above and, 20 minutes later, this side of the village was flooded. Standing there together that morning, however, not much more was forthcoming from Papu. Perhaps, his upcoming teaching duties for the day were more pressing for him in that moment.

Fig. 2.3. Breached embankment two weeks after the event, with flood water receded (source: author).

Yet, it was speaking with Papu later about the video he had created that broke through onto new ground for my own understanding. The increasing proliferation of cell phone and, more significantly, smartphone ownership in India (the latter more easily allowing sharing of image and video content) is evident both in Assam as well as in predominantly rural Majuli (as I will discuss in Chapter 4). Many user-generated images and videos now existed and circulated on social media and messaging platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, of flooded homes, major breaches in embankments/key roads as well as the erosion of riverine areas in Majuli and nearby

districts. The most viewed or shared content included the more acute examples, i.e. greater tracks of land being eroded, faster more dangerous currents and higher water levels. Following this latest wave of flooding in August 2017, on asking I found that many Ximolupuria residents who owned smartphones possessed saved images and videos of their own breached embankment, as well as flood/erosion events from other locations. On asking Papu what motivated him to create this video in the moment, he explained:

> I captured the scene of our road collapsing because that was a special moment for us (*amar ali tu sigi jaute moi video korisilu karon alitu sigi jua muhurtta tu ata bikhekh muhurto*. I captured the video because I wanted to keep the whole scene as a memory (*ismiti*) of how our very own road was broken by the water. And, for some others who have not seen how our road disappeared who will then be able to also see the video and know the whole incident. For this reason, I also made the video.

Flood may come every year, but the breach of the embankment was a “special moment” (*bikhekh muhurto*). Whilst the vast majority of residents, excepting several women who would have married into the village from less flood affected areas, had grown up with the twin phenomena of flooding and erosion, many residents, as we can see in Fig. 2.2., held smart phones at the ready and positioned themselves that day to capture an event that was notably beyond the ordinary. In short, this was worthy of archiving. In addition to its role as a document of “memory” (*ismiti*), I was curious as to who were the others to whom Papu wanted to show the video. He told me, “I had thought I would show it to you and also to some of my friends who live in town. I thought I would show it to them, to those who have not seen erosion like this”. As well as an aide to memory, Papu also anticipated that it would serve as a pedagogical tool that would afford insights to those who were not present and not as personally vulnerable to the adverse effects of flooding and erosion. This included his friends who lived in or near the more secure inland areas around “town”, as well as to myself as a foreign researcher.

Another resident, Ananda, who was away in Guwahati that day, had received a separate video of the breach via his smart phone. Including a message of his own, he then forwarded this “news and a video” (*khobor aru visual*) of the breached embankment directly to the Majuli Deputy Commissioner (DC).[46] Ananda, who often acted as an advocate for his village and caste

[46] The DC is the executive head and most senior civil servant in the district.

group in Majuli with the local administration, was on good personal terms with the DC.[47] He explained, “I informed the DC so that they would become aware of the request for taking the necessary measures. I had thought that essential activities, including rescuing the people that were affected, relief distribution, erosion protection, etcetera, would then be done”. Sending this video to the DC and alerting him to this news (*khobor*) was done with the intention of making him aware of the plight of residents and attentive to their new needs as a consequence. The latter included both a call for immediate rescue efforts and flood relief, as a result of many families being temporarily displaced onto a nearby larger embankment, as well as the subsequent repairs that would be necessary for the road/embankment once the flood waters had receded again.[48] The video here served as a new tool for political advocacy for one’s village and flood affected populations. Like Papu, he thought it would elicit better understanding in those less affected and, Ananda hoped, action.

However, just as significant were the many other residents who, when I asked whether they had captured images of the most recent wave of flooding, answered in the negative. Replies often included a simple “no”, but also on occasion a quizzical counter-response of, “why? It happens every year” (*kiyo? Proti bosore hoi*). I soon realised that these residents were not talking about the embankment breach or destructive events like it, but rather the arrival of flood waters more generally. The latter type of response invoked the seasonal regularity of flooding - the fact that it happened every year, to greater or lesser extents, and thus grounded in both an accumulation of recurrent past experiences and expectations of anticipated future ones - as a reason that meant there was no need for archiving. It was simply too uneventful.

Rather than undermining the noteworthy advent of the embankment breach, the disinterest of some residents in recording the arrival of flood instead points to the present dual nature of floods in rural areas. On the one hand, the disruption of flood events related to an embankment breach and destruction of infrastructure was always a *spectacle* to be

[47] Ananda had on occasion spoken to me of his strong motivation to do “self-service” for SC (or Schedule Caste) communities in Majuli. His good relationship with the DC and the latter’s leadership style had led him to sometimes act as a de facto intermediary for Kaibarta communities in Majuli, along with other individuals. An example of this included him stepping in as a mediator between the district administration and a Kaibarta village on one occasion in 2017 when flood relief, namely essential food stuffs, had been delayed in reaching a flood effected village. The essential rations had been held up in the main storage warehouses on the south bank of the river, much to the anger of residents.

[48] “Flood relief” generally refers to the distribution of essential food stuffs to households who have been temporarily displaced due to flooding. Rations often include packages of rice, lentils, cooking oil and salt, although they may also include other items, such as bedding, clothing and school materials that are given as part of private relief drives. Relief items are distributed by the district administration as well as private organisations/networks, although all efforts are required to be coordinated by the former.

photographed, circulated and perhaps serve as a reference point of a “special moment” to be remembered or rallying point to call for change. On the other hand was the often slow-arriving irrigation of paddy fields by river water, which was vital for a successful harvest (indeed welcomed by cultivators), but nonetheless largely uninteresting and thus unworthy of the archive.

In the next section, I will discuss how historic (and proposed) interventions on the river, namely so-called flood and erosion protection works and hydroelectric dam projects, have led to drastic alterations in the flows that comprise seasonal rhythms and events such as the one described above. Whilst it is not a new observation that floods possess the dual qualities of being required for agricultural prosperity *and* being capable of causing great destruction, we shall see how these altered rhythms render residents more vulnerable to profound disruption and harm with increasing frequency. Flood continues to be life-giving, but what residents have learnt to expect from their rivers has changed and abhorrent eventualities of flood (and the creation and dissemination of related videos) will surely only increase. These are stories not only of rhythm, but also of rupture and arrhythmia.

2.3.2. Interventions, ruptures and arrhythmia

The 2017 floods in Assam took a particularly severe toll. On August 12th 2017 and two days after the flood event described above, the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) reported that over a million people were affected across the state by this wave of flooding, including 51,031 people in Majuli out of a population of approximately 170,000 (ASDMA 2017). Two hundred and sixty-eight relief camps had been established state-wide that sheltered 63,797 people. Over 100,000 hectares of crop area was inundated and hundreds of thousands of livestock and poultry animals were considered adversely affected (ASDMA 2017). Alongside 33,816kg of rice grain, 5,989kg of pulses and 1,198kg of salt, 460 tarpaulins were distributed to residents within Majuli district (ASDMA 2017). The specificity of these data on distribution of essential food rations and materials for the most basic form of shelter can only emphasise the acute vulnerability of a large number of people, whether in Majuli or throughout the Valley. These figures account for the immediate wake of this wave of flooding *only* and not the cumulative total for all inundations that year, which was significantly higher. Many media outlets ran features stating that for some parts of the region, including many parts of Assam, this was the worst flooding in decades (Kalita & Mitra 2017; Ratcliffe 2017).

The scale of the floods in August 2017, both in area and magnitude, was rooted in the prolonged acute downpours that occurred through Northeast India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Northern India (Peirce & Gutro 2017). Multiple sites along the main course of the Brahmaputra and many of its tributaries saw dangerously high water levels during this period (South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People 2017).

However, the severity of the deluge and harm caused to residents needs to be understood, as Debojyoti Das has unearthed, as being, "aggravated by more than 50 years of state intervention" (2014:172). Das (2014) in his article on Majuli and flood-control measures in the Brahmaputra River Basin from 1940-2000, describes how the rise of the riverbed following the 1950 earthquake culminated in the severe floods of the 1954-55 monsoon season, which, "rang alarm bells for the state government and generated calls for urgent measures to be taken in order to tackle the emerging crisis posed by flood" (2014:173). As many lands that were not previously flood-prone became some of the most severely affected, important trade and administrative hubs established by the British in Upper Assam in the 19th century were recognised by the newly independent state government to be suddenly threatened. Embankments were built on the south bank to protect these towns and the lucrative interests in tea and oil that they still host today. These flood mitigation measures meant that, "the flow of the river was squeezed with linear embankment structures that became vulnerable to breaches from hydraulic pressure and peak discharge during monsoons" (2014:169).

As Das is keen to make clear, the 1950 Assam earthquake thus marked a watershed moment for state policy on flood mitigation. From the late 1950s onwards, structural interventions - namely construction of embankments and a river training programme - as devised by experts with techno-managerial knowledge in hydrology, geology and engineering were pursued by successive state governments. As an approach, this was in keeping with the era of big dams and the Nehruvian development paradigm of the day (Goswami 2004:3). Such interventions restricted and accelerated the flow of the river, which in turn exacerbated riverbank erosion in adjoining areas not already embanked. Majuli was one of the "first victims" of embankment construction, when a section was built to protect the town and regional hub of Jorhat located on the opposing bank in the early 1960s (Das 2014:178). Majuli has, in the last several decades, seen the construction of its own anti-erosion measures, including embankments, spurs and dykes. As I discuss in Chapter 3, residents commonly complained that these have been haphazardly planned and implemented and have not proved efficacious in preventing erosion.

For some time, there have been loud voices within civil society organisations in the state that embankments, as a policy intervention for control flooding, are often counterproductive (Sharma 2017:96). As the environmental historian Rohan D'Souza (2006) has argued, these interventions are premised on a troubling separation between land and water. D'Souza, in his vital study of the hydraulic history and legacy of colonial strategies of "flood control" in the Orissa Delta in Eastern India, has argued that this was principally a political project and, besides anchoring the colonial administration's presence in the area, sought to reconfigure human-environment relations according to the interests of capitalist accumulation. The delta's seasonally varying geomorphology became required by 19th century colonial administrators to fit agendas prioritizing private property and rhythms of revenue collection, which were premised on ill-accommodating categories of static land and fluctuating river. The consequence was that, "[c]olonial capitalism, in order to institute and affirm itself as a specific social form, deployed a set of hydraulic interventions that transformed the Orissa Delta from being a flood-dependent agrarian regime into a flood-vulnerable landscape" (2006:222-223). As Das reflects, it is therefore a recent phenomenon that flooding is perceived as calamitous rather than as an assurance of prosperity (2014:169).

Similar interventions continue to fragment the river system, entailing profound implications for local ecologies, fishing and agricultural practices/prosperity and for the lives of residents who dwell beside the river. As acutely excavated by Das, the building of roads and embankments across Majuli in recent decades has checked the free flow of water both into and out of many areas (2014:180). The altering and/or blocking of the river's flow has led to the depletion of already vulnerable ecological habitats in Majuli, namely wetland areas. The impediments posed to the free flowing of water was one reason given by many residents and fishers over the course my fieldwork when explaining how fish populations had slowly reduced over time. Others also mentioned overfishing and pointed a finger at those who fished during spawning. However, Das has urged caution in an uncritical acceptance of depleting fish stocks being due to growing demand for fish in Majuli; he argues this would ignore the, "deeper ecological stresses that are responsible for the loss of aquatic resources" (2014:180). Much agricultural land was also being blocked from receiving new layers of fertile alluvium previously brought in abundance with unchecked flood waters; this was leading to decreasing soil fertility. The residents who possessed arable land, as featured earlier, were afforded a summer crop by the slow arriving nutrient rich water arriving with monsoon. However, if taken alone this example obscures the increasingly precarious position of farmers. It also needs to be contextualised amidst the interventions described. Also, many families in Ximolupuria no longer had land to cultivate,

due largely to historic erosion of arable land, which, as I discuss in Chapter 3, has had a significant impact upon livelihood trajectories and has resulted in reduced agricultural prosperity.

In addition to their impact on livelihoods and local ecologies, Das is keen to stress that these interventions on the river have only increased the risks posed to islanders and undermined traditional methods and knowledges to work with floods (2014:172). The majority of Majuli's lands, its population and its administrative and commercial centres are located within the interior of the embankments, which run along the Subansiri River to the north and Brahmaputra to the south. For those residents who live on the "outer" side of these structural interventions, as Mitul Baruah put it succinctly, "the embankments have produced a condition of *permanent flooding* (2016:55, original emphasis). As flood waters have fewer ways now of "entering" Majuli, these residents must endure longer and more acute floods. This leaves their agricultural lands submerged for a greater part of the year and precipitates families and their animals being forced to relocate to the embankment for long periods during monsoon season.

Embankments may have limited the regularity of flood damages within the interior areas, but their being prone to sudden breaches has increased the destruction of flooding when it does occur. Training the river through embankment construction has meant that during monsoon narrower and higher water courses place extreme pressure upon riverbanks or any riverine interventions, which frequently leads to breaching. According to the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), at least 220 embankments were either damaged or breached during 2020 and this comprised a major factor for many of those adversely affected by the waves of flooding that year (Karmakar 2020). Embankment breaches result in the rapid inundation of lands as described, which constitutes a far greater threat to life and property than floods that are slow-arriving. Sudden and fast flowing flood water often destroys standing crops and results in the spraying of sand and sediment over agricultural fields. This affects land fertility for years to come, as residents told me and as has been well established by geographers, such as Das and Baruah, as well as development economists (Goyari 2005:2725).

Intersecting the interventions that embankments have made within the riverine environment are the new rhythms imposed by increasing amounts of hydroelectric dam infrastructure upstream. In a previous wave of flooding to the one described earlier in this chapter, the sudden release of water on 11th July 2017 by the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited's (NEEPCO) Ranganadi Dam upstream in Arunachal Pradesh, rapidly inundated large areas of adjacent Lakhimpur and Majuli districts. This led to loss of life, displacement of tens of thousands of people and their animals, washing away of homes as well as the destruction of key transport and flood defence infrastructure (Akhtar 2017; see Fig. 2.4.). The

release of water by the Ranganadi Dam proved particularly devastating due to it reportedly exceeding maximum safe limits, coupled with an already swollen Brahmaputra and the absence of warning given to the relevant district authorities (Dowerah 2017). As Majuli's Deputy Commissioner Pallav Gopal Jha later commented, "[t]he water level increased suddenly due to *man-made* reasons. This particular flood could have been better managed if we had more time to respond. But we were caught unawares" (Dowerah 2017, my emphasis).

Fig 2.4. Stretch of embankment at Selek, Majuli, that was destroyed following release of water by the Ranganadi Dam, subsequently inundating many villages on the interior side. A large group of people stand gathered on the far side. July 2017.

The following day, I sat and had tea with the eldest brother Raju at the family house where I was hosted during fieldwork. Raju offered the same assessment as the Deputy Commissioner, that this flood was mostly as a result of the NEEPCO administered dam. He used similar language describing this flood as "man-made" and "artificial", which differed from the typical floods he had grown up with in Majuli. "This flood lasted only for one day", Raju told me, "whereas with natural flooding the water arrives more slowly and stays for longer, from 3 days to perhaps a week or even longer. There was a big flood in 2008. The water was 4 feet deep inside

our home and we stayed on the upper level of our *bhoral* (granary) for maybe a week. [During the flood of] 2012, we moved up onto the *mothauri* (embankment) and built a *sali*. We stayed there for several days or a week. Some families, whose houses are outside of the embankment, had to stay there for between 15 and 20 days". Once the water had arrived, whether in 2008, 2012 or 2017, the same techniques for living through the flood of moving to high ground on the embankment and building a *sali* (temporary shelter) remained unchanged. However, the fast and potentially unforeseen arrival of flood waters when dams release unlawfully large quantities of water unannounced, greatly reduces the time that residents have to plan and respond to these events safely and to protect their animals and belongings. Whilst I did not hear other residents use the English words "artificial"/"man-made" and "natural" as Raju did to distinguish between these types of flooding, these categories nonetheless did capture how residents were increasingly encountering a *changed* flooding in recent years. The repercussions of this not only formed common topics of conversation during flood season, but also initiated popular movements by student organisations in the state for the Ranganadi Dam to be decommissioned for the risks posed to downstream residents (Kumar Singh 2017). Even though these dam-induced floods were likely to coincide in and around heavy rains (when dam capacities were close to their limit and water levels in the river course already being high), they nonetheless were also heavily influenced by the actions of dam employees who were pursuing agendas of maximising electricity generation. The (lack of) signs that precede them, the timings and effects of dam-induced flooding, similarly to embankment breaches, stand them in marked contrast to a "natural" or typical flood that follow rhythms that residents are more familiar with and so better placed to live with. However, addressing this is not simply a question of residents becoming more familiar with the new rhythms of flood posed by big dams, because these events (by arriving quickly and without warning) are by nature *arrhythmic*. Acknowledging this recognises them as causing both figurative ruptures with knowledges of what to expect from floods, as well as literal ones in the landscape as they burst through embankments, entailing ever greater harms to residents of riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley.

2.4 Conclusion

Seasonal rhythms bring expectations of favourable and unfavourable things. Through paying intimate attention within their surroundings, Ximolupuria residents were able to orientate themselves towards the transient affordances, and occasional bounty, produced through both sudden and slower changes in water levels. The temporary displacements and restricted

mobilities that characterised the time of flood, however, left many to simply carry on as best as they were able, employing available techniques to limit some of the harms as well as simply bearing the hardships. In recent years, drastic alterations to the flows that make up water courses in the Brahmaputra Valley and increasing amounts of anthropogenic interventions on the river have led to residents encountering a *changed* flooding. This brings concerning implications regarding what residents can now come reasonably to expect from their rivers and annual floods. An analytical concern with seasonality on the banks of the Brahmaputra, more than simply offering a “mixed bag” of good and bad outcomes that accompany the rainy season, allows us to consider how residents must navigate a flooding that is distinguishable for its increasingly abhorrent and spectacular effects, which stands in marked contrast to an uneventful filling of agricultural fields with river water. We see that establishing rhythm as a guiding principle to structure ethnographic attention in turn reveals rupture and arrhythmia as now integral to seasonal water flows in the region.

Chapter 3: Erosion and aspiration: land, livelihoods and concrete house building

3.1 Introduction

It is not uncommon to meet individuals born and raised in rural areas of the Brahmaputra Valley whose birth places and ancestral villages now only exist in memory, these lands having disappeared into the constantly morphing and increasing width of the river. Whilst some villages may relocate to new locations (taking their place names, people and belongings with them), others do not. There are likely many reasons for the latter outcome that differ with each case, but alongside interplays of individual and collective inclinations as well as access to resources, the often slow creeping nature of this phenomenon is certainly significant.

Amidst the ever-more common arhythmic beats in the river's ebb and flow as discussed in Chapter 2, soil erosion of village and agrarian lands in riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley is of great concern. Whilst erosion is inextricably tied up within the same dynamic flows and processes of the riverine environment, as is flooding, the mark it holds upon the landscape and the markers for memory and the imagination of residents point towards distinct ramifications. The legacies and spectre of erosion of these lands, as outcome and potential of dwelling along this protean river (and attempts to harness its energy and control its excesses), loom large over the riverscape. Whilst floods may prove sometimes highly destructive, they remain life-giving and fundamental to improving and irrigating agricultural lands. The latter point cannot be said to be true of erosion, which is seen to take far in excess of what it gives. Each year, thousands of families become landless as a result of riverbank erosion and absence of state rehabilitation measures.

Apace with repeated household relocations for Ximolupuria residents, riverbank erosion has over the years also washed away much, if not all, of many residents' agricultural lands. Amidst diminishing avenues of agricultural prosperity, this chapter takes as its focus how shifting ground underfoot has come to shape aspiration through time. I make this argument through a discussion of livelihood transformations, as well as construction of new concrete residential housing. There are several reasons for holding work and dwelling together in an exploration of aspiration. More than identifying which futures in each of these domains were considered as desirable and symbols of familial upliftment, is how they need be understood as emerging through histories of displacement. This is not simply to emphasise the jeopardy erosion may pose to these prized structures, or the greater emotional resonance they hold as symbols of permanence within an

environment ever on the move. It is also to note that these dwellings (which point to better lives and augmented comfort) and the types of livelihood capacities that allow particular households to materialise these structures and not others, are mutually implicated. Concrete, as an aspirational material (McDuie-Ra 2018), thus marks important divergences in the making of landscape *and* reflects, if not directly generates, increasing disparities between residents through legacies of loss of lands and prior rural abundance.

I begin this chapter with a description of my host family during fieldwork initiating construction of their own concrete house (*poka ghor*). I highlight how it was prized not only for offering augmented comfort, but also for the permeance it was perceived to embody for the family as well as future generations. By putting these qualities of comfort and permanence into conversation with existing social scientific scholarship on concrete, I describe how concrete's twinned material and affective aspects make it so appealing as a building material to actualise better lives (Harvey 2010). This focus also highlights how the steady concrete pour through the region holds important consequences for the reproduction of environmental assemblages in Northeast India.

Following this, I engage with the present potentialities of riverbank erosion in Majuli and the pervasive uncertainty amongst residents surrounding the efficacy of state-led measures to secure lands. This leads into an extended focus on two residents through interviews (and walking together) examining their experiences of displacement and relocation, memories of prior rural abundance and hopes they hold for their respective children. The accounts of two middle-aged men cannot reflect the multiplicity of aspirational horizons that no doubt exist. Rather, my aim is that the similarities and differences that emerge through these conversations afford nuance in understanding how land, livelihood and aspiration are each implicated within the other as they unfold through time. In returning to concrete household construction at the end of the chapter, I not only conclude that these structures mark significant contemporary divergences in the makings of landscape, but I also advocate for the importance of keeping alive the tensions that run through these objects and trajectories. Rather than attempt resolution, which would soften the power of resident accounts, I advise instead holding together nostalgia for lost agricultural abundance and an optimism that enlivens orientations to new aspirational livelihood pathways and augmented comfort.

3.2. Construction of a new house

Fig. 3.1. Belongings outside old house, as labourers began the demolition.

The building of the new house began in mid-February 2018, although my host family had been mulling this over for some time. The new house was to be a *poka ghor* or "concrete house" and thereby composed of entirely industrial building materials. (I will elaborate on this term and that of other housing types shortly). When my roommate Dhruba first made mention of the plans in conversations with me a week prior to construction commencing, he and the family were still undecided whether to go ahead with the construction that year. There were many factors that needed to be considered.

One reason not to build was that it was already late in the season to begin, with the rainy season not far away. As Dhruba told me, the best time to commence building work were the dry months of January and February. By the time they would commence, it would already be nearly March. An immediate neighbour had begun their construction of a new *poka ghor* in earnest a week previously to this conversation, which appeared in equal measure to both encourage and give Dhruba pause on the timing of any potential venture. Dhruba deliberated these points

alongside his plans to marry in the near future. Ideally, his marriage would follow the completion of the *poka ghor* into which he and his family could bring his new bride. To delay until after the rains would put his wedding even further back.

There were also other pressing concerns which made a prompt construction desirable. The construction of the old house had been led by Dhruba and his brother Raju's late father 30 years previously. As a "half-wall" house, the lower section of wall was made of brick with a remaining upper section made from bamboo mesh plastered with a composite of mud and cow dung (see fig. 3.1.).[49][50] Whilst some sections of the old house were in good repair, other parts including one family bedroom were deteriorating due to age and weathering. Financial, meteorological, conjugal and likely momentary propensity to engage in an exciting, yet daunting and energy intensive undertaking were issues that intersected over several weeks of deliberations. Finally, following a consultation with a *pandit* in the nearby *satra,* it was determined with reference to his almanac that the next *punima* (full moon) between the hours of 10.36am and 12.36pm would mark an auspicious time to erect the front eastern post and for construction work to begin (see fig. 3.2.).

Dhruba's job as a teacher in a local government primary school allowed him ready access to bank loans for such purposes as meeting the costs of building a new home. It was a prized perk that came with such positions. The loan would subsequently be debited directly from his salary and repaid over the course of 5 years. Despite letting out a deep sigh when contemplating the level of interest on the loan he would need to repay, he remarked that the costs of building materials were only but increasing and, besides, it would take him several years to save up this sum on his own and this would negate any potential saving. He emphasised this by pointing to recent cost increases of most, if not all, essential building materials, including bricks, cement, sand and steel rods.

Of this loan, the vast majority was to be spent on materials. Over time I saw that Dhruba was savvy in his pursuit of acquiring costly materials at lower prices, whether by sourcing alternative sellers or buying in bulk from larger suppliers in adjacent districts. The absence of any truly urban spaces in Majuli, as well as its lack of smooth accessibility to larger market centres of neighbouring districts, meant costs for basic materials were higher and came at an added premium when sourced locally, despite executive orders of the District Commissioner that fixed

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[49] The latter composite building method that can involve grasses or wood, earth as well as animal dung and hair has often been referred to as wattle and daub within a European context.

[50] The rear adjoining section of the house was built only several years previously. The walls in this section were made entirely of brick and were to be rendered in cement at a future date that was convenient for the family, financially or otherwise. This back section was to remain as it was and would come to form part of the to-be-built new house.

certain prices. Much of the deconstruction process of the old house was executed with particular care in order to prevent the damage of materials that could be later repurposed. This also included the "pushing out" of the lower sections of brick walls with minimum force and, where possible, lowering them to the ground with care to prevent brick breakage. Many labourers' work hours were subsequently spent in the laborious "cleaning" of these old bricks, including days on end of sitting hunched over, chipping off bits of cement, sometimes to the sounds of a mobile phone playing Hindi pop songs or All India Radio broadcasts aired from the nearest regional centre of Jorhat. These bricks were sought after not only as a cost-saving measure, but also because they were considered stronger than the flaky sandy bricks newly purchased from the nearby brickworks, which the lead builder judged to be of poor quality. This sentiment was succinctly captured by those on site with the English maxim, "old is gold".

Figure 3.2. Centre ground, a *Deori* or officer of the village *namghor* (prayer hall), or one who distributes *prasad*, ceremoniously pours the first trowel of cement into the base of what will become a reinforced concrete post on the auspicious front eastern side, which is also the direction of prayer. The *deori* (otherwise referred to as *biloniya*) had just led the family and close kin and neighbours in a *naam* (sung prayer) before blessing (*ahirbaad*) the start of construction.

The second largest expenditure was labour. Several close male kin assisted without financial reimbursement during the initial few days of building work and also periodically helped throughout the construction process, at points when many hands were needed for specific tasks such as filling in the foundation with earth. However, the vast majority of construction work was completed by waged labour. Like the cost of materials, the cost of labour had also increased from the previous year, which saw the day rate for a lead builder increase by a sixth and for a labourer by a quarter. Often consulting his handwritten calculations that he carried folded in his wallet, which frequently altered depending on how long it took for deliveries of primary materials to become exhausted (all too often quicker than hoped), Dhruba conceded even before the building process properly began that his budget, squeezed between the two main expenditures of materials and labour, would not provide much wiggle room.

Yet, acknowledging these concerns and moments of "tension" that occurred at points throughout construction, there was nonetheless a feeling of excitement and anticipation in the household once the decision had been made, and this lasted well into the construction period. Sitting for lunch one day shortly after the *pandit* had been consulted and with an imminent date now fixed for work to commence, Dhruba's future marriage was discussed with, it seemed to me, a renewed and excitable urgency. "When the house is finished and it's all okay, then our son will bring the girl" *maa* had commented, beaming.

The first night Dhruba and I stayed in the *sali* (temporary accommodation that would house us for the duration of construction), and on the day of moving out of the old house was also imbued with a wave of exhilaration that would continue to ebb and flow throughout the build (see fig. 3.3.).[51] It so happened that the rest of the family were accommodated at the opposite side of the construction site. Dhruba and I talked long into the night, watching music videos on Dhruba's smart phone and revelled in a new found greater detachment from the main household, which afforded us this opportunity. This atmosphere of vacation lingered throughout our stay in the s*ali*.

[51]As mentioned in the previous chapter, *sali* are also built as temporary refuges on high-ground for families and their valuable and/or essential belongings during the time of flood when sufficient water enters a household to make it temporarily uninhabitable. In contrast to a *sali* that is built to shelter a family for several days or, in particularly severe inundations, for potentially weeks during high flood, the one built in the family courtyard, built for a longer duration and with greater resources easier to hand, was of a sturdier and more comfortable design.

Fig. 3.3. The *sali* or temporary accommodation during the building of the family's new house. The outer walls of the *sali* came to be made mostly from sections of the old roof sheets as well as from tarpaulin the household already possessed. The latter included a banner that Raju had had printed when he was secretary of the Majuli District committee of the Assam Schedule Caste Youth-Student Association (*Oxom Anuxusit Jati Juwo-Sattro Xontha*). The banner included a demand that land *patta* be given to the many residents who were landless or who did not possess the legal deeds for their lands. Both Assamese and English taglines, albeit within different guises, brought into sharp focus the conditions of insecurity endured by many residents and the perceived existential hazards posed by the land under foot that refused to stay still.

Several weeks into this sojourn, Dhruba returned on his motorbike one evening from Garamur to find me writing fieldnotes at our table in the *sali*. He had gone to watch a drama staged by a mobile theatre group (*bhramyoman natok*), a form that still draws large crowds; this troupe was one of several that pitched up in Majuli that year and that travel the state in the drier months. Sitting down on his bed, still wearing his jacket that continued to radiate the cold of the February night, we discussed the progress of the construction plans and the continuing evolutions of the budget. Dhruba reiterated that this phase of building work would not include rendering the brick walls in cement, nor painting the house, which were tasks not factored into the present

budget/loan and would be completed at a later date that was, again financially or otherwise, convenient for the family. Similarly, steel rods would be left protruding at strategic sections of the new house construction as affordances for new rooms that could be added at a later date, as young family members grew older or with new ones being added. The new house, even subsequent to this construction stage finishing, contained an open-endedness and signalled towards potentialities of both enhancement and enlargement.

Dhruba then pushed aside these practical matters, of construction timelines and budgetary concerns, that occupied his thoughts and reflected instead more generally on what life would be like post-build, telling me, “this house will be for life. Afterwards [when it is completed and paid for], only enjoyment and roaming”. The new house was therefore imbued with a strong sense of permanence and rootedness. By this token, it would serve to house Dhruba and his family for as long as he needed or cared to envisage, with only imagined leisure pursuits apparently to eat into his salary once the loan repayments were completed. These construction works would therefore put something fixed down, a home that would endure and that would provide comfortable living for the family and future generations. There was a carefree self-satisfaction held within the image that he allowed himself and shared with me that late evening.

Against the untroubled flow of conversation, I then asked Dhruba about the likelihood over time of the river forging its way closer to this part of the village and the coupled implication of erosion of these lands (and, in turn, his currently in-progress build of a new house). Suddenly, the air in the room was much heavier. My clumsy question had unwittingly pierced the fantasy we had both been enjoying, only for lead pellets of concern and worry to drizzle down. Dhruba, quickly recovered but still subdued, acknowledged that, “yes, it is true, that may happen. And, don’t feel bad for asking, I was the one to have told you about this possibility in the first place”. On many previous occasions Dhruba and I had talked about erosion and flooding in the area, often whilst out walking by the river bank at dusk after work, taking selfies of ourselves beside the nearby “porcupine” anti-erosion defences. He reasoned, now in English, that, “[after all] it is a natural disaster, I think everyone can be hit by natural disasters. It is God's thing, the Almighty”. The conversation following this then quickly tapered off. The risk that was brought up was not reduced, but rather generalised as a type of catastrophe that could befall anyone. The initial question acted as a provocation, as it forced a meeting between the diverging possible futures of potential ruin and domestic bliss (albeit, during a particularly pleasurable fantasy of the latter) that, throughout my fieldwork, rarely seemed to be brought together. When challenged to reflect upon this well-known possibility in the context of how it would affect such a prized dwelling -

which moments before had stood for rootedness and prosperity - the potential harm was generalised, smoothed over, made applicable to anyone and deferred to ultimate powers.

3.3. Concrete and aspiration

Concrete is one of the most widely used substances on earth, apparently second only to water (Watts 2019). The exponential growth of concrete as a building material from the early twentieth century into the present moment has seen its use extend into nearly every corner of the terrestrial world. Within its various iterations, concrete is employed within colossal infrastructure works to house radioactive materials or channel large flows of water, as well as playing a key structural and decorative role in housing, whether of grand or modest design. Whilst particularly dense concentrations are to be found in cities and urban areas, concrete is now increasingly familiar within rural contexts in both the Global North and South.

Typical of this trend, and similarly to the rest of South Asia, concrete has flowed into Northeast India in recent decades with increasing speed. Indicative of this is the crowding of public spaces with advertisements for cement brands as they each trumpet their unique strengths across billboards, shop fronts, bus stops and sponsored highway signs which jostle for the attention of passers-by, just as their equivalent television commercials do the same in the home during breaks from programming. In Guwahati, concrete literally stands behind a construction flurry of flyovers, mushrooming shopping malls along the commercial-arterial G.S. Road and growth of high-rise residential buildings loom in nearly every direction over low adjacent plots, the potential of the latter exciting speculation in developers. However, as mentioned, concrete's expansion through the region is not limited only to urban environs; it continues at pace through rural areas too. This was immediately notable when returning to Majuli to begin fieldwork in 2016 after my last visit in 2013, by the growing length of paved roads, and the increasing number of buildings that now soared above two stories in the modestly urbanising commercial areas. This verticality and the altered vista it created, given that some (albeit few) buildings now broke the tree line, was only made possible through this material.

Duncan McDuie-Ra, in his essay 'Concrete and Culture in Northeast India' (2018), seeks to begin a conversation about what alterative stories concrete might be able to open up for us. He argues that in spite of the rapidly growing presence of concrete in the region, "…most of us—researchers, writers—are trained to ignore all this concrete. There are different reasons for this, but most simply concrete is the antithesis of the images and imaginations produced *in* and *of* the region and projected externally: nature, tradition, heritage, and hyper-relativist accounts of

cultures and identities being lost or galvanised into (and out of) political movements" (McDuie-Ra, 2018, original emphasis). Whilst acknowledging that social scientists may analytically only be able to ask so much of concrete by itself, McDuie-Ra argues it can nonetheless help provide conceptual space for another type of script and a counterpoint to existing essentialised and totalising social scientific studies of Northeast India. To ignore concrete, as he suggests, would be to miss important sites through which to consider poignant encounters with practices and discourses of development and modernity (Harvey 2010).

Fig. 3.4. Concrete posts centre ground, facing away from the household and towards the raised village road atop the embankment.

The growing proliferation of concrete across Majuli often came to occupy my thoughts during fieldwork. This even included several unremarkable concrete posts that had been erected at the bottom of the steep slope that led away from the household in which I lived and up onto the embankment and main village road (see fig. 3.4.). Shooting up from the ground, these posts possessed only a slightly wider girth than the numerous areca nut trees near to them, yet they were no less satisfying in their shared straightness. The posts had been meant to serve as supports for a village shop that would have faced the main road, which ultimately was never built. Not long after the posts had been erected, one of the householders had gained a prized position

as a teacher in a government school in an adjacent district, which consequently had meant there was less need and certainly insufficient labour to start such an enterprise. Eventually repurposed only as an occasional and partial support for a cover against the rain, the obstinacy of these posts, or their very *concreteness*, meant they continued to endure, even if the original idea was now seldom thought about by those who had constructed them. (This would not have been the case had the posts been made from bamboo, for example, which could have easily been relocated and reused elsewhere with the change of circumstances). I later saw that other concrete posts from an older construction lay together silently in the underbrush to the side of the slope, barely visible amidst the green of creeping plant life. What struck me as interesting about these columns was less about how plans for making a living are highly dynamic and responsive to a multitude of opportunities and restrictions that morph through time; rather, it was how the use of particular materials (in this case, concrete) as part of generative efforts to forge livelihoods and augment dwellings, mark and make up our material-temporal horizons in qualitatively different ways. Clearly, I share the assertion made by Adrian Forty in his book *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* that, “[a] cursory inspection of even the most debased lump of concrete rapidly takes us into a fugacious world of beliefs and counter-beliefs, hopes and fears, longings and loathings” (2012:11).

My attention was repeatedly drawn by the use of concrete as a building material in Majuli, as well as in the region more broadly, as part of a consideration of how environmental assemblages emerge and transform through time. A distinction is made between *poka* and *kesa* objects, or things that are ripe or cooked and those that are unripe or raw respectively. *Poka (pucca in Hindi*) references durable, solid and permanent structures, whether that be a paved road or house made with concrete and other industrially produced materials (including factory made bricks). By contrast, a *kesa* (*kacha* in Hindi) road is one of packed earth and a *kesa* house is one that is made from locally sourced, non-industrially processed materials, such as bamboo, wood, mud, grasses and cow dung. It is common for domestic and commercial structures to employ a mix of *poka* and *kesa* materials and building methods. (For example, many *kesa* houses would possess metal roof sheets and many *poka* houses may include bamboo woven lattice room dividers or window shutters, if not entire additional rooms on rooftops or to the side of the main heavier structure). Most importantly for this chapter, how does the increasing use of concrete and associated building materials in the region, and more specifically the growing number of *poka* houses in Majuli, aid our understanding for resident hopes and aspirations for dwelling and work in an environment ever on the move?

Penny Harvey, Christian Krohn-Hansen, and Knut G. Nustad (2019) have noted in the introduction to their edited volume *Anthropos and the Material*, that following particular materials through their historical emergence as valuable commodities flowing across capitalist networks of circulation and consumption has proved instructive. Exemplary critical material-social histories of sugar (Mintz 1985), tea (Chatterjee 2001) and oil (Mitchell 2011) have offered insightful accounts in how their discovery, extraction and distribution have not only transformed the world and emergent imperial assemblages, but have also revealed how entanglements with these things both shape and are shaped by transnational political currents in which contemporary life, both human and beyond, unfolds (Harvey, Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2019:7-8). In short, these critical companion histories of key commodities demonstrate, as Harvey, Krohn-Hansen and Nustad put it, "[i]t is thus essential to preserve a deep interest in forms of large-scale political and economic history and in contemporary global capitalism as a structuring force" (2019:8).

Whilst remaining attentive to these large-scale formations, networks and flows that enable unremitting streams of concrete, a focus on it *in situ* and emplaced within a field of social relations reveals the powerfully affective presence that concrete has within human lives. Social scientists have become increasingly alert to the allure of concrete and the multiplicity of ways this material is known and felt by those whose lives it touches. Shuhei Kimura (2016) has detailed how the rebuilding of much taller sea walls in post-tsunami reconstruction Japan have transformed these previously unnoticed parts of the coastal landscape into contentious highly visible interventions, obscuring fishers' views (and ways of knowing) the ocean. Whilst government officials champion these higher walls as indispensable infrastructure of disaster prevention whose height is "non-negotiable", residents worry about how these objects will change their connection with the coastal landscape whilst they consider how best to ensure safety for themselves and their communities. Concrete structures not only shape how people come to know and experience their landscapes, but also act as a means of configuring relations between populations and those that govern them. Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková (2014) in their comparative study of shelters, drawing on Foucault, coin the term "concrete governmentality" to capture how concrete's perceived qualities of durability and permanence are utilised within (largely) state-led attempts to produce preparedness. However, as circumstances alter through time and depending on practices and regimes of care of these structures, "[p]rotection therefore proves to be an entity that can easily 'leak out' of these concrete shelters" (2014:196). Kali Rubaii (2021), in a recent seminar on the large concrete T-blocks in Iraq that have played a core part of U.S. strategy to produce anti-ordnance protective barriers around soldiers, bases and even neighbourhoods, explains that the seeming durability of these objects is only maintained by constantly replacing

the easily damaged blocks. Rather than this being about restoring material properties, instead it is through this monitoring and practices of care that they continue to prove successful in their *semiotic* function. Nasser Abourahme (2014) presses for stronger terms than leakage when pointing to the excesses of the built environ within Deheishe Refugee Camp in the West Bank. Greater access to affordable cement from the 1970s has seen a proliferation of concrete dwellings, which in turn saw the camp grow vertically as well as spilling over beyond its horizontal boundaries. Taking cement as their principal "ethnographic subject" (2014:203), Abourahme argues that the use of concrete as a building material in a location where houses possess a particularly acute political and affective charge blurred the boundaries of, what they call the "material lived" and "symbolic-political", maintaining a tension between the temporary and the permanent, rootedness and right to a return. Abourhame does not wish to give more or less agency to either side of a subject-object binary, but aims to demonstrate that it is often these excesses or "spillovers", rather than anything directed or intentional under a problematic guise of agency, that mediates action. Following cement with Abourhame as our guide, is, "to recognize the camp as a kind of interactional assemblage that brings seemingly disparate elements together - cement/concrete, bodies, discourse, graffiti, sewage pipes, national slogans - into contingent but highly productive relations of paradox and interdependence" (2014:204).

Concrete as a substance that is now immensely and inextricably implicated within a majority of human lives, clearly also shows promise as a means for scholars to trace human-environment entanglements, power and governance, as well as aspects of an affective politics of dwelling. The breadth of the above work may make this potential appear somewhat dizzying, but running through it all is an acknowledgement of the vibrancy of matter. Penny Harvey (2019) in her chapter 'Lithic Vitality' takes this latter point as an explicit focus and makes an appeal to the liveliness of the non-organic. Harvey begins from the premise that whilst these materials may not in many locations be thought of as alive, or animate in any significant sense, they nonetheless can move in (and out of) a vitality that contours human and other-than environmental engagements. As Harvey describes in an earlier work, this vitality is both inherent to concrete's material properties, characterised by a metamorphosis from something initially soft and malleable to a final state of firmness, as well as its symbolic and affective aspects that index material and social transformation (2010:42).

This vitality has undeniably been key in underpinning the rise of concrete as a ubiquitous modern building material, but, as Forty notes, to say that concrete is *modern*, "is not just to say that now it is here, when before it wasn't, but that it is one of the agents through which our experience of modernity is mediated" (2014:14). Cheap and versatile, concrete has not only

transformed environments, humans and all manner of material-social relations, but has also provided structures and occupied locations through which we understand and negotiate these changes, often with much ambivalence.

One of the most radical transformative qualities of concrete, particularly with regards to concrete reinforced with steel rods, is that it can be made on location and can be used by "self-builders", who need not possess formal training. Forty suggests that the use of reinforced concrete by self-builders within domestic and commercial buildings in the Global South probably now exceeds all other applications (2012:40). Correspondingly, concrete has also become fully part of the vernacular. Malleable to a variety of styles, building methods (including alongside those employed with other "traditional" materials, as described previously) as well as construction processes. The latter is evident in how it lends itself to prolonged periods of "incompletion", as unpainted cement rendered walls are suggestive of future decoration and exposed steel rods, open to the elements, stretch upwards towards potential additional floors in otherwise "finished" houses. These tasks are chartered by arrivals of new family members and, in contexts where mortgages or loans are not easily accessible, by the rhythms of domestic finances. Concrete may be highly prone to leakages, excesses and slippages that drain and challenge its properties of strength, endurance and legitimacy as a modern material, but the transformative capacity of concrete for those with limited resources to build safe and lasting structures maintains its powerful allure. For many self-builders across the world, "it is a step up in life, a start on the road to progress" (Forty 2012:14). The sight of clusters of steel rods shooting up and away from completed dwellings, as part of small improvements incrementally made, are symbols of hope and are aspirational in the futures that they push towards (also see McDuie-Ra 2018).

As brought out through the ethnographic vignette that began this chapter, the construction of a *poka* house for Dhruba was desirable not only in that it would upgrade their current home and provide greater comfort, but that it served to put something *fixed* down and offered a longed-for rootedness and permanence in form. It would, as one strategy among many, help actualise a better life. It is this material potency of concrete, or more specifically *poka* houses, that make them useful to think with when seeking to trace residents' aspirations. Putting these structures, which comprise powerfully affective objects and index durability, into conversation with historic and present potentialities of erosion, is not only to demonstrate how the uncertainty of the ground underfoot inflects them with a greater emotional resonance. More pressingly, it is to think history and landscape together (Harvey, Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2019:13) and to throw into relief how concrete, as an aspirational material, marks important divergences in the makings of landscape. In the next section, I will consider how livelihood trajectories have

changed through time and what this reveals about the types of prosperous futures this landscape is now understood to afford for residents. This will then lead into an extended focus with two residents on what it is to build and occupy concrete structures and a discussion of the distinct material-temporal horizons that they attempt to bring into being.

3.4. Displacement, dwelling and livelihoods

Diganta

Living in Majuli and speaking with residents regarding the annual waves of inundation over time brought out nuance not only in a myriad of aspects of flood that were deemed generative and/or destructive, but also an immanent emotionality to dwelling within this landscape - whether the joy of the first rain bursting, irritation at the brown and blackouts common through the summer months, a deep worry at how to tend one's cows, or the persistent gastric infection of a young child during flood. (Many of these types of reflections by residents were considered in the previous chapter). Whilst erosion is indelibly tied up within the same dynamic flows and processes of the riverine environment as flooding, as I discuss in Chapter 2, the mark it holds upon the landscape, and the markers for memory and the imagination of residents, point towards distinct ramifications. As I will come to, the legacies and spectre of erosion of these lands, as both outcome and potential of dwelling along this at times treacherous river, loom large over the landscape.

It was a common occurrence throughout my fieldwork for residents to downplay the hardships posed during the time of flood (or other challenges that came with residing in these locations), instead placing a greater emphasis on riverbank erosion as comprising a more, if not the most, pressing problem Majulials faced and the one requiring the most attention. I encountered this sentiment in various iterations. The following comment made by Diganta, the *gaonburha* (administrative village head) of Ximolupuria from whom we will shortly hear more, was typical. This was his response to me asking his thoughts on a proposed bridge connecting Majuli with the south bank:

> Diganta: As a first priority, we do not want a bridge. We want protection [works for Majuli]. Once there is protection, then we have no objection if they give us a bridge.

Tom: Why? For what reason?

Diganta: If the bridge is given and Majuli erodes, then what is the purpose of the bridge? For example, I built a house, if all the people from here are dead then what benefit is there from having built the house (*ghortu bonalu eyar jodi sob manuh mori thake aitu ghor bonai ki lav ase*)? We are four people. If all four people are dead, then what's the benefit of building the house? If Majuli completely disappears due to erosion, then there is no need in giving a bridge (*majulikhon jodi khoniyat gusi jai, dolongkhon di eku lav nai*). We need protection before the bridge is given, after that, then we have no objection, it's not a bad thing, but we do not want the bridge beforehand. First, we want the protection of Majuli (agote *majulir xurokhya lage).*

Diganta was unequivocal that the protection or *xurokhya* (he used both words during this exchange) of Majuli is required prior to any other significant infrastructure projects. A proposed bridge, for example, may be perceived as a welcome intervention that will bring with it many benefits to residents, as I will discuss in Chapter 4. However, without the construction of efficacious protection works, conceived as structural anti-erosion infrastructure that would stabilise settled lands, then any such projects and their associated benefits have a strong likelihood of being done in vain. The example used of building a house for dead householders is striking in emphasising concisely the destructive consequences of losing homestead, agricultural and common lands. This may appear to be in keeping with the crisis narrative of the existential threat this constitutes for Majuli's both tangible and intangible "assets", as critically examined in Chapter 1. However, as I will argue in this chapter, what is at stake for residents most directly affected, while no less urgent, differs in important ways. I will first continue to unpick both the histories and present potentialities of erosion in this area and the bearing this holds for the relocation of dwellings. I will then further draw out the properties of permanence, comfort and aspiration contained within, and signified by, *poka* housing and the temporal horizons they attempt to bring into view amidst shrinking lands.

In March 2018, I had arranged a meeting with Diganta. I wished to consult official records on household relocations and out-migration, and to benefit from his insights as *Gaonburha* in Ximolupuria. A neighbour had warned me that Diganta as *Gaonburha* was a busy man kept on the move by the role's many responsibilities, and so I arrived punctually for our noon meeting. He was sitting on his veranda and was busy helping a man from a nearby village with some official looking paperwork. "Sit", I was told. It was a pleasant spring day, before the real heat of summer arrived.

The odd cyclist and motorbike passed on the embankment above us, moving along under the refreshing shade of the thick clumps of *bollucca* bamboo that creaked in the breeze that came in from the flat expanse of the Brahmaputra River, which lay not far off.

Once we were alone, he described the wide-ranging duties and situations for which he could be called upon in an official capacity, and commented that in contrast to this busy, sometimes difficult, business he greatly enjoyed his *nijor kaam* or "own work", whether toiling on his land or working on his own *poka* house. I asked him about erosion in the village. He replied that it was now not long before the springtime harvest festival of *Bohag Bihu* held in mid-April, which marks the beginning of flood season and from when erosion might occur. The village was not threatened this year, but the cow sheds and small vegetable garden plots just beyond the village and nearer to the river bank, were at risk. This went too for the adjacent hamlet, whose families had relocated there several years ago following the disappearance into the river of the nearby *chapori* that they used to live and cultivate. Unlike this side of the village, there was no embankment to block the rising waters with the coming of flood. As Diganta reflected, "this year the houses of the Muslim village might go, or might not go".

A camp had been built a short distance away in a nearby village to house workers who were to be put to the task of building flood and erosion protection works along this stretch of river bank, including geobag revetment works. This was part of the over 200 crore rupee (approximately £20 million) project for Majuli as set out by the Brahmaputra Board at the end of 2017 (Kashyap 2018) which, along with the state Water Resources Department, is charged with flood management and anti-erosion measures.

Speaking generally about these interventionist measures, the *Gaonburha* said that "at present the Brahmaputra Board are implementing protection works [across Majuli]. Different places are receiving these works, but from this there has not been any benefit. Protection works are being taken, but Majuli continues collapsing (*protection loise kintu majuli khohi ase khohi ase*)". I asked what he thought about the above announcement. He commented that "this year many vehicles have come here to give protection. It's now been a month. They have built a camp. There now are vehicles, there are men, they are building accommodations, but until today they have not been working [directly on anti-erosion works]. They're here to work but they have yet to do anything. We don't know why this is the case". If this lack of progress were to continue then the arrival of the approaching rains would mean they stood the chance of missing the limited "construction season", entailing prolonged delays to work. Many residents lamented that all too often work on these projects only got going shortly before the start of the rainy season. Work would then have to cease almost as soon as it had begun.

Residents' criticisms about the effectiveness of interventionist measures were both general and also varied in their specificity. Specific criticisms focused on the design of interventions (e.g. the angle at which a spur extended out into a river course being more effective if it were an obtuse angle rather than the existing right angle); use of inferior materials and/or poor implementation (e.g. widespread anger towards the perceived corruption inherent to the nexus of relations between contractors and staff of relevant public bodies who were seen to skimp for personal enrichment and to the detriment of projects); individual works not fitting into a wider holistic strategy (e.g. how sections of geobag revetment works might exacerbate erosion in areas immediately downstream, to the detriment of those residents).[52]

Arguing that decades of state-driven riverine interventions have now led to the continued reproduction of the Brahmaputra Valley as a "hazardscape", Mitul Baruah (2016) in his PhD dissertation has detailed how corruption was believed by the Majuli general populace to be widespread within the Water Resources Department and Brahmaputra Board. Setting aside judgement on whether these accusations were or were not generally well-founded, Baruah asserts that the effect of this damning criticism had been to erode public confidence in the capacity of these bodies to effectively to fulfil their mandate to protect the island and population from flooding and erosion. Recalling an incident from his fieldwork in the early 2010s, he describes a visit to the "mansion-like home" of a particularly politically well-connected contractor, which "often functioned like the headquarters of the state Water Resources Department (WRD)… the house was filled with several local contractors, engineers belonging to both WRD and the Public Works Department (PWD), and some local political elites with allegiance to the ruling party… [His] mother prepared a sumptuous meal with sticky rice, fish and pork dishes, and home-brewed rice beer (*apong*)… Soon after lunch, [he], the WRD engineers and a few of the contractors sat down with their files and maps to prepare what turned out to be WRD's annual work-plan for Majuli for the coming year" (2016:65). Hoops would have to be jumped through and formalities maintained, but the real decisions were made after that delicious midday meal. This episode not only shows the cosy relationship between all involved, but, borrowing from Barbara Harris-White (2003:77), Baruah shows the "shadow state" in action, which sees a "hollowed out" Indian state replaced by an assemblage of intermediaries, political workers, contractors and criminals. In Majuli, this involved absent contractors living in Guwahati and not directly overseeing works, multiple instances of unofficial sub-contracting and rampant

[52] There are other types of criticisms of interventionist measures that do *not* concern their immediate efficacy in stemming erosion or reclaiming lands as I discuss in Chapter 2. These included the detrimental effects they have had on agriculture and ecology; dangers posed by embankment breaches; prolonged and worsened floods for lands "outside" of embanked areas.

profiteering. Baruah states that the immediate material effects of these decision-making processes and their lack of transparency and accountability resulted in painfully slow progress of works, unfinished projects and substandard implementation.

Following ethnographically, as Baruah does, how state and non-state actors interact and how this goes into producing "the material conditions for disasters" (2016:53) is undoubtedly vital. However, for my present purposes I want to emphasise the prevalence and powerful sentiments of uncertainty, doubt and disappointment on the part of residents concerning the efficacy of historic and planned interventionist measures along this stretch of the Brahmaputra.

I asked Diganta what he thought should be done to stem the erosion of lands in Majuli. He answered, "we have not seen it ourselves but have heard and read in books that there is a protection system which is taken by China in the river Haungpu. Along this river there is also erosion like there is in Majuli. If this protection system is done in our Brahmaputra, only then will it be secured, otherwise erosion will continue". He was unsure exactly what was unique about this system, as he had not seen it himself, but the implication was that the action taken by state authorities in China was different from those implemented here, and, crucially, was effective in securing lands.[53] I then asked him if erosion were to continue unabated what would Majuli be like in the future? To which he replied. "There will be erosion, but Majuli will not be destroyed (*khohoniya hobo kintu majulikhon dhongxo nohobo)*. I mean, if the river comes and erodes one side, then people will move to the other side".

Diganta's account was typical in locating both the problem and solution for securing lands within the efforts of state agencies, which so far by historical precedent residents had found to be left wanting. Structural interventions, to be delivered by state agencies and their intermediaries, were seen not only as necessary but as the only means by which this could be achieved. However, as described above, attempts to date had proved ineffective, painfully slow and were shrouded within a worrying lack of transparency. Whilst Diganta saw erosion inevitably continuing into the future, in contrast to popular crisis narratives circulating around Majuli discussed in Chapter 1, he was clear that this would not lead to the destruction (*dhongxo*) of Majuli. Invoking the dynamic flows of both the river and people, the coming and going of both on opposite sides would mean this would not come to pass. Whilst unsure myself what the wholescale destruction of Majuli would look like, nor equally what exactly Diganta had in mind, the emphasis appeared to be more on *process* rather than on a neat, headline-grabbing distant horizon. Erosion was seen as a costly

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[53] In this instance, Diganta was referring to an example of effective state-led interventions to stem erosion of lands, which I understood as being unrelated to widespread suspicion of Chinese interventions on the river upstream.

attrition and urgently requiring remedy, but not necessarily as an existential threat to a greater Majuli.

Whilst Majuli as an evolving entity would endure according to Diganta, he had himself been displaced and relocated on several occasions due to the erosion of village lands:

> Diganta: Forty-four years ago, the village of Ximolupuria was, not very far, probably about one and a half kilometres away from here. The place where we were born is now in the middle of the Brahmaputra (*ami jot jonmo hoisilu jegatu etiya brahmaputror majot ase*). In 1974, when our village fell away due to erosion, our family shifted a short distance away. We moved again to another place in 1978. In 1983, they demolished our house, and from this [land] they built the embankment. So then we came here. This is our third place.
>
> Tom: How did you find living in the old village?
>
> Diganta: It was very good (*khub bhal lagisile)*. There was a village full of people (*bhorpur aikhon gao asile*). There was a lot of cultivation (*khub keti hoisile*). At that time, people had a lot of land for cultivation. In 1974, in our village of Ximolupuria, we had 75 families. Then after the erosion happened that year, the government took 37 families to Titabor (town in Jorhat district). 38 families remained living here.
>
> Tom: If erosion had not occurred, would residents be better-off now?
>
> Diganta: Yes, then people could have farmed. At that time people used to farm pea, mustard, paddy, etc.. They earned money from selling these products. But, now farming lands are gone because of erosion.

That afternoon in 2018 we sat on the veranda of the house where Diganta now lived following three relocations due, either directly or indirectly, to riverbank erosion. Whilst the dates and the exact number of relocations differ for each family (of those who remained in Majuli), all were affected by the erosion of village lands in 1974-1975 and subsequently were forced to move inland to the present location of the village. (I will return shortly to the 37 families who out-migrated from Majuli with government assistance). Diganta reflected that households had moved slowly, gradually further inland, over time to the present location of the village. As older residents related, their current lands were, for the most part, formerly agricultural lands that belonged to

residents of a neighbouring village and from whom they were purchased. Majuli, as well as other riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley, is dotted with many villages whose names include the prefix *notun-*, which indicates the "new" village that has relocated due to riverbank erosion elsewhere.[54]

Diganta would have been 5 years old in 1974. He described a village full of people and with an abundance of arable land. Yet since then erosion had eaten into their lands, and consequently into people's agricultural livelihoods and avenues for rural prosperity. From a village survey I conducted, with all 76 households participating, 31 reported that they now had no land to cultivate of any description. Many households said that they formerly had had land to farm but this had been lost to erosion post-1974 and up until the past decade.[55] With familial lands already having been washed away at a previous date, for many younger families there was no section of land that could have been divided up and given to them when they formed their own households. Of the remaining households, 7 had vegetable gardens only, with many of these on the nearby *chapori*. 38 households had agricultural fields, in which several varieties of paddy were cultivated as well as mustard. A half-dozen of this number cultivated this land on an *adhi* or sharecropping basis and the same number again reported that they currently did not engage in farming. Land holdings ranged from 1-8 bigha (0.33-2.66 acres), with the mean average approximately 3 *bigha* (1 acre) and the median average 2 *bigha* (0.66 acres), although as mentioned not all of this land was being utilised for cultivation.[56][57] Many households reported that farming as their principal or major livelihood pursuit was gradually diminishing over time and with each generation.

Of the 113 residents (out of a total population of 399, including children) who reported livelihood information, only 10 reported farming as their principal livelihood now. It was however true that many landed or sharecropping households engaged in agriculture both for subsistence as well as an auxiliary income, often with any surplus sold to traders at local markets on an ad hoc basis depending on the quality and abundance of the harvest. Whilst several women reported themselves as farmers and are included in this figure, taking this figure alone obscures the far

[54] Often villages (whether partially or entirely) do not relocate together when widespread erosion occurs. Village residents may not have the resources or inclination to move together en masse, and, as erosion is often a slow process, villages may also dwindle to a small size or population over time, which would make such a move impracticable.
[55] Three households had moved to the village in 2012 following the erosion of their lands on a nearby *chapori*, and had no current agricultural holding.
[56] In the 2000s, land holdings per family in Majuli sub-district ranged between 1 (0.33 acres) and 10 *bigha* (3.3 acres) (Nath 2009:119).
[57] Whilst the average land holding in India was found at a more significant 1.15 hectares (2.84 acres or 8.6 *bigha*) in 2010-11, this masks the reality that for small holder farmers the average was only 0.39 hectares (0.96 acres or 3 *bigha*) and reflects a growing land scarcity across the country (Chakravorty et al 2019:S193).

greater level of agricultural labour performed by many women at multiple stages of the harvest. Goswami and Bhattacharayya (2014) explain that as more men move into non-agricultural jobs in the rural economy in Assam (and South Asia more generally), there is increasing dependence on family members, and in particular women, to complete agricultural activities. They note that women are structurally less able than men to make the shift towards non-agricultural work that is often seen as offering greater financial returns than farming.

Livelihoods have increasingly diversified with time in Ximolupuria, a Kaibarta village and traditional fishing community. As mentioned in Chapter 2, many households engaged in a variety of fishing techniques whether during moments of bounty, for subsistence, as an occasional auxiliary income and also for pleasure too. 10 individuals reporting fishing and a further 15 in associated livelihoods (including managers, traders and sellers), which taken together still accounted for the single most prevalent livelihood pursuits. In recent years, many more individuals and families had begun small business, such as village or retail shops (10) as well as *hotels* or small cafes catering to passengers at the nearby *ghat* (8). Other non-agricultural rural livelihood pursuits included carpentry (3), driver (4), petrol station attendant (3), bus conductor (1), mechanic (1) and periodic work as a contractor or sub-contractor for tendered public works (2). Day labour also accounted for a large number of individuals (15). Of professional workers, there were both government and non-incorporated school teachers (6), bank manager (1), insurance officer (1), Inland Water Department surveyor (1) and healthcare practitioner (2).

As occurring in locations throughout the region, many male residents also migrate to the larger metro cities outside of the state, mostly for periods of one to several years, often working as security guards or other low paid labour. When the survey was taken in early 2018, 14 residents were then presently working outside of the state with the vast majority located in Hyderabad.[58] Many residents had also recently or in previous years returned from similar work outside of the state. In addition, two other residents also worked in Guwahati operating JCBs on large construction sites.

Few women reported work outside of their home or nearby agricultural lands. Of those that did, jobs included working as a school cook (1), tailor (1) and assisting at the village school (1). Yet, as mentioned, women were integral to agricultural work and many also regularly spoke about their work on the household loom (*tat)*, with the products of the latter being mostly for personal consumption. Whilst this summary is brief and not exhaustive, particularly with regards to the multiple sources and varied composition of rural household income and livelihoods, it is

[58] This figure includes one woman who was working as a nurse in Kerala.

nonetheless helpful in offering a sketch of present livelihood activity as well as pointing to trends that are changing through time.

When Diganta described a lovely village pre-1974 full of people and with an abundance of cultivatable land, he was referencing a time before land scarcity and ever diminishing agricultural prosperity, a time prior to the revolving high number of young men working in distant cities and sending remittances home. Later we discussed together other changes that had occurred during the intervening period and, with this, the tone of the conversation became noticeably more hopeful. Diganta mentioned the first motorbike purchased by a resident some fifteen years previously as well as that several residents now owned cars. As he told me:

> Diganta: Many people will take cars. Cars have now become available. [In the future], people will become richer (*tetialoike manuh dhoni hobo*). Children are reading, they will get salaried jobs and, from today, say after ten years, people will be much better off (*ajir pora aru dos bosor pisot manuhor bohut unnoti hobo*). In our village, there weren't any salaried jobs before. Now, there are a couple of jobs. In Anando's house, there is a job (he is a teacher) and now it's become two (his brother had also recently received a post as a teacher). Like this, other families are getting a couple of jobs. Development will happen (*unnoti hobo*). It is happening, and it will continue.
>
> Tom: You have said, there will be more salaried jobs for young people in the village. What type of jobs do you expect people to get?
>
> Diganta: Which jobs, I cannot say (laughing good naturedly).
>
> Tom: Okay, well, you have said your children are now studying. What type of job would you like them to get?
>
> Diganta: I have two children. A son and a daughter. I want them to become teachers. It is a good job. It has both comfort and prestige (*aram aru xonman duyota ase*). The future will be better than now (*etiyatkoi bhowisyote bhal lagibo*).

Being with Diganta, it was impossible to ignore the optimism that imbued his comment, "the future will be better than now" (*etiyatkoi bhowisyote bhal lagibo*), which in this exchange

centred upon welcome developments that had occurred within the village and the increasing prospects for residents to achieve prized salaried employment. Here, as with Dhruba's fantasising about the construction of his new home (discussed at the start of this chapter) and with many conversations I had with residents discussing their own efforts to actualise various types of aspirational projects, I frequently found myself during fieldwork encountering residents who were optimistic, occasionally buoyantly so, about the possibilities of today and tomorrow.

Considering Stef Jansen's (2016) analytical distinction between hopefulness and hope(s) will now prove instructive. In attempting to establish what anthropologists are referring to when taking hope as an object of study, given an explosion of interest in recent years, Jansen makes a distinction between intransitive and transitive modalities. In its intransitive use, hope is primarily an affect. It refers to a "hopefulness" that is primarily not directed at specific objects. Jansen argues that "[on] the whole undefined, hope is then deployed in an expectation of recognition that is itself largely based on affective resonance: hopefulness as an intransitively understood affect seems to be considered simply the opposite of hopelessness" (2016:449). By contrast, in its transitive use hope is understood as relating to specific objects: that is, to "hope for" something, or "hope that" something will occur. Of significance is that this allows for a plurality of hopes that may be incompatible with each other. Whether located in one or multiple persons, these hopes aimed towards specific objects can endure through states of hopefulness *and* hopelessness. Crucially, they do not possess a constitutive opposite, but instead they fluctuate in intensity and change through time, as do the objects towards which they orientate themselves. Whilst these two modalities of hope are of course not mutually exclusive, but rather are different aspects of the same phenomenon, the point is there is analytical benefit in separating them.

Having emphasised in Chapter 2 the importance of approximating an emotional and affective liveliness within embodied perspectives of seasonal variation and environmental transformations, I maintain that attempts to keep a "spark" of contingency alive in our writing is vital. As I have argued, it is necessary to do this in order meaningfully to situate residents' accounts of dwelling on the banks of the river (or in any location for that matter). However, to foreground indeterminacy and to make hopefulness a sole focus of study in and of itself would be to flatten, if not totally ignore, the histories that have created the conditions in which hope (and hopefulness) can flourish. In agreement with Jansen, an analytical concern with hope in a transitive modality is to acknowledge that "[hopes] have their histories—and their contents, objects, directionality and intensity are always the product of activation in a specific historical configuration" (2016:460). In the next section, continuing to follow residents' hopes, we shall see how visions of prosperity have gathered around new objects through time. In particular, as we

move to Pradeep's account we shall hear how, as agricultural prosperity has diminished, residents are orientating themselves towards other types of livelihood trajectories.

Pradeep

A neighbour and resident of Ximolupuria, Pradeep would often relate to me what he understood as the correct telling of historical events and religious narratives. Pradeep would do so as part of his morning walk along the embankment whilst brushing his teeth or during excursions, and the occasional boat ride, taken along the river bank. I found him energetic, and gracious to someone he saw as a student to be taught.

On one such walk in August 2017, splashes could be heard as we neared the river bank, as large and smaller blocks of earth fell into the river. The unnerving constancy of these sounds accompanied us as we forged a careful path along the edge of the high and fast waters, as they continued to quickly cut into the bank, making it less stable underfoot. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out cracks silently forming and expanding at land's edge. The ground had become *animated*, as grass, plant life and roots twitched and vibrated under the strain of the inevitable fall towards the brown waters below. With each splash, many bubbles rose to the surface. Amidst this escaping air, a fish jumped out of the water. It was a feast of worms for these creatures, as Pradeep pointed out.

Walking again along the bank the following spring, the scene was one of a contrasting calmness. The waters low, still and quiet, the earth dry and definitively *not* twitching. Like Diganta, Pradeep was also a young child in 1974. Alongside asking Pradeep to draw and narrate a map of dwellings and landmarks in and around the old village pre-1974 and up until the present day, I had suggested that we take another walk along the river in the hope that it may spark new points of conversation regarding his memories of the area as a child and young person. Cupping our eyes with our hand, we looked out to the horizon in the direction of Sankardev's landing point and also what once used to be village lands, which now comprise a mix of sandy *chapori* and river (see Fig. 3.5.). Having chosen to do this under the full glare of the midday sun, we decided relatively quickly to retreat back to Pradeep's own *poka* house back in the village. Pradeep continued to narrate the histories and his own experiences that were interwoven with these now eroded lands:

When Sankardev came to the upper side [of Majuli] from Dhuwahat [in what was then the lower side of Majuli], they did not come by car, they travelled by boat. It's called *nauka bihar* (boat travelling). At this time, there was land, a *huge* area, in front of this Ximolupuria village. They kept their boat beyond this area in front of the village in the *chapori*. There were many large trees in that place. It was jungle. At that time, people did not live there, only animals. There were tigers, bears and elephants. Their boat stopped there, where [later] was to be established the Old Kamalabari Satra. Devotees (*bhokot*) who accompanied Sankardev, lit lamps there at Sankardev's behest. From [the Old Satra], New Kamalabari Satra, North Kamalabari Satra, and Kamalabari Satra (Mahimabari, Jorhat District) came eventually to be formed. But, the place where the Old Satra was, where there was that *very large* area, where there was that *very large chapori* where you would have to walk for more than two or three days to visit all sides of it, that place later disappeared very quickly. The Brahmaputra took it away, there is now only *sand* in the middle of the Brahmaputra (*brahmaputroloi loi gusi gol, brahmaputror majot bortoman etiya bali*).

Fig. 3.5. On the bank of the Brahmaputra River during the dry season, Pradeep pointing out the location of the "old" village prior to a large-scale erosion of village lands in 1974.

As the then Assistant Settlement Officer for Jorhat Circle Hari Prasad Chaliha later described, the old Kamalabari Satra, may have survived multiple internal schisms over the centuries, but it, "could not, however, withstand the onslaught of the awesome erosion of 1974 caused by the powerful currents of the mighty Brahmaputra and the turbulent Tuni River on two fronts, east and west simultaneously. The [Satra], once gorgeous with tropical vegetation of huge ornamental and valuable trees like Kendus, Neems, Agars, Coconuts, etc in its periphery, sandwiched by two stormy rivers, was virtually on the verge of extinction, leaving the district administration with no alternative but to shift it within a short time to a suitable place" (Chaliha 2006:261). With the go-ahead given from a state government apparently pursuing progressive land reform, Chaliha was charged by the Jorhat District Commissioner Arif Ali with overseeing the rehabilitation of Kamalabari Satra, along with "as many as three hundred odd families" (2006:262) from five villages in Majuli.

The 37 families who left Ximolupuria following erosion of their lands in 1974 travelled together as part of this relocation effort. It was a huge undertaking by all it engaged, involving, "[t]ransportation of heavy building materials and other household articles of a four-hundred years old Satra and of about three hundred families from Majuli to Mahimabari across the river Brahmaputra and a forty-five kilometre road journey was indeed a massive affair in terms of logistics. Three double-engined machine boats and ten trucks which were pressed into service for the purpose had been provided with police escort to and from the terminus" (Chaliha 2006:263). After the first "prime" plot of one hundred bighas by the side of the Titabor-Mahimabari PWD road was given for the establishment of the *satra* on 9th February 1975, each displaced family was subsequently allotted five bighas of "*jungle*" land, as residents of the new village told me in early 2018. The state provided essential rations alongside assistance given from locals during this period, as displaced families encamped in a maidan near the thick forest out of which they were to make their new homes and village. Once land had been surveyed, measured and plots allotted by state officials, such as those instructed by Chaliha, residents, I was told, collectively got to the "very hard work" (*bor kosto kam*) of clearing the lands they were to settle. Thirty kilometres inland from the main course of the Brahmaputra and in the shadow of the Naga Hills, with the forest now gone, the village sits between extensive tracts of paddy fields, the edges of the tea estate (out of which these lands had been acquired by the state for the purpose of rehabilitation (2006:262)) and the lines of houses of the plantation workers (who have their own distinct stories of relocation across vaster distances). Many familial ties remain with those in Majuli and today the village is considerably more populous than the one it separated from back in 1975.

The minister of state for Water Resources, Social Justice and Empowerment, Rattan Lal Kataria, in 2019 told the Lok Sabha that as many as 86,536 people had become landless in Assam, including up to 10,500 people in Majuli, in the last five years alone, due to soil erosion (*The Wire* 2019). Chaliha reflected in 1974-1975 that the state government and district administrations were left with no option but to execute the above initiative after it was, "dispassionately judged that unless the ill-fated families were shifted and rehabilitated in some safer place, they would be exposed to further uncertainties" (Chaliha 2006:262). However, this action appears largely atypical for the large number of households who have been displaced due to erosion in the proceeding period. Mitul Baruah states that only a small number of displaced families in Majuli received land from the government in the 1990s and early 2000s, and, writing in 2016, that no families had received rehabilitation since this period (2016:188). At present, thousands of families in Majuli remain landless and living in makeshift arrangements along the embankments. The many who have been displaced from nearby lands over the years and who have not been rehabilitated, Pradeep says, have been scattered across many places with, "people now living in the hills, some in town, some on the roadside and some of them live on the banks of the river". Whilst not to deny differences in approaches by state governments over the years, the dubious luck of residing adjacent to a popular *satra* may have led to a more beneficial experience of relocation for these people, as compared to less managed relocations.

When contemplating erosion of lands in the present and near future, Pradeep shared the same widespread scepticism as did Diganta concerning the efficacy to date of anti-erosion works as implemented by the Brahmaputra Board and Water Resources Department, saying "the way they are trying to save Majuli so far, if they are to continue to work like this in the future as well, then Majuli is not sure to survive (*tetiyahole majulikhon thokatu nissito nohoy*)". Pradeep's typical lack of faith in structural interventions by the state to date, in contrast to Diganta also acknowledged that erosion could pose an existential threat to Majuli, which in turn lent a greater urgency to the following:

> [Village residents] bought this land from [our neighbouring] village. But, now there is no more land for us to go to from here… Next time, if there is erosion, then people from our village will have no option but to move to different places. Some will have to set-up a *bhur* (raft), some will have to go to the *chapori*.[59] People are not sure what will happen if the government does not give land. [In this scenario], it would be a good thing if the government did give land. This

[59] These rafts are often made during flood with several highly buoyant trunks of banana trees skewered together.

> road is our last wealth, if it goes then we will have no options (*aitu ali xex xombal, jodi herai jay tetiya amar gotyontor nohobo*). We can't afford to go outside and buy land. Not everyone has the capacity (*hokolure xamorthyo nai*)… There are many rich people in Majuli (*amaar majulit bohut dhoni xrenir manuh ase*). If Majuli were to end tomorrow then those people would not experience much trouble. They will go outside and buy land. They have money to survive… Only 10 or 20% of people [in Majuli] are able to go outside. The rest of the people are like us. Most of the people live by cultivation. Where will people cultivate if the soil is lost? Where is there to go?

Pradeep's description of their road as their "last wealth" (*xex xompal*) refers to its function as an embankment and its role within flood control and securing lands "inside" against erosion. His own house was located on the inside of the embankment, but many within the village were located on the "outside", which, as previously described, leaves them more vulnerable to longer, more acute flooding. There is uncertainty both in whether this road/embankment would hold up against annual waves of flooding in perpetuity, as a perceived guarantor at least for those located on the "inside", and more generally about whether the state would offer rehabilitation if they were to lose their lands to erosion. Whilst a handful of families either possessed some land outside of Majuli or likely possessed the resources to do so, the risk of not receiving rehabilitation was heightened due to there being no more lands available for residents to retreat to further inland, as had been the case post-1974. This was compounded by the vast majority of residents in the village and, by Pradeep's reckoning, 80%-90% of Majuli's wider population, lacking the "capacity" (*xamorthyo*) to purchase land outside of Majuli should this be necessary. It is important to keep in mind that the various, sometimes devastating, effects of acute flooding and erosion are felt unevenly across Majuli. Mising (who are the largest ethnic constituency and who make up the vast majority of the tribal population) and more marginalised caste populations, are overly represented in the lists of landless households who occupy locations that bear the worst of flooding and erosion effects annually (sometimes repeatedly). These groups are also far less likely to possess the resources to independently buy land "outside" Majuli. This is in contrast to a smaller relatively rich class of people (*dhoni xrenir manuh*) who are generally of higher caste residing in the well-connected less vulnerable central areas and who are more likely, according to Pradeep (who, like Diganta, possesses Schedule Caste status), to be able to make a good life "outside" without too much trouble.

The excerpts of Pradeep's account included so far emphasise transformation of the nearby lands and waters near to his house. This has ranged across centuries, from the times of

Sankardev in the 15th and 16th centuries to the present. It is not only land and riverine structural interventions that won't keep still however, but also animals and forests, religious reformist movements and political regimes. It is important not only to focus on past or potential events of dramatic upheaval, which would serve to collapse the everyday (and majority of lived experience) between periodic catastrophes. Life may be becoming tougher for many, but it is generally not ending (at least not yet). I wanted to know more of how land, life and livelihood were implicated together within the quotidian and how this may have changed through time, and so asked Pradeep:

Tom: Did you ever visit that area of the Old Satra?

Pradeep: Yes, I have been there. I have taken worship (*hewa loisilu*). I have eaten plum whilst I was roaming there. I had breakfast there. I remember all that. It makes me sad to remember these things today, now that the place is no more. There was an abundance of cattle in that place (*tat goru-gai nodon bodon asile*).[60] Each morning, every house was able to produce 3 or 4 litres of milk. Ours are very small native cows. There was no shortage of rice, milk and fish in any household. Areca nut, betel leaf and lemon, all of these things, are grown in our garden. But these days, people can't get this stuff unless they go outside [to market]. The middle-class people cultivated paddy and the *bhoral* (storehouse) would last for the whole year. At present, 90% of such people do not have enough [household cultivated] rice to eat at home. They will get to eat only if they buy from the market. They have to buy everything from the market, vegetables, lentils, lemons, etc. These people have no choice but to buy food from the market. There is no suitable land to cultivate a garden. This is also due to floods, as sand buries all the good soil. People are unable to cultivate, that's all.

Tom: How did you like being in the old village?

Pradeep: The old village was *very beautiful* (*bohut dhuniya gaon asile*). Every house had a large *bhoral*. The rice reached right up to the top! They couldn't finish eating the rice [from the harvest] in one year, it was

[60] The phrase here, "*tat goru-gai nodon bodon asile*", literally meaning "there was an abundance of cattle there" refers not only to a specific abundance of cattle, but to a general abundance.

stored for three to four years. Our people threshed that rice and sold it, and made money from that. They made money by selling items produced in the garden, selling cow's milk. Our gardens had mangoes, jackfruit, plum, everything. There was no dearth of anything… Nowadays, there is no milk production, as there is no place for the cows to graze.

Tom: How does it feel in the village these days?

Pradeep: That's everyone's sorrow in the village these days (*gaotu ajikali hokolukor dukhtu heituai*. There is a great deal more work/obligations (*korma*) these days. I must work if I want rice. I do not have a *hal* (plough), and so I must do a different type of work. Cultivation in this village has almost finished. There are only a few households in our village who cultivate. The rest buy and eat. Without Punjabi rice, we can't survive [chuckles].

Tom: What will your children do?"

Pradeep: If they study well, they will definitely get a *sakori* (salaried employment). They will spend their lives doing this work. Every parent wishes that their child will get a job. May my children have a good future (*mur loratu bhal houk, mur suwalitu bhal houk)*. I have a son and a daughter. My daughter has to be married. She has almost finished her B.A. degree. If I can educate her well, if she can get a job, if she can get married to a suitable boy, that would be good for me. This is what I am thinking for my children. If they don't get a job, then we will have to suffer (*jodi sakori eta napai tetiya hole eta xomoyote ami bhogim*). The way the land has collapsed so far, if good action is not taken, then there is no guarantee that we can do business by farming.

For Pradeep, the general bounty of before was located in their milk production, rich varied produce and self-sufficiency, succinctly captured within the phrase, "there was an abundance of cattle in that place" (*tat goru-gai nodon bodon asile*). The sadness he expressed in remembering what is now no longer there reflects a nostalgia for somewhere you can no longer return, both in time and space (Simpson 2013:164). Where before there was no dearth of

anything, now there is scarcity of all that previously signified abundance and dependency on imported rice. For the majority, other types of work to cultivation must be found and one must manage a greater number of obligations (*korma*).

Pradeep prioritises education for his children as a means for them to secure jobs (*sakori*), by which is meant salaried professional employment. Whilst Pradeep is less specific than Diganta (who hopes for teaching jobs for his children), there is nonetheless a symmetry for both in charting stable salaried service as an aspiration for their children as well as a sign of increasing prosperity within the village, as more residents attain such employment. Pradeep's account, however, reflects a greater jeopardy, in acknowledging the potential uncertainty that the family could experience if their children were unable to fulfil this ambition. In contrast to the period of Pradeep's recollections of the old village, pursuing cultivation here could lead to suffering. The point is not necessarily that all residents share a rigidly uniform set of aspirational sensibilities (there is no doubt a multiplicity), but rather to recognise the primacy of these imagined forms of future flourishing and the histories through which they have emerged here.

Given the present configuration of livelihoods in the village and the small number of residents who held such types of permanent salaried employment as shown earlier, a widespread movement towards these forms of work would mark a radical transition. In Diganta's words, it would be a gradual process as more of the younger generation adopt such work. Recognising the difference in tone and confidence in Diganta's and Pradeep's imagining of what the future may hold, particularly the latter's, is important in highlighting increasing disparities that are emerging between residents, as some navigate towards secure well renumerated employment (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) and many others who are seeing their livelihoods become increasingly precarious. However both accounts reflect a denuding of historical sources of prosperity and a transformation through time of the types of dominant trajectories that come to be considered aspirational by residents and, in turn, towards which they orientate themselves and close ones.

3.5. *Poka* houses, aspiration and a denuded landscape

Placing these difficult relocations and hopes for children's futures in conversation with the increase in concrete-based building projects shows us something interesting. Similarly to discussions of desired livelihood trajectories, such dwellings enable a subjunctive in which people are able to put down something *fixed*, from which to grow their families and make plans for a

better future, in an all too liquid world. As outlined in the beginning of this chapter, in Majuli and across South Asia, building with concrete constituted important efforts towards familial upliftment and to make their lives more comfortable. As Diganta answered my question on the reasons why these days more and more residents were building *poka* houses:

> First, if people don't have much money, then they are not able to build these houses. But, when people come into money, then their minds don't go towards wanting to live in a broken or ordinary house (*jetiya toka poisa hoi jabo tetiya aru manuhe bhoga ba xadharon ghorot thakibo* mon nokore). Suppose, I have 10 lakh in a box and I don't build a house because I am thinking that it will go to the river. What's the benefit of having money in a box? I will live the whole of life in a broken house.

Diganta also described how an unknowingness about potential erosion did not serve to dissuade those residents who came into greater means to pursue such objects as part of efforts to live well:

> These days we [of this village/our *jati*] have dreams *(amaar aji/kali manuhor… xopon thake)*. Today, I may get a couple of coins or a little bit of money, or suppose I get a lot of money, then I will wear nice clothes, I will purchase a good car, I will roam around on a nice motorbike, I will build a good house – I will live beautifully (*dhuniyake thakim*). For these reasons, [concrete] houses are being built. You asked, why are they built? For all this time, the water has been chasing us *(ami jiman dinor pora pani kedise)*. It is chasing us! We have become very restless (*ami bur otistho hoi goisu)*. If this time this land goes [to erosion], then there is no other land to go to stay. Where is there to go? And, what will the government do? [What the government will do] is not certain. Finally, we do this, build these houses in which we can enjoy life. It is this mentality people have adopted (*eta monubhab loisu ai kini, manuh kini*). The people who are affected by erosion are always being cheated, they are being cheated. The water is cheating them (*panir babugit ji hokol poriase)*. Those people, like ourselves, now have this mentality, this way of thinking (*teoluke ami bilake, hey keneke bhabhisu).* We build houses after we became restless (*ami ghor bonua otistho hol).*

As both Diganta and Pradeep acknowledge, only households who came into greater financial resources were able to build these highly desirable dwellings, which left this as an unfeasible prospect for many residents. Whilst many households in Ximolupuria had managed to accrue the necessary capital or access to finances to build their *poka* houses without any family members possessing professional employment, these structures did nonetheless visualise increasing income disparities between households.

At the beginning of this chapter, the discussion with Dhruba concerning his family's house construction was particularly poignant, as the two potentialities of future domestic bliss and possible ruin were briefly allowed to touch. Like Dhruba, both Diganta and Pradeep acknowledged the disastrous possibilities that could be ushered in by erosion, but dismissed it as having any bearing upon decisions to build these structures for themselves and their families. Whilst the whims of the river and actions of state bodies fostered uncertainty and stood outside of the residents' control, by contrast pursuing a *xopon* (dream) of domestic bliss remained within one's bearing. It simply didn't make sense to diminish how one lived during the *many* days of the everyday, due to the possibility of a future catastrophe you could do little about. As Diganta suggested, what would be the point?

The imagery conjured by Pradeep of residents being perennially "chased" and "cheated" by (at least) the river was startling in emphasising what residents have previously and continue to endure. It is important however to not only conclude that these attempts at putting down something that is fixed and will endure were tinged with a greater emotional resonance due to the jeopardy posed to them by erosion. As argued in the previous section through the extended conversations with Diganta and Pradeep, aspirational trajectories, and associated prized objects, need to be located historically and understood as emerging through a rapidly shifting landscape and changing array of environmental affordances. As Pradeep told me:

> People have now started building *poka* houses. About twenty years ago, most peoples' houses were built of bamboo and straw. The walls of the houses were coated with clay and lime was applied. People loved living in such houses. It doesn't feel cold in winter, and it doesn't feel hot in summer. In today's world, people after seeing outside society and the very beautiful houses they have built, using bricks, Majuli's beloved straw houses are gradually disappearing. Those grasses are also not found now. Those grasses grow on the *chapori*, and so now they are missing as the *chapori* has gone [due to erosion]. In our original place, we had bamboo in our own gardens, but now this is lost. Because those things have disappeared, the fun of being in such a house seems to be forgotten

> (*heibilak naikiya huwar karone hei ghor bilakor amud pahori juwar nisina hol*). Nowadays, there is no straw, no bamboo. People build *poka* houses as they are unable to get these essential things. That's what it's all about. Otherwise, it's *so* nice to stay in a straw house. The straw house that I have built behind my [*poka*] house is very nice to be during the summer. I like it very much.

In what Pradeep had previously described as part of a "dream" (*xopon*) and as a desirable object embodying prosperity, *poka* houses were now also explained as a matter of necessity due to the scarcity of local materials. Rather than attempt to resolve these contradictions, I wish to conclude instead that it is important to keep alive the tensions that run through these accounts and histories. Loss of access to local building materials (such as bamboo and certain grasses), observations of trendy architectural designs in nearby locations and increased financial resources for some, refuse to be neatly separated from each other. Thinking landscape and history together (Harvey, Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2019:13) reveals not only how eroding lands, livelihoods and aspiration are forever in motion, but also that each is implicated within the other as these transformations unfold through time. Reorientations in aspirational trajectories therefore comprise not only movements towards novel avenues and objects, that may emerge through greater access to further education for example, but are also shaped by loss (and associated sadness) of prior abundance and now denuded sources of former prosperity.

3.6. Conclusion

Histories and potentialities of erosion and displacement for Ximolupuria residents has left them being perennially "chased" and "cheated" by the river. Sudden and extensive riverbank erosion in 1974 saw the village divided in two, with half of households relocating to the south bank through a state-led rehabilitation programme and the other half retreating further inland in Majuli, buying land from neighbours in an adjacent village. As lands have continued to erode through time, widespread doubts persist for residents about the ability of the state to fulfil its obligation to stabilise village and agrarian lands. Amidst an unknowing for residents of what both the river and state has in store for them, this chapter traces resident attempts to actualise desired forms of work and dwelling. I argue that holding livelihood transformations and construction of concrete dwellings together provides an important avenue to understand the dynamic relations between unruly landscapes, an indifferent state and residents' own projects for flourishing, and how together these shape emergent possibilities for life. As this chapter has shown, historicising

aspiration and situating it within these processes is not to prioritise an apparent *hopefulness,* as imbued within the dream (*xopon*) of concrete or of well renumerated professional employment, over a markedly less hopeful loss of agricultural abundance. Rather, it is to maintain the tensions that exist in this location between these visions of domestic bliss and erosion catastrophes.

Chapter 4: "Communication problem" and infrastructural promises

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I consider how the inconsistent flows that move people and things within Majuli and between neighbouring areas was regularly perceived by residents as indicative of Majuli's "communication problem" (*Majulir jatayotor ohubidha*). I begin by paying particular attention to the ferry service that links Majuli with the south bank of the Brahmaputra, which through my fieldwork emerged as a particularly troublesome node of communication for residents of Ximolupuria and the greater Kamalabari area. By doing so, I highlight that the ferry service as a stuttering connection, prone to sudden suspensions, incurs regular inconveniences for residents and leaves them vulnerable to considerable harms, particularly during the time of flood.

Having approximated the "texture" of this means of travelling and situated the stakes involved for Majulials and interbank commuters then provides a useful vantage point from which to consider a proposed road bridge that would connect Majuli and Jorhat Districts. The laying of the foundation stone in Kamalabari in 2016 with central and state politicians in attendance is recalled by many residents as a day of jubilation and signifier of transformation. However, as time went by and no further ground was broken other than for this ceremony, I heard how doubts began to emerge about the project. As many wondered, was this just another example of a cynical politicking that had served the purpose of gathering votes for the state election that had been held shortly afterwards? And so, consequently, would it all come to nothing?

I argue however that thinking with the bridge offers us more than a sketch of the deplorable behaviour of official representatives, and instead can show the enduring allure of modernist aspirations for constituents who feel they, and their lagging locations, need to "catch up" (2018: 46; Ferguson 1999). I make this case through an engagement with a growing body of anthropological work which takes infrastructural forms as central foci of analytical enquiry. The potential purchase of such approaches is the capacity they possess to trace important and dynamic relationships across scales, without losing site of the people touched by such projects or unmooring our analyses from a consideration of the political (Harvey 2018: 83).

Amidst the (ruins of) infrastructural promise in which the proposed bridge inhabited (see Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018: 27), I question in this chapter how prospective projects, particularly high-profile and much desired ones as in this case, were imagined by residents to reconfigure rhythms of daily life and relations with other people, places and the state. I approach the bridge as a "figurative [topos] for ethical judgement" (Bear 2015: 180-181) or surface through

which residents (and myself as researcher) could engage in what I call “bridge talk” and speculate about potentially destructive and/or generative life trajectories that it might help shape or bring into being. Far from suggesting a lack of contestation concerning this object which sometimes occasioned troubled discussion of what counted as too much or too little connection, the bridge emerging as a “necessity” (*proyojon*) instead highlighted that it stood for a future of smooth journeys *and* inclusion within a modern Assam.

4.2. “Communication problem”

Fig. 4.1. A ferry plying the route from Majuli to the south bank at Nematighat.

As I stood on the open ferry deck one afternoon in April 2018, various *chapori* rose from the brown impenetrable water of the Brahmaputra River, heavy with its silt load. Many *chapori* possessed a height of more than several metres above the low water level, forming the distinctive features for which this river and its braided channel are known. Sand was whipped off the top by a gentle wind and drained from the edges down into the river as if flowing through an hourglass. All would be submerged with the coming rains over the course of the next few months.

Such conditions pose difficulties for ferry crews to navigate as they transport passengers and cargo between banks. Bamboo markers had been firmly wedged into the muddy riverbed to mark the channels that pilots should follow, an annual task for employees of the Inland Water Transport Department of the Government of Assam. On that sunny afternoon, the ferry was not busy. The open deck was largely devoid of vehicles, which usually comprise mostly motorbikes with one to several cars or trucks, and many seats were left vacant in the covered mixed-gendered seated passenger section. Unlike many busier crossings, there were also no groups of men atop the corrugated metal roof covering, squatting to play the three-hard card game *tascard* for lower or higher stakes, and as a form of *timepass*.

Ferry journey times vary considerably, depending on route, direction of travel, weather conditions, seasonal water levels and currents. Travelling upstream during low water levels as we were, our crossing time outwards from Majuli towards Nematighat on the south bank would usually take between 1.5 and 2 hours. However, not long after departing Kamalabarighat, the ferry ran aground on a submerged sandbar. The crew laboured over the engine, trying to wrest ourselves free for some time. But, it seemed for the moment at least, we were beached.

Ferries running aground mid-river remains a periodic occurrence through the dry months of the year. Ferries can also become stuck or forced to drop anchor during fog and strong currents when the river is in spate if the pilot finds conditions unsafe to navigate. When this happens and the ferry cannot right itself, passengers are occasionally stranded for hours before another vessel can safely reach them and allow them to continue their journey to the opposite shore.[61] I sat with my friend Sanjib who was on his way back to his job in an insurance office in the considerably more well-connected south bank subdivision of Titabor, following a visit to his family home in Majuli. We bought cups of red tea from the vendor onboard, distracting ourselves from the delay by sipping the hot sweet drinks served in thin plastic glasses.

Such delays were frustrating for passengers, but were not unexpected. Over the course of my fieldwork, residents often lamented the unreliability of the ferry service and the stuttering flows of people and things it allowed. Resident responses both to my explicit questions on the subject and as part of the usual conversational fare in market areas and villages along Majuli's central belt, featured criticism of the delays, level of service and conduct of staff as well as the inadequacy of service provision during emergencies. Typical refrains lambasted the type of connectivity it fostered, to various degrees, from the "not great" (*eman bhal nohoy*) to "not good"

[61] In one particularly severe instance in July 2017, an acquaintance became stuck in the river for approximately 6 hours when their ferry was forced to drop anchor mid-river due to a strong current and fog (*khuwoli*) that prevented the pilot from seeing the bank. The stranded passenger updated others of their plight and eventual rescue via images and statuses uploaded in real-time on social media.

(*bhal nohoy*) to “absolutely bad” (*ekdom beya*). The odd person did suggest that the service was adequate and some pointed to how it had improved over time. For others who rarely travelled to the south bank (as well as a smaller number who had never made the journey in their lives), it did not pose a great concern. However, it was far more common to hear exasperated complaints by residents about the lengthy time spent on such journeys (*bohut homoi lage*). A university student returning to Majuli for a holiday from his studies once joked when travelling on the ferry that, “we Majulians must have spent a quarter of our lives travelling aboard these vessels!”. *Majulir jatayotor ohubidha* or “Majuli’s communication problem” were common phrases used to refer to, neatly summarise and critique these restrictions and slow-downs in the flows of people and goods across and out from Majuli.

This indefinite lengthening of commuter journeys clearly caused a great deal of inconvenience for travellers. However, more troubling was the ability to secure timely access to healthcare provision. In addition to long crossing times and potential interruptions, temporary and ad hoc suspensions of services to the south bank cause further issues. Ferry services close each day from mid- to late-afternoon and recommence the following morning. This is of particular issue when medical emergencies occur during these hours and patients require specialist treatment beyond the limited provisions available at the main health centres in Majuli.[62] As the Majuli Deputy Commissioner explained, he is able to sanction ferries at night time in emergency situations, and his phone often rings during these hours with the pleas of anxious family members, but this comes with risks. Poor visibility at night greatly increases the possibility of ferries beaching themselves midriver, which would result in a patient in critical condition being left stranded. It makes for an “impossible decision”.

The ferry service is also suspended during the time of flood, if there are safety concerns regarding strong currents and/or dangerously high water levels. This sometimes continues for multiple days at a time. Alongside fluctuating water levels are the changing political conditions in the state, including the not uncommon district- or state-wide strikes (*oxom bondho* or *bandh*), which, amongst other actions, entail the withdrawal of labour from the ferry service. When such suspensions occur, this in effect completely cuts off the near 170,000 residents of Majuli from being able to commute to work as well as avail themselves of the essential services and better provisions to be found in the towns on the more developed south bank of the river.

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[62] Since 2009, a dedicated ambulance boat (*Sify News* 2009) is available to transfer patients in more serious conditions across the river. This is equipped with basic medical equipment and traverses the river in significantly less time than the passenger ferries. In early 2018 (*Northeast Now* 2018), an upgraded version was put into operation at Kamalabarighat.

As we waited on the beached ferry that April afternoon, some passengers stood trying to reconfigure the logistics of their onward travel, in many instances via mobile phone with significant others. Other passengers, I imagined, sat performing cognitive gymnastics of their own whilst assessing how this indefinite delay stood to affect what they had planned. The uncertainty surrounding journey duration and arrival time, as well as the possibility of transferral to another ferry mid-river, was an effect of this "communication problem" - encompassing as it did a range of limited and problematic connections - that Majuli commuters were required to endure.

Luckily for us, after 30 or 40 minutes of forward and backward propulsion, our boat managed to pull itself free of the sandbar allowing us to continue our journey. Shortly afterwards, we again began to move between the various *chapori* that separated us from the ferry terminal on the south bank. The delay may not have been extensive (at least this time), but the question remained as to whether passengers would see their post-travel arrangements disrupted, whether that be an important doctor's appointment, business meeting, shopping trip in the bigger and better stocked regional bazaars, arriving too late for an important family function or catching important and expensive onward transport connections across the state and beyond for work and study.

4.3. The bridge

> The day the foundation stone was laid, I was present with a few of my friends. At the time, I was unemployed, and so I had gone along with a few people from my organisation *Oxom Anuxusit Jati Juwo-Sattro Xontha* (Assam Scheduled Caste Youth-Student Association). A large meeting was being held in Majuli's Dhoriya Field. Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, his cabinet colleagues and the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari were present. Many people had come to attend the meeting.[63] It was very fine weather. So many people had come. People of Majuli and many organisations had long demanded a bridge. People were so pleased to hear that finally the bridge was happening. Many people were enjoying themselves and they felt happy. I thought that it was good thing, that this bridge was very necessary (*khub proyojoniyo*) for us. I believed that it would happen. Certainly, we were happy to hear this news. Due

[63] At the time of the meeting, the BJP were yet to form the state government in Assam. The positions of Chief Minister and "cabinet colleagues" have been applied retrospectively by the speaker in this account. However, Nitin Gadkari was at the time Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways.

> to the absence of a bridge we, the people of Majuli, are facing many challenges here, and this would maybe solve many of our problems. It felt good and this made many people happy.
>
> Luit, Resident of Ximolupuria (August 2017).

In the context of a problematic ferry service, the laying of the foundation stone for a bridge that would connect Majuli with the south bank on February 27th 2016 was a large event in Majuli. As Luit recounted to me, the announcement and the ceremony designed and choregraphed to broadcast this commitment was received in Majuli with much fanfare. The public declaration that a bridge would be built caused jubilation among the large number of residents who had travelled in person to be present at the meeting. The attendance of high-profile union and state ministers affirmed the importance and legitimacy of such plans, for a project that was seen as a necessity (*proyojon*) by many in Majuli. The hope was that it could help reduce, if not solve, the multiple hardships that residents face.

However, the idea of a bridge is neither new nor novel. One previous well-known attempt was in 2010 when the then Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, made a speech at the Jhanjimukh festival in Jorhat District announcing that it would not be long before a bridge would be constructed across the Brahmaputra. Addressing the assembled crowd, he said his government had already requested that a survey be performed to determine the shortest distance from Majuli to the mainland and that, "[t]he bridge will be constructed either from Jhanji or from Neemati, depending on the distance" (*The Telegraph* 2010). However, this initiative soon ran into difficulties. The following year, there were reports that the bridge would instead cross the river further upstream connecting Lakhimpur and Sivasagar Districts thereby circumventing Majuli entirely. This change of plan was pinned on the apparent political opportunism of a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the affected neighbouring constituency, who desired the bridge (or at least the announcement of a bridge) for his electorate, given the upcoming state assembly polls. This MLA, in his political manoeuvrings, was said to have exploited and played upon a statement of opposition endorsed by several *satradhikars* in Majuli; it was said that they feared that a bridge, and the increased traffic that it would bring to the island, would harm Majuli's (still) ongoing bid to receive UNESCO's World Heritage Site status (*The Telegraph* 2011).

The iteration of the prospective road bridge at the time of my fieldwork (as far as could be ascertained from information that was publicly available) would, once built, become one of an increasing number of very long bridges in the country. (The exact length of the bridge was never confirmed during this period). The bridge would traverse the Brahmaputra between Jorhat and

North Lakhimpur running via Majuli at Kamalabari. At the time of the foundation stone laying, there was a simultaneous announcement of a second bridge that would connect Sivasagar and North Lakhimpur Districts (*The Hindu* 2016). Forming the shape of a large loop, the connecting roads between these two bridges, linking Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Majuli and Jorhat, were to be upgraded to the status of national highways (*The Hindu* 2016). As reported in *The Assam Tribune*, this status upgrade, when taken together with the construction of the twin bridges, "is expected to fulfil the long-cherished dream of getting smoother surface communication for lakhs of flood-hit population of Upper Assam districts" (2016, n.p.). As announced at the time by Gadkari at the foundation stone laying, the estimated cost of the Jorhat-Majuli-Lakhimpur bridge, was 10,000 crore rupees (approximately £1 billion), presumably to have come from the 100,000 crore rupee (approximately £10 billion) pot that the Union Government had supposedly already earmarked for infrastructure development in the Northeast over the proceeding 5 year period (*Assam Tribune* 2016).

There was a strategic political dimension here. The announcement of a bridge by the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways at Doriya Field in Majuli was performed during the campaign for the 2016 Assam Legislative Assembly Elections. With less than two months before polls were scheduled to open on April 4th, Nitin Gadkari on that single day laid the foundation stones for not only these two large road bridges, but also for more than 80km of new four-lane highway in the state, a ship repair facility in Guwahati and a new ferry service between Dhubri and Hatsingimari on the Brahmaputra (Kashyap 2016). As a member of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre, Gadkari criss-crossed virtually the entire Brahmaputra Valley that day, declaring the release of significant funds from the centre for these various projects.

These choregraphed functions were clearly designed with the ambition that they would assist in increasing the BJP vote share and return a greater number of BJP members to the Legislative Assembly in the upcoming state elections. Then Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi of the Congress did not attend any of these functions that day, saying in a statement put out by his office that evening, that, "I have never seen a central government like the present one going on a foundation stone-laying spree without preparing the [Detailed Project Reports]. They are out to hoodwink people with an eye on the elections" (Kashyap 2016).

Having made significant electoral gains in Assam in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP eyed the 2016 state assembly elections as an opportunity to firmly increase the party's presence within Assam and, with a meticulous election strategy, strove to win the state for the first time

ever (Rai and Vikram 2016).[64] Standing little chance of success in the four other state elections occurring that year, "the entire BJP leadership threw its weight behind the [Assam] campaign, ranging from star campaigners to small fry" (Gohain 2016, n.p.). As the well-known Assamese social scientist and scholar Hiren Gohain summarised in a newspaper article published not long after the election, the BJP's electioneering deftly and effectively combined a welcoming of popular defectors from other parties in the state and made shrewd alliances with smaller regional parties, as well as campaigning on the well-received "magic chant" of development and effectively translating their communal agenda to the specificities and anxieties posed by the perceived threat of Muslim migrants from former East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh to the "khilonjiya (indigenous) people" of the state (Gohain 2016).

Fig. 4.2. Photo accompanying Hiren Gohain's article 'The Assamese Do Not Really Know the Guests They Have Welcomed With Open Arms' featured in *The Wire* (2016, 20th May). Image accompanied with description: "Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves at BJP workers after being presented an Assamese japi and gamusa to mark the party's victory in the Assam assembly polls on Thursday" (Source: PTI/Vijay Verma).

The importance of winning Assam was again increased by it additionally being viewed as a "gateway" to the wider northeast region and thereby as a means to act as a foundation for the BJP to secure future electoral gains in the neighbouring states (Varma 2016). A priority at both

[64] The 2014 parliamentary election was the first time the BJP had taken the largest vote share and won the largest number of seats (7 out of the 14 available) in Assam (Bhuyan and Kishore 2016).

national and state levels of the party, the eventual BJP electoral sweep of Assam was greeted with a special mention at the BJP national executive meeting in Allahabad held within several weeks of the formation of the BJP-led state government in Assam (see fig. 4.2.). The resolution adopted on the final day of the event, a third of which was devoted to Assam, stressed the singular significance of the election win: "Assam holds an important place in the minds and hearts of millions of BJP *karyakartas* across the country…It signifies a major ideological victory for the Party" (Kalita 2016, n.p.). This watershed moment in the politics of the state was not lost on either BJP officials and staff in Allahabad or leftists such as Gohain residing back in Assam, as the state decisively turned saffron.

4.4. Infrastructural promises

The bridge was a promise that sat within a carefully planned and energetically fought campaign by the BJP to increase their vote share in the 2016 Assam Assembly election. Yet, thinking with the bridge offers far in excess of a relatively shallow rendering of the political machinations of a state election campaign. The idea of a bridge that would traverse the Brahmaputra between Majuli and the south bank stretches back far before the 2016 election, and looks set to far outlive the peculiar rhythms and bursts of activities that accompany the relatively short duration of election campaign cycles. It is not only that the proposal for a bridge, and the sentiments that have become attached to it for residents, are not to be taken lightly. In addition to this, it is that such large projects serve as a "figurative topoi" (Bear 2015: 180-181) for affected populations to imagine the various possibilities for life brought by such speculative projects.

In the introduction to their edited volume *The Promise of Infrastructure*, Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel helpfully explicate the temporal implications of such projects, succinctly capturing, "that new infrastructures are promises made in the present about our future" (2018: 27). In the case of Majuli, a prospective bridge holds the promise of smoother connectivity for residents in the future, in turn decreasing certain hardships, limiting risks in the case of emergencies and during the time of flood, and allowing for greater inclusion within the state economy. In the same volume, Akhil Gupta instructs us in this vein to view infrastructures as "concrete instantiations of visions of the future" (2018: 63). Adopting the perspective of infrastructure projects as always being future-orientated allows us to appreciate the role they play in shaping the present through a politics of *anticipation*. This horizon of anticipation, as Gupta reflects, could be anything from a few years to far into the future. Gupta argues that

treating infrastructures as a technology of and for the future can help distinguish three related but distinct aspects, which include: “as a physical presence in the landscape that channels communication, travel, and the transportation of goods; a biopolitical project that aims to address the health and welfare of the population while also facilitating discipline and control; and an aspirational project that functions as the symbol and index of a future becoming” (2018: 63). For Gupta, the latter two aspects of infrastructures are as important as the first; as I will now discuss, infrastructures stand as biopolitical projects and affective symbols of the future-orientated ambitions of nation-states.

The new temporalities that these projects bring into being affect not only those immediate groups and the better or changed services that they may come to experience through the so-called physical presence of new infrastructure. We must also recognise what such projects come to signify about the future for the territories in which they are or will be built. Brian Larkin (2013) has referred to this latter quality as the “poetics of infrastructure”, which can allow for the aspirational dimension to become just as important, if not dominant, over the technical. Or, put another way, the capacity for an infrastructure project to signify *something* about a place can therefore outstrip in importance the new, improved or altered flows that it allows for, or was supposedly designed for in the first instance. Anand, Gupta and Appel build on Larkin’s poetics arguing that, “[p]articular infrastructures signal the desires, hopes, and aspirations of a society, or of its leaders. Nation-states often build infrastructures not to meet felt needs, but because those infrastructures signify that the nation-state is advanced and modern” (2018: 19). Gupta views the contemporary haste to build new highly visible infrastructures in (what he still refers to as) “The Third World” as not only down to these countries having become richer and building according to their increasing needs and demands (which he says only offers a partial explanation), but also crucially in what the infrastructure *represents* to people within and without its borders: that the nation-state has now arrived, as a modern, industrial and developed entity.

In thinking with the flurry of infrastructure projects presently being built and planned in the Northeast, particularly with regards to the energy and transportation sectors, the now open Dhola-Sadiya bridge in Upper Assam offers a particularly illuminating example of how such large projects are just as important for what they signify, as for what smoothened flows they facilitate. The video segment played almost on a continuous loop on national and regional news networks of the inauguration of the bridge in May 2017 included extended footage of Prime Minister Narendra Modi striding alone along what appeared to be seemingly endless freshly laid tarmac. The effect of watching Modi walking away on the empty bridge, ever-diminishing in size, conveyed the sheer scale of the project and served to emphasise the spectacle of the occasion

(Zulfiqur Rahman 2019). Even the PM wanted more time to take in the size and majesty of the project, which we as viewers were allowed to be (repeatedly) privy to through the consumption of the news cycle on our variously sized screens.

As well as significantly reducing journey times between this part of Assam and eastern Arunachal Pradesh (*The Hindu* 2017), the longest bridge in India that runs over the Lohit River was hailed in the media as allowing swifter troop movements, including being capable of supporting "the weight of a 60-tonne battle tank", in the "strategic" border region with China (*The Economic Times* 2018). On a visit there in early 2018 with several friends, I found it appeared predominantly as a pleasant picnicking spot. Force Traveller people-carriers were parked by the dozen on the north side of the bridge, beside one of the many *hotels* that served tea, snacks and rice meals to the visiting "day-trippers". The majority of people we encountered that day were tourists on a Sunday out, just as we were ourselves. It was thus a spot to visit, picnic with family and friends, and take selfies (slightly precariously) on the length of bridge itself before returning home the way you had come, from the bridge you had never needed to cross in the first place.

Infrastructure projects in India, most notably in the case of large dams, are commonly constructed as tourist destinations. As Gupta describes, a great deal of planning goes into how tourists will encounter the dam, which includes from which direction they will enter the site to where they will park their vehicles. These "modern" infrastructure projects, whether dams, airports or high-tech institutions, will be "built with beautiful landscaping, lawns, flowering gardens, and high-tech fountains so that people can come and participate in the making of the modern nation-state" (2018: 67). As he notes, many tourists would be barred from going beyond the manicured gardens and entering the actual sites themselves. However, this does not diminish the pedagogical and performative roles served by such infrastructures as part of a biopolitical project for creating citizens who share the hope of inhabiting a modern future.

In the case of the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge, planning on the part of engineers for how tourists will encounter and participate with the bridge does not appear evident (even if private entrepreneurs have opened and run a range of amenities and services beside or near the bridge for the benefit of visitors, as mentioned). Nonetheless, the project still effectively performs the function of signifying to populations how to engage with/in such infrastructure *and* that such engagements are what it is to live in a modern, developed and aspiring Assam and India. As filmed, edited and broadcast by the obliging national and regional media, Modi and his team certainly served up a perfectly choreographed and deeply affective display, conveying the awesomeness and significance of the bridge and the type of futures it will apparently help foster and allow to flourish. This performance concurs with Penny Harvey's observation on road

construction in the Peruvian Amazon that, "[i]naugurations are public rituals that seek to fold construction work, which an engineering company and often a fairly large and dispersed workforce have brought about, *back into a narrative of state-led development*" (2018: 94, my emphasis).

Whilst profoundly differing in ideology, Modi, like his predecessor the first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, has maintained, if not arguably renewed, a faith that infrastructure forges a path to a modern and developed future for India. As Gupta writes, every school child in India can quote Nehru when he declared, at the inauguration of the Bhakra Nangal dam in Punjab in 1954, that, "[t]hese are the temples of modern India". I suspect too that one would be hard-pressed to find a student, at least in Assam, who wouldn't be able to recall and recite the 9.15km length of the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge. Modi on this occasion did not execute quite as elegant a manoeuvre of fusing India's past with its future as Nehru did in his repeatedly cited speech. However, the current Prime Minister certainly didn't miss this opportunity for generating a highly affective public engagement with this project and cementing its role as an index of the ongoing progress and development of the nation-state and region with the BJP at the helm.

Acknowledging the role new infrastructure plays within biopolitical projects and as powerfully affective signifiers of modernity and progress, it is vital not to lose sight that these tropes of development are not ideal abstractions for residents of the region. Far from existing at a distance from quotidian life, many of these projects make themselves intimately felt and "press into the flesh" (Fennell 2015: 32). This can be especially evident in the case of inconsistent, stuttering infrastructure projects, or in the absence of longed-for newer ones. Consider how a *kesa rasta* (literally "unripe road", or packed earth road) in Majuli in the dry season makes itself known to motorcycle riders through every bump. The uneven surface was "acknowledged" on uncountable occasions between Ximolupuria to Kamalabari, whether that be by the grimaces on the faces of those occupying the less comfortable passenger seat or the frequent comment, "*rasta bohut beya*" (this road is *very* bad). The same could be said of the discomfort of passengers aboard a crowded ferry on a sticky monsoon afternoon, or the deep frustration of those who haven't had power for three days due to a damaged transformer. Being encompassed within Majuli's "communication problem" as discussed earlier, these inconsistent flows sat as powerful markers of its continuing "backwardness" for many residents. As these brief examples in Majuli point towards, "[g]overnance, it turns out, does not take place at a distance but through the intimacy and proximity of toilets, pipes, and potholed roads" (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018: 27). The political can be glimpsed not only in relation to the affect generated during the inauguration

of large bridges by aspiring strong-man politicians, but also in domestic sanitation arrangements and the condition of the village road.

Infrastructure projects, thus understood, reach across scales and modes of experience. They press into our flesh, and are highly intimate in this regard. Nonetheless they still also allow us to look back and reflect upon the state of "development" of the country, region or area in which we live. It is the scalar plasticity of infrastructure, and the multiple spheres where important and novel connections can be traced, which gives it such analytic purchase. This is demonstrated in the increasing number of contemporary anthropological studies that take infrastructure as the core focus. As Harvey has recently written, "infrastructural forms offer a focus for the analysis of contemporary social life that side-steps the limits of humanism without erasing the human, and allows for a dynamic and open sense of scale that does not assume a singular perspective" (2018: 83). Infrastructure offers anthropologists an eloquent means to work across scales, foregrounding the political without losing the hue and power of ethnographic insight.

The announcement of new infrastructure, as in the case of a bridge between Majuli and the south bank, comprised future promises between the state and publics that would come to be touched by it. However, in the period since the foundation stone laying in February 2016, little work towards this goal has been observably achieved from the perspective of residents. As Luit continued in our conversation together in August 2017:

> Some days after they laid the foundation stone for the bridge, there was an election. Some people started saying [that this announcement] was therefore only for election purposes. But, we did not think like this, we thought that it was a truthful thing [they had said] and up to this day we are still hoping that it will happen. It's a big budget project after all and so the bridge will be built slowly (*lahe lahe*). Genuinely, the BJP people are saying until now that the bridge will certainly happen, that they will do it. But, the people from the opposition, these people say it won't. They say that this time they aren't able to do it, that they won't. But, still, we think it *will* happen, but maybe it will be a little late. The Chief Minister of the Assam government has also since said that they have put the [Detailed Project Report] out to tender, and given it to contractors to fulfil, which leads us to think that it might be a truthful thing.

In the period that followed the foundation stone laying, we see how doubt emerged for some as to whether this announcement should be believed and, in a connected fashion, whether

those making it should be trusted. On a general level, Luit correlated these “positions” as existing along the lines of political parties and their supporters, with the opposition having argued that the foundation stone laying was for “election purposes” only and would not therefore come to fruition. Luit had been an active supporter of the BJP in the 2016 Assembly elections. Along with many other voters in the state and in Majuli, he had for the first time switched his long-time electoral allegiance from the Congress Party. More than providing them his vote at the ballot box, he had also campaigned on behalf of the local party branch. The latter point may, at least partially, explain why the politicking of both governing and opposition parties featured prominently in his description. In either case, Luit was adamant that, despite this emergence of doubt, a majority of residents retained faith that a bridge at some point in the future (even if delayed) would still come to be constructed across the Brahmaputra.

Large infrastructure projects can take decades to complete before they begin operation. Developmental time in locations where infrastructure serves as a metonym of modernity is often constructed upon the better tomorrow flowing from a necessarily deferred today (Appel 2018). Even long after the myth of developmental time has been called out by social scientists and undermined within their accounts, it is nonetheless an enduring telos for politicians, policy makers and populations of desiring constituencies alike (Ferguson 1999). Gupta has urged anthropologists not to approach infrastructure through apparent stages of its completion which give way to the above teleologies and favour a “well-worn script of modernity” (2018: 62). The lives of infrastructure projects are myriad and emerge across various trajectories, whether within the erratic stops and starts of construction, inauguration of partially “finished” projects, the continual repair and maintenance “after” construction, as well as the complete abandonment of others. Suspension here is one of many trajectories that infrastructure may take, generating its own effects and temporalities that are particular to itself.

At the time of writing, construction on the bridge at Majuli had still not begun. Media reports periodically circulated that detailed the progress (or lack thereof) of planning and construction, including the cancelling of the tender with two South Korean companies to prepare the Detailed Project Report (DPR) due to “alleged non-performance” (*The Telegraph* 2017) or a more recent call by the Chief Minister to the Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari to expedite the construction work (*The Times of India* 2019). Figuratively, no shovel had yet disturbed the earth on either bank, but the spectacle of the foundation stone laying ceremony in 2016 and the commitment made by the now elected state government ran deep here and brought with it keen expectation. And so, whilst building work has yet to begin, it is this promise within the shadow of a phantom bridge that Majuli residents could assess, contemplate

and discuss the generative and/or destructive potentialities that such a project would bring. It is to these speculations and deliberations of residents and how this project may or may not stand to remake important connections for them and for those that live in Majuli that I now wish to turn.

4.5. Bridge talk: too little or too much connection

4.5.1. Wanted connection

During my fieldwork I did not follow any engineers who may (or may not) have been engaged in planning or building a bridge across the Brahmaputra.[65] Construction had not begun, and so there were no material interventions, activities or people that one *could* follow in Majuli in this regard. As we have heard, the bridge was a promise, whether to be kept or broken, and the lack of activity was conspicuous to residents. Yes, there were ceremonies, speeches and announcements made *about* the bridge, some of which were powerfully affective. And, as reported in the media, a tender was issued for the preparation of the DPR, although as we have also heard, this company had its contract terminated due to "alleged non-performance" for which it was apparently also referred to the police (*The Telegraph* 2017). Therefore, there may have existed small loci of activity within relevant state government departments, and those of the private companies who had won tender, but these were oblique and difficult to trace ethnographically. The bridge was speculative, shaped by those above artefacts of ceremonies and speeches as they came in bursts and amidst long stretches of inactivity.

The final section of this chapter is therefore not about those who were (potentially) charged, within technical and logistical capacities, to bring the bridge into being. Rather, it seeks to consider the proposed project from the vantage point of those whose daily rhythms it stood to reconfigure. Considering infrastructure as "figurative topoi for ethical judgement" (Bear 2015: 180-181), I wish to explore how the proposed bridge provided a surface for residents to reflect upon and evaluate potential destructive and/or generative life trajectories that are imagined to spin off from the future project. As a still-unrealised piece of infrastructure (although one that as a powerful idea has had prolonged incubation), following Bear, it offers a ground for residents to imagine relations with other people, with the state and with those charged with governing them

[65] I regularly met and conversed with engineers and staff within the Public Works Department and related civil departments as well as private contractors who were engaged in building embankments and roads in Majuli during my fieldwork. However, I did not encounter in Majuli any construction or planning activity concerning the bridge, other than on one occasion, when I came upon a small survey team taking measurements with a theodolite at Kamalabarighat.

as well as with technological objects. As Penny Harvey (2018) has asked about the building of roads in Peru for those who have not been served by them, and who desperately want them, what are the "grounds of expectation" that come attached to such projects? Taking seriously the expectations, imaginings and desires of marginalised publics (Ferguson 1999), how might considering these expectations of the project put such relations into relief? In addition to this, how might this also aid our understanding of how residents imagine how their lives may come to be transformed by them, whether these reconfigurations be desired or unwanted?

Over the course of my fieldwork, the subject of the bridge cropped up in multiple contexts. It featured in many conversations I had with Majuli residents across the district, public meetings that I attended, interviews with civil officials and engineers as well as a school debating competition. Ximolupuria being situated near to Kamalabarighat and adjacent to where the proposed bridge was presumed/imagined/planned to be built across, made it an interesting location from which to consider resident evaluations of how this prospective infrastructure project was imagined to reconfigure the speed and smoothness of important flows of connection into and out from Majuli.

My primary interest was not in quantifying support (or lack thereof) for the project, or at least it wasn't limited by this aim. (The vast majority of residents expressed they were in favour of a bridge being built, several emphatically so and many on balance). Rather, the "bridge talk" I myself initiated, participated in and heard sought to discover what was felt to be at stake for residents. I will here offer a selection of resident responses and comments in order to chart the various contours of these conversations. Unless otherwise stated, what follows comes from semi-structured interviews I conducted as either part of, or as following on from, a household survey in Ximolupuria in March 2018.

The ruins of promise in which the idea of the bridge was grounded, far from fixing its current status as comprising one among many existing on a continuum from inception to completion, instead allowed for a plurality of imagined outcomes to germinate for residents. Dates and locations were discussed, speculated upon, and doubts, hopes and fears attached themselves to, or spanned out from, these future possibilities. Cautiously optimistic disclosures ("I have heard it is happening") sat alongside the decidedly less expectant ("We wish for a bridge for when people are ill. But, the government does not give it. The hope (*axa*) is small"). Through this talk it was clear that many residents found their current conditions of connectivity with the south bank problematic and wanted for enhanced connection, as the following resident responses demonstrate:

Our connectivity is not very good. A bridge is a necessity (*proyojon*).
Bor bhal nohoy, dolongkhon proyojon.

The ferry takes a long time. Two hours. It would take five minutes with the bridge. We also want the bridge in the case of emergencies and for when people become ill.

I would like a bridge. Then I would be able to travel by motorbike.
Dolongkhon bisare. Bikeloi jabo paribo.

[If there was a bridge] then within one hour I could travel, do my work and return. The ferry takes a lot of time and runs late.

Once the bridge is built, then if a problem (*ohubidha*) occurs it is possible to travel to Jorhat at night.
Dolong hole, ohubidha hoy tetia raati jorhatot jabo pare.

I am not satisfied. It takes a long time to make the journey. Three-four hours will become thirty-forty minutes and there will be no timetable.

If family die outside [of Majuli] and the ferry service isn't running then there can be a problem. We won't get to see them.

There are problems when ferries get stuck on the sand banks.

The ferry is not very good. It runs late.

There are problems with our connectivity. It takes a lot of time. "Time loss" happens. I would like a bridge, for in cases of needing a doctor or when people are ill. But, the government has not given a bridge. The hope is small.
Jatayotor ohubidha, besi homoi lage. Time loss hoise. Doctoror karone, baema karone bisare. Osustho manuhor karone. Kintu, sorkare dolong nidiye. Axa kom ase

There are many problems with our communication. The ferry takes two hours - that's a long time. If there was a bridge, then people could travel at night.
Jug-a-jug bohut ohubidha hoy. Dui ghota lage, bohut homoi. Raati t jabo paribo.

Everyone wants a bridge!
Protijon dolongkhon lage! Sob manuh dolongkhon bisare!

The problematic traffic/transportation (*jatayot*) and communication (*jugajug*) flows characterised by the ferry service, as we see here, were found severely lacking by many residents. In contrast, the prospective bridge was frequently framed as providing swift and unimpeded access to the south bank. The speed and ease of movement of people and things that it would facilitate would reduce a lengthy and uncomfortable journey to an imagined one comprising a third of the time, if not less, depending on the ambitions of the speaker. No longer dependent on the ferry timetable, residents could travel on the bridge on their own transport and at a time of their choosing. This newfound convenience would comfortably allow for outward and return travel to the towns on the south bank within the same day. In the case of emergencies, whether day or night, enhanced medical treatment could be sought on the south bank.

At its simplest, but nonetheless most profound, “infrastructures shape the rhythms and striations of social life” (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018: 6). Imagined in wonderfully pleasant terms by many residents, the bridge as a prospective infrastructure project would reconfigure the speed and smoothness of important flows of connection into and out from Majuli. Accelerated connectivity would allow for more timely access to essential services, including healthcare and in the case of emergencies. However, as well as improving access to any one of these amenities, it was the more general sense of open possibility that comes attached to unimpeded and enhanced connectivity, that was so powerfully alluring, and inflected many of the responses included above. Whether for work, medical or official appointments, in the case of a funeral of a relative or within the suddenness of an emergency, one would *simply be able to go*. As we heard from Luit earlier, the bridge for some time now had become seen by many as a “necessity” (*proyojon*).

4.5.2. Loss of Peace

One afternoon in late March 2018 I sat waiting for sweet red tea in the guestroom of one of the houses nearest the river in Ximolupuria. The family had moved to the village six years previously, after the *chapori* where they had lived was washed away into the river. Their *kesa ghor* (mud plastered house) was without

electricity as the line was yet to reach them. The householder told me that things had been beautiful then, before they were forced to move due to erosion.

When I broached the subject of the bridge, she mentioned that her eldest child along with the rest of the class in a nearby secondary school in Kamalabari had been told by the teacher that the people of Majuli want the bridge and that it would be a positive development for the district. Similarly to all Majulials, she told me she too was in favour of the bridge. Whilst the teacher's words were not shocking in that they stuck to what had become part of the dominant discourse on the subject, it was striking to hear how settled the narrative had become that it could be conveyed didactically in such a way.

I encountered this flattening of dissenting voices concerning the virtues of the proposed bridge on several occasions in Ximolupuria, with several residents emphatically declaring that, "*everyone* wants the bridge" (*protijon dolongkhon lage* or *sob manuh dolongkhon bisare*). In addition to this often being repeated in the moment for emphasis, on one occasion when sitting with half a dozen residents, I was urged with an untypical urgency by a person I was less well acquainted with to use my pen and notepad to write down Majulials' apparent unanimous backing of the bridge. As he stood over me watching me write, he explained to me that to do so was "strategic", presumably that confirming mass support was one more active effort towards helping bringing the bridge into being. Of significance here was how the assertion of "everyone wants a bridge" shut down other viewpoints.

Attempts to reconfigure the daily rhythms of our and our neighbours' daily lives can be highly contested affairs. Whilst some residents argued that the bridge was an uncontested "necessity", many others expressed wariness, as well as sometimes enmity, towards the project. Rituparna made this clear to me in no uncertain terms when I visited their house that same month. Beside a blue fishing net that had been laid out in the front courtyard, Rituparna squatted on a low stall beside baskets of small pink onions and garlic bulbs. "Today, you remembered us," (a*ji amaark monot thakile*) she greeted me warmly, as she continued to sort through the freshly harvested produce from their garden plot on the nearby *chapori*, deciding which to keep and which to be saved for replanting. A light film of dust rose above her hands as they moved.

After chatting for a while, I asked Rituparna and her sister-in-law who had joined us, whether they thought the bridge would or would not come to be built (*dolongkhon nirman kora hobo ne nohobo?*). Upon mention of the bridge, the action of sorting vegetables between baskets quickly ceased. Turning towards me, Rituparna exclaimed:

Rituparna: It will not happen! If the bridge is built then thieves and dacoits will come at night. We do not want the bridge to be built. Our things will be stolen [gesturing to their belongings in the courtyard], and the cows will be taken [from the chapori]. We will certainly be scared and we won't be able to sleep at night! And, the cars will travel very fast [across Majuli] towards Lakhimpur. This is dangerous and many accidents will happen.
Nohobo! Jodi dolongkhon hole, tetia ratit sur ahibo, dacoit ahibo. Dolongkhon bonaibo nibisaru. Amaar bustu tu lobo, goruloi jabo. Ami bhoy koribo lagibo, tuponi najaam! Aru gari bilak Lakhimpuroloi bohut joldi jabo. Aitu bipodjonok, bohut accident hobo.

Tom: Is there any benefit to that bridge?
Hei dolongkhonor kunu labh ase neki?

Rituparna: There are some good things and some bad things. Some people want it, some people do not.
Kisuman bhal kotha, kisuman beya kotha. Kisuman manuhe bisare, kisuman manuhe nibisare.

Tom: What about in the case of emergencies? Or childbirth?

Rituparna: They can go to Garamur Civil Hospital [7km away from Ximolupuria in the administrative centre of Majuli]. The hospital boat takes 30 minutes [to cross the river].
Garamur civil hospitaloloi jabo pare, aru hospitalor nowkhon adda ghonta lage.

I was struck in the moment of how energetically both women related the fear inspired in them by thieves (*sur*) and bandits or armed robbers (*dacoit*) from the city, widely perceived as crime-ridden places. The bridge would allow such people to come under the cloak of darkness to steal cattle from the cow sheds on the *chapori* at the edge of the village just beyond their houses, before vanishing back over the bridge and into the anonymity of the spaces from which they came. Whilst acknowledging the mixed blessings and support for a bridge, Rituparna also pointed to existing service provision and downplayed the acuteness of any perceived problems that justified construction. Many other residents expressed similar (and some distinct) concerns over what greater connection would bring with it:

I do not want the bridge. Outsiders will come and will be disrespectful. There will be many thieves and dacoits. It will not remain a peaceful environment. If the bridge happens, then I will not know who many people are.
Nibisaru, bahiror manuh ahibo, ulai koribo. Sur dacoit besi hobo. Hunti poribex nathakibo. Jodi dolong hol, tetia bohut manuh sini napabo.

Our connectivity is good. For some reasons I want [the bridge], for some reasons I do not want [the bridge]. I want the bridge because of the ferry. But, now I am not scared. If the bridge happens, then I will certainly be scared. There are no thieves and dacoits now.
Jatayot bhal. Kisuman kothar karone bisaru, kisuman kothar karone nibisaru. Bisaru, ferryor karone. Kintu, etiya bhoy nokore. Jodi dolongkhon hole, tetia bhoy koribo lagibo. Sur, dacoit etyia nai.

There are some problems with our connectivity. Because of the ferry. The bridge is needed. But, now there are no problems. Thieves and dacoits will come at night, which I do not want. I have heard [the bridge] will happen.
Jatayot alop ohubidha hoy. Nowor karone. Dolongkohn lage. Kintu, etiya digdha nai. Dacoit sur raatit ahibo - nalage. Hobo bulli hunisu.

[Our connectivity] is good. I do not want [the bridge]. It is a peaceful place. There is xotriya culture here.
Bhale. Nalage. Hunti jega. Xotriya hunskriti ase.

[Our connectivity] should be a little better. With the ferry, [outsiders] can roam in Majuli but it is restricted. It is good as it is.

I do not want it. It is a peaceful place. [If a bridge is built] it will become more like a town… Satra dharmo in the middle of the river. Sankardev came here.

I do not want it. The ferry is running. Thieves and dacoits will take cows from the chapori.
Nalage. Ferry soliase. Chaporir pora sur dacoit goru lobo jabo.

Now, it is peaceful. If the bridge happens, it will not remain peaceful.
Etiya hunti hoy. Nalage. Dolongkhon hole, hunti nathake.

> If the bridge happens, then dacoits and thieves will come. Our peace will end. The ferry is fine. (*Dolongkhon hole, dacoits, sur ahe. Hunti hekh hobo. Nowe thik ase*).

Whilst residents of both genders expressed the above misgivings, it became clear over time and in consultation with my field notes that women made up a greater proportion of those who intimated that the bridge would bring with it *too much* connection. As a follow-up to the last comment featured above, I asked, "Older Sister, women seem more worried than men about the bridge being built. Why is that?". She responded, "we stay at home, that is why we worry" (*ami ghorot thaku, heikarone ami sinta koru).* The anticipated arrival of outsiders appeared to have elicited greater anxiety for certain women as it is they who remain alone in or around their households for much of the day (or at least in the absence of more mobile male householders). When considering increased connections and smoothened flows with both desirable and undesirable elements, we must appreciate that the reconfiguration of rhythms of daily life in this regard stand to affect persons unevenly. Social position is thus refracted through differentiated access to infrastructure (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018: 6) and the type of engagements that it makes possible.

What type of persons would be able to make use of the accelerated and smoothened flows that a bridge would afford clearly generated disquiet for many residents of both genders. The perceived security inherent to *limited* connectivity was deemed as likely to be fatally undermined by the prospect of dangerous others, namely thieves and *dacoits*, being afforded unimpeded access to their village under the cloak of darkness to steal their cattle (which presently did not need to be guarded at night) and do who knows what else. Even if accepting the boons that a bridge may bring, limitless connectivity was imagined to incur sleepless nights and an end to residents' peace (*hunti hekh hobo*), jeopardising a precious way of being. The trouble was that the traffic would go *both* ways.

4.6. "Come and visit Majuli now…"

> It's very difficult nowadays to totally get disconnected [from] the outside world, and facilities, like hospitals and medical care, and commercial establishments, maybe shops, theatre, whatever you say. So, it becomes difficult or unbelievable in these times to say a place becomes disconnected, with all of these human demands… It's my personal opinion, I think the bridge should be there. From

> peoples' perspective, those challenges will become reduced/solved with a bridge. In this age and times, you should have proper communication with where you want to go".
>
> (Majuli Deputy Commissioner Pallav Gopal Jha, D.C. Office, Garamur, Majuli, February 2018).

"Proper communication" had become essential "nowadays" and its absence "unbelievable", as the youthful DC told me in his office between appointments with constituents. Nearing the end of his 18-month tenure as Majuli's first Deputy Commissioner, Jha was reflecting on his task of putting in place the infrastructure required of district status after it was granted in 2016. Not long after arriving in Majuli, he "moved around and met people" and, in so doing, identified three "major problems" that he understood as being faced by residents: floods, erosion and rural connectivity (inclusive of transport and telecommunications).

It was not simply that Jha appeared to have had his finger on the pulse of popular opinion, but that his comments showed how a "communication problem" - never a neutral description - had emerged in a specific historical moment. Never only a story about the mixed blessings of development projects or the instrumental workings of electoral politics, talking about and thinking with the bridge showed the powerful persistence of modernist dreams for desiring constituents (Ferguson 1999). As noted earlier and here described by Hannah Appel, "[t]hough the staged theories in which infrastructure was mobilized have now been rejected as valid social scientific description, anthropologists have often noted that modernization theory still hangs out ethnographically. People around the world talk in terms of developmental time, progress and relapse, of being behind and needing to catch up" (2018: 46; Ferguson 1999).

In July 2019, Gaurav, a young tourist guide who had recently opened his own lodge in the Garamur area and who I had come to know well through fieldwork, posted two videos on Facebook during a severe wave of flooding across the Brahmaputra Valley. The first video titled 'Majuli Flood…' featured him speaking to camera on the back of a moving motorbike on his way to Kamalabarighat. As he passed residents encamped under tarpaulin on the road, amidst sheltering chickens and pigs, speaking to camera he tells us, "you can see the tragedies that are being suffered by the Majuli people. This is the real picture of Majuli suffering". In the second video posted shortly afterwards, he walks into frame and stands in front of camera in the manner of a news anchor (see Fig. 4.3.). As others behind him cycle or wade through ankle-deep water at the edge of the road to the Ferry Ghat, which had become impassable due to floodwater, he says, "Hi guys. This is the road connecting to the Kamalabarighat. Now this is under flood. So these are

some practical problems, which we are facing being a Majulian. So the big question is about the installation of bridge. So where are those guys who are opposing the connecting bridge to Majuli and Jorhat”.

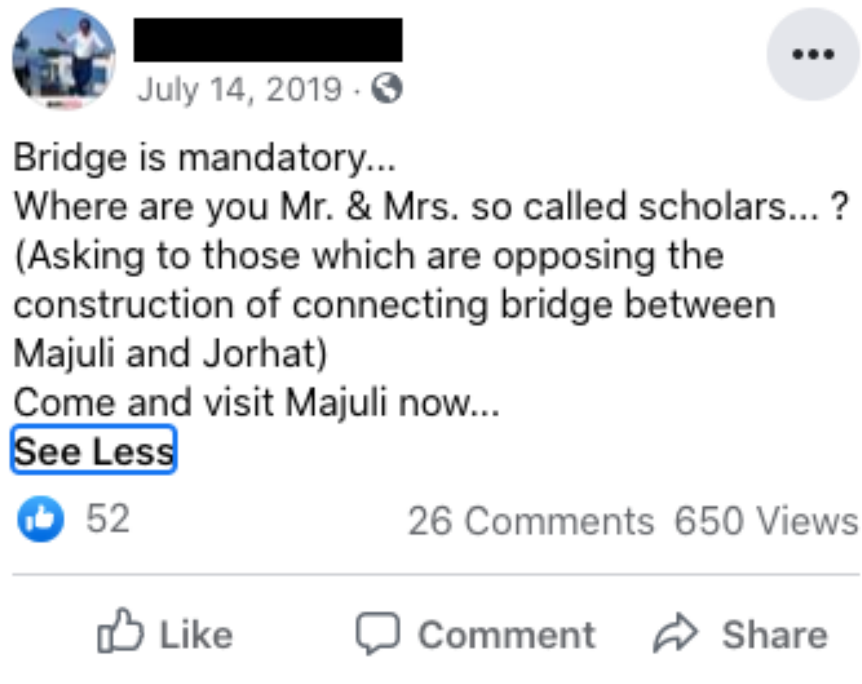

Fig. 4.3. The caption accompanying Gaurav’s second video. July 2019. (Facebook).

“So called scholars… Come and visit Majuli now….” Gaurav’s challenge framed opposition voices to a proposed bridge as elite persons who made such claims in absentia, remote and unaffected by the tough conditions and suffering endured by residents during the time of flood. Speaking in English may have been intended to reach as large an audience as possible of this target demographic, although he commonly posted videos in both English and Assamese. The case for the bridge being “mandatory”, as we have heard of many Ximolupuria residents describing the bridge as a “necessity” (*proyojon*) and wanted by “everyone” (*protijon*), similarly served to flatten dissent (whether or not this comprised distant and unentitled individuals and groups).

More powerful still, was delivering this message via the immediacy of social media during flood and consequent suspension of routes to the south bank. Speaking directly to camera as the sound of water lapped against his ankles and being unable to move any further along the road focused the attention of viewers on the unbearable *nowness* of disconnection. This was perhaps even more effectively captured by another image in Majuli that was widely shared on Facebook at the same time, which showed a young man knee-deep in water with a sign that read “we need this bridge” (*amak aikhon dolong lage*) (see Fig. 4.4.). The situated demands for a bridge by

protagonists who literally stand stranded in floodwaters travel with relative immediacy as images taken on smart phones and circulating on social media. Both Gaurav’s video and this image bring past, present and future together in an instant and act as a constellation of futurity and present absences (Appel 2018: 58; Benjamin 1999: 462).

Fig. 4.4. An image widely shared on Facebook of an artist from Majuli standing in flood water with a sign that reads “we need this bridge” (*amak aikhon dolong lage*). July 2019 (Facebook).

The stuttering communication flows in Majuli here served as a metonym of its marginality and as the perceived root (at least in part) for the suffering of residents. Anthropologists may be well placed to trace ethnographically how the lives of infrastructure projects, through a plurality of stop-start trajectories from incompletion to abandonment, perennially disrupt development narratives of linear progress. And yet, the idea nonetheless persists. As Appel notes, “desire for the infrastructural world with which developmental time has come to be associated— paved roads and skyscrapers, running water and electricity— *is a claim on material equality in a profoundly unequal world* (2018: 58, my emphasis). The challenge made explicit in Gaurav’s video is to those who would deny the claim of Majuli residents for this “material equality” and greater inclusion within the social and economic flows within the region. As a journalist friend who worked as a Majuli correspondent for a state news network phrased it when talking about opposition to a bridge from outside Majuli, “Why should we be a museum?”

4.7. Conclusion

The proposed bridge is currently suspended amidst ruinations of promise. Thinking with the bridge however, provides us much more than a summary of intrigues of the workings of a state election campaign or a story of the mixed blessings of development projects. Engaging in "bridge talk" with residents enlivened the future connections and altered flows that were imagined would be brought into being by this piece of infrastructure. A tension between too little and too much connection emerged as central for residents to the types of prosperous and/or destructive possibilities that were thought to spin out from this project. Despite concerns about an unrestricted connectivity that was considered to bring with it the arrival of undesired Others, the insistence by a louder majority that the bridge was a "necessity" (*proyojon*) smoothed over these divergent voices. As a concrete object, the bridge once built would yield less resistance in the movement of people and things hereto unknown in Majuli and was most commonly positioned by residents as a future condition that would prevent suffering and foster more generative potentialities for life. As a metonym of modernity (Appel 2018), the bridge also comprised a powerfully affective symbol of what it was to live in a developing and aspiring Assam and India. Demands for expeditious construction, and associated criticisms of Majuli's "communication problem" amidst the unbearable *nowness* of disconnection, advanced resident claims for greater inclusion within these transformative processes in the state.

Chapter 5: *Morom*, Assam and hospitality in India's Northeast

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I take up a recent interest in hospitality within anthropology (Candea and Da Col, 2012) in order to unpack historical and contemporary claims of national belonging within the state of Assam. I do so by first narrating my own "farewell scene" (*bidai drisso*) from my field site of Majuli Island at the end of 15-months of ethnographic research. I reflect on how this was filmed by a local news crew and on the reception the news segment received in Assam and on social media. This will serve to draw out popular notions and discourses surrounding "Assamese" hospitality within the region. Not only does this allow for important insights into my own positionality as a foreign and privileged researcher in South Asia, but more poignantly and interestingly it sets out who can be judged as a "good guest" worthy of hospitality. I then use the opening this provides to consider the counterpart to these claims, namely the demands for the exclusion of so called "infiltrators" within the state who, it is argued, should be refused this hospitality. I argue that this issue takes on added significance given the colossal exercise of updating the National Registration of Citizens (NRC) in Assam that was ongoing during my fieldwork, which assessed which persons do and which do not count as legitimate citizens of India and the potential consequences for (non-)citizen rights granted by the state. The framing of migration through notions of hospitality and host/guest relations is indeed problematic, given the ready capacity of hospitality discourses to slip scales, which obfuscates rather than elucidates relations. Ominously, this muddles the types of obligations and entitlements people can reasonably expect to fulfil/enjoy in their homes and those of others, as well as within the nation-states in which they reside. However, I go on to argue that dwelling upon hospitality and considering how people themselves deploy hospitality, as animated by its scalar versatility, provides one helpful avenue to explore the discursive and affective registers mobilised around debates surrounding rights of legitimate citizenship, whether that be in national parliaments, social media forums or beside chai stalls. The stakes concerning such claims and the demands of inclusion and exclusion in Assam for the over thirty million people who reside in the state are high indeed and compel critical reflection.

5.2 Departure scene

5.2.1. Morom

On the day I was to leave Majuli for Manchester at the end of April 2018, most members of the household where I was hosted for the majority of my fieldwork slept later than usual into the day, after a late night attending a *bhaona*. It was the first time since the commencement of the four-day *bhagavat path* held in Ximolupuria that the PA system of the *namghor* lay silent. It was a welcome opportunity to take much-needed rest. Many relatives and acquaintances had visited and performed prayer (*parthona*) and given offerings (*orihona*) within the *namghor* over the last several days, with countless *saki* or *bonti* (small terracotta oil lamps) lit as part of their devotions. It was novel that our ears were no longer filled with the rhythmical reading of the *bhagavata* that had been amplified through homes and out across the flat agricultural fields and nearby villages within a radius of several kilometres for the past few days and nights.

The family patriarch Raju was one of the last to rise. He had himself performed in the *bhaona*, which served as the culminating event that marked the *bhagavat path* closed. Outside of his teaching duties, acting in *bhaonas* was a passion that greatly animated him and an art to which he devoted considerable time and energy in regular performances held across Majuli. After taking our morning cup of milk tea and digestive biscuits together in the shade granted by the construction of the family's new house, I began to ready myself for catching one of the early afternoon ferries that would form the beginning leg of a day-long journey towards the main state airport. All of us were bleary eyed through prolonged lack of sleep over the last several days, but there was also an untypical sadness, as well as a few tears, as we went about our regular morning rituals. A "little sadness" (*alop dukh lagise*) acknowledged an ending, or more aptly reconfiguration, of relations that would be occasioned by my imminent departure.

No doubt many anthropologists who are positioned as guests to those who host them experience similar departures at the end of fieldwork, a change in relations that had been cultivated through daily practices of commensality, adoption of appropriate kinship terms, as well as the innumerable and unquantifiable other mundane acts of care involved in everyday intimacies. Of significance for my purposes here is how considering the enacting of a uniquely special hospitality in Majuli (and, to a lesser extent, Assam more broadly) provides an avenue for considering contested claims for belonging and exclusion within the state today.

That same morning, I stopped for tea and last chats in the households of several neighbours. As it had on many occasions before, the subject of *morom* was brought up by one

neighbour, as I attempted unsuccessfully to politely refuse another helping of *pitha* (homemade sweet snacks) whilst I finished my tea. My host specifically wanted my agreement that *morom*, or a "loving affection", was inherent within the actions of Majuli residents. Surely, he pointed out, I must have become aware of this fact during my stay and as a recipient of hospitality imbued with *morom*.[66] He was rightly proud of the treatment I had received, and I could only affirm his rhetorical question, "*Majulir manuhe tumak morom kore ne*?" (the people of Majuli love you, no?). On a previous occasion earlier that month, another resident described this quality (*gun*) as exercised by Majuli residents, as follows:

> Majuli people have a rule (*eta niyom ase*). They have an honest quality (*xot gun ase*). They want to treat the guest from outside with the respect they themselves would wish to receive (*bahiror pora aha alohik nijor dore xonman dibo bisare*). They love those who do good deeds (*jihokole bhal kore teolukok khub moromore adhor-xadore kore*). But, those who want to do wrong are very much disliked (*kintu jihokole onyay koriboloi bisare teolukok kintu bohut beya pie)*. That you bad people want to stay away, don't come to us (*atorai rakhibo bisare je tumaluk beya manuh, amar usorot nahib*a). Tom, I would like to tell you, but I don't want to be so proud, but it's nice to say that whether it is in the day or in the evening, when someone comes to our Majuli we always serve a glass of water and a cup of tea. He is then asked if he has any difficulties in staying, etc. etc. We have such things here. Never let a stranger get into trouble (*ketiyao manuhok bipodot poriboloi nidiye osinaki manuh ejonok*). But, we see elsewhere other than Majuli, or in a town area, that people do not want to let a guest stay. Also, they hesitate to give a glass of water. I'm talking about other places. But, it is an immense matter of pride for our Majuli (*kintu amar majulir babe aitu eta bohut gaurobor kotha*). Our Majuli people very lovingly take care of others (*amar majulir manuhe manuhok khub morom kore*).

This comment formed part of a popular discourse invoked by both residents (as in this case) as well as non-residents alike (as will become apparent) that depict Majulials as rustic,

[66] The *morom* that I had been shown by Majulials was often framed within the perceived coldness and self-interestedness of my "own place" in the UK where such affectionate actions of care were, as I was told, not found or perhaps even possible. My understanding is that these comments did not suggest that this coldness or self-interestedness was a property inherent to my "Englishness" per se, but rather that the richer economy of the U.K. and the better employment opportunities available there meant that whilst this meant that people possessed money, they in turn lacked time. Money and the lifestyles this afforded individuals thus has led to the corroding of a peoples' capacity to perform *morom* within their daily practices and actions. The same could be said of those living in cities and larger towns in India, as I often heard from Majuli residents, or of the "town areas" referenced in the above comment.

warm-hearted people. The good treatment of guests (*alohi*) and strangers (*osinaki*), assuming they are of good intentions, is held up as "a matter of immense pride" (*bohut gaurobor kotha*). The "respect" (*xonman*) and "love" (*morom*) shown to guests is enacted through acts of hospitality, such as serving water and tea come day or night, and making sure they have accommodation. "Never let a stranger get into trouble" (*ketiyao manuhok bipodot poriboloi nidiye osinaki manuh ejonok*) typifies the high-level of concern for others distinctive to Majuli, that as our speaker said was not to be found in other locations. I will now consider how this uniquely "very loving taking care" (*khub morom kore*) of visiting others was framed through the filming and broadcast of the "tearful goodbye" (*sokulore bidai*) at the end of my fieldwork as I left Majuli for Manchester. Despite these qualities being apparently peculiar to Majuli, we shall see by examining the responses and affect generated by this news feature that it came to serve as a specific example of a more general type of unrivalled "Assamese" hospitality.

5.2.2. Media encounters

After lunch at the family's household, I noticed an unfamiliar motorbike pulling into the courtyard. It turned out to be a young video journalist and camera operator, both of whom I knew well and who were based out of Kamalabari. After greetings were exchanged, they mentioned their plan to film a short video news segment on my departure from Majuli. They played down the effort this would take, with their only needing to collect a few "[sound] bites" from myself and others.

I attempted to deter them from filming on the pretence that my ferry was due to depart within the hour and so there was not enough time. They listened, even as the young camera operator continued to unpack his equipment and attach his microphone to his camera. Before trying to reassert my position, Raju took me to one side and made a case that the journalists had travelled all the way to our village and it was surely but a "small thing" (*horu kotha*). At that, I acquiesced to the wishes of my host. Eventually, I came to accept that my permission was perhaps never really required for a story that was *worth* making, as I will describe shortly. I also later reflected that, in the moment, I had remained stuck within my own sensibility of how demonstrable sadness was something that should be meaningfully *private* - and, at the least, certainly not for state television broadcast. In this way, I remained unwittingly resistant to an appropriate emotionality, more public in its performance of a sadness that should necessarily come with a departure.

Previously, over the course of fieldwork, I had been interviewed or featured on several news segments that were broadcast on one of the principal Assamese language news networks. These segments included features on my involvement in a theatrical drama for the *rax mohutxov* as well as my role as the *xohki* or "best man" for a friend's wedding in Garamur.[67] State broadcast outlets and their correspondents hold a prominent presence in Majuli, particularly around the centres of Garamur and Kamalabari, due to its premier position as a heritage, spiritual and tourist centre in the state, as well as its vulnerability to disasters.

Majuli correspondents are affiliated with one of the Assamese language news channels and are paid for the segments they produce that successfully make it to broadcast. It became clear over time that certain established narratives are easier than others for the correspondents to receive clearance from their editors in the state capital of Guwahati. With particular reference to Majuli, this included stories on the seasonal damages and sorrow caused by severe flooding and erosion (*Pratidin Time* 2017) as well as the annual arrival of domestic and international tourists after the last of the rains in late October at the start of the tourist season (*Pratidin Time* 2018).

I quickly realised once beginning fieldwork that my positionality as a foreign researcher, and one whose research methodology was rooted in my active pursuits as a language student, was particularly well-suited to the preferences of many of these news editors and local news correspondents who knew what would make it to broadcast. Like these earlier encounters, the appeal of filming this goodbye-of-a-foreign-researcher-who-spoke-Assamese played to popular public sentiments that generated positive affect around *oxomiya* (Assamese language) and *oxomiya xongskriti* (Assamese culture).

I had long since grown uncomfortable and dissatisfied concerning these encounters with the media. This displeasure principally stemmed in how my positionality - as a foreigner clearly interested in both the Assamese language and "culture" - was used as a surface through which to advance particular claims of belonging and identity in Assam. My concern stemmed from how the narratives of these accounts often, whether more or less explicitly, tapped into popular and not untypically chauvinistic guises of Assamese nationalism. However, as I had found previously, my attempts to outmanoeuvre these correspondents often proved futile in their relentless efforts to film a story that they felt was worth making.

[67] Also known as the *rax lila*. A three-day festival held on *purnima* or day of the full moon in the Assamese months of *kati-aghun* (typically at some point in November). During the festival, theatrical dramas are performed at dozens of locations across Majuli which retell and venerate scenes of Lord Krishna as chronicled in the *bhagavata purana* and as later elaborated in the dramas by Srimanta Sankardev.

The video news segment "*sokulore bidai englandor govexok satrok"* (tearful goodbye of an English research student) that came to be produced was broadcast later that same day on the evening editions on the Assamese news network *Pratidin Time*.[68] Rather than describing the events as they were filmed, I will instead now analyse key sections of the edited three-minute video and the reaction it received once widely circulated on Assamese state television as well as subsequently on social media, most notably on Facebook. In so doing, I explore how considering the affective resonance generated by the video for many viewers helps to illuminate what distinguishes an Assamese hospitality and which guests can be said to be deserving or undeserving of these renowned forms of hosting. As I will argue, the invoking of multiple scales through these ethical assessments is not only conceptually slippery, but unhelpful and problematic when considering the coupled associated claims for inclusion and exclusion, belonging and alienation within the state of Assam today.

5.2.3. "Tearful goodbye of an English research student"

The following description of the video segment is not a full transcription; instead I have sought to sketch out the tone of the piece and to highlight several key elements. The segment begins with the researcher (me) centre-screen, walking along a narrow village path with women residents either side of him, singing a prayer (*naam*) in anticipation of the long journey on which he is about to embark. Shortly after, the video cuts to a still, showing a group of half a dozen men, including the researcher, smiling and taking a selfie at the ferry terminal shortly before departure. Soft music plays as a smooth voiceover utters, "*sokulore bidai englandor govexok satrok"* (tearful goodbye of an English research student). Next, the camera pans out to show the family who hosted the researcher, their extended relatives and neighbours standing in a line in front of the new concrete house the family is in the process of constructing. The voiceover continues to explain that the researcher has lived in Majuli for two years and got to learn Assamese during this period. We then shift back to the walk from the village to the ferry terminal, which appears to show a convoy of perhaps two dozen people accompanying the researcher, as well as others looking on from afar, with the guiding voiceover description, "here is the scene of Tom's farewell" (*iyar tomor porpor bidai drisso*). Now, back to a shot of the room where the researcher has lived,

[68] A second network, News 18 Assam/Northeast, also recorded and broadcast a similar news segment. They arrived after the *Pratidin Time* journalists had already began filming. I decided to not include them in the above description for the sake of clarity, and as this video received, from what I can tell, a smaller circulation.

continuing, “in Majuli, he stayed in this house in the village of Ximoluporia. He became like a close family member” (*majulir ai gaon ximoluporia gaonot, ai khon ghorot thake. Ai poriyalor onontom xodosyo porisil tom*). Subsequent clips show the researcher bowing his head to receive a *gamusa* (traditional handloom towel-stole) being bestowed around his shoulders. The act of bestowing *gamusa* is a respectful action, normally practised to welcome important guests, but in any case serves to mark the occasion and the relationship between persons, places and institutions. Afterwards, at the entrance to the researcher’s room, he kneels and bows his head to the ground, with his palms cupped and upwardly outstretched, to receive *axirbad* (blessings). A close female relation to the household, as part of this blessing, asks aloud for the researcher to have a safe return journey to the UK, as he is poised to receive this blessing.

The latter section of the video switches format and comprises mostly the “talking heads” of several of the researcher’s host family being interviewed. Raju is first to feature in the segment, beginning, “he is no foreigner, he has become a member of our family” (*teojon bidehi nahoi, teojone amaar poriyalor xodoiso porisil*) before quickly, aided by an edit, breaking into tears as he speaks. Raju’s wife Priyanka then speaks too, “he has come to be my own younger brother” (*mur nijor bhaiti dhore*). Raju’s eldest sister, like Raju and Priyanka before her, sobs as she comments, “today, I am experiencing great sadness” (*mur monot bohut dukh lage aji*).

The researcher is then interviewed, and describes that his research focuses on flooding, erosion and local livelihoods. His next few comments, that riverbank erosion is continuing and happening not far from here (as he gestures towards the river) and that it is a big problem, do not stray from normative discourses on the subject. When prompted by the correspondent, he affirms that flood protection works must be commenced as a response to erosion, saying, “[flood] protection works must be given” (*protection dibo lage*).

A second section later in the segment features the researcher saying, “I am also feeling very bad today. I have lived in this village for a long time, and today I feel very bad and sad. People here have been very loving of me and have helped me a great deal” (*muru beya lagise. Moi majulit ai khon gaonot bohut din thakilu. Aji bohut beya lagise, dukh lagise. Yaar manuhor bilak muk bohut morom korile. Bohut hohi korisile*). The researcher did not cry nor affect this parting as aptly as others close by, but he was at least able to verbalise the upset he felt at leaving.

5.2.4. "I liked it… Assamese people are so loving"

As noted in Chapter 4, whilst flows of people and things moving within and without Majuli were slow and often disrupted, by contrast circulations of videos through media and social media channels were often fast and smooth. This has been greatly facilitated by exponentially expanding internet access in Majuli, similarly to the rest of India, following the launch of the low-cost data plans on the Jio Network from September 2016.[69] After the initial broadcast, as the video rapidly sped out and away from Upper Assam, it became clear that it achieved an affective resonance with a large audience. It was later that night that I began to realise the wide circulation of the video, after my phone received many calls, SMS, Whatsapp and Facebook messages from friends and acquaintances who had seen the evening news broadcast of the video segment, with several people in personal communications saying they had cried whilst watching the segment.

Once back in Guwahati in the days immediately after, on more than one occasion I found myself recognised by name by strangers when out shopping. Eventually checking Facebook, I saw that the news segment from *Pratidin Time* was being widely shared, and this now ran into the tens of thousands of views.[70][71] Within a couple of days, the number of views went into the hundreds of thousands. At the time of writing, the video on Facebook has had in excess of 1 million views, with over 46,000 likes, more than 1,000 comments and has been shared 11,000 times. As mentioned, I had been on television in Assam several times before, but it had never generated a response anywhere equal to this news segment. It appeared this one had *struck* something.

Once back in Manchester, I began reading through and reflecting upon the stream of Facebook comments generated by this "tearful goodbye" (*sokulore bidai*), as a productive means to make sense of how viewers were responding and interacting with the video. The most obvious

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[69] Reliance's Jio Network was launched on September 5th 2016 and, after initially offering customers a limited period of unlimited free data and calls with their product, began providing hugely reduced priced data plans in comparison to its telecom rivals. This led to Jio possessing the fastest growing mobile network subscriber base in the world (*The Indian Express* 2016). Other mobile networks in India in line with Jio's price plans subsequently also slashed the cost of their data plans in order to remain competitive. In the two years since the launch of Reliance's Jio Network, consumption of data has increased dramatically along with hugely significant price decreases in India. India is now the number one consumer of data in the world, as compared to being 155th globally prior to the launch of Jio. The cost of data is now on average less than Rs 15/GB (17p/GB) as compared with an average cost in excess of Rs 250/GB (£2.82/GB) prior to the launch of Jio (The Economic Times 2018).

[70] The Assam news networks, like many news outlets across the world, now increasingly offer their news segments as stand-alone videos on social media platforms, such as Facebook, to be viewed, liked and shared by online consumers.

[71] The news feature can be watched via: https://www.facebook.com/pratidintime/videos/1624193484364478. The English title given to the Youtube video is 'People of Majuli find it difficult to stop their tears as they see off British research student'.

commonality that ran through the majority of the comments was the pleasure taken by many users in the video. Here is a selection of typical examples:

Bhaal lagil....Okhomiya mahnu bilaak bohut moromiyaal
*(*I liked it… Assamese people are so loving*)*

Thanks for capturing such an inspiring and beautiful news

Other users focused more on the researcher:

Iman dhuniya axomiya kole… Really appreciated
(he spoke very beautiful Assamese… Really appreciated)

Accent tu o okhomiya wow
(wow, what an Assamese accent)

Look at his Assamese accent. Amazing, it looks like he was born Assamese

Some remarked on the emotion the video elicited in themselves:

Bor dukh lagil o... soku Pani olai gol
(I felt very sad [watching the video]… Tears came to my eyes)

saku pani dori rakibo nuyarilu
(I could not stop the tears from coming)

A large number of comments also took great satisfaction in how this presented Majuli, Assam and the Assamese people, with comments such as:

This is our Assam", "…#Proud to be a Majulian ❤️❤️

Majuli Axomor gurob. Joy ai Axom
(Majuli the pride of Assam. Long Live Assam)

This is the perfct exmpl of atithi devo bhava (guest is God)*.....hope evry indian learn this....*

As these examples illustrate, the comments mostly conformed to at least one of three main themes, respectively highlighting: the user's pleasure and pride that the unrivalled hospitality of Majulials (and by extension the Assamese) was being showcased on a proper platform and being given its due attention; the researcher's language competency; the sense of a feel-good video that is a more general example of "humanity" or kindness in the world. The fact that this hospitality was being dispensed to a foreigner, a person whose kin and support networks are known or assumed as far away, also appeared to add greater poignancy to the affair for many.

When considering these Facebook comments together, the activity of viewing and interacting with the video provided a shared space to feel good about Assam and being Assamese with other "insiders". This "feel-good" quality of the video can be understood as stemming from how it depicted salt-of-the-earth villagers dispensing a "*moromiyal*" (loving) and unrivalled "Assamese" hospitality (much as my neighbour had pressed me for my recognition of the *morom* (love) I had received when living in Majuli). The video and engagement with viewers can thus be considered as a popular artefact that served to reify a particular vision of Assam and the Assamese.

Whilst in this respect the researcher was not the story, his role was nonetheless more important than simply that of an anonymous guest. Rather, it tells how his depiction as a student of Assamese culture (*oxomoiya xongskriti*) and Assamese language (*oxomiya* or *oxomiya bhaxa*) came to position him specifically as a "good" guest. As a counterpoint, we shall now turn to an atypical Facebook comment (and the replies it sparked off) that invoked the positionality of the researcher precisely in order to critique elements of the narrative fostered within the news video and the responses it generated, as discussed above (see Figs. 5.1-5.4). This will allow us to glimpse and draw out the profound disquiet concerning migration that has existed uneasily and sometimes violently within the state throughout its modern history.

5.2.5. "SHHH… LET PEOPLE ENJOY THINGS"

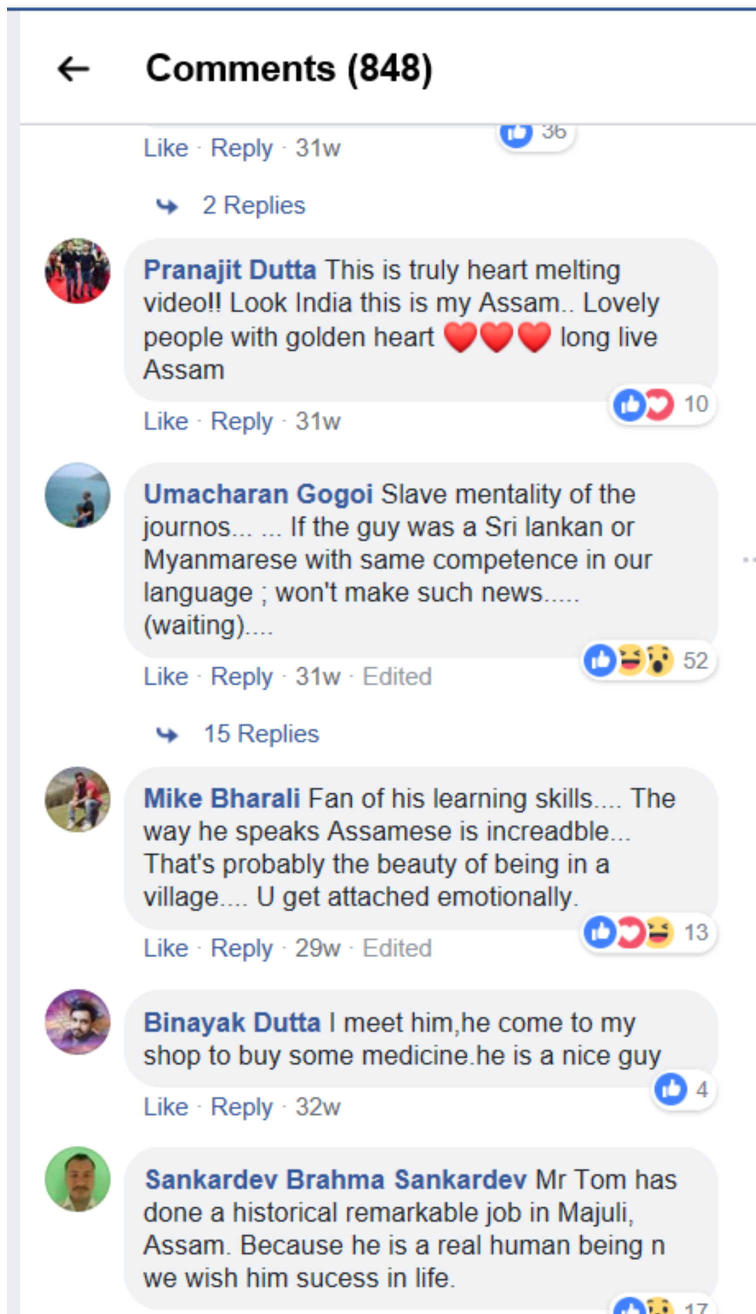

Fig. 5.1. Facebook comments for "*Sokulore bidai englandor govexok satrok*" video. Umacharan Gogoi's comment, second from top, is atypical of those featuring in the comment thread in his critique of the video.

← **Comments (848)**

Umacharan Gogoi Slave mentality of the journos... ... If the guy was a Sri lankan or Myanmarese with same competence in our language ; won't make such news..... (waiting)....

Like · Reply · 31w · Edited

^ Hide 11 Replies

Umacharan Gogoi Shang Crux pls read properly, m talking about the media, not the guy....is he the 1st foreigner to hv stayed at Majuli for his thesis or survey....... Media wl always hv a weakness for the white skinned n thts wht i meant.....

Like · Reply · 32w

Bhabajit Boruah Some people create ways to find something bad in something good. White skin brown skin, racist remark is the way here. It is a simple video of a foreign research student leaving for his home after a long stay amongst fellow human beings in a foreign land.

Like · Reply · 31w

Bhabajit Boruah Attachment, love, affection, feeling, emotions are some of the words you can choose from.

Like · Reply · 31w

Poretush Debnath Brother i think its depends on the behaviour of tht particular srilankan or mayanmarese whtevr......He is such a good guy..thts y he learned assames also..bt there some othr guy those who don't lyk assames aftr staying in assam also..just look at him how he talk in assames infornt of the media person..

Like · Reply · 31w · Edited

Fig. 5.2. Facebook comments for "*Sokulore bidai englandor govexok satrok*" video. Expanded replies shown for Umacharan Gogoi's comment.

←   **Comments (848)**

some othr guy those who don't lyk assames aftr staying in assam also..just look at him how he talk in assames infornt of the media person..

Like · Reply · 31w · Edited

Kuntil Baruwa

Like · Reply · 31w

Chao Robin Baruah You yourelf is suffering from mental imbalance.Its not about slavery.A person from from england left england and mingled with assamese culture.He is a good human and deservers praises..thats all.

Like · Reply · 31w

Surajit Sarkar How do you know it would have been otherwise in case of other people, any example to show?? Although I get your point to some extend but since this lad deserves some respect you could have easily shared your opinion in some other related discussion.

Like · Reply · 31w

Fig. 5.3. Facebook comments for *"Sokulore bidai englandor govexok satrok"* video. Expanded replies shown for Umacharan Gogoi's comment [continued].

←   Comments (848)

Umacharan Gogoi Kripaja Valson, with due respect Ma'am, (jus checked the feedback) .pls develop ur analytical n derivative skills bfr commenting n yes kindly take a flight to our state from Trivandrum, settle down, learn a lil bit of assamese, watch our vernacular electronic media...u might luv them n try b a part of them.... wish u all the best .. Sadly barring to n extent sensible News 18 we hv to watch the others for updates on local happenings..... Which is seriously a 3rd degree torture at times but seems u wil relish it 🙂

Like · Reply · 31w

Umacharan Gogoi Chao Robin Baruah, ok i agree to ur point.....thanks for ur views.... I m overwhelmed to know that u also praise, hug and welcome for feast at ur place all the ex Bangladeshi immigrants (labour :mistris : fish sellers:rickshaw pullers thelawalas etc etc) near by who don gamosas, speak better assamese than the English guy....thanx for pointing out my faulty comment...

Like · Reply · 31w

Bishal Limbu

Like · Reply · 24w

Fig. 5.4. Facebook comments for *"Sokulore bidai englandor govexok satrok"* video. Expanded replies shown for Umacharan Gogoi's comment [continued].

Whilst, at an initial glance, the Facebook comments generated by the news segment video appeared near universal in their approval of the piece, with a closer read of the thread, glimmers of disruption of this narrative did exist. One of the more popular examples of a dissenting viewpoint (based on sub-comments and responses generated) was Umacharan Gogoi's reprimand of the media reporting, which condemned the, "[slave] mentality of the journos… …If the guy was a Sri lankan or Myanmarese with same competency in our language; won't make such news… (waiting)…" (see Fig. 5.1.). The last word "waiting" followed by an ellipsis confirms the comment to be a knowing provocation, indicating that they are expecting, or perhaps more likely inviting, other users to respond to a sentiment that deviates from the largely uniform script of affirmation.

In response, several users attempted to undermine and dismiss the structural critique inherent in the original comment, which I understood as a critique of the editorial line and subsequent praise sparked by the video, as comprising examples of continued colonialization of thought. The commenter was indicted for spoiling the tone of what was, after all, as one user remarked, "a *simple video* of a foreign research student leaving for his home after a long stay amongst fellow human beings in a foreign land… *Attachment, love, affection, feeling, emotions are some of the words you can choose from*" (see Fig. 5.2., my emphasis). A wry cartoon graphic that then followed included the caption, "SHHH… LET PEOPLE ENJOY THINGS" (see Fig. 5.3.) neatly encapsulated the unwillingness of many users to engage with Gogoi's comment within the terms in which it was written. Whilst the overwhelming majority of those who commented wished to revel in the positive affect generated by the video concerning Assam and "Assameseness" and the possibility of cross-cultural conviviality, Gogoi sought to reference the less palatable histories and present realities that challenged both the media framing and reception of this "farewell scene" (*bidai drisso*).

In his last comment on the thread, Gogoi precisely points out what he perceived as a hypocrisy at work in the criteria being applied for which persons are deemed worthy recipients of an unrivalled Assamese hospitality. He wrote, "Chao Robin Baruah, ok I agree to ur point… thanks for ur views… I m overwhelmed to know that u also praise, hug and welcome for feast at ur place all the ex Bangladeshi immigrants (labour :mistris : fish sellers:rickshaw pullers thelwals etc etc) near by who don gamosa, speak better assamese that the English guy… thanx for pointing out my faulty comment…" (see Fig. 5.4.). Gogoi's final comment sarcastically lambasted the perceived double-standards of welcoming the English researcher but not the "ex-Bangladeshi immigrant". As Gogoi argued, the latter are not also happily hosted even if they meet, or exceed, the standards of "assimilation", i.e. by donning a *gamusa* and speaking fluent Assamese, for which the

English researcher was praised. This was most powerfully conveyed by the accusation that the "ex-Bangladeshi immigrant" was not welcome to "feast" in the home of another user.

Gogoi used hospitality imagery to highlight the uneven treatment of different types of Others in Assam. In describing who is deemed worthy or unworthy of receiving such hospitality, he attempted to disrupt the uncritical celebration sparked through this video by making explicit these evaluations. "Assamese" hospitality may be renowned, but here we understand it as being selectively distributed. Hospitality here serves as both totem of Assamese distinctiveness and as a means by which to critique the treatment of Others in Assam and present realities of marginalisation and discrimination of such groups, as I will return to later in the chapter. I will now draw on a recent interest in hospitality within anthropology in order to further draw out its scalar versatility and what this reveals (and obfuscates) about identity and belonging in contemporary Assam.

5.2.6. Scales of hospitality

Matei Candea and Giovanni da Col (2012) argue that staying with the conceptual potential offered by hospitality can provide anthropologists with important new ethnographic horizons. Taking their inspiration from a more long-standing interest in hospitality within political theory, cultural studies and philosophy, most notably in the work of Jacques Derrida (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000), Candea and da Col seek to make space for a distinctive anthropological contribution on the subject.

They begin with reference to Derrida's well-known accounting of hospitality, which they summarise as making the case that "at the heart of hospitality… is the impossible pairing of the necessary ethical requirement of absolute openness to the Other, and the equally necessary exclusionary sovereignty, which simultaneously gives the former its reality and yet negates its aspirations" (Candea & da Col 2012:S4). The aporia that Derrida locates in hospitality is that the roles it imposes of host and guest, and the processes of territorialisation that must accompany such role giving with hosts staking claims and freeing guests of such stakes, makes for an impossible enterprise (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000:75-78). To say, "*my* house is *your* house", putting sentiment aside, is to invite transgression.

I heed Candea's (2012) warning that adopting concepts from continental philosophy wholesale, runs the risk of employing scale-free abstractions that may harm, rather than enhance, the nuances brought out through ethnographic research. Discussing hospitality in Corsica, Candea

finds that a Corsican hospitality, like a Derridean hospitality, abruptly switch scales, "tying together into causal chains entities of radically different sizes (individuals, nations, doors, villages, etc.)" (2012:S35). However, as he recommends:

> …[If] we suspend for a moment the temptation to simply 'apply' Derrida to Corsica, and take instead a careful ethnographic look at what is going on, we will find that it is not hospitality itself which is schismogenetic, *but rather the abrupt scale-shifts which suddenly pit an individual against a whole community, or subsume one individual's action into a collective will*. This in turn leads one to wonder whether the reason why Derrida finds such a radical antinomy at the very heart of hospitality, part of the reason why his hospitality seems to be constantly, breathlessly buffeted from absolute self-annihilating openness to the most virulent xenophobia and back again, is precisely because he chooses to unmoor his discussion from the concrete objects and forms which, in practice, allow people to decide where welcome ends and trespass begins.
>
> (2012: S46, my emphasis)

In agreement with Candea, the real conceptual purchase of hospitality within ethnographic accounts lies in exploring what it actually *does* within the everyday. As Candea suggests, this is to take Derrida's writing more as an *ethnographic object* than as a theoretical framework (2012: S43). Attending to hospitality in practice, as I do in this chapter, reveals a remarkable scalar versatility.

It exposes how the shifting scales of hospitality, as it is deployed by people, contain evaluations of Self as well as judgments which determine whether or not Other(s) are worthy subject(s) of hospitality. Turning back to the Facebook comments thread, I shall now make explicit these qualities of hospitality with reference to the "farewell scene" (*bidai drisso*), by examining comments of those who use this video as a means to direct attention towards persons in Assam whom they judge to be trespassers and whose presence, they argue, is harmful to the "host" community.

5.2.7. “We should be not so kind always”

The more time I spent going through the comments thread, the more I started to come across comments in which users employed subjects focused on in the video, primarily the Assamese language (*oxomiya bhaxa*), as a means of identifying and differentiating “the Assamese” from other groups of people who live in Assam, including the migrant populations described by Gogoi. In contrast to Gogoi, these users pointed to an inverse scenario where these groups had apparently not met the evaluative criteria of “good guests” or demonstrated what they believe constitutes appropriate behaviour for persons resident in the state. We saw this within the same comments thread shown above, with one user responding to Gogoi, “[b]rother I think its depends on the behaviour of tht particular srilankan or mayanmarese whtevr… He is such a good guy… thts y he learned assamese also… *bt there some othr guy those who don’t lyk assames aftr staying in assam also*… just look at him how he talk in assamese infront of the media person..” (see Fig. 5.2., my emphasis). In a minority of comments, descriptions of certain populations who live in Assam and the manner in which they are differentiated from “the Assamese” is articulated more explicitly and within derogatory terms:

> A person from England respects Assamese culture by learning Assamese language in just two years but the Mulxuti (mainlander) Indians who have lived in Assam for years do not understand Assamese language and show no respect for Assamese culture.
> ইংলেণ্ডৰ পৰা অহা এজনে ব্যক্তিয়ে মাথো দুবছৰত অসমীয়া ভাষা শিকি অসমীয়া সংস্কৃতিক শ্ৰদ্ধা কৰে কিন্তু বছৰ বছৰ ধৰি অসমত বাস কৰি অহা মুলসুতি ভাৰতীয়ই অসমীয়া ভাষা বুজিকে নাপায় তথা অসমীয়া সংস্কৃতিৰ প্ৰতি কোনো ধৰনৰ শ্ৰদ্ধা প্ৰদৰ্শন নকৰে।
>
> The Miyas who consume Assam's air and Assam's water can't speak the Assamese language properly until now. A foreigner has spoken Assamese language so beautifully, I am extremely happy.
> অসমৰ বতাহ অসমৰ পানী খোৱা মিঞা বিলাকে জে আজিলৈকে অসমীয়া ভাষা ভালকৈ কব নোৱাৰে..বিদেশৰ এজন মানুহে অসমীয়া ভাষা ইমান ধুনীয়াকৈ কৈছে মই নথৈ ভাল পাইছো

> After coming from England and learning Assamese in just two years, lakhs of Bengali speakers living in Assam have not learnt Assamese. It is a small shame, no?
> ইংলেণ্ডৰ পৰা আহি মাত্ৰ দুবছৰতে অসমীয়া ভাষা শিকি ললে, অসমতে বাস কৰা লাখ লাখ অসমবাসীয়ে অসমীয়া নিশিকি বাংলাভাষী হৈ থাকিল । কম লাজৰ কথানে

> We should be not so kind always. Because of our [kind] nature today our culture, our state our language all are in danger.

These populations are criticised for not showing respect (*xroddha prodorxon nokore*) to "Assamese culture" (*oxomiya xongskriti*) and, in particular, to Assamese language (*oxomiya bhaxa*). They are described as not being *from* Assam, but as having only stayed there a "long time", which delegitimises their claims to belonging and inclusion within the state. The comment that the *Miya* community (Muslims of East Bengali origin) "[consumes] Assam's air and Assam's water" emphasises this with particular offence; it intends to act as a warning, "[b]ecause of our [kind] nature today our culture, our state our language all are in danger". This suggests that the examples of "kindness", or the acts of hospitality shown in the video not only distinguish "insiders" in the region from Others (a category that can be more or less expansive of the groups it includes depending on the speaker), but also that these acts are seen actually to threaten the continual survival of a collective way of life. This user poses the problem in similar terms to Derrida, looking askance at a hospitality that may invite potential self-annihilation. The user's call to not always be so kind appears ominous in the context of a region replete with many simmering ethnonational conflicts (Baruah 2005).

As already mentioned, using a hospitality framework that slides scales between a specific example of the hospitality shown to a foreign researcher by residents in Majuli and the much wider contested relations of insider/outsider and autochthon-migrant in the state of Assam, is conceptually slippery and problematic. Analytically, there is a shift in scale occuring that obscures, rather than elucidates, relationships. Discussions of immigration through the lens of hospitality and host/guest relations in this vein have been rightfully criticised (Rosello 2001; Shryock 2008). However, noting this abrupt scale jumping in how *users* in the comments included above deployed hospitality is precisely the point. In doing so, they made a claim for themselves as belonging to Assam, to this land and its lands, and as enfranchised persons/peoples. Positioned in relief, they judged particular (and not always well-defined) Others as underserving and denied them these rights.

As discussed in the Introduction, the existential angst that accompanies these evaluations of identity and assessments of the long-term viability of Assam (or an Assam in which "the Assamese", Assamese culture and Assamese language occupy statuses of unrivalled dominance) has deep historical roots. The urgency of the situation during my fieldwork was that users' judgements of particular persons and groups within Assam as unworthy transgressors came amidst the colossal state enterprise of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The NRC, by its own criteria, sought to establish a definitive list of persons who possessed a legitimate right to reside in Assam and those who, in absence of this right, were to be excluded. Similarly, to residents commenting on the video as discussed, the state was also engaged in forming its own judgements about who rightfully belonged within Assam. As we will see in the next section, these judgements of both the state and residents carry profound consequences for potentially millions of people in Assam concerning their increasing marginalisation, (dis)enfranchisement and threats of deportation.

5.3. National Register of Citizens

Beginning in late 2014 and continuing through the majority of my fieldwork, the NRC was in the process of being updated. The Supreme Court had initiated this update through an order in a case brought by the NGO *Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha*. The *Mahasangha* had challenged section 6A of the Citizenship Act (1955) that had been enacted in the first instance to give effect to the Assam Accord of 1985, to which I will return shortly. They had taken issue with section 6A, which, in contrast to other states in India, qualified migrants (and their decedents) for citizenship or for a route to citizenship if they could prove they had settled in Assam prior to the cut-off date of 25th March 1971. For the *Mahasangha*, this "violated the right to life of the citizens in the state by encouraging the "massive influx of illegal migrants" from Bangladesh" (Bhat 2019, n.p.). Whilst the sitting bench recommended that the issue be referred to a larger constitutional bench for final determination and thus raised its constitutional validity, paradoxically they nonetheless, in the same order, decided to commence supervision of the NRC update as based on the requirements of the same section 6A (Bhat 2019). Legal paradoxes aside, the register once completed would be used, as its proponents advocated and as compelled by the Supreme Court, to "detect and deport" foreigners (Phukan 2018). Producing a compulsory register of Indian citizens resident in Assam, as read alongside the Foreigners Act (1946), placed the burden of proof upon individuals. Put into practice together, these Acts transferred responsibility from the state

onto individuals to prove their nationality to a degree that considerably exceeds reasonable doubt. Profoundly, this meant that any person suspected of being a foreigner or excluded from the list would be required to prove their citizenship status at Foreigner Tribunals in the state, which could lead to an outcome of immediate detention (Raj 2020).

The scale of this bureaucratic exercise initiated by India's top judiciary was staggering. In 2018, the state government screened 32.9 million people and 65 million documents, at a cost of around £130 million (Raj 2020). Ultimately, 1.9 million people were excluded from the final list of the NRC released in 2019 (Ratcliffe & Bhattacharya 2019), which effectively rendered them stateless overnight. The NRC update has been found to have been plagued by irregularities and arbitrary decision making. As has now been widely catalogued, individuals under suspicion found themselves at the mercy of a process that was characterised by poor training of advocates, inconsistent and discriminatory judgements with little or no oversight, as well significant logistical and infrastructural failings (Amnesty 2019). The requirement of providing as proof of citizenship "legacy data", or documents that proved ties with a family member either listed on the original NRC of 1951 or included on an electoral roll up until March 24th 1971 (which were imperfect and incomprehensive lists in themselves), failed to acknowledge realities of poverty, illiteracy and flooding in Assam. For many, such documents would have been destroyed during annual inundations, or simply lost or incorrectly submitted through not understanding the relevant form and having no resources to seek legal recourse. Many also saw their documents deemed inadmissible due to minor typographical errors and name changes, or rejected if an advocate found apparent inconsistencies with recounted biographies, with speculation alone enough to carry through their judgement (Amnesty 2019). The NRC update and use of Foreigner Tribunals created a state of exception for millions of residents in Assam. Summonses to hearings with little notice and at great distance, detention centres increasing their populations with persons guilty of being "foreigners", and suicides through the anxiety of being excluded (Saikia & Gogoi 2018) all evidence the huge stresses and strains placed upon those who were held under suspicion, as well as those now finding themselves stateless.

Reaching this point had involved years of protest, struggle and work of concerned activists and organisations who were often at odds with a central government which had their own, and often diverging, priorities. Present efforts to establish an "Assam for the Assamese" remain guided by articulations about a unique and independent language and culture, which, as discussed in the introduction, have a long history. Within its early phase, the Assam Movement (1979-1985), also known as the Assam Agitation, Anti-foreigner Movement and *Oxom Andolon*, involved a huge mobilisation of the population onto the streets and caused the cessation of the

ordinary running of things as well as of state institutions. As Sanjib Baruah has explained, the "proximate episode" that begun the six-year long movement was the publication of the election rolls of the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency ahead of a by-election in 1979 (1999:121). Possessing a significant population of Muslim voters of East Bengal origin, reports that the number of eligible voters in Mangaldoi had increased by a vast margin since the last election two years previously led many in the state to make formal complaints that challenged the citizenship of many voters included in the electoral rolls. As Baruah describes, this came in the wake of multiple, well-publicised accounts detailing continuing high levels of migration from Bangladesh into Assam. Shortly after this in June 1979 the All Assam Students Union (AASU) called for a twelve-hour general strike (or *bandh*) in the state to demand the "detection, disenfranchisement and deportation" of foreigners (Baruah 1999:121). As Nandana Dutta has described, "[the movement] was led with flair and enthusiasm by the [AASU], and captured the imagination of the people in a way that no other mass mobilization could have done" (2012:48). However, the dawn of the new decade after an initial "festival of protest" soon saw increasing confrontations between state forces and demonstrators, communal violence and the breakdown of law and order in the state (Baruah 1999:125-138). The 1983 massacre in Nellie, Nagaon district, in which at least two thousand Muslims of East Bengal origin were killed (many estimates state far higher figures) by their neighbours in a single morning, constitutes a particularly devastating event during this period (Choudhary 2019).

In 1985 an accord was signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and leaders of the movement, which brought the agitation to an end. The Assam Accord declared that undocumented migrants who had entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 would be disenfranchised for ten years and those who had arrived after this date would be deported. It was also agreed that the state assembly would be dissolved and new elections would be held with the revised electoral rolls later that year (Baruah 1999:139).

Revisiting the traumatic period and social turmoil in Assam in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dutta (2012) poignantly describes how the extraordinary violence that became commonplace during the movement over time, slowly became part of the "ordinary" within the state. She argues that this has continued profoundly to shape the possibilities and limitations for public life into the present. For Dutta, "[it] is here that the several issues of immigrant influx, *a people in danger of engulfment during a lifetime*, and evidence of official apathy come together in a violent collective outburst, or in the legitimization of individual acts of violence…" (2012: 65, my emphasis). In a footnote to this passage, Dutta expands on what she means by "a people in danger of engulfment during a lifetime", explaining:

> This is a fear that is not given adequate consideration. The fear that in my own lifetime I stand witness to these processes by which I become minoritized, or I am mute spectator to territorial occupation as politicians engage in their own games of vote bank politics and personal deals.
> (2012:99)

Dutta's account screams of an urgency felt by many in the state concerning continuing migration to Assam from outside of the region or across international borders and how this is perceived to pose a desperate threat to their political and social dominance as well as the land they know as their own. In attending to this fear and associated existential angst, Dutta turns to "the larger question of hospitality implicit in the reception of migrants by a host society" (2012:157). Dutta acknowledges that a Derridean unconditional hospitality finds particular resonance within India where a guest is equated with God (*atithi devo bhava*) and the Beloved, who in any guise and at any time, may arrive at your door. However, in scaling up from one's personal threshold to the issue of immigration, Dutta quickly dismisses the application to Assam of Derrida and his France of the 1990s. She contends that, unlike the almost completely totalising record keeping at the borders of western European states (according to her rendering), the "invisible migration" (2012:162) into Assam that occurs across India's highly porous border with Bangladesh, on such a scale and at such pace, make a comparison unhelpful, if not impossible.

Dutta finds that the movement formulated the issue of migration in a way that continues to resonate powerfully today, as a question of the dilemma posed for the "receiving" or "host" society. Following this formulation, Dutta's attention is drawn to what she says are the uncomfortable questions subsequently raised, including "the right of host nations to protest the entry of immigrants, to guard their cultural distinctiveness, to insist on assimilation - the shadowy other side of the multiculturalist, multi-ethnic master narrative of inclusiveness that repress these issues in its articulation" (2012:146).

Rather than interpret Dutta's account as a theoretical framework that explains migration and an associated identity politics in Assam, instead, following Candea's suggestion in the case of Derridean hospitality discussed earlier, I treat Dutta's account as another ethnographic object. As such, it demonstrates how hospitality imagery and "host-guest" relations function as a means to debate categories of Self and Other and to form evaluations of the perceived harms (whether historic, present or potential) committed against each other. As was also evident in the Facebook comments thread discussed earlier, the fact that such evaluations can be made through discussions of hospitality is made possible by the abrupt jumps in scale that can be sustained.

Hospitality in this vein is prone to moving across scales (as well as transmutations of form), from localised specific social acts of care between individuals or a small group to universal ethical imperatives, and back again.

The questions Dutta sees raised for Assam as a "host society" and the anxieties attached to them, both during the Assam Movement and more recently, point towards instability. Despite an early optimism for those that, with varying intensities, supported the principal agenda of the Movement, the years that followed the signing of the accord saw no significant movement on the issue of in-migration to Assam. The ambivalence of national parties on the subject of immigration, which fell within the purview of the national parliament, meant that state politicians had few tools they could use to implement the accord.[72] However, it is important to note the increasing use of the word "infiltrator" within the national parliament from this period onwards to refer to Bangladeshi migrants in India (Shamshad 2017:236). Whilst the update of the NRC had been touted by the state and its supporters as an action that would finally see aspects of the Assam Accord implemented, the final list appeared to offer anything but closure. Within hours of its publication, many of the organisations and student bodies that had campaigned passionately on behalf of the NRC update announced their unhappiness with the results of the project (Barooah Pisharoty 2019). They claimed dejectedly that the final figure was *too low* and did not reflect the true number of foreigners living in the state. By contrast, others decried the fact that many "genuine Indian citizens" had been left out and the countless anomalies that existed, for example with parents included on the list but their children inexplicably absent (Barooah Pisharoty 2019). With no bilateral agreement between India and Bangladesh for the latter to receive "back" those the NRC had deemed as foreigners, the intractable question of what to now do with the 1.9 million people left off the list remained. Rather grimly, the NRC update at present appears an expensive political failure, which has provided little closure with regards to the issue of citizenship (for those who had supported the exercise) and opened thousands more to state sponsored-harassment and potential detention.[73]

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[72] The passing of the Illegal Migrants (Determination of Tribunal) Act in 1983, which ironically was given impetus by the anti-immigration sentiment characterising the Assam Movement, according to its detractors made it difficult, if not impossible, for state officials to prove someone was an "illegal alien" (Singh 2019). The striking down of this act in 2005 was key in facilitating the burden of proof being placed onto the individual with regards to the NRC update, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

[73] The more recent Citizenship Amendment Bill (now Act) potentially undermines much of the stated aims of the NRC update, as it allows non-Muslim citizens of neighbouring countries to be able to claim asylum in India or to regularise their status if already resident.

5.4. Conclusion

I began this chapter by reflecting on *morom* and the lovingly affectionate treatment I had received from residents whilst I was living in Ximolupuria. I was made aware that this special type of taking care of others was not to be found everywhere and was in fact distinctive to relationships in Majuli. The "tearful goodbye" (*sokulore bidai*) news video broadcast at the end of my fieldwork, as a discursive object that re-presented these sets of localised relationships and acts of reciprocity, for many viewers referenced and stood as a prime example of an unrivalled "Assamese" hospitality. Recognising the capacity for hospitality to jump abruptly between scales, revealed how users invoked this point of distinction, as well as other associated and intersecting aspects of singularity including Assamese language (*oxomoiya bhaxa*) and Assamese culture (*oxomiya xongskriti*), as a means not only to explore representations of an "insider" identity, but also to differentiate themselves from Others living in the state. Through these evaluations particular persons emerged as worthy or unworthy subjects of a renowned hospitality. Whilst we must be wary of the scale free abstractions involved in thinking about hospitality, particularly in the context of migration, it is helpful to agree with Candea (2012) that the real conceptual purchase of hospitality for ethnographers is to consider what it actually *does* in the everyday. Tracing moments of scale shifts when they occur, from a guest departing Ximolupuria to the borders of nation-states, revealed how people made particular claims of belonging as well as who they judged to be trespassers. Significantly, in Assam and the context of the NRC update and its aftermaths, it also offered a vantage point from which to understand a charged identity politics of belonging (and the related demands for exclusion) that has in its wake left thousands at risk of persecution and many as foreigners in the only land they have ever known.

Conclusion: Majuli moves out of the margins?

C.1. Nematighat ferry accident September 2021

In the late afternoon of the 8th of September 2021 two passenger ferries collided on the Brahmaputra, near to Nematighat in Jorhat District. The last service of the day, the single-engine *Ma Kamala* left Nematighat bound for Majuli "full" with passengers as well as motorbikes and several cars. Shortly after departure, the *Ma Kamala* collided with a government owned twin-engine vessel that was making the journey from the other direction. The river being in full spate following heavy rains and recent floods, the smaller privately owned *Ma Kamala* became wedged horizontally at the bow of the incoming ferry. After being carried like this for a short distance by the fast-flowing river the *Ma Kamala* capsized.

In the moments before it capsized, passengers escaped the sinking *Ma Kamala* by jumping across to the larger vessel. However, many were still aboard when it tipped onto its side and were forced to jump into the river with a large number having to swim to shore. In the days that followed, multiple accounts of bravery surfaced telling of passengers repeatedly returning to the *Ma Kamala* to rescue others (Devi 2021), which suggest the tragedy could have been significantly worse had it not been for their actions.

In the immediate period following the accident, media reports cited varying numbers of missing persons as well as giving only rough estimates for the total number of passengers travelling. Whilst this may seem indicative of the confusion that follows in an aftermath, it stemmed from the fact that private ferries plying this route do not operate a proper ticketing system nor are headcounts performed prior to passengers boarding a ferry (who pay a ticket collector during the crossing). As the ferry capsized shortly after departure, eye witness accounts were relied upon to provide rescuers an idea of how many people may have been travelling and, crucially, how many people they were therefore seeking to rescue. Whilst initial estimates ranged from between 80-150 persons, it was eventually determined by contact tracing carried out by emergency services through the night that 90 people were aboard the *Ma Kamala* that day (Scroll.in 2021). Following days of searching and an agonising wait to determine the fate of those missing, it was eventually confirmed that Indeshwar Bora, a school teacher from neighbouring Lakhimpur district, Parimita Das, a college lecturer working in Majuli, and Dr. Bikramjit Baruah who was posted at Garmur Civil Hospital, Majuli, lost their lives in the accident.

Like many, I became aware of this ferry accident in near real-time through videos of the collision that were uploaded onto social media by witnesses on the second larger vessel as well as on the nearby river bank. As I sat at my desk thousands of miles away that Wednesday lunchtime, I came across Facebook Live streams within minutes that showed those terrifying moments of the boats unable to free themselves from one another before the *Ma Kamala* began sinking. I imagine that bystanders and online viewers alike will find it impossible to ever forget the shouts and screams of those involved in the accident.

This tragedy painfully demonstrates the risks that commuters have faced on a daily basis. Continued calls by residents for improved connectivity with the south bank were motivated by imaginings of future convenience and, more pressingly, greater inclusion in the economic life of the state. However, as I discussed in Chapter 4, they were also grounded within demands for Majulials to have timely access to essential services during emergencies as well as consistent safe passage across the Brahmaputra. A whole variety of factors compounded, if not caused, this "accident", including overcrowding; lack of passenger registry; scanty number of life jackets and lifebuoys; use of a single landing platform rather than multiple platforms for departing and approaching vessels due to high water levels; poor maintenance of already old vessels, engines and equipment that in many cases do not meet existing safety standards; potential staff negligence and poor decision making (Devi 2021). Previous ferry boat disasters in 2012 and 2018 (*The Sentinel* 2021) demonstrate that these conditions of travel mean that it is only a matter of time before/between river transport calamities along the Brahmaputra.

The sinking of the *Ma Kamala* however has done more than powerfully bring home the high stakes involved for passengers travelling on the river on small single engine boats or *bhoot-bhooti*, which is how many, if not a majority, of riverine journeys are made. Admittedly, it being so soon after these events as I write that it is yet to be seen what the long-term implications might involve for all affected residents. Yet despite this, the collective grief and anger across the state that has followed in wake of the tragedy appears to have crystallised popular sentiments for residents in riverine areas to be assured safety and greater prosperity.

The reaction of the state government suggested that they immediately understood the seriousness of the event and/or its political ramifications. Within minutes of the news breaking Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma took to social media to not only express his pain at learning of this accident but also to assert that he and his administration had the situation in hand. Sarma announced that he had "[d]irected Majuli & Jorhat admin to undertake rescue mission expeditiously with help of [National Disaster Response Force] & [State Disaster Response

Force]" and that he would visit the accident site the following day (The Sentinel 2021). Along with Sarma's tweet and that of many other senior state and centre politicians, Prime Minister Narendra Modi an hour later expressed his sadness and prayers for those involved and gave reassurances that all was being done to rescue passengers (The Sentinel 2021). After Sarma visited the site the following day, he announced the introduction of a slew of safety measures including that all single-engine boats plying this route would be suspended with immediate effect; private ferry operators would be able to buy heavily subsidised "marine engines" that would allow them to modify their vessels and put them back into service; an enquiry into why the new (larger and safer) Ro-Pax ferries had been inexplicably out of service for some time; and a directive to the Jorhat administration to open a criminal investigation into the incident (Karmakar 2021).[74] Sarma also confirmed that construction work on the Majuli-Jorhat bridge would commence in November 2021 and that work would take four years to be completed.

The sudden banning of single-engine boats spelt misery for commuters in the weeks that have followed. As I have heard from friends and acquaintances in Majuli (not to mention social media being awash with such posts) the dramatically reduced ferry service has meant that prospective passengers had to arrive at the *ghat* in the early hours of the morning and wait in line for hours in the hope of buying a ticket on one of the ferries that is still able to ply. Many eventually still came away unable to secure passage for that day. Whilst there are signs that the situation began to improve towards the end of September, Majulials have thus not only had to contend with reeling from the shock of the disaster but also the stress and woes of an unexpected restricted mobility. These reactionary state measures have proved high profile interventions, but many including both residents and state commentors alike, have questioned if this really marks a turning point in how river transport is regulated and delivered in the Valley. The aftermath of the ferry accidents of 2012 and 2018 saw their own official enquiries, yet their recommendations were never implemented (Zaman 2021).

Whilst there was much criticism in the immediate aftermath from Majuli residents and within civil society concerning conditions of travel on private ferries and the previous indifference of the state to enforce proper safety standards, one issue that took on a sharper focus within public discussion was the subject of the Majuli-Jorhat bridge. Particular scorn was directed at writers who had previously written editorials and letters to state newspapers with titles such as *majuliloi dolong kiman proyujon* (How necessary is a bridge to Majuli?) and those emphasising the

[74] "Marine engine" here refers to a twin engine with reverse gear. Crucially, this means that if one engine fails then vessels are not left without propulsion. These engines are considered to meet tougher safety standards.

threat a bridge posed to Majuli's unique cultural and spiritual heritage (Barooah Pisharoty 2021). Popular campaigns centred upon a range of related slogans and their connected hashtags including #Amak eikhon dolong lage (we need a bridge), #Majulianneedabridge as well as #Novotenobridge. The long brewing frustration of residents and commuters stemming from a perceived cynical politicking around this project and continual rounds of empty promises appeared best captured by the popular slogan "*amak dol nalage dolonghe lage*" (we don't need a party, we need a bridge).[75] As all this strongly suggests, support in favour of the bridge appears to have further solidified since the accident (Barooah Pisharoty 2021).

The day after the accident saw gatherings at multiple locations across Majuli for residents to grieve as well as to express their anger. Demonstrations also took place, involving large crowds and with some sections raising chants against senior politicians alongside the burning of their effigies. On at least one occasion, the police lathi charged a group of protesters (Kumar Nath 2021). Whilst the accident amplified demands for a bridge, as well as accountability for those at fault and for safer ferry crossings in the interim, there was also what appeared to me a feeling of despair with residents questioning whether the state valued their lives at all. As I saw through media video reports of the demonstrations (East Mojo 2021), two people held up a placard that read *bhutor mulyo ase jibonor mulyo nai* (votes matter, lives do not). I later shared on social media an image from an artists' event in Guwahati, which focused on Majuli and the lives of people who live there. The image comprised a placard tied to a fence that inversed the above sentiment as an affirming challenge reading *amar jibonor mulyo ase* (our lives have value). The post was unsurprisingly unanimously well-received, but a Majulial poet-friend was more realistic, or perhaps cynical. In a phone conversation the following day, he said to me referencing my post *amar jibonor mulyo nai* (our lives do *not* have value).

Although, it is sad to begin my conclusion with a discussion of the Nematighat Ferry Accident, it is a necessary illustration of the sharp edges that comes with living on the banks of a protean river and neglectful state. Following dramatist and Majuli native Anupam Kaushik Borah, I began this thesis by arguing that "life is just as wonderfully and painfully complicated for Majulials as for anyone else". Joy and wonder do abound for many Majulials. However, as the ferry accident has bitterly demonstrated to residents, life for them and populations residing in riverine

[75] The Assamese daily *Doinik Jonombhumi* (2021) reported on September 26th that in Majuli, "the youth has created the public opinion "we don't need a political party, we need a bridge" (*juwosameo "dol nalage dolonghe lage" buliu jonomot xristi korise*).

areas of the Brahmaputra Valley who are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of flooding and erosion is also periodically both *more* painful and *more* complicated.

This time three people lost their lives and many others have been left traumatised. As in this recent case of the sinking of the *ma kamala*, each accident shakes things up. People are left shocked, stirred up for a break from the status quo and the state is galvanised into action. However, nothing seems to change.[76] Neither loss of life, nor resident anger or state interventions make the difference that matters. Residents are left to surmise that their lives, both as bare life and as subjects who may flourish, are without worth. Long-standing state neglect and worn-out promises complicate demands for a corrective to the problematic connections that exist between Majuli and the rest of the state. As I attend to in this thesis, amidst these pushes for desired state actions residents also pursue their own efforts to make their lives worthwhile.

C.2 Looking back

As shown in this thesis, Majuli has likely never comprised a timeless idyll. Grounding geomorphological and socio-political histories together brought into focus the flows and sometimes violent upheavals that have, like the river, ebbed and flowed to make up Majuli. Immeasurable grains of silt continue to shape Majuli in no less significant a way than have great earthquakes. Similarly, radical (and sometimes revolutionary) socio-religious movements have marked this location as have long periods of conservative regrouping. Popular and academic narratives that present this location as a threatened site of pristine and unchanging cultural and natural heritages obscure the tumultuous events through which Majuli has emerged. Producing a critical history of Majuli is therefore less about providing a simple origin story or some kind of "context", but about reinserting it back into both past *and* contemporary historical and political

[76] Residents' despair that nothing appears to change - that they will continue to remain highly vulnerable to disasters and residing in locations marked by the absence of desired forms of development - however it is true that whilst events may appear to repeat themselves, they never do so in exactly the same way. Widespread smart phone ownership, cheap data plans and resident engagement in social media platforms across Assam and India as a whole meant that millions of people across the Brahmaputra Valley could immediately, and in graphic detail, watch for themselves the sinking of the *ma kamala*. The vicarious trauma of watching the disaster unfold in near real-time played a crucial role in the profound level of response the event generated across the state. The qualities of attention fostered by these forms of mass communication technologies and the new publics that can gather around these objects point to opportunities that may, or may not, bear upon the state government to establish and enforce structural reforms for river transport upon the Brahmaputra.

currents that shape the Valley. Crucially, this establishes a lineage for both place and people that positions them as active agents within a contemporary moment of political and social possibility.

This thesis has explored how anthropogenic interventions in the river system, namely embankments and dams, are producing ever more disastrous geographies in the Brahmaputra Valley (Das 2014; Baruah 2016). Increasingly, flooding is being perceived as calamitous and not only as an assurance of rural prosperity. Establishing rhythm as an important guiding principle to structure ethnographic attention, with reference to the work of Mauss & Beuchat (1979) via Harris (1998), shows how seasonal water flows are now encompassing a *changed* flooding. This accounting of dwelling in Ximolupuria focuses upon resident negotiations of a changing array of transient opportunities and potentially adverse prospects through the seasons. This form of attention reveals however that flooding today requires more than residents needing to attune themselves to new rhythms. Rather, we see how the operations of big dams upstream and fallibility of embankment infrastructure mean that residents are left trying to pick things up again amidst more frequent *arrhythmic* beats. What residents can now know and come to expect from their rivers cannot be separated from these large-scale hydro-projects and riverine barriers, positioning them in the way of danger like never before.

Inseparable from the ebbs and flows of the river and seasonal flooding, the mark riverbank erosion holds upon the landscape as well as the memory and imagination of residents possesses distinct effects. Perennially being chased by the water (*pani kedise)* and doubtful of the efficacy of state-led measures to prevent further erosion of lands in Majuli, residents pursue actualising their own "dreams" (*xopon*) in efforts to live well. These attempts at augmented domestic comfort may fall apart (or into the river) in the future, but this does not diminish the desirability of such objects or plans (for those who have the capacity) to build them. Thinking landscape and history together (Harvey, Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2019:13) reveals not only how eroding lands, livelihoods and aspiration are forever in motion, but also that each is implicated within the other as these transformations unfold through time. A focus on aspiration is not to make this account more "hopeful" (as perhaps a means of challenging popular depictions of Majuli as a doomed location as discussed in the Introduction), which would be politically irresponsible, but to examine the types of hopeful contingencies that may be possible within particular historical conditions (see Jansen 2016). This thesis shows that reorientations in aspirational trajectories therefore comprise not only movements towards novel avenues and objects, that may emerge through greater access to further education for example, but are also shaped by loss and nostalgia for prior abundance and now denuded sources of former prosperity. The importance of holding livelihood and new household construction together amidst eroding

lands is to demonstrate these connections and tensions whilst retaining the emotional resonances held within resident narrated histories of shifting environments and important contemporary divergences in the makings of landscape.

The prospective bridge between Majuli and the south bank has again lately taken on renewed significance, as discussed above. By the time of my fieldwork in late 2016, the bridge had already become a matter of concern for residents, with many uncertain or doubtful that the government would fulfil its obligation. The power of the future promise contained within the green light announcement(s) was that the bridge would comprise both a *concrete object* that would usher in desired smoother connectivity and that it r*epresented* what it was to inhabit a modern and developed Assam and India. As a "figurative [topos]" (Bear 2015:180-181) for ethical judgement, the prospective bridge formed a contentious area in which Ximolupuria residents explored and debated diverging speculative futures and the resulting tensions that emerged between too much connection and not enough as well as between enhanced connectivity and the current peace (*xanti*) they enjoyed. Majuli's "communication problem" (*Majulir jatayotor ohubidha*) emerged as a "problem" in a specific historical moment. Recognising the enduring telos of developmental time for governments and citizens alike (Ferguson 1999), the same could be said of the bridge being not only longed for by residents, but having become a "necessity" (*porijon*). In this vein, "why should we be a museum?" served as a powerful rebuke of opposition for a bridge as residents continued to demand safe and efficient modes of connectivity as well as greater inclusion within the economic and social life of the state.

This thesis has sought to understand how in the face of a *changed* flooding, attrition of lands due to riverbank erosion and legacies of state neglect (as well as more recent high profile (if dubious) state programmes to address this neglect) residents make efforts to lead lives in which they and their families can thrive. Much of this understanding comes from the conversations and engagements I have had with Ximolupuria residents. The strength of exploring what the good life is for residents ethnographically was less that the time afforded through fieldwork allowed for an understanding of lived complexity, but rather for the contradictions between issues of land, livelihood and aspiration to arise and help foster an analysis that does not immediately attempt resolution where none can be easily found. Amidst seasonal arrhythmias, shrinking lands, an indifferent state and diminishing agricultural prosperity, I followed residents own projects of future flourishing. I came to recognise that aspiration (as an affective object, form of attention and means of directing such projects) was dynamically shaped by a nostalgia for lost agricultural abundance and hopes that enliven orientations to new livelihood pathways, augmented comfort and lives that have value.

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