

INTRODUCTION

Our research site was Salmora, a village situated in the southernmost tip of the riverine island of Majuli in Assam. Geographically, Salmora can be roughly understood as a peninsular shaped land mass, 70% of it being surrounded by the mighty Brahmaputra on three sides. Given this geographical location, the region is naturally prone to floods. Moreover, some streams of Brahmaputra cut across Salmora worsening the flood situation. However, in spite of the rampant floods, the glutinous clay found in the region has been saving it from soil erosion for years. The clay also became the primary reason for the settlement of potters in this region and made Salmora a '*Kumhar*¹ village'. However, the case seems to have reversed now, with Salmora being one of the worst hit by soil erosion in recent times. This shift intrigued us to gather more information about the current situation at Salmora.

Since Majuli is a riverine island formed through alluvium deposits brought by the mighty Brahmaputra, there are ongoing processes of soil deposition and soil erosion happening on either side of the island simultaneously. However, in recent history, the rate of erosion has superseded the rate of deposition, leading to the shrinkage of Majuli. As per the information provided by the government of Assam, the land mass of Majuli has reduced from 733.79 sq. km as per Survey of India map of 1940 to about 522.73 sq. km in the year 2013². Salmora has been worst hit by this trend, affecting not only its geography but also its socio-economic configuration. Taking this as our premise, we have attempted to investigate the changes in the socio-economic composition of Salmora in the backdrop of floods and soil erosion.

Research Question:

How has the socio-economic configuration of the potters' community changed in the backdrop of recurrent floods in Salmora?

Since most of Salmora's residents are potters and since an occupation like '*Kumhari*' has its entire way of life shaped around it, we hypothesized that the backdrop of floods and consequent soil erosion must have reoriented and reconfigured the socio-economic aspects of the community,

¹ The Assamese word for 'potter'

²<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/majuli-island-in-assam-lost-28-per-cent-of-its-land-mass-in-2013-govt-4790954/>

including its occupational choices, migratory trends, land ownership patterns, caste segregation and cooperation and gender relations.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological position chosen for this study is bent towards interpretative understanding of the problem at hand. The problem, i.e. change in the socio-economic configuration of Salmora, has been understood through the following categories:

- Caste malleability
- Gender relations
- Alternative occupation
- Migratory trends
- Land ownership patterns

Our sample included 43 households and 6 officials of different designations including the District Collector, Chief Executive Head of the Brahmaputra Board and the village headman. The field visit started on the 23rd of May 2016 and continued for the next fifteen days. We used unstructured and structured interviews as tools to conduct our research. The interviews were mostly taken in Assamese and rarely in Hindi. The length of the interviews varied from thirty minutes to two hours per household. Descriptive field notes were prepared by the four of us for the same.

BACKGROUND

Pottery without potters' wheel?

Before going into the findings of our research and analysis of the same, let us try to understand the process of pottery briefly in order get a grasp of how pottery as an occupation is uniquely placed in its geographical setting.

The process starts with making circular pits near the river-bank which contains glutinous clay. This pit could be as deep as 30ft. The pit has steps cut at intervals for men to stand, collect and

transfer the clay from the depth to the surface. This task is done by a group of few men from households belonging to a common locality. The collected clay is then uploaded in a truck and distributed among the households who had contributed in collecting it. From here onwards the process is solely taken over by women. The making of pots starts with mixing the clay with sand so that it binds easily. The mixture is then kneaded into a dough with their legs. The women use *pat*, a piece of wooden sheet used as a plate to knead the dough on. Then, to make a pot, a proper amount of clay is taken and shaped in the form of a cylinder. This, then, is placed on *Aphori*, a circular rotatable wide mouthed bowl-like structure, traditionally used for making pots in Majuli. Then, *pithoon*, a bat-type wooden tool is used to beat the outsides of the pot and give it shape. *Boliya*, a spherical tool is used to shape the insides of the pot. *Suchoni*, *Gorha Kapor*, are other tools used to give the final shape to the pot.

These pots are then left to sun-dry. The final process of baking the pots is taken over by the males. The baking is done on a *pheghali*, a mud structure used to bake pots; it is generally shared by a set of few households. Items other than pots are also made including toys, showpieces, *diya* and many other items for rituals and festivities. These are then taken by the men to be sold to cities in other districts via boats across Brahmaputra.

It can be noted that the existence of glutinous clay became central to the establishment of Salmora as a potters' village. Having understood the process, we get an idea as to how geographically embedded this occupation is. At this point, it then becomes important for us to also understand the changing geographical and topographical conditions, because they have largely affected this occupation and the lives of the people involved in it.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

FLOOD AND SOIL EROSION

Any attempt to understand the geography of Salmora would lead us to the mighty Brahmaputra which surrounds Majuli on all sides and Salmora on three. Brahmaputra is a very unique river in its nature. The river becomes as enormous as it is due to the inflow of 13 tributaries which adds to the volume of the water in the main river. The river has changed its original course of movement many times leading to different topographical changes at different times. Unlike many other plain

rivers, Brahmaputra does not meander and therefore the flow of the river is ferocious and concentrated. In such rivers, the tendency to erode is found inherent, leading to its fierceness.

Majuli had come into being because of the huge alluvial deposition at the confluence of river Subansiri on the top and river Brahmaputra at the bottom. The nature of both rivers is different and hence the deposition content also varied. The deposition near Salmora is different from the rest of the places as the composition of the soil is more of clay and silt, and less of sand. In the rest of the island, the deposition is mainly of silt and sandy soil. The sandy composition of the soil leads to comparatively more erosion. Since the nature of soil in Salmora is unusual and sticky, it developed as a favorable region for pottery. Pot-making requires digging of huge pits for the excavation of the clay mud. This mud is systematically extracted by digging as huge as 30 feet vertical tunnels in the river banks of Brahmaputra as mentioned above. This process has led to the slackening of soil near Salmora. The nature of the soil is essentially tolerant towards excessive erosion activity but the loosening of mud has made it more penetrable, and this has led to escalation of erosion in Salmora. However, this notion has been contested by the villagers on the grounds of erosion happening in other parts of the island where there are no mud extractions. The whole of Salmora lies in a flood plain outside the embankment which should ideally be left uninhabited due to the flood risks involved. However, the easy and free of cost access to raw material for pot making has remained a major reason for which people continue to reside here despite of huge risks.

The claim of mud extraction escalating soil erosion was made by this body called the Brahmaputra Board. This body came into being by an act of parliament and has been working on anti-erosion activities since its inception in the year 2004. One of the major objectives of the board is to mitigate the erosion activity and make efforts to reduce the effects of it on the island. This mitigation process has been carried out in different phases which primarily came up as a remedy to the shortcomings of the earlier technique. First in this process was the Embankment and Drainage program (E&D) which is locally known as *Mathauri*. The embankment is an elevated slant wall to restrain the flood waters from entering into the inhabited area by increasing the surface area to be covered by flood water. Next came the construction of 'Spurs' which are huge wall-like constructions perpendicular to the flow of the river. However, due to change in the course of the river, now the flow of the water has started obliquely hitting on the spur, because of which the spur is proving insufficient in controlling the river water. The spur construction had been criticized by

the villagers on account of its structure being erect. This had led to more rampant floods as it did not stop the water but rather redirected it to other portions of land, making them flood prone.

The Board had proposed another technique of river reverting Geo-bags, through which the spurs could be made more efficient. The board officials explained to us the arrangement of a geo bag which constitutes a non-oven bag inside an oven bag. The spurs presently controlling the river water are made out of heavy boulders which are not cost effective and are difficult to transport. Geo-bags on the other hand are not only cost effective but can be easily transported to the construction sites. This will be created into a needle like structure which will be helpful in subduing the ferocity of the water. The objective here is to induce river bed erosion rather than river bank erosion. Although it is still a proposed plan and is yet to be materialized, the installation of geo-bags has many repercussions. The Board has quantified how their flood control measures have proven beneficial over the past 10 years wherein they have reclaimed the flood affected land. They claim that from 502sq km in 2004 they have increased the area to approx. 527sq km in 2010.

Precariousness of conditions

In spite of the efforts of the Brahmaputra Board in Majuli, Salmora had not benefitted from them. Salmora had either been excluded or inefficiently dealt with, which is why the situation only kept worsening. Nevertheless, the villagers had adjusted to the circumstances in their own unique ways. The structure of the houses is the greatest evidence of this. The houses in Salmora are called 'chang ghar', which refer to houses raised above ground level with the help of wooden planks. During floods, when water level reaches to their houses, they move to the chang ghar, as it is raised above the ground. They even prepare food there and sometimes go without food and stay there until the water level goes down. Furthermore, each house owns a boat because heavy floods make people leave their homes and move to embankments, and sometimes in rare cases, they even stay on boats.

There is the obvious fact of there not being any agricultural land left in Salmora due to heavy soil erosion and hence agriculture is barely an occupation optional in recent times, unlike the case in the past. Even where minimal agriculture does take place, it is molded around the flood situation. The villagers grow those varieties of paddy which harvest easily in flood water and take less time for the same. By this, they at least produce enough for household consumption.

The villagers have developed coping mechanisms; and there was a form of habituation to uncertainty, especially future uncertainties. The villagers have not planned what they would do if the left land mass is further washed away, which could be a definite reality, given the rapidly increasing rate of soil erosion. Brahmaputra Board's solution to the problem is that of complete evacuation from Salmora. But this becomes baseless since these potters' lives revolve around pottery. To settle elsewhere is not feasible since they do not have any other occupational skills and building their lives around something apart from pottery would be extremely difficult.

The precariousness of their situation is rather grave. In the backdrop of this and the precariousness specifically of the occupation of pottery, few villagers are attempting to diversify in occupations. However, there is hardly any alternative occupation which emerges as a viable option. Let us understand the alternative occupational options and patterns to get an idea of the same.

ALTERNATIVE OCCUPATION

The people in Salmora had been associated with the cottage industry of pot-making since historical times. It was found during the field work that there is greater affinity towards the profession of pot-making in the older generation, and the younger generation had been pushed to look outwards for alternative income sources to add to the earnings from pottery. This shift in preferences had occurred due to the decreased viability of pot-making. The respondents in the field stated various factors that had contributed to the shift in preference. The income generated from pot making did not suffice for the sustenance. Most of the pot making process was done by the women of the household and the selling of pots was done by the older men. In this situation, the young men had found the space to find jobs outside the village for which many of them had migrated to distant cities like Hyderabad, Bangalore etcetera. However, when it was the digging season (December-January) they would come back to the village to help. There was also flexibility in the earning options, such as people had started doing petty businesses in and around the village, many amongst the youth had started other occupations such as selling of milk procured from the neighborhood cows, furniture making etc. to substantiate the income. *Hazira*³ was a common alternative to pottery, especially in the months of floods.

³ Assamese for casual labour

Young generations who are still in school realizing the potential of education are reluctant to carry on the traditional occupation. In many households, women are skilled in weaving traditional cloth and some women also sell it for profit at times. The existence of sub health centers provides for an employment opportunity to few women. Some men and women are also teachers in the schools of Salmora. It was found that if such service provided a stable income then people tend to leave pottery altogether, but such cases were rare. There were also people in the village who were skilled in the art of boat making and generated their income by making boats on contract basis. One of the respondents, Mahendra Bhuiyan, pointed out that the middle men took away a huge portion of the profit margin in such contract based transactions.

In the village, fishery was considered as a more profitable occupation than pot making because of the minimal investment involved. Nevertheless, there was a clear-cut caste based demarcation on the practice of fishery and pottery. The Das were the scheduled caste who could practice fishery for profit. Other castes did fishery only for self-consumption but could not sell it for income. On the other hand, Das people could not touch *Kumhaar Maati* (pot clay) and hence could not practice the pot making business. This distinction was prominently present in the village dynamics and is rigidly followed to this date.

The role of the government to provide alternative source of income had also had several lacunas. Despite of having job cards meant for governmental employment schemes, the unequal distribution of work chances had left many without opportunities. Other employment schemes like MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was also in operation but poor execution of it had not reaped desired results for the villagers.

Skill Development organizations such as NIITS, a state organization working for the development of the art of *kumhari*, had recognized the historical art of pot making and hence had tried to promote the art under Assam Sate Rural Livelihood Mission. A Government initiative was taken wherein few men from Salmora were taken to Bangalore for training. This was aimed at diversifying their art and making it more profitable. However, it was ironical how, although all the pot makers in Salmora were women, the people chosen for this training programme were all males. Moreover, not a single person could apply the new techniques learned there and make any profit out of them when they returned to the village. According to the Deputy Commissioner of the newly formed district, Mr. Pallav G. Jha, under the livelihood mission, the administration had tried to

provide easy link to the market for the potters. Through other bodies such as Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority, pot making art was proposed to be promoted through workshops and display exhibitions for tourists, added Jha.

The respondents had acknowledged the fact that the coming generation will not look favorably towards this traditional occupation as their career option. Education has become one of the major factors in this shift. Due to education, the young generation has been less involved with the art of pottery and hence has not developed that level of attachment which the older generation exhibits. Some level of diversification in occupation has been witnessed; however, there is no viable alternative in the village which the villagers could look forward to.

CASTE COMPOSITION AND RELATIONS

Prior assumptions had led us to believe that caste was not a rigid criterion of stratification in Salmora. However, our field work brought to light the fact that caste was indeed very much a reality, even though less rigidly operating than many other parts of India. It was Prashanta Bhuyan, a young man in his early 20s, who introduced us roughly to the caste composition of the village. As per scheduled categories, the target group comprised of only five households under the General and four under Scheduled Caste category and the rest of them, barring one under Scheduled Tribe category, placed themselves under the Other Backward Caste category.

Table 1: Caste composition of the village

Scheduled Category	Jati (Caste group /Sub-caste group)	Surnames commonly attached to the caste group	Occupation
General	- Goswami - <i>Bamun</i> (Brahmin)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goswami • BorKalita • Borthakur • Pujari • Sharma • Hazarika 	Farming, priestly activities, service (esp. Govt jobs), business

Other Backward Caste (OBC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Kos</i> - <i>Keuth</i> - <i>Koipotto</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xorukalita • Saikia • Bhuyan • Bhorali • Bora • Dutta • Hazarika • Motok 	Pottery
Scheduled Caste (SC)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Das 	Fishing, service, Business
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pegu 	Farming, service, business

This table (Table 1) shows the *jati* and aligned occupation that each category associated itself with and thus gives us a sense of the caste composition of the village. As noted above, there were very few households in the village which fell under the General category. Although the primary job of this group included priestly activities, they were engaged in government service, teaching and business. It was the Brahmins who officiated the marriage rituals. Also, all priestly activities were not reserved for the Generals; some were shared by the Generals and OBCs on a rotation basis.

Now, what defined and separated whether one was an OBC or a SC in this particular village was their mode of livelihood. A look at the table above (Table1), suggests the pattern of segregation of caste groups on the basis of occupation. The OBCs and the SCs engaged exclusively in pottery and fishing, respectively. There was a strict separation of these two occupations, neither could engage in the other's occupation. Hence, a potter could do fishing for household consumption but never sell fish; on the other hand, the fishers community 'could not even touch pottery', as told to us by one of our respondents.

All the potters of the village, no matter what surname they used, belonged to the OBC category, because they did *mitshilp* (pottery). So, for instance, a person having the surname *Hazarika* could

fall under either the General or the OBC category, depending on whether he was a potter or not. The potters' community formed the majority of the village population and addressed themselves as the *Kumhar jati* or *Kumhar xomproday* (Potters' caste). On the other hand, were the '*Das manuh*' (Das people), whose primary source of livelihood was fishery and they fell under the Scheduled Caste category. Our target group had around 4 households with the surname Das, although essentially, they all had the same lineage.

Our research highlighted a clear notion of separation between the potters' community and the Das people. This separation played out primarily, apart from occupation, in aspects of residence, worship and marriage. Our respondents told us that in earlier times, the Das people had their own village as so did most other caste groups; hence there was a clear-cut residential separation. However, due to the rapid soil erosion caused by floods in Majuli, these villages were forced to come closer to each other and the separation became rather fluid. Although, even now, the Das households occupy a particular area in the village, the separation is not very rigid at all. The second aspect of separation is evident in the fact that each of these groups have their own separate *namghar*⁴. Nevertheless, they could collectively engage in communitarian affairs and festivities such as '*Bhauna*' (a form of theatre).

The aspect of inter-caste marriage was the strictest of all. Marriage between a potter and a SC was unacceptable. When enquired about cases of inter-caste marriage in the past, varied but similar responses came forth. Some told us that such a couple is excommunicated. However, a respondent, a woman from the OBC category, explained to us that excommunication essentially meant that the couple was detached from the community and lived separately until they went through a ritual conducted by the '*satra guru*'.⁵ The ritual, among others, included the shaving of the head of the boy and an upliftment of the couple to the OBC category. Speaking to a Das family, on the other hand, revealed a similar but less stricter reaction to inter-caste marriage. The lady said that the couple is converted into a Das couple and more or less easily accepted within their fold.

An OBC lady said that the reaction of the Das people in case of an inter-caste marriage was more relaxed because, after all, they would be happy to have a member from the higher caste in their community. So, the respondents were aware of the sense of caste hierarchy, however, it was not a

⁴a community prayer hall where the Hindus of Assam recite the name of God

⁵ Officiating person is satra. Satra is an institutional center associated with Vaishnavism found in Assam.

rigid one. The idea of difference rather than hierarchy was a deeper reality for the residents of Salmora. This was observed and evident in our fieldwork. The hierarchy did not showcase in terms of economic position or social status. This was evident in the case of Sonaram Das, the head of a Das household, which was the wealthiest one in the village and the only one which owned a generator. Sonaram Das was a retired school headmaster and was one of the most respectable men in the village. Moreover, the post of the village headman could be filled by a villager belonging to any of the caste groups present in the village. These examples showed that one's caste identity did not define social status.

Furthermore, since the residential set-up did not strictly separate the potters' caste and the SCs (Das people), there was intermingling of both the groups. They equally participated in communitarian occasions and ate at each other's homes, although some families had their reservations about this. We also often encountered ladies and young people from both the caste groups socializing with each other quite comfortably. We witnessed an instance where men cutting across caste groups came forward to rebuild a small bamboo bridge across a stream of Brahmaputra cutting across Salmora. All the villagers had pooled in money for this purpose. The communitarian nature of the village was reflected via this instance. However, an interesting case of 2012 showed how the communitarian nature of the village was not always voluntary but neither was it an unpleasant affair. 2012 witnessed one of the worst flood situations in Majuli in the recent past. We gathered that people had to live in a large boat for 8 days consecutively as the floods had destroyed most of their houses and their possessions. This was a time when the different caste groups had to live, cook and eat together and we did not witness any tone of displeasure or complaint when the respondents recollected the memory of such a situation.

We saw how even though there was strict separation of occupation among caste group it did not reflect into their day to day social life. A major reason for this was also the shrinkage that was caused due to soil erosion which made people from different caste-based-villages draw towards one compact space. This inevitably meant that different caste households were placed in proximity and this in turn facilitated social interaction and communitarianism.

GENDER

The uniqueness of the occupation of pottery is played out exquisitely in its gender aspect. Pottery involves a balanced and equal sexual division of labour and it requires the indispensable participation of both men and women. The process of digging the pit for extraction of '*Kumhar mati*' (potters' mud⁶) and transferring the mud from the bottom of the pit, which could be as deep as 30 feet, to the surface land is done by men. Women help the men in passing the mud along and unloading it on trucks. This mud is then distributed among the people who were engaged in the extraction of it. From here on, the whole process of creating the pots is done by women. The baking of the pots however is generally done by men which is then later sold by them in towns and cities in other districts. Simply put, the 'workmanship' aspect of it was exclusively the job of the women in the family and the selling exclusively that of the men. There was thus, an indispensable participation of both the genders required for the sustenance of pottery. Here are a few interesting instances which highlight this uniqueness of a balanced participation of each of the genders.

During pregnancy, especially the later months of it, when women are unable to make pots, the husbands buy baked or unbaked pots from other women in the village to sell them in different cities. Puna Saikia, an unmarried woman in her 50s, sold pots to other villagers, especially, within the neighborhood, and made less money than others, as the pots were unbaked and absence of a man in the family meant that the pots could not be sold in the market. She got around Rs. 1500 for a hundred pots which was much less than what one gets for baked pots sold in other districts.

However, it is vital to note that in the absence of women in the family, pottery fails to be an option of livelihood altogether, unless the males buy unbaked pots from other households. Pottery, as such, was, then, essentially a prerogative of the women. Almost all women from the potters' community knew the art of pot making. It was a skill passed down through the mothers' line. In fact, one woman went ahead to state that it was a skill which they acquired in their mother's womb. Women from other villages brought into Salmora as daughters-in-law, mostly did not know pottery, although some of them learned it in due time.

⁶a clayey nature of mud found along the banks of Brahmaputra near Salmora used for making pots

Although, the balance of sexual division of labour in occupation came out as a unique feature of this village, when closely looked upon, it appeared that the art of pot making solely relied on the inherited skill of women. The men handled the logistical and marketing aspects of the pot making process. So, it was essentially the women who are the true potters in Salmora.

Women in this village were quite active and performed a myriad of activities. Not only did they engage in a full-fledged occupation of pottery, but also did fishing for consumption, household chores, rearing of cows and also weaving. Most of what they wore on a daily basis, a *mekhela sador*⁷, was weaved by themselves in *taat xaal* (weaving loom), although the ones to be worn in festivities were bought from the market. A few of them sold these too. All women in the village could row a boat as it was an essential skill given the flood situation. The women also actively participated in village meetings, panchayat meetings held for flood relief preparations, meetings for organizing festivities (such as *raas*) etcetera. Not only this, the village's Self-Help Group (SHG) was an active body. The Village Development Program (VDP) officer officiated the SHG meetings. We attended one such meeting and gathered that these meetings looked not just into entrepreneurial ventures of and opportunities for the women in the village, but taught them to be more vocal, confident and participative.

Another village body was the Village Security Unit where women played a significant role. This body initially only had male members. However, since it handled micro level criminal and other problematic issues of the village, such as domestic violence, pregnancy before marriage, sexual harassment, inter-caste marriage related issues, our respondent said that the issues were such that they required women members in the administrative body. It was thus, evident that the women of Salmora were very active in this village.

As noted above, the women were seen to be vocal and participative in village affairs. This was evident even in the private sphere. During most of the interviews, we noticed that women were expressing their views and opinions rather freely in front of men of the household and even outsiders. Moreover, presence of bodies such as Village Security Unit (VSU) furthered facilitated active participation of women. The VSU was expanded few years ago with three women entrants. Initiative for this expansion had come from the SHO of that area and as Pushpa Hazarika, one of

⁷ A traditional two-piece garment worn by most Assamese women

the women members, mentioned that since this organization looks into women related issues it was a step highly called for. Among many other issues she mentioned that they settled cases of 'pregnancy before marriage' also. Since intra-village marriage was a common practice in Salmora, intermingling of young boys and girls in the village did not seem to be as restricted. Moreover, the very fact of considering 'pregnancy before marriage' as an issue to be dealt with administratively speaks for the liberal character of the society. The geographical milieu was indirectly a facilitator in the process of the active nature of women and thence the liberal character of the society.

MIGRATION

Migration is one of the major phenomena identified by us which had made a deep impact on the socio-economic configuration of the Salmora village.

Migration in Salmora, if compared with migration patterns in other villages in India, is very similar and at the same time, peculiar in some aspects. Several push and pull factors have been recognized by us which are as follows:

- **Employment:** This was the most common reason specified for male migration by our interviewees. Salmora seemed to be a guild-type village where almost all the people performed one particular kind of occupation. Historically their settlement on the banks of Brahmaputra, rather than any land locked villages (within Majuli), which are comparatively less affected by floods, had catered to their occupational needs, especially of raw material. But with rampant soil erosion and shrinkage of the village, the horizon of pottery as an occupation had also shrunk. Now, if people, especially the new generation, make a cost-benefit analysis between pottery or any other service in nearby towns then, they tend go for the latter one. There are both push and pull factors behind this selection of occupation.

In our interviews, we found that prioritizing school education at the cost of learning their traditional art of pottery was a common answer throughout. Almost all the households we covered sent their children to schools and sincerely talked about their children's performances there. Furthermore, we found three schools situated very close to each other,

within the radius of 300-400m⁸. This again was the result of the shrinkage of the land mass of Majuli. Thus, both the will to educate as well as the infrastructural requirements essential for education were found to exist. We witnessed a commitment towards education when we found residents of the village celebrating their children's success in Higher Secondary Examinations, just like a festival. Thus, a good percentage of youths migrate to nearby towns in search of jobs based on their high school degrees. It seemed that, although they had been brought up around *Kumhari*, they are devoid of that emotional bonding which their parents had with their traditional occupation. Many potters mentioned that their educated children find 'clean' jobs in cities more attractive than dirtying themselves in pottery. So many of them migrate for different kinds of service jobs in companies or transport business etcetera.

Another Push for migration came from floods and in most of the cases, it was facilitated by the government. Many of those who had lost their lands and houses in erosion had been resettled, but not rehabilitated⁹, in nearby districts of Jorhat, Shibsagar, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur. But even those who were not fortunate enough to come in the government's list of flood victims, many had resettled in the places mentioned above on their own.

A pull factor of migration was kinship based seasonal migration, as was found in some cases. As in pottery some months are very engaging and productive for males (December-February) but in other months, either there is no work or very little work to do. So rather than engaging in disguised unemployment¹⁰ in pottery, many join their friends or kinsmen in nearby cities to do some casual work.

- Education: As mentioned above, the school education in Salmora seemed satisfactory. However, there was just one college which offered graduation degree. So many of those who could afford to move out, migrated to Jorhat or Guwahati for higher education. But, from here onwards gender equality in education, observed so far, seemed to get sacrificed.

⁸because the schools which were washed away by Brahmaputra were relocated in the remaining area hence reducing the circumferential gap.

⁹Rehabilitation included providing a sustainable means of survival which was not done for potters

¹⁰ More people employed than required

We hardly came across any case where a young girl had migrated, neither for education nor for employment. Another pattern was of skill based education. The nearest market area from Salmora was in Bongaon, which alone had three Computer Learning Centers. Many youths enrolled themselves in these centers. But despite of these centers offering job-oriented courses, there seemed hardly any usage of such knowledge in Majuli itself. So, we can deduce that the sole motive of such centers was to facilitate jobs in nearby districts, hence facilitating migration.

- **Marriage:** Another reason identified for migration was marriage. The marriage preferences varied from family to family but strict prohibition on intra-village marriages, as we see in North Indian Villages¹¹, was not found as such. In fact, intra-village marriage was a common phenomenon and somewhat seemed to have a functional utility for this occupation to continue. Kumhari in Salmora was peculiar, as discussed earlier in the report, so some familiarity with the process helped in the easy transmission of the skill from one generation to another. Hence, if daughters of Salmora are married within the village they are already tuned with the art of pot-making at the age of their marriage. So, in Salmora, now a Moja¹², quite vast geographically as well as demographically, many girls migrate within the village after marriage. But in many houses, we also found brides being brought from other nearby villages of Majuli or even from different districts of Assam. Some of them learned the art of pottery to continue the family tradition but most of them could not continue with this occupation in cases when brides were brought from elsewhere. We have already elucidated the indispensability of both the genders for this occupation, so it was a critical link for pottery for the husband-wife unit, both, to be accustomed in pottery. The families where this link had broken were not found to be doing pottery anymore and were dependent on boat-making or other services for livelihood.

¹¹Oberoi, Patricia 'The kinship map of India' Pg 55

¹²An administrative unit, traces its origin from Mughal rule

LAND OWNERSHIP

Majuli, itself being a riverine island, emerged as an alluvium deposit which got hardened over the years. But unlike the banks of Brahmaputra in Guwahati or Dibrugarh, here, erosion is a continuous phenomenon because of the absence of any rocky hindrance. It is an upper riparian district; hence, flow of water is comparatively high-paced than Guwahati, causing soil erosion all around Majuli, Salmora in particular. The continuous erosion and deposition made the ownership claims over land somewhat provisional or contingent on flood situations. Like any other flood and erosion prone village, Salmora kept losing and gaining considerable amount of land along the periphery. But in recent years this balance had been disturbed because the erosion rate has outpaced the deposition rate. So, the land in Salmora had skewed up to 1/3rd according to *Gaon Budha*.¹³

As the Revenue Circle officer of Majuli explained to us, there used to be two kinds of plots which are called “*patta*”.

First type was the Permanent or Parsona Patta. These were the land allotted to people for 10 years or more. After the completion of the tenure/lease it had to be renewed for continuing the ownership claim by payment of some minimal fees. The owner was allowed to sell or transfer the land to anyone else. He/ She had the freedom to make any use of the land, be it for agriculture or constructions. Second type of land was termed as Temporary Patta. These were basically agricultural lands which had been historically allotted to people. It was allotted for one year and no permanent construction was allowed on that. At the same time, these lands could only be inherited, neither bought or sold nor transferred to anyone else.

Few years back because of the intensity of flood, the entire region of Salmora was declared “Abandoned” as per the officials in Brahmaputra Board. It meant that land Revenue department would not collect revenue from the village. According to the officers as well as our respondent villagers, because of the prevailing conditions in Salmora after heavy erosion, the divide between patta and non patta land had faded away. There, people had started living on land initially meant for agriculture. The land was now bought and sold among villagers without any paper work. Thus, new ownership of land was gained and transferred without any registry in the Circle office. Moreover, the nature of buying and selling has changed because the whole exercise now is driven

¹³Assamese for village headman

not only by the idea of extra possession of land but also by dire need. Houses' being washed away in floods is a common affair in Salmora, hence buying of land becomes imperative to build houses, which of course is not a luxury but a necessity. Mutual trust and village brotherhood played the major role regarding such exchange and payments.

In fact, from our field visits we can say that there was hardly any big plot left for farming. Most of the land left, had houses over it which were very closely spaced and only few, a little well-off, had some spare land in front of them.

Second important aspect was related to land price within Salmora. Since major part of the village lied outside the *Mathauri* (embankment constructed by government which encircled Majuli), it was affected and disconnected during floods from the adjacent places. So, the land price was quite low; 10 times less than the nearby land inside the mathauri. According to Gao budha, the traditional village brotherhood played the major role in buying and selling of land within Majuli. Most often the payments were made in instalments extended over years.

Another amusing observation was regarding the land chosen for resettling erosion affected families. Many families were resettled alongside Spurs¹⁴. There were three Spurs constructed in Salmora, which were parallel to one another. The first and second number spurs had many settlements alongside them, which had come up in the last decade. We were surprised to see that even in the beginning of June, when most of Salmora was still dry, these houses were half submerged in flood waters. So, it was somehow very evident that for intra village resettlement, government selected the lands which were even much lower than the rest of the village, hence prone of early drowning.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

In this report we have made an attempt firstly, to set the premise of our investigation, which was the Brahmaputra floods and rampant soil erosion in the potters' village of Salmora and then we have tried to give a detailed description of how we put our hypotheses to test and what our major findings were on the identified parameters. In the concluding remarks regarding the

¹⁴Structure perpendicular to embankments made for diverting river water, to reduce erosion.

aforementioned socio-economic parameters of Caste, Gender, Migration, land ownership, and Alternative occupation, on the basis of our report, we want to claim that our hypotheses were correct.

Caste was existent, but more as one of the many identities rather than a dominant one which was identified with hierarchy. Occupational delimitation was intact and inter-caste marriage was still a serious '*bhool*'¹⁵ but the sense of hierarchy was not evident in their everyday lives. Earlier the entire village was majorly populated by potters but now the skewed territory has brought the Das people also within the village, not just in the territory, but the community as well. The awareness of each other's location on the caste hierarchy was certainly there but due to spatial proximity, thanks to erosion, the two communities did not show traces of caste separation in their day to day lives.

Regarding gender, the major conclusion is that, it is essentially the women who were the potters, and not the men. However, to carry pottery as an occupation, clear-cut sexual division of labour exists. But apart from women being the epicenter of pottery, the over-visibility of women in public spaces is also commendable. The vibrant SHG meetings or the existence of women bodies like VDP gives a very empowered view of the womenfolk in Salmora. But the most significant manifestation of this empowerment was the way they tackled floods. The techniques of combating floods - be it rowing the boat, swimming, or saving their cattle or guarding their houses or even actively participating in meetings regarding flood related issues - they had learnt it and engaged in all. So, no matter how ironic it sounds, we can say that calamity has given the women of Salmora the space where they can realize and exercise the power attained gradually.

Whereas the conclusion we made regarding alternative occupations was disappointing because there were hardly any alternatives found. The occupation of boat-making has been there traditionally so it cannot be called an alternative to pottery. Second thing, there is a limit to the spread of this occupation of boat making because the nature of both the occupations in terms of cost, labour and market are intrinsically different. So, this lack of alternative and the ongoing 'tug of war' between Brahmaputra Board and the potters have put the future of youths in trouble. The

¹⁵ Word for 'mistake' in Assamese.

large-scale migration from Salmora, mostly for petty jobs, seems like a direct consequence of the two issues we mentioned.

And lastly comes the land-occupation matrix. We have discussed earlier that entire Salmora was declared an 'abandoned' territory a few years ago. However, since people of Salmora have still not agreed to abandon the land they have been living on since centuries, the business on ground is going as usual. Buying and selling of lands, mostly for making new homes after losing old ones in erosion, were taking place without any government regulation. The distinction of agricultural and non-agricultural pattas, made by government in the past, was non-existent as agriculture in the village was almost lost because of the crisis of land and floods.

Thus, we see how the socio-economic configuration of Salmora is changing with the recurrent floods which increase soil erosion every year. Let us finally look at some of our limitations.

One of our major limitations was the lack of secondary data available on our field of research area. This limited our background understanding of the matter at hand. Another limitation was the language. Our informants' mother tongue was Assamese and almost no one conversed in English or Hindi, the two languages commonly known to the four of us. Since only one of us was fluent in Assamese, it limited interpretation by the rest. Moreover, it had its disadvantage in form of time consumed in translation.

We were expecting mushrooming of tourism related infrastructure and jobs in Majuli as the Southern part of Majuli had become a tourist abode in recent years. On our way to South Majuli, we saw some cottage homes developed for tourists, which seemed to second our expectations. In fact, Salmora with its *Kumhari* lifestyle and beautiful Brahmaputra banks seemed to have tremendous scope for ethno-rural tourism. Growth of tourism in Majuli can consume the villagers of Salmora in a variety of occupations that it can create. Although, the villagers of Salmora have adapted themselves to the changing geographical conditions, their precariousness cannot be denied.

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