

## **Spaces of Autonomy/ Spaces of Power- Individual aspirations and collective life at the Backdrop of a Precarious Ecology.**

**A case study of a Mishing settlement near Kaziranga National Park on the Brahmaputra floodplains in  
Assam .**

Situated near the union of Dhansiri and Brahmaputra rivers, and bordered by the Kaziranga National Park in Golaghat district, the 4 Mishing hamlets of Bamungaon watch over the river as it flows atop what used to be home to a much larger village, both in terms of the natural resources they could draw upon, and the social relationships that realized their dialectic with nature.

Generally literature on floods and social ecology have emphasised the resilience of social structures or institutions in how the community deals with floods, even as it criticises the modern state in handling these disaster-events. But we have yet to ask the question as to how these very structures, and the fissures therein, in terms of gender and age, to point out two broad parameters in interfacing with the flood- (not just as an event), but as a process- reorients even as it reinforces social institutions that have co-evolved with floods.

Simultaneously a particular kind of globalisation in terms of access to a plethora of media images that portray differently constituted cultural worlds, a peculiar monetization of both the world of work and the social relations they encompass, give rise to new possibilities of imagining social life in tandem with personal aspirations however contradictory and provisional they may seem, or indeed are.

**In the report after discussing about our methodology and objective, we have elaborated on the geographical as well as social background of our field area. After stressing on the coevolution of the river and social institutions of our village, we have tried to come to the observational and analysis part of our collected data in the field.**

**We have tried to conceptualise the household space, the division of labour therein, and factors which hold such hierarchies in place by focusing on the institutions and social spaces exclusively occupied by men. We will show that while women are able to secure spaces of autonomy in their daily work, men have occupied spaces of autonomy that are**

**congruent with spaces of power, at the backdrop of a social division of labour which makes it exceedingly difficult for women to participate in decision making processes.**

**Within this context we will present case studies that serve as examples of individual trajectories structured by everyday collective life and the fissures therein.**

### **Methodology:**

To understand the state of being of everydayness of the villagers dealing with the precarious ecological condition, we have taken up ethnographic approach by trying to adopt participant observation. In a small span of time comprehending the state of being or their rationality behind the everydayness is in first place difficult to achieve.

Initially to understand the background of the milieu, we went through secondary data, for that consulted the library of Assam Institute of Research for Tribal and Scheduled Castes. Along with spending time in Delhi to read secondary data, we spent two and a half days in Guwahati, Assam to go through secondary documents before going to the field.

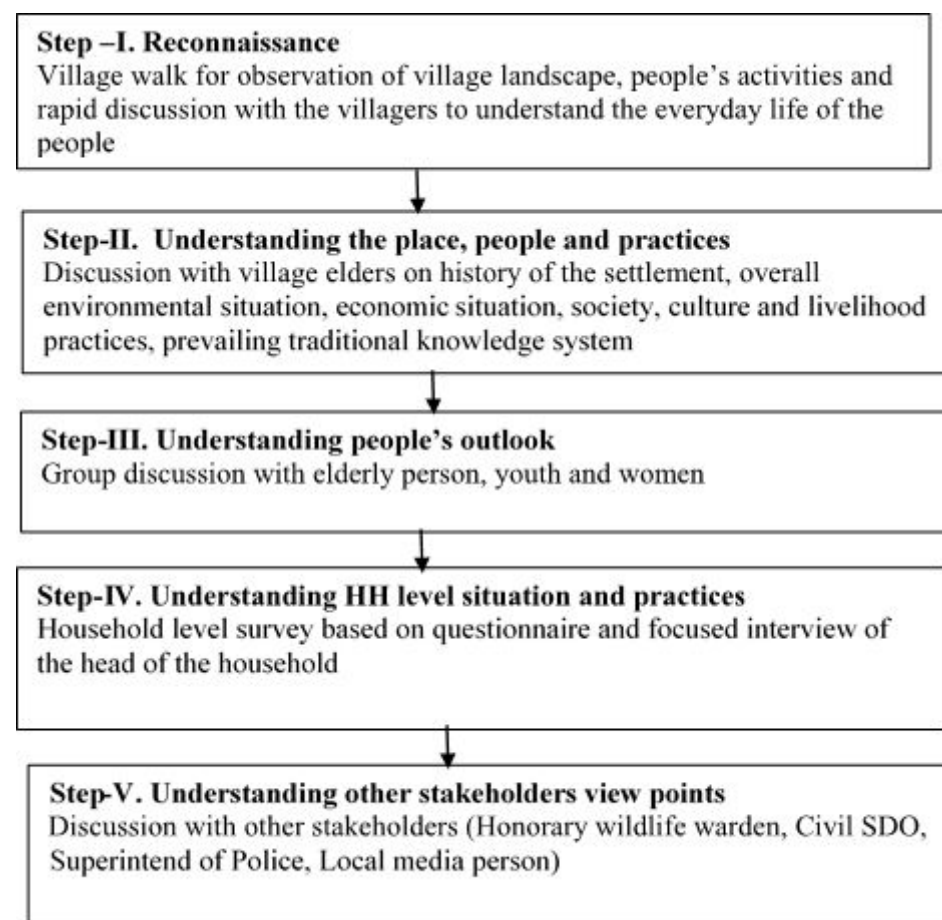
In the initial days of the field we started with village walk with our informant, who is also a village dweller. These walks were aimed at understanding the village landscape and people's activities. We went for village walks with this purpose for two days, where we tried to have random conversation the villagers. On the second day, we also talked to some of the older people of the village to understand the village history, its history of settlement, changes in the ecological situation, economic situation, social relations etc. Later from day third we engage into pilot based survey by asking issue related questions in groups. In that process we had interaction with a group of young boys, a group of young girls, women, men, old people. After the pilot survey, we selected our case studies on the basis of age, sex, vulnerability intensity variation, livelihood sources. After selection of our respondents, we went for structured household based interviews.

In terms of structured interviews, we have covered 48 households from different hamlets within the village, where there were 19 women respondents ranging from the adolescent girls, married women to olden ladies. We have covered 29 male respondents in the structured interviews, which includes man folks from various age groups ranging from 19 years to 80 years.

Apart from interviews, data is also being collected from day to day observation of happenings in the village, people activities and conversation from morning till night. This aim was being fulfilled through engaging into generally conversation with the villagers and participating or attending rituals of the villages. These kinds of casual conversation were mostly taken place in Murong Ghar, at embankment of the river while patrolling the field, in the kitchen, at the village shops etc.

After the field based interview and observation, we took interviews of people who represent the state bodies working in these areas.

Steps of fieldwork:



**Objective:**

The aim of the study is to understand how the precarious ecological milieu is being perceived by the community of the village. The perspective is to look at the community's sense of being not from a collective whole with unique traditional perseverance, but to see how the individual households or the individual social groups fragments being the recipient as well as the molder of the practice of coping and how the conscious or unconscious imbibing of modern way of living influence their dealing with the ecology and ascribed social structure .

Our original focus on 'coping' is altered immediately when we focus on the simultaneity of various social pressures. As such, to look into only the coping mechanism at the time of natural disaster, is erroneous and seeing it from the angle of historical backdrop of displacement, its impact on their psychic; structural social positioning of different sex groups and age group - thier individual conceptualisation or the practice of coping and how the constant interaction with wildlife provides us a more comprehensive and accurate picture.

To sum up, the study is being designed to look through the lens of-

1. To understand the people's understanding of precarious ecological milieu.
2. To understand the everydayness of the village lives dealing with the hierarchized yet changing social institutions
3. To understand the roles and duties of different social stakeholders in order to comprehend the impact of the ecology on them and their household based practices.

**Background of the field- study area and the People:**

Bamungaon is a fringe village of Kaziranga National Park situated in Agoratoli range, in Golaghat district of Assam. It is a village of 90 households divided in four hamlets. The area comes under Bokahkat development block.

The area located between latitude of 26°41'51.36" to 26°41'51.36" and longitude of E 93°36' 38.88" to E 93°38' 93°38' 22.56". It is a riverine area, predominantly comprises of recent composite alluvial plains and floodplains. The channels and point bars, back swamps

deposits are quite conspicuous in the active floodplains of the area. The area experiences the maximum of 38° C temperature during the summer and minimum temperature during the winter, fall up to 8° C. The annual rainfall is about 1960 mm. About two-thirds of the rainfall usually occurs during the rainy season i.e. during June-September.

The village consists of 90 households spread into four hamlets, Sarong suba, Koloni suba, Sarigoria suba and Mekurisuba. Majority of the demography consists of Mishing indigenous people who are called as the riverine area people. Among the Mishing population there are two groups, those who speak the dialect and those who do not speak the dialect, they are called as Assamese speaking Mishing. These Assamese speaking Mishings are originally mainland Assamese population who took shelter in Mishing village during the time of Maan attack. They initially worked as labourer in Mishing houses, later started having their own households. Apart from that there is one non-Mishing household belong to schedule caste group. The Mishing villagers call them Adivasi family.

The village has five small grocery shops. Among these three shops sell certain varieties of foreign liquor, one of which is particularly prominent, in that it provides credit and is located right at the intersection of the 4 hamlets. The village has a community area where the Murong ghar is situated and here the constructions are going on to convert the place into a resort. The village has a prayer hall, where scripture reading and pujas are conducted. In terms of religious belief, the villagers follow Hinduism along with Donyi Poloism.

The village has an LP school where teacher comes from outside to teach and there is an Anganbari where two women from the village work as helper and cook.

There is a tourist resort in the northern end village which is owned by a man from Bokakhat, the resort does not contribute anything in the village economy.

Being a fringe village of Kaziranga National Park, Bamungaon's natural milieu is shaped by its existence. An 80 years old Bhola Kardong shared his story of his young age when he and his friends used to visit the forest almost every day. The forest stands as one of the prime sources of collecting daily basic resources. They used to visit there for fire woods, wild vegetables, herbs, fruits etc. Many of the natural herbs of the forest have a ritualistic value in the community. For instance, leaf of the Tora tree is the essential element for any ritual institution like, Aliailigang (Mishing New Year), birth ritual, marriage and death rituals. This particular leaf is used to make local wine. So, it's generally a habit to visit in group to collect

Tora leaf before any ritual events. Moreover, in their food habit or local cuisine, the village community or Mishing community at large depends on many edible herbs which they collect from the forest.

Moreover, the forest is a great support system in terms of villager's practice of livestock rearing. The villagers generally take their cattle for grazing in the grassland area of the forest. This dependency reduces people's pressure on collecting fodder for the livestock.

The visit to the forest paves another way of socialisation in a sense that people who go in group share experiences, life events with fellow visitors in the group.

The forest acts as the facilitator for constant interaction between wild lives and villagers. Wild animals like, elephants, deer, buffalos and tigers visit village area. The issue of depredation of agricultural land results from such kind of interaction and the village's ecological location. This very interaction with the wild animals, actually shapes certain life conditions for the villagers. For instance, during harvesting season it's a regular ritual for men from each household to engage into patrolling the agricultural field at night. Thus, in the month of June and July, after dinner men and young boys sit in the river embankment to patrol the fields. In an interaction with such a group of men at the embankment on our fourth day of field stay, they shared how they had to give attention to minute sounds that elephants make when they are near the area. One of the respondents, a 60 years old man said that, he is so habituated to listen to the sounds of the elephants that he can figure it out even if the elephants are there in the middle of the forest. In the discussion they said that, patrolling and guarding the fields from the wild animals is like playing a game between men and elephants. They make strategies for such actions and carry sharp edged sticks to scare the animals as well as to sometimes attack them. The forest department, as they informed, sometimes provide equipment for patrolling, they give high power torches etc.

Apart from depredation of agricultural field, the wild animals like tiger also kills livestock, especially cattle. One of the respondents (Nosi Kardong) while visiting her household, informed us how tiger killed their cows last year. Moreover, they have to be selective in terms of what trees to be planted near human settlement. Debojit (50) another respondent said

that they don't generally plant banana trees near the house because it invites more wild elephants to the village.

*"It is good that the Kaziranga NP is near to us. We co-habitat with the animal. We don't disturb each other. There is restriction in entering into the forest. But as forest personals know us if some time we need elephant apple(ou-tenga) or some leaves/herbs (Tora etc.) to use in our pujathen we request them to allow us to collect those. Then they allow us. Actually they know that we would not harm the forest and as well as to animal there." (55 year old male respondent, who visits the forest at the invitation of national park authority to help in cutting trees)*

The very interaction with the wild animals also includes the engagement of human beings with event of discursive illegal- hunting or poaching. From interaction with the villagers as well as other stakeholders, it has been known that during the period 2005 to 2010, there were numerous instances of poaching in Agoratoli range of Kaziranga National Park. With the suspect ion of involvement of local people, there used to be constant surveillance on the village. As Gaon Bura mentioned in the interview, there were few male folks of the village who involved in poaching and in the process of suspect ion along with surveillance the state authority use to catch innocent villagers of Bamungaon. This series of phenomenon compelled the village community with the permission of the village head to arrive at the decision of out casting or forcing families involved in poaching to leave the village. There were four families who got caught and they to leave the village. In the present time, there is one family whose male folk is now in prison because of his involvement in poaching. There is ambiguity about whether they will be asked to leave the village after his release or not. Though all the respondents said that no villager is engage into poaching in the present day, when they were asked the reason behind villager's involvement in the past, the rationale varied over generation or age groups. For instance, people of the older generation explains that these were ill attempt by certain individuals motivated by the greed to earn easy money whereas younger generation tried to see these kind of involvement as the direct result of state of poverty and unemployment.

## The River.

The river acts as a source of livelihood and subsistence, i.e. fishing is one of the central activities of the village dwellers. Men and women of the village engage into fishing actively. In groups they go by boat in Dhansiri for fishing. Fish being an important ingredient in their cuisine, they do fishing for subsistence purpose. At the same time, in case of catching big fish they sell in the market via Mohaldar (lease holders) . However, there are households which completely rely on fishing for earning and many households only sell fish when it is abundant i.e. during the time of flood. During flood season they can earn Rs. 500 to 1000 per day from fishing, but they don't get sufficient number of fish every day, so during one-month flood period they go to market around twelve times.

### Box-2

#### Practice changes over time

*Now it is changed than the earlier days! Heard from older people and even see our self when we were young, people didn't feared for flood, used to stay in bamboo plate from house in flood situation too. In those days flood water bring more fish. We catch fish and it was like playful moment, but now people fear for flood, particularly by the younger one. In our younger days we were adjust with flood applying our own observational knowledge or information shared by our seniors, now days educated younger don't relies on us and unable apply experiential or observational knowledge, so they fear for flood. In case of older people like us, due to reducing physical strength, we also unable to fight with flood as it was earlier. Don't know how illness encircled us, earlier days we were cured by medicinal herbs available nearby us but now we are depending on medicine of pharmacy. Now I personally feel fear for flood, sometime feel water speed is increases, may be it is due to my old age. Earlier flood water receded fast, now it is remain for longer times. Eelior flood water carries 'Palos' (humus) , deposited on our crop field, which help in agriculture in post flood period, now it is decline. Spreading grassland in the surrounding of the village along the river island helps to break the water flow and 'Palos' were deposited, now grassland also reduces. Earlier when Brahmin people live here, during the flood with their livestock they went towards Bokakhat, only Mishing people stay here during flood. When flood receded they come back.*

( shared by 70 years old person who was suffering from illness)

**Due to flood and erosion thousands of Bighas of land lost by the people, we never get any compensation.**

The river acts as a way of communication, especially during flood period, river becomes the only commuting agent. So during flood time, emergency visit to the hospital, market etc.



usually done by riding boat. Moreover, during flood for defecation people go in boat to faraway places.

More importantly, the river influences the agricultural activities of the region. As it helps in deposition of humus, it determines the soil quality and ensure the availability of water, the agricultural activities along the bank of Dhansiri River basically designed on traditional crop calendar of the community.

The river also acts as the recreational centre for children and young boys and girls. They swim with friends and spend leisure time. Until tube wells were installed in the village, the river was the only source of drinking water.

(the negative-erosion)

The shifting of course of the river impacted the village at extreme level in the form of flood and erosion. The flood has set the ecological tone of the village and thereby it directs the village's existence of being. The yearly instability created by flood leads to the destruction of cropping field, human settlement, and livestock. The added natural disaster of erosion with flood again leads to the extreme end of erosion of the whole settlement area of Bamungaon. The very village has the traumatic history of displacement of the whole village due to erosion, whereby, some of the households have lost cultivable land and some lost settlement lands. As many respondents remembered earlier the village used to be the village of abundance with huge area of agricultural field along with huge homestead garden. 60 years old Moni Pasong said, *"Earlier time there was ample amount of agricultural land everyone used to good product; every family was well-off with their agricultural product. Now in this place we have limited agricultural land so there is limitation in production."*

**Box-1****River plays with us**

*Actually river paly with us.*

*Earlier we had lots of land here, but now all had been eroded away by the river Brahmaputra. Our village was in 4/5 mile ahead towards Brahmaputra earlier from this location. Last 3 /4 years erosion has not been taken place but sand deposited on land . I have 18 to 20 bighas of land in other village, namely No2. Sildubi Pothar Gaon. But out of that entire land only 10 to 12 bighas of lands are usable.*

*Nearly for 10 years I lived in No2. Sildubi Pothar Gaon. There life was more challenging there. We had to wait and watch animal for whole night to save our agriculture product, otherwise elephant and rhino damaged our agriculture. So I decided to shift to this village.*

**as shared by Upen Charah- Village Headman (Gaubura), Bamungaon.**

The event of river erosion clearly paints the image of natural milieu for the villagers (box-1). Apart from historical transition of the village along the river Dhansiri, the river impacts the day to day life of villagers in many ways and changes of people's lives and practices are overt.

Flood being the existence of being, the village as a physical entity and its dweller are bound by the fact that they have to adjust their activities on the basis of what will happen during the flood, the timing of the flood etc ( box-3). Some of the respondents explained how there is an institutionalised manner of dealing or coping with the ecology. Community meeting are held during pre-flood and flood period, to decide on how to take steps, who will do what. At the community level they build bamboo platform in the road or river embracement for staying people during flood. Before the flood the villagers regularly individually or collectively keep observing the river's water level. When the water level rising, the first thing they do is to shift the livestock into the safer places, i.e. river embankment. They also give importance to keeping valuable materials in the safer position, where along with various documents, their chauka (cooking stove) , important utensil, weaved clothes etc. They generally make raising platform inside the house to keep these things.

Box-3

**Life goes on**

Our life is goes on!

Flood creates lots of problem to us. There are crisis space to dry paddy and grind paddy get rice. Boat is required. Unable to graze the cattle. We don't have boat, so face lots of problem. Usually take paddy in boat to highland area of the village, where use to dry and grind. However, able to catch fish during the flood which can take in daily meal. Sometime compelled to purchase rice. During flood period, after wakeup from bed in the morning goes to fishing site check what fish trapped in our 'chepa ' ( a bamboo fishing gear) . Both we husband and wife goes to fishing site 1<sup>st</sup>. Some catch are sale out, some are dried for later use. During the flood period male folk are busier with fishing.

Another problem face by us is use of toilet, we use to go by boat to the appropriate place for doing latrine.

Use to visit forest in search of wild edible. Visited one week before. Usually visited in flood free period, used to visit in group.. Night watching and patrolling practice is there among the villagers to protect crop from wildlife.

Don't want to go to town for settlement, not interested allow daughter or son for that. Some visited such place but no plan to settle there.

( as shared by Kanchin Mili, a 45 years female respondent )

During flood they have to rely on government relief material i.e. 5 kg rice per family for a week with some other materials. The respondents are concerned about their destroyed crops for which they barely get compensation.

We note that the relationship of the people with the river comes about not just in terms of the annual event which is the flood or the resources that they have drawn from it. The river, and successive erosion of land is a historical process i.e to say simply that the movement of the river over time has shaped the physical environment of the village. We were told by several respondents that before 1950s, Bamungaon was a part of a much larger village called Dhansirimukh. The name 'Dhansirimukh' comes from the geographical location of the village i.e. it was situated in a meeting point of Dhansiri river and Brahmaputra river. It is around 1955, that this larger village had to face erosion and after 1950's great earthquake successive instances of erosion led to the fragmentation of Dhansirimukh village into several tiny villages, like. Bhalukguri, Baligaon, Xapekhuwa, Bohikhuwa etc. Concomitantly, a group of people from Dhansirimukh during these events of erosion came to the area called

Bamungaon and settled there. These group of people belong to Mishing's Charah clan and thereby Bamungaon is also termed as Charah Gaon.

The point we would like to stress is that which follows from the historical nature of their relationship with the river, i.e. their society has co-evolved with the river. As such the river being one of the important factors of natural milieu of Bamungaon, constitutes its lifeline, a cause of transition as well as the source of identity.

We need only look at the architecture of the Household unit to determine this relationship.

### **THE HOUSEHOLD SPACE.**

**The household is the basic unit of social organisation in the village.** The Mishing household structure is created on a bamboo platform, roughly 5-6 feet above the ground, depending on its proximity to the highlands. This has significant implications for our purposes. This means that they do not have permanent infrastructures or appliances because of the flood. The technological implements that can be incorporated need to have a mobile character- bikes, cell phones, standard kitchen utensils. Valuables also have to be mobile. At the same time they do not have elaborate partitions of the house.

Bathing, washing, and toilet facilities are outside the household structures and these spaces are usually shared among 2-3 households. i.e to say that the functions of the house are not and cannot be confined to the bounded physicality of the housing structure, in any case. It is not meant to be a self sufficient unit. As such, with respect to kin ties and corresponding emotional sensibilities, as well as the general nature of material disadvantages, water (tubewell) and toilet resources are to be shared.

We situate this against the very recent trend of fragmentation of the household. On two instances, newly weds, owing to problems within the household have opted to create structures of their own but have to share these essential resources and functions, with the very same households from which they initially separated.

Some of the households in the village has fragmented through the separation of one unit from joint family and have settled as nuclear family in the same vicinity. The separation happens due to conflicts among family members especially among siblings and their spouses regarding following ascribed works and duties in terms managing household and household economy.

After marriage, Rambabu (34) lived for four years in the joint family, then he, along with his wife and three children, moved to nuclear family set up. Expense in terms of HH management has reduced after separation from the joint family. However, now the works are more time consuming as he does not get help or don't have people around who can help to finish any work faster. After separating from the joint family, the children are being able to improve on their studies, as they are being able to give more time to studies. Moreover, parents also get time to look after children's studies.

Another HH we have come across in our filed stay, who have recently separated from their joint family. After separated from the larger family, the present nuclear family has started using gas cylinder and stove for cooking. However, as they still have not got government built toilet for the family, they have been using the toilet of the larger family.

In any case, this is one particular instance of individual aspirations being mediated by collective concerns. Individuals tend to draw on collective resources to provide for Household subsistence, even if the purpose is to eventually migrate out of it.

These collective resources have an immutable character, tubewells and bathrooms are brought about through collective efforts, and lobbying for govt. Interventions. Constructing

the house is itself a collective effort, generally takes 3-5 days of labour done by upwards of 20 people for 5-6 hours a day, although the cost, which is roughly around Rs 40- 50,000, is borne entirely by the prospective residents.

As we will see later, similar forms of co-operation extend to the domain of agriculture, for instance- men form groupings to plough each others land on the basis of daily wages. More commonly women from various households share the task of cutting the harvest even as household duties are managed internally.

However, with respect to the household, there are deep divisions on the basis of gender in the labour that is used to sustain it, in terms of the labour that pertains to its internal management and the functions therein- which includes collecting firewood, cooking, washing and childcare among others. This falls entirely on women, the only exception being the labour needed to repair it from time to time, especially after the floods which is a responsibility borne primarily by men, even if not exclusively.

In terms of household management women's ascribed duties can be divided into various segments, cooking food for the household members, fetching drinking water from drinking water sources, cleaning work, rearing children (Figure 1) and Table -1 reflect the scenario.



**Fig.1. Women HH management work**

**Table-1. Daily HH work of women**

<b>Specific HH based works</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Total time spent (Approximate)</b>	<b>Remark</b>
Cooking	<p>Three times a day</p> <p>i. Morning: 5:30am to 8am</p> <p>ii. Afternoon: 12 noon</p> <p>iii. Night: 5pm to 6pm</p>	Three to four hour per day	<p>i. Generally, the duty comes under daughter in laws of the family</p> <p>ii. Young girls of the households' act as the helping hand of daughter in laws</p> <p>iii. Mother –in-law suggests/old women of the family suggest what should be cooked.</p> <p>iv. Sometimes young men in the family help in chopping vegetables and sometimes married men cook vegetables when their wives go to the agricultural field.</p>
Fetching drinking water	Two to three times per day	25 to 30 minutes per time i.e. 1 to 2 hours per day.	It is predominantly the work of the young women. Young girls before going to school fetch water, after coming back from school in the

			afternoon they fetch water. Again they fetch water in the evening.
Cleaning Work (cleaning the house +cleaning used utensil+ washing clothes)	In between 5:30 to 8am	40 to 50 minutes per day	Both young girls as well as married women (daughter-in-laws) engage in it.
Childcare	No specific time period		The work of childcare comes under the domain of elder siblings especially elder sisters, thus there are instances (observed during the field stay), young girls miss school when the mother has to go for agricultural work, as they take care of their younger siblings. However, it's also being noticed that women carry small kids to the field. Even in the leisure time they enjoy, childcare is an ever present responsibility.
<b>Specific HH based works</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Total time spent (Approximate)</b>	<b>Remark</b>



Collecting firewood	During the day time especially in the morning (after 8am)	3 to 4 hours or sometimes the whole day.	Women generally go in groups (10 to 12 women), for collecting firewood they go to the forest.
Collecting vegetables for subsistence	During the day time	15 to 20 minutes	They collect it from homestead garden or they collect wild edible vegetables and herbs when they visit the forest.
Fishing for subsistence	During early morning	4 to 5 hours, sometimes take the whole day	They go for fishing in groups in boat.

**It is clear at this point to us that women have the leading role in maintaining the household. It is a contrary, though unsurprising observation that men continue to wield power within the household space.** From the ascribed role of being the patriarch of the family and at some point being the patriarch of the household, the oldest male member basically holds the sole position of decision making. It is so because, as we will state further in our report, the household space is but one of many spaces where gender hierarchies are manifested and reinforced.

We note that there is a major gender based power dynamic in familial relations. In terms of relationship between husband and wife, the woman has to encounter the suppressive behaviour of her spouse on a daily basis. In context of rampant practice of child marriage, the men or the young husbands don't prefer using condoms, it leads to early pregnancy where the mother has to face problems in delivery as well as in breast feeding the infant. Moreover, as

the Asha worker has informed in the interview, the couples don't keep a minimum gap of three months, which risks mother's health. Apart from that physical violence seems to be very prevalent among the married couple. Rambabu (34) who has moved with his wife and children from joint family, said, "When I get angry, sometimes I slap my wife. It is very normal in our society, everyone does it. It's nothing serious." Moreover, while interacting with a group of married men about their relations with their wives, they believed among themselves that Mishing women who stay in the town are very sharp and shrewd, one can't take them for granted, they know law thus they are aware what is legal and what is illegal. But, according to him, Mishing women in their village is very dumb, they have zero knowledge about law, thus men can deal with that easily.

**At the other end of the spectrum, we note simultaneously, the broader political institutions,** The Mishing Autonomous Council (MAC) being one other institutional support base for the village, where only one representative is there from the village in the council and that person is always a male person. MAC plays the role of advocacy and lobbying along with activism for the safety and security along with the development of the community. At the same time, they ensure the implementation of the indigenous community rights.

Nearly 7 years ago the Mishing Autonomous Council (MAC) was formed (As per official source it was created in the year 1995). Gana Sakti is a political party who are in majority in MAC. TMPK (Takam Mishing Porin Kebang) is a student union of it. There is also women wing known as TAMK, its presence is very remotely felt in the village we studied.

According to the respondent Bijay Pegu (35), representative MAC as a leader of Gana Shakti, after formation of MAC their situation has improved. Earlier government does not pay much attention to those backward Mishing villages. Thus the situation of Bamungaon also has changed.

At the community level in the village, as the respondent mentions, they have provided, platform to keep livestock during flood, Murong ghar (community hall where public meeting, public celebration etc. are held), built school boundary.

During flood, they provide tarpaulin sheet for constructing camp and installed tubewell above the water level for safe drinking water. They volunteer for flood relief distribution in the village.

We can observe that from the most basic unit of social organization to its highest political forum, women representatives are scarce. It is so because women are routinely excluded from spaces even remotely connected to decision making on a general level, which is not to say that women do not have spaces for autonomy within the village structure, but that these spaces of autonomy never coincide with spaces of power. By spaces of autonomy we mean to highlight the spaces where men or women can express their concerns, amongst themselves or to others. For women these are the spaces constituted during weaving, cutting the harvest. or the brief leisure time they get during afternoons (ofcourse, even in this time, childcare is an ever present cause of frustrating one's labour). A brief remark is most opportune at this point. One of our newlywed respondents, Debojit (19) when asked about this unequal division of labour, said that women have to work hard only during times of harvest. For the rest of the year, they sit back at home.

For men the spaces of autonomy are boundless, but even more interestingly, they spaces are easily transposed to spaces of power, by which we mean, for example, the Murong ghor, where collective decisions, on matters ranging from domestic disputes to political support are decided upon.

Our insistence in alluding to the relationship between these spaces, is not simply to point out that it is these same men who deliberate and decide on matters of collective relevance. It is so, but, as we will show, the spaces where men enjoy autonomy do not tolerate the presence of women, even as it deeply affects them. This is not the case with women, for whom spaces of autonomy are simply spaces of work. For men these are spaces of autonomy in an unqualified sense. These are spaces for interacting with different cultural worlds, spaces of leisure, where news is shared and opinions are formed. In and of itself it reflects a deep division of power, as we will note later in empirical terms.

**Spaces of autonomy, Spaces of power.- The world of work.**

## Women's work, beyond the household.

### Livestock Rearing

Majorly of the livestock rearing works managed by the women. Except cattle rearing, rearing of pig, chicken, goat is done by women of the household. In terms rearing of cattle, it's been done by men and older women in the households ( table-2)

Table -2. Livestock rearing related works			
Livestock	Time period	Total time spent	Remarks
Pigs	Feed two times a day	15 to 20 minutes	i.Pig is considered as one of the important assets of HH as it has a ritual value, in ritual events they sacrifice it. ii.It is considered as woman property, but when it is sold in the market the money goes to HH based management instead to the woman who looks after it. iii.When they sell piglets it costs around 2000 to 2500 rupees. Selling of pigs generally is considered as an option for crisis fund.
Chicken	Feed two times a day	15 to 20 minutes	i.Chicken is reared generally for subsistence. ii.Sometime they sell it in market in 200 to 300 rupees, the money generally goes to household management.
Goat	Take the goats to the grazing area in	20 to 25 minutes	

	the morning and bring them back in the evening.		
Cattle	Take the cattle to the grazing land, bring them in the evening and then provide them with fodder	It takes almost half a day because the person takes them to the grazing land, stays there.	1. Being agricultural society cattle is considered very important.

## Weaving

Weaving is the one of the work where larger section of women of the Mishong community transfer their imagination in to creativity, however, it is also a means of occasional livelihood earning for a tiny section of women.

Women in the village spend a lots of time in weaving. Almost every household has traditional weaving machine. Gamosa, Mishong mekhala sador (Mishong's traditional attire) are the most common things they weave. Majority of the women weave cloth for their own use. Women's engagement in weaving is considered very important in the village. Mothers teach the skill of weaving to their girl child from a very young age and it is an ascribed norms of the village or broader Mishong community that after attaining puberty, girls have to engage actively in weaving. It is a practice that girls before their marriage have to weave cloths for their marriage and married life. So, the cloths that they weave generally preserve it for future and in some very special occasion they wear some of it. The practice of keeping of weaved cloths and transfer of it from one generation of woman to other is a very old practice, which still is very relevant in the village.

After finishing up of household based work women spend maximum time in weaving. During the days when they don't have to go to the agricultural field they spend time in weaving from

morning till the evening. Young school going girls engage in weaving right after coming back from school.

Women generally weave together i.e. neighbouring household install their weaving machine at one space, thereby the weaving space gives a space of their own where women discuss and share day to day happenings to each other.

Though women generally use traditional design patterns, now they also go for some modern design. Some of the woman occasionally sell some of the weaved products. They sell mekhala sador at around 3000 to 4000 rupees and gamusa at around 500 rupees. Those women who sell these, they get more customer between December to February as tourist visit their village for picnic. They earn good amount of money when foreign tourists visit their village. The earned money is solely owned by woman herself. Though almost all women engage in weaving they don't do it specifically for commercial purpose. While asking why they don't want to engage in commercial based weaving, they explain how their hectic work schedule in terms of managing the household based work and agricultural based work don't give too much of time to engage in it.

It is noteworthy that, during flood period they can't engage in weaving.

We compare this with the world of men's work.

**Fishing** is a major work where men generally involve into. For fishing they use bamboo net as well as 'Cepa' (Bamboo fishing gear). They put the fishing gear in the middle of the water bodies. Moreover, they go in boat for fishing in Brahmaputra. Generally fishing is done for subsistence, but when they catch big fish, sell it in the market through mahaldar (lease holder). During flood period, they get fish in abundance, thus they sell it in the market.

The HH units are dependent on the market for certain basic things – salt, oil, sugar, vegetables (non-seasonal period – during flood). These things are being generally purchased by men when they travel to town's market.

Involvement of men in agriculture includes three types of works. First, they are the one involve in making fencing of the agricultural field. Second, they solely involve in ploughing the field. For ploughing they use generally traditional instruments, but nowadays, they have

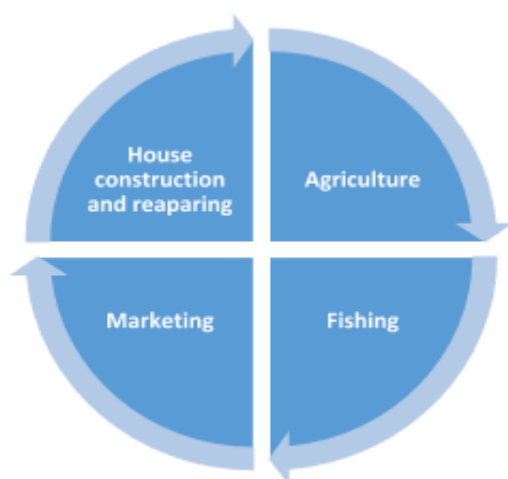
started using power tiller. They sometimes hire power till from someone from the village who has it or they sometimes hire it from the neighbouring villages. Most importantly, man plays the sole role in the decision making part of the agricultural work. The decision making part includes basically three aspects, they are, what crops they want to sow, how much land they will use for each varieties of crops and the commercial part of it i.e. whether they want to sell the production, the price of the crops etc. Moreover, taking the rice to the mill for its refinement is being done by men along with women.

Moreover, the agricultural work also very much links with the daily event of night watching or patrolling the agricultural fields from wild elephant's attack. This is a daily routine especially at the time of harvesting. It is the male folk of each household who involves in it.

Men are also involved into boat repairing. Presently, there are only two people in the village who can make boats.

<b>Table – 3. Daily work of men</b>			
<b>Involved Work</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Total time taken</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
Building traditional platform houses	3 to 4 days of work where every day they work for four hours (2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the morning)	12 to 14 hours	It can be built in one day, if there is enough manpower, i.e. for completing in one day they need more than 20 people

Agriculture (Ploughing)	It takes 5 to 7 days, per day they spend 3 to 4 hours	20 to 28 hours	
Boat making & Repairing boat	20 days for making full boat; 3 to 4 days for repairing and maintenance	80 to 100 hours (for making full boat)  16 to 12 hours (for repairing)	For making a boat from it costs 10000 to 12000 rupees.
Fishing	2 to 3 hours		Generally they keep their fish catching equipment to catch fishes in the river, it does not take much time.
Night watching/ patrolling the river banks and paddy fields	During the harvesting period	1 to 2 hours per night	





### **Fig.1. Man's daily course of work.**

As we have noted before, for men, the spaces of autonomy exist beyond the spaces for intensive labour. In the previous sections we have tried to contextualise both the physical-geographical contexts in which our settlement exists, their relationship to the forest and its resources as well as the impact of floods as it pertains to collective life in broad terms. We have simultaneously looked at the various social actors involved in this process, the positions of relative power they occupy with respect to the nature of work manifested in time.

### **SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND SPACES OF POWER.**

For this section which tries to connect these various threads of observations, and present our main analytical framework. We look at the village as a social space with various co-ordinates. The first important co-ordinate is the household itself, its architecture and the functions it entails. Subsequently we look at spaces like the Murong ghor, the riverbank which is the site for organising night vigils, and the spaces that have evolved with the consumption of foreign liquor.

We will make the argument that while women are fixed into certain roles within the household and especially in their work beyond it- to include the supervision of livestock, weaving, fishing and collecting harvest, which all produce spaces of autonomy; Men enjoy a particular kind of autonomy within the spaces that they assume. Specifically, the kind of autonomy that coincides with spaces of power, the Murong ghor being a prominent example of it, as are the riverbanks, where night vigils for are organised. With a gradual proliferation of cell phones, again, owned and occupied primarily by men, these are spaces where opinions are formed, opinions pertaining to politics, aspirations of the world outside the village, and decisions are taken with respect to the village itself. These are spaces which women are structurally unable to occupy, which has significantly to do with the gender roles and ontological position fixed on to them (which we suspect, is of being available to men), manifest in the multifarious domestic responsibilities they have to assume and partly due to the nature of these spaces themselves, as it has coevolved with the way men make use of these spaces.

A particularly illuminating observation in that regard, is the when Raju Pegu asked Soham to join him on the riverbank at night. The plan was originally to remain there throughout the night and consume marijuana. However, the prospect of Trishita joining them quickly lessened the time actually spent on the bank. They were not there for more than an hour and marijuana was not consumed. The reason why that particular space was important, is made clear to us when compared with a situation in Vijay's own house where many of the same people who were at the banks including Soham and Trishita, smoked weed and made merry, without reservations.

As such we spend time in this section on this particular group of men, of the age 20-35. Which wield an enormous amount of social power. The spaces they occupy, in the way that they do when compared to the spaces women occupy, provide us a critical insight into the manner in which power social or political is wielded in the village, and how they structure aspirations be they, within or without the village.

At this point we introduce our observations of the institution of the Gaubura and most importantly the Dekabura.

Goan Bura is the village head additionally occupying an administrative position with political baggage. Upen Charah, a 70-year-old man, is the present goan bura of the village. He acts as the representative of the village who conveys various issues to state power for solution. Moreover, in case of conflict inside the village the goan bura acts as the mediator between the quarrelling parties. It is considered that, educated man with active involvement to the community is best suitable for this post or responsibility. The weightage of the position has something more than the tokenism value in the presence of democratic state functioning state apparatus, comes from the fact that the villagers generally don't go to the legal institution of the state. They believe in solving problem inside the village as much as possible. Only in case of extremely serious issue which could not be solved even after discussing in community meeting, they seek institutional legal assistance.

Where Gaonbura deal with political and legal aspects of the village, the positional figure of Dekabura acts a surveillance lens for maintaining the socially ascribed norms and familial and kinship based relation and reflects a self-governance system of the village. In Assamese Deka denotes a young man and basically he is considered as a leader of youth group. Deka Bura deals with issue of youth especially in the realm of marriage. While interviewing the present Deka Bura, he says that in their community marriage generally happens through elopement. Even though there is a position of Tiri Bura who is a female youth leader, main decision is being done by Deka Bura.

According to ascribed social norms, boys of Mishing community can disclose about his relation with a girl whereas the girl herself can't say about it. In the Mishing community marriages are generally happened through elopement. During March or April Deka Bura initiates in holding meeting of the eligible bachelors of the village and there happens sort of an inquiry whether they are into relationship or not. When many youth disclose about their relation in the meeting, in second step Deka Bura notice whether they are serious about relationship or not. If Deka Bura along with other youths observed that a particular couple is serious about it and want to get married, then Deka Bura arranges for their elopement. The illegible bachelor supposed to give an amount of rupees like, 400/500 to the group as token of respect.

Now-a-days, youths, especially who are still studying, are being suggested by their peers and elders, who are married, not to get married soon. But, they hardly ever work as those who generally give this advice mentioned very casually that they failed to follow it themselves. Marriage gives the youths a sense of position in the family. There are instances of child marriage in the village. Young men who are in their 20s bring girls from other villages through elopement who are 16 or 17 years old. At the same time there are instances where both boy and girls are very young. Dekabura as being a youth leader doesn't look into this issue with respect to its legality, much less its ethical implications. The emphasis is on how the dispute between husband's family and wife's family can be solved. Basically he looks at how amiable kinship relationship can be sustained between two patriarchs.

Deka Bura acquires the ascribed role of acting like a watchdog in terms of protection of girls of the village. If any boy misbehaved any girl during Bihu or any other time Deka Bura along

with other youth take action against the offenders. At the same time, Deka Bura and his team organise various community programmes and arrange the traditional musical instruments like, dhol, pepa for occasions like community bihu. This kind of arrangement is done from Deka Bura youth funds. These funds come from the youth's financial contribution, now-a-days as Deka Bura was sharing in the interview, the fund has reduced and sometimes he alone has to bare the whole expenditure. Earlier Deka Bura used to have funds generated through rendering collective services to the villagers. There is a common which was more active earlier, is that, if any house requests the dekabura along with other youths (boys & Girls) to work in his/her agriculture field during harvesting season or sowing season then they used to give service to the household as a social responsibility. As a remuneration of their services an amount of money the household pays to the Deka Bura (which is less than normal daily wages i.e. less than 150 per day) which they used to deposit in DekaBura's fund. That fund is used for arranging community programme or any other community activities. Nowadays the youths are busy with other different activities like study, services etc. consequently now they unable to render such community services like earlier. Hence their fund collection is also reduced day by day.

The institution of the Dekabura and his age cohorts, falling roughly between the age of 20-30 comprise perhaps the single-most powerful group in the village. The spaces of autonomy which we mentioned earlier are occupied if not wholly then significantly by this group. This is the group that both physically and socially, occupies the Murong ghor, the river banks during the night vigils and the drinking spaces that have opened up. These spaces, the perspectives and opinions that populate wield a discursive power, that bears on the moments of decision making within the village.

All these male dominated social committees of the village intensifies the patriarchal power dynamics by overtly portraying male in front and hiding the female behind. The political power possession gives the upper hand to men to define their leisure time by transferring major duties to women. Thus in terms of work schedule of men there is a certain kind of flexibility, this leisure times they spend mostly in consumption of alcohol and marijuana, playing cards etc. These leisurely habits lead also to occupying of certain spaces which are

ideally meant for all. For instance, they use Murong ghar, river embankment etc. for playing cards and drinking. Thereby it restricts the mobility of women and children into those spaces. Moreover, though in their community men and women both drink local beer, which is a practice gradually in decline. The popularity and availability of commercial liquor like boxer etc as well as the intensity of consuming foreign liquor has increased in the case of men. This leads to a serious phenomenon of increasing violence or quarrels in the households among family members. While talking to women in the agricultural field, they said that, “In our houses many people stay together and when men folks come home intoxicated and create noise, it disturbs the studies of children at home. Community meetings have been organised many times to address the issue, create awareness, but the problem remains the same.” Moreover, men’s mobility to the market in the town again intensifies the matter. Young boys and middle-aged men have started drinking in town i.e. in Bokakhat or in nearby market place called Dhansirimukh.

### **Aspirations and Tensions.**

It is within this context that the questions of individual concerns and personal aspirations are navigated. The five case studies detailed in this section bring out different aspects of involved with negotiating individual concerns and aspirations within a broader social milieu. With Namini we have an aging woman, who due the recent rise in foreign liquor consumption, has lost out on a relatively secure economic avenue, secured by making rice beer at her home. At her age, she has to shift between various kinds of work, dependent as she is only on the traditional works associated to women. On the other end of the spectrum is Puja, 20yrs old, who has the exception of being the only woman pursuing education and employment opportunities outside. Her being related to Vijay Pegu, one of the most influential young men in the village, part of the Dekabura institution, sets the conditions on which she has worked to pursue these opportunities.

The third and fourth case studies belong to Ganesh and Rajiv, both differently abled. While both have led an illustrious life. Rajiv has been able to secure a loan to work and live in the town, Ganesh has had to adapt to the traditional setup and for the time being draws on the

collective resources of the village to lead a meaningful life. His parents provide crucial support to him, as does the institution of the Dekabura.

The last case study in this section is of a Gunadhar Pasong, who secured employment in Hyderabad, as a security officer but had to return to the village to tend to his ailing father. He has had to meditate his desire to leave the village and is currently looking for employment outside, against the enormous pressure generated by incidences of several young persons who have been duped out of money in seeking employment outside.

70 years old widow Namini Pasong, lives in Kolonisuba hamlet. Her husband died at the very early stage of the marriage. She has been living alone by then.

For earning she has to engage in wage labour. She goes to the town (Bokakhat) to work in other's houses, works in others agricultural field during harvesting and sowing season. She also used to engage in fishing for other household in the village. It's been 7 years, she has not gone for fishing, she can't go now due to age related illness. From all these works she monthly earns around 200 to 300 rupees. Earlier, when she used to harvest, for an example, 15 kg of rice should would get 1 kg and rest went to the owner of the field. Now, the way of remuneration has changed, she gets one tin full rice against per day of work. Due to old and old age, her sources of earning have got reduced and limited.

Moreover, for earning she also engages in selling local liquor from her village house, where she generally earns 300 to 400 rupees per month. But, due to coming up of commercial local liquor bands and its availability in the local shops have hampered her business. Now, the villagers hardly buy local liquor.

She never goes to school, "Due to erosion in my young age our village had not school."

During flood, if her house submerges in water, she has to take shelter in other's house or she makes rising platform inside the house to stay and to keep important things. During the flood she has to rely completely on the relief ration.

She is a member of the Mandir committee where her job is to collect money from the HH of the village for Mandir activity. "Secretary and president of the committee are males, they don't have time to collect money, recruited two women to collect funds for the temple committee." The woman members of the temple committee don't have say in decision making.

According to her, woman has to work hard in the Mishing villages. In terms of men those who can go for work outside for work, they go, rest keep themselves busy in fishing.

Moreover, she does not like the idea of young guys immigrating to other cities for work. "One should stay in his own country and earn, because if they die outside, we won't be able to see, even can't see their dead body. This village is itself everything. In fact, one does not have to search for girls outside the village for marriage. Everything is plenty here." Similar sentiment is shared by women of certain age group, especially by old women and mid aged women.

About her present condition she says, "Even if I work hard, I have to face and always have to face problems. It is because I don't have a husband nor children. I don't have any men, so I can't do agriculture."

Ganesh Pegu who is 30 years old is a differently abled person. he was not physically challenged by birth, at the age of 12 he fell down from buffalo, thus from then on he had to face this.

There are total 8/9 persons in his family -Parents, one younger brother, 5 sisters and himself. His younger brother is working in Bengal for. Last year he did matriculation and after that joins job there. He was not willing to study further. He has five sisters and two got married and rest are now at home.

Ganesh went to special school in Bokakhat run by an NGO. He appeared matriculation exam from there but could not clear it. During school days, he used to stay in hostel Bokakhat town and engaged into playing tennis, hockey etc. He could not adjust with the town environment, so after class 10<sup>th</sup>, he returned back to the village. He does not have any future plan to move to the town.

His household engage into various kind of livelihood sources, fishing, agriculture (they have 4 bighas of land), poultry and pig rearing. They have a homestead garden which suffice their daily requirement of vegetables. He contributes into household based economy by engaging sometimes into agricultural work. Belonging to big family with sources of possession of material property, unmarried Ganesh does have worry much about household management.



Rajib Pegu is a 29 years old married man who has two male kids.

Studied till class 10<sup>th</sup> in a school for specially abled children under an NGO in Bokakhat. He stayed there in a hostel for 16yrs. He learnt bamboo work in the school and the school had an outlet where children can showcase and sell these products. Moreover, with the initiative of the school and NGO (Upper Assam Handicap Centre) he went to Delhi, Kolkata and other North-eastern states for sports and expos.

He takes order for Bamboo furniture and made in his house premise since he has not gone for opening a workshop. When order comes he earns decent money at a time, eg.- in 2015 he earned 22000 from order. He generally sells bamboo bed at the price of 8000 whose manufacturing cost is 1500. But, as he stays in the village he hardly gets order.

When he does not do work – he plays card with friends and spends time in talking with them. But, during work time, he generally spends the whole day from 5am to 11pm in work. He does not do paddy except Khali kheti (1 bigha), which is sufficient for 6 months and for rest 6 months they buy rice from the town. His wife goes for fishing. If she catches big fishes, then they sell it. In terms daily required vegetables, they rely on the homestead garden, otherwise during off season they buy from the market. They have recently bought two cattle and have kept in his father-in laws place.

He worked in an NGO “My Shelter Home” for 2 years, but did not get due salary which counts almost 92000. He has filed a case against it and the legal process is going on. However, he has applied for a loan to open a Bamboo furniture shop in the town, he has got the approval but the planning about where to open it etc. going on. He will initially commute to shop from the village daily, later he has plan to shift to the village with his whole family. The settling in the town idea comes from the consciousness that he wants to give good education to his children. According to him, since he spent 16 years in the town, it helps him see things from different perspective, because of which he believes he gets the chance to get married and have a family unlike other disabled people of the village. Thus, Rajib’s conscious decision to eventually move out to the

town and his overall endeavour to search for ways of earning comes predominantly from his responsibility to manage a household or a family in the village milieu where he does not possess a strong village based material asset like, agricultural field to work on.

During flood, he generally has to face lots of difficulty because his physicality.

Puja Pegu is 21 years old, presently studying in Nursing in Jorhat Medical College. She stays in college hostel, visit village in vacations. She has been staying outside the village from class 12<sup>th</sup>.

“The town life is good, if one knows how to adjust there.” Puja likes living in town because it gives her space to make certain kind of choices without worrying about following various rules and regulations that she has to do back in the village. In hostel, she can able to study 5 to 6 hours a day, whereas in village she to give maximum of time in household based work. She hardly gets time for study there.

She does not have any plan to come back to village after studies. She has applied in Guwahati Medical College for job. Puja is the only woman in village of her age, who is still continuing studying. Her way of leading a different kind of life unlike other women of her age coming from a special type of social position she enjoys belonging to a socially privileged household. Her elder brother is Bijay Pegu who is the leader of local political party called Gana Shakti and represents Mishing Autonomous Council in the village. Her father was also a strong political leader of Mishing Autonomous Council.

Gunadhar Pasong, a 20 years old young men who did not any educational qualification, is the youngest member of his family. He migrated to Hyderabad in 2017 to work in private company as a labourer. He initially worked in a tablet company, later moved to rubber company where he was offered better salary. Both these companies provide free shelter to their labourers and he stays there.

He got the news about job in Hyderabad from his friend from the same village, who were working in tablet company in Hyderabad at that time. He did not think much about the job, instead he just followed his friend's path.

He has come back recently due to his father's illness. He is planning to go back to Hyderabad. He likes working there as he has friends there and there is less hard work in comparison to village daily routine. In village, he has to indulge into collecting firewood, fishing, paddy work etc., these he does not have to do in the city. As he has returned to village for sometimes now, he is engaging in harvesting work in his land. Even though he likes to stay in Hyderabad, he does not want to settle there, he is planning to eventually come back to village. He used to be the part/ member of youth council.

By way of conclusion.

In our penultimate section titled 'Aspirations and Tension', we have showcased 5 different case studies. Each of them are exceptions in their own right. However, each of these cases and the people therein have had to deal with a variety of factors, be it in terms of gender, age or physical ability and the consequent- socially mediated opportunities afforded to each. By way of conclusion we may offer the general proposition that the dialectic of the individual and the collective are affected by a broader alignment of social and ecological factors.

Where at one end this village is looked at as a whole, as though collective life is the overriding concern. We have tried to show that, the altered geo-social terrain, a gradually

fragmenting household structure, and various social hierarchies in their multifarious interfaces has in fact made various individual trajectories possible.

This manner of studying everyday life, we feel is faithful to the people about whom we have written today, who deal with uncertain futures, and uncertain presents and search for possibilities of life that balance both their collective responsibilities and resources, all the while trying to realise individual aspirations.

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