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## The Flooding Frontier: Engaging with Alternative Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

The optimism of democracy and inclusive growth comes to standstill in the peripheries of the modern nation-states. India for that matter is no exception. Far from the national narratives of “India Shining” – a slogan that celebrates India’s democracy, high economic growth rates, and new-found prestige in the global arena lies narratives of uneven development, alienation and discomfort in the peripheries. These usually dormant and restive narratives are unveiled at times of natural disasters among others. This study engages with the series of devastating floods that visit the northeast Indian state Assam every year and more precisely the major one in 2015. The predominant narrative on flood in Assam has been revolving around the issue of disaster relief. In this regard, the indifference and dereliction of duties by the government in providing relief and also the limited coverage by mainstream national media have been the major issues that are talked of during and after floods. Behind these dominant narratives however remain veiled other alternative narratives ranging from unpreparedness for disaster mitigation, loss of land and livelihood, degradation of soil quality and agricultural sustainability, need for regional cooperation for effective disaster mitigation, human-induced climate change and the entire narrative of development and disaster. The narrative that natural disasters are unpredictable and unpreventable does not go well in case of floods in Assam. It is more than obvious by now that floods in Assam are recurring annual phenomenon and shall visit every year during the summers when the level of rainfall is high. Disasters like the 2015 floods bring to the fore the underlying power structures, patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities. This study makes a modest attempt to throw light on some possible alternative narratives both at the regional and domestic level. At the regional level, this study engages with the entire issue of effective regional cooperation for flood mitigation. At the domestic level it throws light on the internal disparities within the peripheral state which undermines the popular understanding that natural disasters affect all sections of society equally. The “naturalness” of natural disasters is therefore problematic and calls for a critical engagement.

**Keywords:** Assam Floods, Development, Disaster, Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Basin

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Assam: The Flooding Periphery**

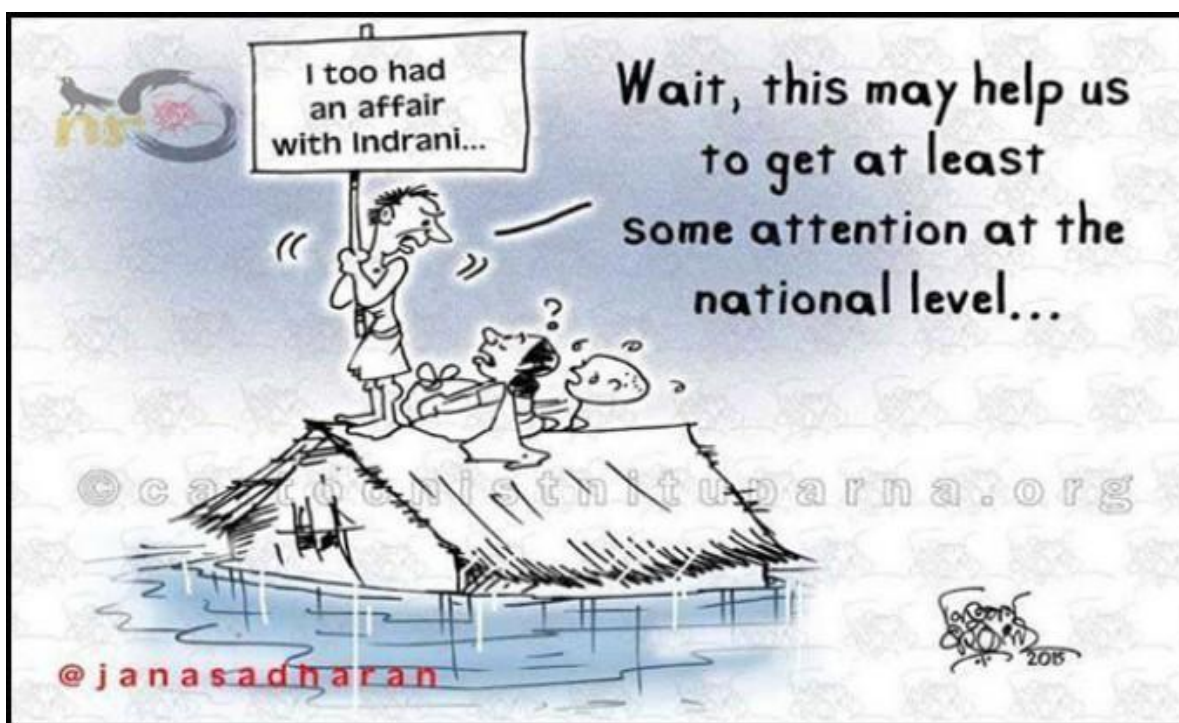
The fact that not all events occurring across the globe do figure in the disciplinary debates of International Relations (IR) is a sufficient enough cause to raise an eyebrow on the international (ness) of International Relations. It is no more an earth shattering discovery that individuals have actually figured very less in the discipline of IR. In a state centric top-heavy discipline, the predicament of the Third World individuals is even worse. The talk of the conflicts and conflict related deaths in our part of the world is very limited and in such a scenario, it would be too much to expect the coverage of disasters and calamities of this part of the world. By one estimate, the number of poor people in the Ganges-Brahmaputra basin is more than in all sub-Saharan Africa (Rogers et al.,1994). The South Asian region is most vulnerable to floods. The two major river systems of the region – the Ganges and the Brahmaputra have been bolstering riparian anxieties for decades and discussions on them have borne limited fruit. The tragedy of our time has been that on the one hand, the countries have failed to capitalize on the potential of these rivers and on the other they have failed to check the perils, especially floods, associated with the rivers. The inadequacy of the countries is visible from the devastation witnessed by the low lying territories of Bangladesh and Northeast India where flooding has become a fact of life.

Flooding is an annual recurrence in Assam and floods as such have become for Assam in words of Ashis Biswas, “the usual thing” (Bhaumik, 2015). What is seen as usual is thus rarely covered by national and international media. The flood of 2015 in the state was unprecedentedly devastating and therefore qualifies for detailed engagement. According to the daily flood report issued by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority on Sept 7, 2015, 14.42 lakh people in 19 districts of the state were then reeling under the floods (Thakur, 2015). Assam has always been prone to flood but the 1950 Great Earthquake in the region has made Assam even more vulnerable (Bhaumik, 2015). Thousands of people die in flood every year in addition to the loss of livelihood. Various narratives concerning such devastating floods have become even more relevant for a people centric International Relations discipline.

### **Dominant Discourse on Floods in Assam**

The predominant and popular narrative concerning natural calamities is that they are unpredictable and therefore unpreventable. This “naturalness” of natural calamities seems to be problematic in case of floods in Assam and it has been discussed in the study. The other sets of narratives that hogged the limelight in the aftermath of the 2015 floods in Assam were the indifference of mainstream national media and the central government. Academicians, journalists and politicians were preoccupied in the blame game. The political leadership in Assam as always blamed New Delhi for lack of cooperation and delay in release of funds. The masses in Assam were yet again cocooned in the age old debate of indifference and step-motherly attitude of New Delhi.

Tarun Gogoi, the then Chief Minister of Assam said during the floods that the state was unable to provide adequate assistance to flood-hit villagers as it did not have enough resources and called on the federal government in New Delhi for more support (Das, 2015). Over the past 60 years, successive governments have built levees along most of the Brahmaputra, but experts say the embankments are not only poorly maintained but are a discredited form of flood management (Al Jazeera, 2015). The academicians and media personnel from Assam complained of limited coverage by the mainstream Indian media. At the time concurrent to the 2015 floods, an issue that was hogging limelight in national media was the sensational murder mystery involving a high profile media industrialist, Indrani Mukherjea.



This cartoon by Nituparna Rajbongshi, drawn during the 2015 floods reflects a sad irony. While the national media failed to give adequate coverage to death and vulnerability of nearly 1.5 million people in Assam, a lady from the very state grabbed all prime time slots. The man in the cartoon is seen holding a placard showing “I too had an affair with Indrani”. With this he expects to draw some attention from the national media – otherwise obsessed with the murder of Sheena Borah, allegedly the daughter of Indrani Mukherjea. Mentioned below are few excerpts from two popular news items featuring in national and international media during and after the 2015 floods. These provide a fair idea of the dominant narrative of the time.

**Forgotten floods: Why India can't afford to ignore Assam**, BBC News. 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

*“... there has been little coverage in the newspapers and news channels about yet another deadly bout of flooding in the north-eastern state of Assam... The local media have run single word*

*headlines like proloy (cataclymic disaster) to capture the fury unleashed by the floods. But the national media has remained unmoved... So why does the state which is regularly hit by floods, not get national media attention?” (Bhaumik, 2015).*

**Assam floods: who cares?** The Hoot. 11 , September, 2015.

*“Nearly 1.5 million people were affected in this year’s floods but our media was busy focusing on the Sheena Bora case as if Assam had no other news to offer... Barring one or two, national newspapers and TV channels mostly chose to ignore the fury nature had unleashed on the state, rendering thousands homeless and many dead...every time Kashmir goes under water or Uttarakhand is ravaged by rain, a battery of reporters is lined up for special coverage from ground zero, prompting people from Assam to ask a pertinent question: “Are we lesser mortals?”” (Thakur, 2015).*

### **Marginalized Alternative Narratives**

Behind the veil of dominant narratives as mentioned above, remains unnoticed the alternative narratives concerning the unacknowledged inequalities, unpreparedness for disaster mitigation, issues of soil quality degradation and agricultural sustainability, and possibilities of disaster mitigation through regional cooperation. The major shortcoming of the popular narratives is that they mostly take up floods as natural calamities that are unpredictable and therefore unpreventable. This dominant understanding seems to be inappropriate in case of floods in Assam.

As mentioned above, floods in Assam are an annual recurrence and it is more than obvious that they shall visit during the summers when the level of rainfall increases. Having said that the floods in Assam are more than predictable, it should be the responsibility of the government – both central and state – to ensure preparedness and effective mitigation. This unfortunately has not been the case in Assam. The confining of the floods to “natural”, “unpredictable” calamities helps the government to actually escape from preparedness for mitigation and rather putting the weight predominantly around post flood relief.

While engaging primarily with the relief activities and on that line criticizing central and state government for dereliction of duties, what goes unnoticed is the post-disaster plight of the victims. The loss of shelter, cattle, livelihood, and land, leaves behind a considerable section in sheer poverty, making them even more vulnerable to the next year’s flood. Assam loses 8,000 ha of land to rivers like the Brahmaputra and the Barak and their tributaries every year (Bora, 2015). Very less is talked about the post-disaster relocation of the victims and there is absolutely no discussion about the entire discourse of development and its relation to disasters.

## 1. Sustainability of agriculture

Sustainability of agriculture in Assam in the face of damages wrought by natural calamities like flood is a crucial question. Unfortunately the dominant narratives on flood in Assam have mostly undermined the issue. Agricultural productivity and sustainability is a prerequisite in a predominantly agricultural economy like India. "Frequent floods every year in Assam have been destroying standing crops, creating water logging, soil erosion and affecting large crop areas and thus threatening the sustainability of the drive towards higher productivity and production of various crops in the state" (Goyari, 2005). Unlike other natural calamities such as earthquake or cyclones that are uncontrollable and unpredictable, floods are comparatively more predictable. For instance, it is almost a matter of fact that flood shall visit Assam compulsorily every year during the summers. Given the certainty of occurrence of floods the extent of damage should therefore be controllable, which actually has never happened. The Shukla Commission Report of 1997 titled Transforming the North East stated –

*"The flood damage to crops, cattle, houses and utilities in Assam alone between 1953 and 1995 is estimated at Rs 4,400 crore with a peak of Rs 664 crore in a single bad year" (Shukla Commission, 1997).*

The great earthquake of 1950 was observed to have raised the bed of the river Brahmaputra and as a result floods have become even more common in Assam

### Regional Cooperation for Mitigation of Floods

Crow and Singh (2009) delineates that

*"In South Asia, floods in India and Bangladesh are often exacerbated and sometimes caused by cross-border river flows. In these circumstances the form, content and efficacy of relations between South Asian nations may have implications for flood warning, the range of possibilities for mitigating floods, and the extent to which precautionary investment can be made" (Crow and Singh, 2009).*

The losses of lives and valuable assets could be significantly minimized by implementing non-structural measures including the improvement of flood forecasting and warning system. The existing flood forecasting and warning systems could be more effective if real-time data could be acquired from upstream areas where runoff is generated. Hence there is an urgent need for better cooperation between the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna regional countries of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan (Ahmad and Ahmed, 2003).

## **2. Not all are equally affected**

The public imagination that natural disasters do not discriminate, but are instead equal opportunity calamities is problematic in itself (Belkhir and Charlemaine, 2007). The fact that not all sections of the Assamese society were equally vulnerable to the floods rightly justifies the above statement. It requires no mention that people vulnerable during floods are the ones staying close to the river or those residing in the small patches of islands. But, what is crucial here is the question, - who are the people that actually inhabit these regions? Flood is an annual phenomenon and shall revisit every year during summers. Despite this being a ubiquitous fact, why do the people residing in the vulnerable areas not evacuate and escape damages? These questions bring us to the fact that the people residing in the flood prone areas are doomed to suffer every year given their constraints in mobility. Such constraints accrue to limited alternative land, financial shortfalls and attachment with the last inch of existing land.

The most vulnerable districts in Assam are Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Borpheta, Morigaon and Tinsukia among others. The people inhabiting the vulnerable areas are mostly of the Mishing community who have since ages resided on the banks of the Brahmaputra and their life style have been shaped in proximity to the river. Other considerable numbers of victims belong to the community of the Bengali speaking Muslims whom an entire generation of post colonial Assamese alleged to be Bangladeshi immigrants. Given the poor assimilation process, the community has limited presence in the mainland Assam and hence they inhabit the peripheries of the peripheral state. The river is their primary source of livelihood and they therefore are doomed to stay close to the river despite getting devastated every year.

In a study conducted by eminent environmentalist from Assam, Amarjyoti Bora, he found that for seven years, Abdur Khan, a resident of Assam's Balimukh village in Morigaon district has been calling the makeshift camp, a thatched one room on an embankment, his home. Khan is not alone. State government data shows over 150,000 families have been displaced in the past decade due to soil erosion in the state, and 37,000 of the families have been rendered homeless in the past five years (Bora, 2015). The government has been indifferent in relocating hundreds of families like that of Khan's and such narratives must be brought to the fore by means of adequate engagement.

## **CONCLUSION**

The "naturalness" of natural disasters is a myth and equally mythical is the acceptance that natural disasters affect all sections equally. Natural disasters like the 2015 Assam floods bring to fore stark realities which are otherwise veiled behind dominant narratives. Floods in South Asia often accrue to cross-border river flows. Regional cooperation and diplomacy is therefore essential for flood mitigation to the extent that floods are induced by cross-border river flows and inadequate drainage downstream. The popular narratives

concerning floods are often misleading as they undermine other possible alternatives. There is an urgent need to engage with and accommodate such other narratives.

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