

Where Land and River Meet: A Study of Disaster at the Riparian Zone of Majuli Island

Avijit Sahay

India (avijitsahay@gmail.com)

Situated on the River Brahmaputra in the Indian state of Assam, and inscribed as a Cultural Heritage site by the UNESCO, Majuli, one of the largest and most populated riverine islands in the world has for long been considered a cultural and spiritual capital of Assam. Shankerdeb, the famous 15th century social and religious reformer of Assam started the Vaishnavite cult in this island, and to this date, it is the center of Vaishnavite Hinduism in India. However, in 1950, a powerful earthquake struck the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, turning this life giving river into a harbinger of disaster for the island. Post-earthquake, the river has been flooding and eroding the riverbank at an alarming rate. Preliminary studies have shown that between one-third to two-third area of original land has been lost to the river. This has caused a large number of its 167,304 persons to become migrants in their own land. Clearly, a human tragedy is unfolding at the site where land and river meet. The present study is an attempt to quantify this human tragedy by using Remote Sensing images and techniques to find out the exact extent of damage done by the river and to qualify the tragedy by finding out the impact of riverbank erosion on the culture, society, and economy of the island through fieldwork and primary survey.