

CHAPTER-2

FIELD AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

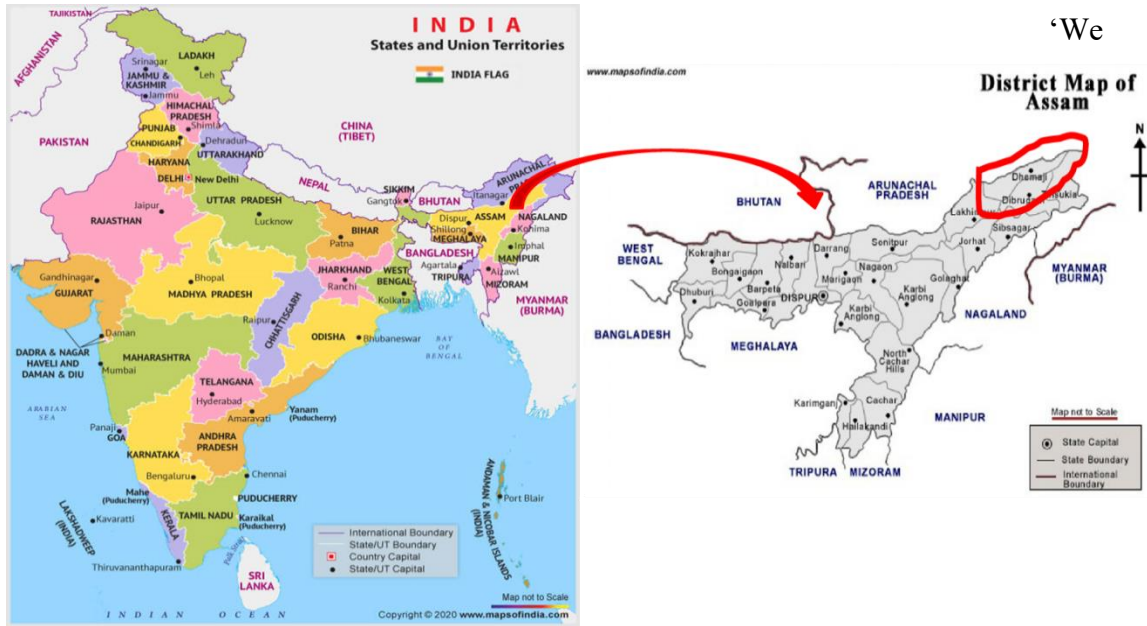


Image 2.1 Map of Dhemaji district in Assam in North-east India. My field was located in the area highlighted in the map. Source: Mapofindia.com

We have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere'¹ (Sara Ahmed 2017).

Recent debates by sociologists and anthropologists on practices of doing ethnography and change in the conventional idea of field asks for serious methodological deliberations. In the light of these debates, if production of knowledge in research is a political process, then how is it reflected or justified in the methodology of this study? The question of why a particular field is chosen needs to be justified with relevant methods. Further, to answer these questions, the issue of positionality becomes an important consideration. This chapter engages with a brief discussion on the debate of ethnographic fieldwork and situates the discourse, within the context of the fieldwork of this study. Focusing on un-orchestrated immersion in the field by 'being there' and 'hanging out', the chapter deals with how prior frameworks to study the field becomes volatile when the field is in excess i.e. beyond the control of the researcher.

¹ For details see, Ahmed, S. (2004). "Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left By Others". *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21(2):36-42.

2.2 Ethnography as a practice

Field is a cultural site, a site at which fieldwork is conducted as a taken for granted space to study and write about a society or culture that is considered as the “other” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 2). But in contemporary society, the very notion of ‘culture’ and ‘field’ has undergone change. A rapidly changing globalizing world in tandem to a method that was developed to study small-scale societies becomes a misfit. Appadurai (1991, 191) poses the problem in the following way: ‘As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, non-localized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscape of group identity-the ethno-scapes-around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, in so far as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious, or culturally homogenous ...the task of ethnography now becomes the unraveling of a conundrum: what is the nature of the locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, de-territorialized world?’

In such a context when field is interconnected and culture is fragmented, there remains a debate on how we proceed for explanation and description. In the light of this debate, there has been a deliberation on methods wherein the ethnographers put themselves, their own society and the societies they study on an equal footing (Nader, 2011, 217). In other words, it is not that we study a society up or down or sideways with a power position but being politically neutral. But being politically neutral as an observer in the field is a blotch to the scientific objectivity that social sciences are sensitive to. But as an already established argument that science in itself is not neutral, this debate is used to counter the objectivity question of the researcher. In studying an eclectic and innovative field, the old rule of going to field and writing a thick description of the field is obsolete. Rather, revealing a researcher’s subjective position in the field and the categories that are used to search the field is a pathway to study contemporary field sites (Nader, 2011, 211).

On a similar tangent putting the onus of studying the field on the researcher, Sigmund Howell (2017, 16) maintains that ethnography is an empty practice if it is not in conversation to the disciplinary debates within anthropology/social anthropology. He maintains a strict difference between ethnography as a means of producing qualitative data and ethnography that is central to anthropology. Research that employs some open-

ended interviews, focused group discussions and return to the same individuals after a certain interval of time is not considered to be an ethnographic study. An ethnographic study refers to staying at the field for a longer duration of time and participating with a community in their household, conversing in their language, taking part in their daily chores so as to understand their values generally. It so happens that when people describe a reality, they do so in unrelated domains as for instance in economic transactions, political and religious values and gender values as well. As for instance, if a researcher wishes to study changes in marriage practices of a community, then one has to stay in the field for a considerable amount of time to know how economy, politics and gender come to inform the changes in the marriage practices. This method aids to familiarize the researcher to observe actions that take place in unrelated domains and interpret them in light of the practices of the interlocutors. As it is widely agreed upon, qualitative study do not grasp the gap that remains between what people say and do and why it differs from what they actually do. Stating the difference between qualitative study and ethnography, Howell (2017) lay emphasis on the method of participant observation to be a methodology in itself. This helps to validate the data a researcher collects from the field. How and why does people think and act in a particular way is often not reflected in a qualitative study. A qualitative study if exclusively depended on methods of data collection viz interviews, focus-group discussions, observation, etc does not make explicit the context in which an interlocutor is speaking. This is where the strength of ethnography come to the forefront.

In continuation with the above argument and stressing on the need to look for gaps between what interlocutors say to define a phenomena, Shah (2017, 47-49) argues that ethnography can be a strong political act to challenge the hegemonic conceptions of the world. According to her, participant observation can be a revolutionary praxis for two reasons: First, in the course of living with and being a part of the lives of the interlocutors makes us question our basic assumptions and pre-existing theories of the world and chalk out new ways of thinking and seeing the world. When we become a part of the intimate lives of our respondents it makes us question our conceptions of the world compelling us to revisit and revise the questions with which we enter the field. Second, when we take the lives of our interlocutors seriously, participant observation enables us to identify the complex interconnections between history, ideology and actions of the observer in ways that were unseen. Professional rigour of this kind would help challenge

the kind of knowledge that is produced from the field in the form of descriptive studies or case-studies.

In light of the literatures discussed above, the following subjective experiences as a researcher in the field, compelled to rethink my objective of exploring the human dimensions of climate adaptation. By ‘being there’² in the field and following the everyday practices of the interlocutors in the field site, illuminated how adaptation to climate is not a linear process, but of varied temporalities with entanglements of history, state and society. In early 2018, I was conducting a study in Ziro, among the Apatanis to understand their local adaptation practices to climate variability. Scholars have emphasized the role of collective action and cultural theory to emphasize collective attitudes to adapt better to climate change (Pendergraft 1998, Page and Shapiro 1992). Given, the fact that the Apatanis are known for their rich traditional environmental knowledge in tandem to natural resource management, the community was selected purposively as a site for that particular study.

Taking the concept of ‘adaptation’ as a trope to enter the field, the everyday practices of people in this community revealed the local actors in Ziro were happy and contend with climate variability. The response to climate variability (increase in temperature) was reflected in the predilection of the community members to shift to a new pattern of Kiwi mono-cropping. This shift was partly a resultant of government assistance to undertake horticulture diversification in the region and partly because of migration of the youth to the metropolitan cities for better employability. These two factors have led to a decline of communal labour in Ziro. Less number of people to work in the farms had resulted in large tracts of land being left barren. The aged Apatanis opines that for these reasons they are now responsible for the upkeep of the farms. On a different scale, it was observed that a new artificial lake was built by the Government to boost local tourism. A new service sector catering to the tourism industry in terms of concrete homestays and laundry-centres are bustling in Ziro. People are reluctant to work on their agricultural lands because of declining returns and saw tourism as a viable economic option. The

² I draw this term from Enrike Van Wingerden (2022) to refer to the process of witnessing the field and how in the process of witnessing, we see the field to be different to that of the literature we read and come to an authoritative position to study and write about the field. ‘Being there’ is a term used by the scholar to deconstruct orchestrated immersion into the field. For details, see Wingerdan, E.K. (2022). *Unmastering Research: Positionality and Intercorporeal Vulnerability in International Studies*. *International Political Sociology*, 16(1-17).

traditional structures of the Apatanis- Bujang and Lapang have been eroded which were largely responsible for bringing the Apatanis together on certain festivals, through which important traditional environmental knowledge were transmitted. Loss of traditional structures for transmission of traditional knowledge has increased the anxiety of the elders in Ziro. In one such instance an elderly Apatani states that despite the fact that she lives alone in a village in Ziro, she continues to go to the fields because once she stops going to the fields the knowledge of wet-rice cultivation would be lost forever (Dutta and Das, 2022).

From the fieldwork in Ziro, it is evident that the Apatani society is in a flux. Tourism and its associated activities of building artificial lakes and cutting hillocks to make concrete homestays are putting pressure on the ecology of Ziro. Introduction of new mono-cropping patterns to the soil and its repercussions would be revealed in the future. Migration and its impact on the traditional communal labor and barren lands have redefined the concept of loss. In Ziro, given the fact of climate variability, there is no animated sense of alarm and panic among the community. The assumption that indigenous communities are categories with static environmental knowledge which would aid global climate adaptation becomes futile. In the face of climate change, loss for the elderly Apatanis means loss in traditional knowledge of cultivation which would have consequences for the tribe. Being a participant observer with the Apatanis throughout 2018 and 2019 compelled me to revisit my assumptions of climate change in terms of bio-physical indicators and culture alone.

This field work taught me to think of a study in holistic terms where coloniality, development, migration and decay of village life shaped the perceptions of people to climate variability. Second, how do we think of engaging with a reality that is emerging? In other words, the past of colonialism and migration which has its residues in the present society is shaping how people will turn into the future. Future may be in various forms as for instance their changing human-environment relationship and alteration to its ecology, capital intensive mono-cropping and its impact on society. The reality has still not emerged but is in its formation. Therefore, studying an emergent phenomena or a society that is in flux require more deliberation than providing a thick description of the community members (Dutta and Das, 2022).

After the intense fieldwork in Ziro, certain parameters redirected me to the subsequent field of examining disasters in Assam for my doctoral research. I decided to take up the trope of knowledge across various scales that exist in a society in studying a social phenomenon. How and through what practices do different kinds of knowledge exist within the same community? How and why is there a gap between knowledge of a particular community to climate variability and to that of the State? Does this gap in knowledge impact the traditional natural resource management in Ziro in the face of climate variability? These epistemological and ontological underpinnings compelled me to rethink how situated knowledge exists through enactment of practices in tandem to climate variability. In sum, situated knowledge, practice and scale became the parameters that exceeded my authority as a researcher to explore community adaptation to climate change in Ziro.

At this juncture a shift was made in the field site from studying climate adaptation in Ziro, Arunachal Pradesh to disaster adaptation in Dhemaji, Assam, with the same objective of exploring human adaptation to environmental variability. The shift from climate adaptation to disaster adaptation was guided by the discourse of increasing impacts of the natural forces in shaping human activities. As a response to environmental challenges, humans are engaging with the impacts of the natural forces by formulating adaptive frameworks to plan, prevent and imagine new ways of living with risks. A causal link between climate and disasters is established by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their twenty years' documentation that a rising number of natural disasters (heat-waves, droughts, floods, cyclones, coastal flooding, coastal erosion) have intensified in the last twenty years. These reports suggest that due emphasis need to be given to natural forces which are affecting human activities (IPCC 2014).

Based on this discourse of a causal link between climate and disasters, a shift was made to study the conditions of floods as disasters in Assam. The annual occurrence of floods, in Assam, is the most compelling case study that has been a serious contention both for the government and the riparian communities as well. When global circulation of water is changing owing to global environmental change, its effects are undeniable in the Brahmaputra floodplains as well. At the same time, anthropogenic activities along the river aggravate the condition of floods. Taking these exigencies into consideration, how

human activities affect the river and how the river has its intentional impact on humans was selected as one of the research questions of this study.

2.3 What is an Ethnographic Study?

The experiences from the field in Ziro revealed that the Apatani community does not have a static and essentialist meaning of traditional knowledge among them. The fluid categories of history, development and market mechanisms in Ziro, compelled to think my position as a researcher in order to study their traditional natural resource management practices. There has been a serious debate on how ethnography as a practice of research is seen as an endeavor that is planned, executed and controlled under the aegis of the knowing researcher. Production of academic knowledge comes to be connected with a broader culture of productivity which is premised on the idea of producing something new (Odell 2019), claiming ownership over insights gathered from the field; while erasing the histories and the voices of the researched in this process (Liboiron 2021). There is a tendency of the known researcher to go to the field, build rapport with the researched, collect data through various research methods, gain insights and produce knowledge. An orchestrated immersion in the field does not include the gaps that emerge between the researcher and the researched. As Ravecca and Dauphinee (2018) argue, an ethnographic study reflects on the gaps of knowledge that exist for the researcher and the researched and includes these gaps as a space for knowledge and change. On a similar tangent, putting one's self-reflective and self-conscious positioning as a researcher is crucial for an ethnographic study (Knafo 2016:46).

Therefore in the above context, to conduct an ethnographic study the researcher is solely responsible for it. To study a dynamic and emergent field site as well as the unpredictable interactions and relationships that emerge in the process of research, shapes the positionality of a researcher. Being reflexive of how the field and the interlocutors transgress the researcher, Briggs and Bleiker (2010) states, the 'self' need not be put away while making claims on knowledge.

However in understanding ethnography as a mere method of procuring qualitative data, it is pertinent to understand what it is meant to be ethnographic. In dealing with the question of what is ethnographic and why it needs to be taken seriously, Carole McGranahan (2018) maintains that when ethnography is a culturally grounded way of

being and observing the world, ethnographic refers to the rhythms and the logics how researchers collectively make sense of the world they are observing. And in that world, if a researcher comes across certain surprises that is in disjunction and may not be translated to the refined concepts of academia, at that point the local context comes to inform theory. When ethnography is employed as a method, participant observation is the key to get the goal of the ethnographic. In terms of writing, ethnographic sensibility guides to illuminate field-based knowledge of communities as in how they live or make sense of their world in both extraordinary or ordinary time and place.

Currently it has been increasingly realized and agreed upon by anthropologists, that even if ethnography is practiced as a method for studying socio-cultural groups, it can be used as a *way of knowing*. Thus, ethnography becomes worthy to have an intellectual project in its own right. Malinowski (1984, 5) explains that the goal of anthropology is to study native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world. Additionally, in studying institutions, customs and codes of behavior without taking into consideration the subjective desire of feeling by which these people live, ethnography seems to miss its greatest reward. Thus, ethnography becomes a programme based on fieldwork that requires to collect both the objective/explicit and the subjective/implicit entirety of the society. This puts the limelight on the researcher to attune to the nuances and the surprises the field may open up to while understanding the underlying implicit fluctuations that may not be visible as objective or material reality. In this context, an individual as a researcher becomes as crucial to the process of research as the people on whom the study is conducted upon. As Sherry Ortner (2006:25) explains 'Learning and knowing is not outsourced to technology, but instead is incumbent upon the ethnographer and is both all-encompassing and demanding.' She further explains, 'One definition of ethnography that captures this is the attempt to understand another life world using the self – as much as it of possible – as the instrument of knowing ... [that is] as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality – a constructive and interpretive mode – as it is a bodily process in space and time. In other words when research methods at disposal are used to ask the question of how people give meaning to their world, what emerges is an ethnographic study.'

Discussing the strengths of ethnography in order to identify social dynamics and underlying patterns that is not emphasized in a qualitative study, Kirin Narayan (2014)

maintain, the necessity to do ethnography is ‘for the discipline of paying attention; for becoming more responsibly aware of inequalities; for better understanding of the social forces causing suffering and how people might somehow find hope; and most generally, for being perpetually pulled beyond the limits of one’s own taken-for-granted world.’ Positing ethnography as a tool to engage ethically and politically with the world, ethnographic is a means of paying attention to spaces that is otherwise not captured by research methods.

In discussing what ‘ethnographic’ means, Carole McGranahan (2018) defines in terms of going beyond the taken for granted world and push the investigators ability to listen, to know and act. Sometimes when in the field a researcher may get overwhelmed by abundance of stories and narratives from the field and might not know how to respond or learn from them. But it is with adequate time and attention that is given to the field which will help us broaden our ability to listen that in turn will transform our subjectivities. When subjectivity of a researcher gets transformed, the ability to listen to stories and to transform it to knowledge or to something to tell from the field makes a study ethnographic. The method to make a study ethnographic is to invest in long-term immersion in the field. Carole Mcgranahan (2014) makes an urgent plea and argues that ethnographic research to be embodied and experiential by meaningful engagement by the researcher with its field site.

2.4 Getting an ethnographic stance

Borneman and Hammoudi (2009, 19) make a call to make ethnographic research a reflexive exercise than producing ethnographic surrogates (representing the past and the present) and fitting them into conceptual and theoretical frameworks. These scholars deliberate the possibilities that emerge when the ethnographer’s experiential encounters in the field guides to understand how subjectivities emerge in an inconclusive present. Second, it suggests modes of engagement to be employed while generating knowledge. Experiential encounters from the field is gained through methods of ‘observation, linguistic exchanges, but also through linguistic exchanges, (mis)translations, feelings of attraction and repulsion, discussions and arguments, and fights and power tactics, as well as through the study of knowledge that societies have produced about their past and present’. The onus is upon the ethnographer to demonstrate ethical engagement wherein

the ethnographer is arrested in the act of perception which would create a productive doubt of the phenomena in action and also to explore the shared knowledge.

Borneeman and Hammoudi (2009, 20) conceptualize the reflexivity of the researcher in the field as 'being there'. It refers to the field-based experiences in the field that guides a researcher to write and engage through those encounters. Further, it also includes 'registering of sensory experiences in a temporal process and critique, an engagement with persons, groups, and scenes that takes into account the dynamics of our interactions as well as the differences between our locations and those of our interlocutors'. Finally their claim to rethink fieldwork experience is not to have an innocent understanding and transmitting impressions of the field on the researcher but rather to forward a dialectical relationship between experience, observation and representation. Drawing from the scholars, the following section, discusses the engagement of the researcher with the interlocutors in the field and how these exchanges moulded the knowledge produced in the study. Emphasizing on the sensorial experience of the interlocutors and paying attention to their engagement with the river guided to explore their relational engagement with water.

During the second year of my doctoral research, in an attempt to understand the chronic problem of floods in Assam from a sociological vantage, I began exploring the places that were generally reeling under the effect of floods. A field survey was initiated to understand how communities adapted to the annual floods. During the pilot study in villages in Lakhimpur³, villagers consistently talked about the bio-physical problem of soil erosion and siltation as the major dilemma that have tested their adaptation skills. The bio-physical effects of tributaries of Brahmaputra on communities exemplified a study suitable to explore the environment-society relations. Dhemaji district which is adjacent to Lakhimpur district shares a similar fate in terms of devastation caused by floods. An attempt was made yet again by surveying the villages that are mostly affected by this annual disaster.

To begin with, a list of villages mostly affected by floods in the year 2018 was procured from the Emergency Department in Dhemaji. The next step involved making a survey in these villages by asking two basic questions: how do they define floods and whether

³ Lakhimpur district is an administrative district in Assam, surrounded by the Siang and Papumpare districts of Arunachal Pradesh and by Dhemaji district and the Subansiri river on the East.

there were any changes in the nature of the floods. It was in the village of Pomua, under the jurisdiction of Sissiborgaon, Dhemaji, where a perception of change in the nature of floods was articulated by the villagers. According to them, sometimes flood would inundate their villages causing devastating havoc while sometimes floods were knee-deep and giving the villagers a sense of relief. What seemed striking is that these villagers do not emphasize on erosion but rather how the personality of floods has been changing. This non-linear nature of floods mismatched their preparedness for the annual cycle of floods. Sometimes they were better prepared and the floods would not occur and sometimes they were less prepared and floods would be devastating on that particular year. At this juncture the researcher asked the villagers of government assistance in terms of relief and compensation.

The villagers of Pomua have reservations towards government assistance provided by the local bureaucrats. One striking observation one could make about a visible shift in their body language in terms of a wry smile, sarcasm or making a joke on the government officials. To re-route the conversation to a serious discussion, I asked the interviewees, how they prepare for the floods when floodwater comes at an unusual time. The answer was simple: 'we gather our families, cows, goats and pigs with us and try to climb the provisional plinths and be safe'. Grains were stacked in sacks and carefully placed above the plinths as well. This was the only minimum they were considering in times of precarity. But, as a researcher what gave me a perspective to look at the precariousness of floods and finalize this place to be the ground to base my doctoral study was when I had an embodied sense of the agency of the floods. Given the precariousness of floods what came as a surprise is how the nature of the floods are testing the survival skills (boating over the flood waters) to sustain themselves during this calamity.

In June, 2019 on a sunny morning, I made my way to the village of Pomua on a four-wheeler. Leaving the four-wheeler on the concrete road (embankment), I further walked for half a kilometer to reach the field. After waiting for my field translator to come and receive me for the day and deciding upon whom to interview in the village, it was decided to visit the eldest villager Monikanto Pegu who would be able to give us a picture of the changes in the nature of the floods. To reach his house we had to cross the river. A rickety boat was tied at the edge of the river that was ordinarily used by the villagers to commute across the river. I with my field translator and her teenage son

placed ourselves in the boat. I was seated in the middle while the mother and son were seated at the edge with wooden rows in their hands. As the boat made into the water, the rows were put to work by the mother-son duo to reach the other edge of the river. When the boat reached the middle of the river, there was a tensed conversation between them in their native language. Sunita Doley, my translator just put a sentence: '*panir current besi, solabo para nai*'. This can be loosely translated as: current of the river is high and it is getting difficult to row. I was instructed to use a dish made of steel to clear the water from the boat and throw it into the river in case water seeps into the boat. For some seconds we were stuck in the middle of the river while Sunita and her son negotiate in high voices (tensed) as to how to turn the boat against the water currents. Sensing trouble, all I could do was make a desperate plea to them to help me if we get drowned. Soon, Sunita follows the decision of her son and both of them swirl the boat towards right and the boat takes its pace. It was only when the boat reached the bank, three of us took a sigh of relief. This embodied experience with water transgressed my understanding of how one does feel when caught unprepared which also can be seen as a sense of vulnerability. Crossing the river by foot or by boat is a routine exercise for the villagers in Pomua. But this episode of the water currents threatening their agency to row unsettles their everydayness of living with the river. In other words, human representation of 'knowing water' by rowing across it is challenged by the non-human river through emergent properties that the humans does not know of. At one time the villagers have an agency with the river and the next time they have a relational dynamic of confusion and helplessness. In such contexts, when their historical and cultural adaptation skills of living with water is challenged, people perceive the river as a living entity. People provide meaning to the river by acknowledging that the river has its own intentions of disservice to them.

The next interviewee, Mithila Doley resides with her two daughters making a living by weaving clothes. After briefing my presence and asking them of any noticeable change in the nature of the floods, Mithila provides a sensorial experience of the floods. She demonstrates the sound in her mouth as the river makes, when the river swells up and is raging, in the river-basin. According to her the sound of the river like a raging motor boat makes it terrifying especially at nights when there is an eerie silence over the village. Paying attention to these small yet significant narratives of how people at the

margins relate to the river compelled the researcher to understand the river as a living entity.

Such narratives of change in the personality of the floods as narrated by the villagers in Pomua village together with my own bodily experiences and encounters with the agency of the river is consequential in shaping how as a researcher I would understand a disaster. The adamant refusal of villagers to shift to relief-camps and rather choose to stay back so that one can witness their bamboo grove to be raged by floods posited an incoherent notion of adaptation to floods. Materially, the loss of bamboo grove made them vulnerable subjects but at the same time their agency urge them in choosing to stay back and see how their vulnerability emerges. Further, this allowed me to see the sliding of vulnerability to agency on part of the villagers in Pomua. These contradictions emerged as one of the objectives of the study.

Second, the aversion of people to live in relief camps and looking up to the government and yet the persistence of a Disaster Management Plan at the district level, the willingness of the government to improve the conditions of the communities affected by flood gave me another objective for the study. Do the efforts of relief and compensation or in the construction of flood control infrastructures take into consideration the bodily experiences of fear, shock and trauma that these affected communities encounter? The cultivation of knowledge by 'being there' shaped my positionality as a researcher of disaster that gave a legitimacy to follow the objectives that are focused upon this study.

2.5 Challenges of Studying a Bureaucratic Field

After a discussion on the methodological deliberation of being there in the field, I now turn to the methodological challenges that emerged while studying the bureaucratic practices related to floods. In conducting fieldwork in/with bureaucratic offices and officers, immersion is a tedious task. By the term immersion, I refer to the process of how a researcher enters into a field and attempts to be a part of the society that one endeavor to study. Since bureaucratic offices are gated communities vested with power, observing their everyday practices and reality is different from that of studying a village or a community. According to Nader (1972), such challenges are similar to the problems of 'studying up' where the ethnographic endeavor inverts the gaze from the 'village,'

‘poor,’ ‘disadvantaged,’ ‘foreign,’ and ‘exotic’ to the middle and upper echelons of wealth, influence, and domination in increasingly capitalist and bureaucratic societies.

Philip Abrams (1988, 81) notes that in studying the everyday life of politics, a clear definition of the reality of state is a difficult task. The search for the state as a concrete state system contingent on protecting information about themselves or instinctively protecting information from becoming public is a serious impediment to any study of the state. State in its existence, is a third order object – an ideological project legitimized by its coercive actions. He contends that the state is not an entity masked behind political practice; rather it is the mask that prevents us from studying political practice. In approaching a study on state there is a need to focus on the nexus of practice and institutional structure through which the state is solidified and legitimized (ibid, 82). Similarly, Das also emphasizes on the need to study the relationship between state and society from the perspective of sociology of governance in the context of Northeast India to understand the complex nuances in a more productive way (Das, 2022).

During the period of pilot study in 2018, the District Office of Dhemaji was approached to gain permission to visit the various departments associated with adaptation and mitigation to floods. In 2019, when the departments of Revenue and Water Resource were approached for collection of data, there was a sense of discomfort and alertness among the officials. A perpetual experience in studying the bureaucratic practices was that the concerned interviewee who was supposed to provide me with an interview did not turn up the next day. When the official was pursued by me through a phone call, for the scheduled interview, a proxy of him i.e. another official is directed to provide the interview. Within the settings of the office, when an interview takes place, officials in the department would be alert and listen to what the interviewee (official) is giving away in the interview. A revenue official in describing the distribution of relief mentioned the role of the civil society and the market in providing the essentials for flood affected communities. However, transparency to the practice of distributing collected essentials was denied in a diplomatic tone.

This concealment of knowledge was similar to a concern raised by the Circle Officer of Sissiborgaon. According to him, there was a tender at the DC office in 2018, to provide basic essentials to the flood affected communities that included sanitary napkins, biscuits, mosquito nets and milk. That year, the circle office did not receive any such

items for distribution, nor there was any intimation of relief items donated by the NGO's. To inquire about these practices on part of the government officials in Dhemaji, I did not get any access to ask an official about these practices. At the same time, it was clear that participant observation and semi-structured interviews would only serve as a proxy to know the social structure and hierarchy within these public bureaucracies. In observing the bureaucratic practices of anticipating floods through the techniques of relief and compensation measures showed instances of concealment of knowledge.

According to Hahonou and Martin (2019, 3), 'bureaucratic mode of control is defined by four dimensions of power: service, rule, violence and secrecy.' Since public bureaucracies⁴ are saturated by all of these forms there arises a significant methodological challenge for ethnographic research (ibid, 3). These instances of politics inherent in providing relief show how disasters are not only naturalized phenomena, but also an active site to study politics and disasters.

Therefore, drawing from the first-hand encounters in the field, studying bureaucratic practices with the help of qualitative research methods of observations and interviews and fitting those findings within a conceptual framework omits a reflexive sensibility of bureaucratic research (Hahonou and Martin, 2019). A methodological conversation of how immersion is done reveals the ethnographers' sensibility which may be achieved by following ethnographic pathways. Ethnographic pathways are forward looking heuristic device to make inroads into the bureaucratic field (ibid, 6). A pre-structured approach of walking into a bureaucratic office, building rapport with the respondents, conducting interviews and then theorizing the collected data fails to reflect on the nature of immersion in the field which has methodological impetus. To deal with these methodological challenges the ethnographic pathways as suggested by Hahanou and Martin (2019), the following section discusses how immersion and access has been gained into bureaucratic space of governing floods in Dhemaji.

2.6 Framework to define the stages of access to the field

Immersion and access to the field are two sides of the same coin. As mentioned above, it is only after a researcher is immersed in the field i.e. a researcher after establishing

⁴ Public bureaucracies refer to formal and law bound institutional structures serving in the name of the state providing both services and expecting obligation from the public.

rapport and able to be a part of the society studied, will gain access to the field. Access refers to the process wherein the field opens up to the researcher without any guard. This process can be multi-dimensional and influence the outcome of a research to a great extent. The following section discusses the framework that was employed to immerse and have access to a bureaucratic field. It gives a methodological focus on how and why a particular bureaucratic field was selected and why a particular practice was taken up for a sociological inquiry.

Time spent in the field is crucial to have access to the bureaucratic field (Marcus et al. 2015). Bureaucrats may not be able to put to words their practical ends in their institutional units through interviews. Time is a factor which allows the bureaucratic respondents to be less conscious of the settings when they are being observed in revealing their practical tasks on a daily basis. Additionally, knowing a person with time become a technique helps to convert flat professional relationship between the observer and the observed into a thick relationship of a friend, patron, mentor and confidante (ibid, 8).

2.6.1 Time as a pathway

During fieldwork in 2018, immersion in the bureaucratic field occurred in stages. When the District Commissioner Office was visited for the first time to conduct my fieldwork, I was directed to the Emergency Department of Dhemaji which was responsible for coordinating emergency activities regarding floods. In the first visit to the department, the Chief Project Officer demonstrated how the Assam Disaster Manual dictated their practices in adapting to floods. Pre and post flood reconstruction programmes (relief, compensation, disaster management drills) are planned in tandem to this manual. Henceforth, the Disaster Manual, 2015, as a document emerged as a pathway to explore to examine the formal system of knowledge that defines governance of for governance. After explaining their bureaucratic work of paper, lists and documents and its importance to plan and prepare for floods, the local bureaucrat closed any further line of questioning. He maintained that whatever was explained to the researcher was exhaustive to how floods are dealt with every year. Here, I became a helpless spectator and had to do with whatever information was provided to me. When immersion in field at the district level was tough, I proceeded to collect data from the sub-divisional office of Sissiborgaon, under which the jurisdiction of Pomua village is included.

It was here, where I noticed how the hierarchy of bureaucrats decides the behavior of bureaucrats when they are observed at work. A commonality in the interviews of the Additional District Commissioner of Dhemaji, Circle Officer of Sissiborgaon, Chief Engineer of Water Resource Department, Emergency Project Officer was that they gave a scripted performance of the formal/institutionalized rules of adapting to floods. Their scripted performance means their explanation to the researcher demonstration looked like rote learning. Given their social position and role, these bureaucrats have to deal with the front level management of knowledge when their work is being observed or is expected to be opened up according to the ethnographer. Therefore, these officials at the highest level are always sensitive of the situations they are in or what they are speaking about.

After an interval of time of four months, in 2019, I visited the Emergency Department of Dhemaji again asking for any documents that would help me understand their delivery mechanisms of service and care to the flood affected communities. This time the officer, since he has met me earlier and know about my research project, was not surprised of my presence and showed around various records of how they keep a tab on the rising level of floods. The format of the water reading document, provided by the Water Resource Department, was shown to me. He further explained the role of the document and the practice of this document to be taken up to the higher authorities to get signature and submit as a daily record. At the same time, the officer revealed his experience of floods during his childhood and narrated how floods were less destructive and more of joy to them. The interview was cut brief because of his official commitment and I was asked to come to his office the next day.

In the subsequent visit, surprisingly the bureaucratic field had partially opened up for immersion. Lohit Gogoi shared with me the flood management plan of Dhemaji district that aided as a blueprint if I had to understand how their practices related to floods led to social reproduction at the level of the community. A soft copy of the same was also mailed to me. As Dubois (2016: 20) maintains, gradually with time people become less concerned of being observed and open up their daily practices to the ethnographer for being observed. Therefore, in approaching the bureaucratic field with time, led to my immersion in the bureaucratic field, in terms of the fact that these officials in the Emergency department in Dhemaji became comfortable with my presence. After this point of immersion in the field was attained, the Project Officer in the emergency office

of Dhemaji, gradually allowed me to have access to places to observe their everyday practices of preparedness to the annual cycle of floods. During this time, the official shared official documents, reports and list demonstrating how they turned floods as a technical field for intervention.

2.6.2 'Facework' as a pathway

It is important to note that building rapport with one or two bureaucrats and officials over time will not provide access to information they try to conceal. According to Rappert (2010, 572), public bureaucracies are apt sites where secrecy is highly maintained. There seems to be an imminent tension of maintaining secrecy on one hand and being a service provider; and hence public accountability on the other (Hahanou and Martin 2019, 7). While keeping secrets bureaucrats have to perform a front stage management concealing information and depicting the imaginary state. To deal with these challenges in a bureaucratic field, Hahanou and Martin (2019, 6) use Goffman's interactionist perspective to comprehend the 'facework'⁵ in a bureaucratic world. This methodological pathway provides us not only to reflect on the performance of the bureaucrat but also on the performance of the researcher from the front stage to backstage and offstage, where ethnographic research could be conducted.

Front stage behavior usually follows a routinized and learned social script within an institutional framework and the bureaucrats behave in a scripted way. On the other hand, back stage behavior refers to the behavior of the bureaucrat when no one is watching or when one is free from the formal expectations of their role (ibid, 6). Drawing from this framework, front stage behavior of the bureaucrats is readily observed in interviews with the bureaucrats at the water resource and irrigation department. They always had a sense of glorifying the state while explaining the flood governance mechanisms. Similarly, these officials readily explained their existent practices to provide relief, build relief camps, practices in providing relief for the people as well as their rescue operations in saving human lives. In a performance of this kind, the concealment of knowledge is rampant and to explore if there arises any discrepancies in conducting the annual phenomena of floods is inflexible. In order to move beyond the guarded performances of the bureaucrats, Hahanou and Martin (2019, 7-8) suggest that in conducting ethnography

⁵ Hahanou and Martin (2019) employ, 'Facework' as a metaphor to explore not only the performance of the bureaucrat but also to reflect critically on the performance of the researcher.

in a bureaucratic field, it is necessary for the ethnographer to ‘perform’ to avoid being a mere spectator to an obtrusive actor. To ‘perform’ refers to act of the ethnographer to move across stages where one is allowed to participate in key events and get a sense of what is going on and then quickly outcast as an outsider to bureaucratic front stage.

Performing as an ethnographer, it was challenging to engage with the bureaucrats especially with the officials of the sub-divisional office by engaging with them when they exhibit their back-stage behaviour. Developing a ritual of having a meal together during times of visiting their office helped revealed most of the data regarding their governance practices. At field sites, when engineers discussed how to repair/rebuild a hydraulic infrastructure to impede gradual erosion of land, I was a spectator and unable to participate. Nevertheless, after the formal discussions had ended and the senior officials left, a junior engineer revealed the details of their official discussions. In this way, moving between stages benefitted as a technique to conduct ethnography among the bureaucrats.

2.7 Multi-sited ethnography

In times when the local sites are transgressed by the processes of globalization, transnational discourses, techniques of governance and communication networks, multi-sited study requires careful analysis of distinct field sites (Marcus, 1995; Ong and Collier, 2005). The strategy of multi-sited approach helps to generalize specific findings from multiple specific sites (Silvast and Virtanen, 2019) and a small place such as one village can reveal multiple external inter-connections and layers (Candea, 2013). Extending the strength of multi-sited ethnography, Pollock and Williams (2009) contend, this approach helps bring together organizational contexts and historical timeframes with ethnographic sensibility to situated local activities. In order to capture detailed organizational practice that is unique to a local place, multi-sited approach captures first-hand experience of how an organization or technology works (Silvast and Virtanen, 2019, 463). Drawing from these literatures, in order to study the socio-technical governance practices of the State to mitigate disaster of floods, a multi-sited approach is chosen as a research design to collect data.

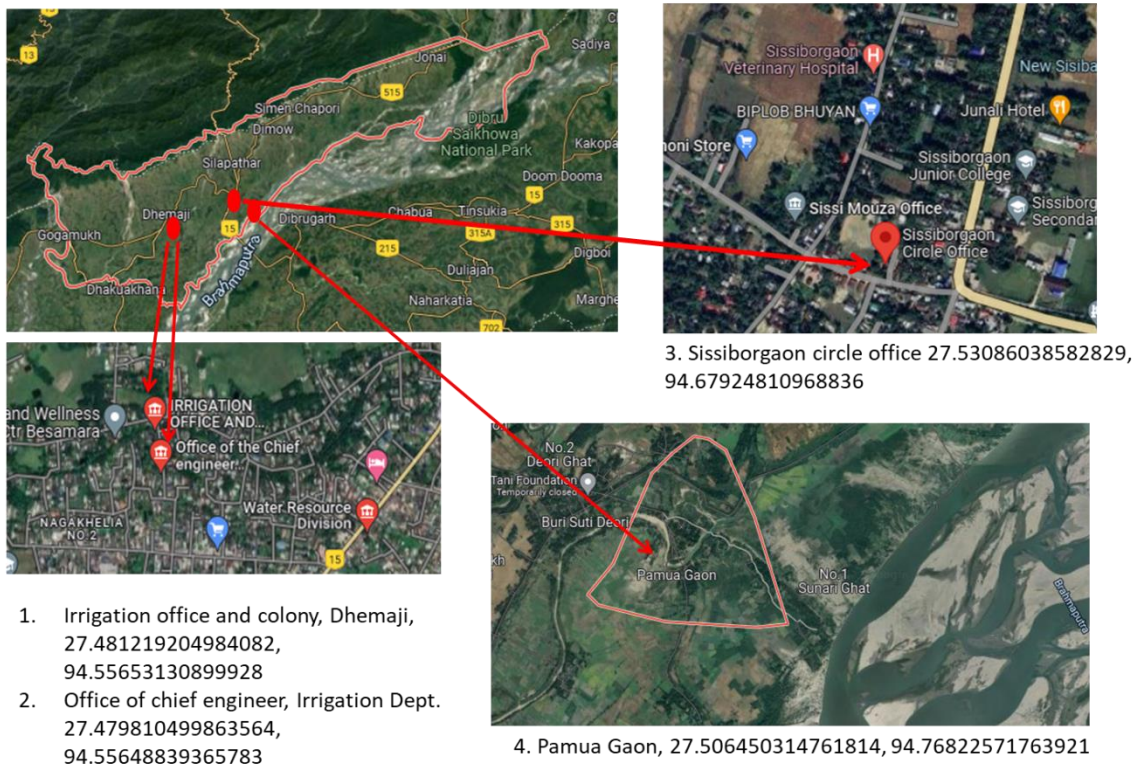


Image 2.2 Geographical locations of the four research sites. Source: Googlemaps.com

In conducting a multi-sited ethnography, Hannerz (2003, 206) argues that ‘multi-site’ is not a mere comparative study of localities. It is pertinent to show how these local sites are connected to each other and the kind of relationships they have which needs to be an essential part of the study. Given the expanse of the river Brahmaputra and its numerous rivers and tributaries, the selection of the district Dhemaji is discussed in the above sections. The criteria for selection of Dhemaji district is people’s perception of an emerging alternate personality of floods that is testing their adaptation skills to live in water. People in Pomua attribute that the dykes employed by the government in Dibrugarh⁶ to control erosion is affecting these villages adversely. The diverted water flow and hit back at their village causing inundation. Second, the newly built Bogibeel⁷ bridge causes water-logging in these areas during the monsoons. As a result, when the natural flow of water is interrupted by these infrastructures, this village is bearing the brunt of it. In tandem to these new experiences, the assistance they receive from the government in the form of relief and compensation is administered by the sub-divisional

⁶ The district of Dibrugarh lies in the opposite direction of Pomua, i.e. on the opposite bank from where Pomua is situated.

⁷ The Bogibeel bridge is a road cum rail bridge over the Brahmaputra river connecting Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts. This bridge is of strategic importance as it aids communication with the neighboring state of Arunachal Pradesh.

office of Sissiborgaon, in the district of Dhemaji. Therefore, this site was chosen to explore the governing practices of floods.

Visiting the circle office of Sissiborgaon further revealed how their practices to provide aid and relief to the flood affected villages are guided by the District Commissioner. This fact then led the researcher to the office of the District Commissioner in Dhemaji and the subsequent department of Emergency situated in the premises of the circle office of Dhemaji. From this site, I was guided to the revenue department as the release and budgeting of funds for recovery and reconstruction to floods is decided by this department. The water-resource department in Dhemaji was chosen to examine the flood preparedness vis-à-vis their practice of predicting floods. Lastly, the irrigation department working in close association with the water-resource department in Dhemaji is selected as a site to observe the practices of the engineers who work to keep the water away from eroding lands and re-building infrastructures that are breached by the floods. A mapping of all these sites reveals that the government sites at the district and the sub-divisional level represent the various departments that come together to govern floods. The village of Pomua represent a community living along the edge of the river demonstrating a different relational approach to make sense of the new personality of floods and continue to live as amphibians in water.

2.8 A short profile of the Mising community

The Misings are one of the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley and is recognized as a scheduled tribe by the constitution of India given their traditional habitat of residing along the river. The Mising, with a population of 6, 87,310 (as per 2011 Census), constitutes the second largest plain tribes of Assam, the first being the Bodo –Kachari group with a total population of 8, 87,142 as per the 2011 census. The settlement areas of the tribe are Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Sonitpur, Darrang, Jorhat and Golaghat districts of Assam. They also reside in few districts of Arunachal Pradesh. These are mainly Lower Dibang Valley, Lohit and East Siang district.

The Misings are a distinct tribe inhabiting the areas north of the Brahmaputra river in upper Assam, and they are also known as Miris, but they call themselves as ‘Misings’ in reference to the former which to their minds sound somewhat derogatory (Pegu, 2011, 1). Given their traditional habitat along the banks of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries,

they are easy victims of the twin processes of flood and erosion. Erosion of vast tracts of agricultural land which is a vital source of livelihood for the Misings, have affected them severely. Needless to say, the Misings as a riparian community, have been the worst victims of recurring floods and erosion, a problem which has been aggravated by ineffective and unscientific flood control measures (Doley, 2017, 104). The Misings govern themselves under Mising Autonomous Council (MAC), which was formed in the year 1995. The Misings have their age old tradition and religion known as Donyi Polo. Some of them follow Vaishnavism founded by saint Sankardeva. Agriculture is the major form of livelihood for the Misings. They grow varieties of rice mostly using the traditional agricultural method. They also cultivate mustard, vegetables and areca nut for their subsistence. This community rears variety of livestock like pigs, hens and goats.

2.9 A brief profile of Dhemaji

This district was formed on 1st October 1989. It comprises of erstwhile Dhemaji⁸ and Jonai Subdivision and is surrounded by the Arunachal Pradesh to the North and the East. The district emerges at the foothills of the Arunachal hills and stretches to the Brahmaputra river with Subansiri on one side and the river Siang on the other. This region lies at an altitude of 104 meters above the mean sea-level.

The district of Dhemaji was originally inhabited by various indigenous tribes like Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Bodo Kachari, Deori and Laloong. The economy of Dhemaji is depended on the agricultural sector. Seri-culture, fishing and driftwood business are practiced on a small-scale. Given the adverse effects of sand deposition and other effects of recurrent floods on the fertile agricultural land have adversely hampered people in this district. Absence of facilities like power, proper irrigation and marketing facilities has led to massive deprivation for these people. Lack of industrialization in this district contributes for the local economy to be at a subsistence level of production and consumption.

⁸ This information is retrieved from the government website of Dhemaji: <https://dhemaji.gov.in/> accessed on December 18, 2022.

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