

CREATING TRADABLE BENEFITS FOR WOMEN THROUGH DEVELOPMENT OF INLAND WATERWAYS



Case 1: Borderline benefits for gender from trade and navigation on waterways

Initial scoping visits by CUTS showed that women are minimally involved in activities related to NW1 and NW2, especially in the context of trade and navigation. However, women are able to avail borderline benefits from the livelihood options related to waterways like fishery, local foods, shops, etc.

For instance, at Kamalbari, Majuli (Assam) women self-help groups (SHGs) under the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) project by Ministry of Rural Development help women with alternate employment throughout the year, since they are not directly involved in fishing activities.

The key income generating activities for the women in these SHGs are weaving and preparation of sweets. Mainland traders come and collect the products from the women for sale outside the Majuli Island. Further, they sell handicrafts to the tourists who visit the island for sight-seeing. The SHGs also get help from non-governmental organisations and other bodies. For example, the Mising Autonomous Council with the support of state government has provided loan for Rangam Cooperative Society of Women.

Similarly, at Khagaria (Bihar) women are involved to a certain extent in the fish value chain. They pick-up fish leftover from market sale from the ghat and sell it to the houses in the nearby villages. They have also started cleaning and adding value to the fish for immediate consumption at household levels. There are multiple SHGs working in this area helping these women for saving money and also for accessing many other women-oriented government schemes. Some other women were also found to be selling homemade savoury and sweets at the Khagaria ghat to passengers. They make a rough profit of INR 200-300 per day from sale of these products.

In Srigouri village which falls under Karimganj district of Assam, the women respondents shared that they generally do not travel much either for trade or tourism. Peak season for commuting through Inland Waterway is from November to March. They also had concerns about the safety of inland navigation as there are no safe vessels and it is more time consuming. Availability of road transport has also led to reduction of movement through river ways. Navigation in IW has a considerable impact on livelihood mobility, access to health services and food as well as social, cultural and religious networks.

While advantages from navigational usage of waterways for women might be minimal, however CUTS discussions in Brahmaputra did flag some concern that might originate from seamless waterway connectivity. One such concern was that many household activities like bathing, washing dishes, clothes etc. are carried out by the river bank; hence entry of foreign boats or vessels could be a possible threat for the privacy to women who perform these household activities.

Another concern was that trafficking of young girls and women is an increasing concern for vulnerable communities living in make-shift house by the river. A sudden unchecked influx of out-state and foreign footfall via waterways might elevate trafficking activities. These concerns are also closely inter-linked with the processes followed by governance structure to keep track of boat movement in border areas on Barak and Brahmaputra.

Case 2: Life in Char (Flood vs. Erosion)

Chars in Brahmaputra are small islands formed by alluvial deposits in the mid channel. In Dhubri district alone, which is situated in lower Assam, there are a total of 480 small and big chars with human settlements. The char areas are highly prone to erosion along the upstream side whereas accumulation of sedimentation in the downstream areas causes migration to downstream whenever land is eroded. Majority of the people residing in char areas are Bengali speaking Muslims.

Bir Singh Char Part III is one such chars in Dhubri district situated 1 km east of Jogomayaghat in Dhubri town. The day-to-day life and livelihood of the people living here is linked with the small motorboats plying between the char and Dhubri town. We interacted with few families in a new settlement. The men were mostly engaged in wage labour (push cart/rickshaw puller/ agricultural labour) earning a wage rate between INR 250- 300 per day. Though, each family had ration card and job card (under MGNREGA scheme) but they have never been able to accrue benefits from the job card.

Agriculture, dairy, fisheries and poultry are other sources of livelihood of the people in this Char. Rice, mustard and black gram are the main crops grown whereas *beel* (lake/wetlands) fisheries is the common type of fisheries found in chars. Water transport is the only mode of conveyance for the inhabitants to take their produce to the market in Dhubri.

In this area women are generally seen busy with their caretaker role and household chores. School, local market and government dispensary were found about to about 3 km away from their settlement. Still, we found children using the ferry to commute to the primary school situated in Dhubri. They say, "the teacher of the school in char comes once in a week and doesn't provide Mid-day Meal. Hence we go to Dhubri".

The normal ferry charge to Dhubri is INR 5, but at the time of medical emergencies during night, the rate goes up to INR 700-800. Thanks to the telecom connectivity through affordable mobile handsets, that they can give a call to the local cab driver during emergencies and get the diseased transported to the ferry in the ghat. The ghats in BirSingh char are under the purview of *gaon panchayat* (village administration).

There is one tube well for every three household which has been installed by the inhabitants for the purpose of drinking water. But iron toxicity is a problem as mentioned by the respondents.

The people in char have accustomed themselves to annual floods. With practically no flood warning system from the government, they shift their settlement by judging the water levels. The relief package from the government is also nominal. They use boats (country boats and rafts) for conveyance. Rather they find it is easier using boats during floods than walking kilometres to the ghat to get into the ferry. Even though these inhabitants have to do extra labour to fetch their source of living but high rate of bank erosion is a bigger threat for them, making them more vulnerable to frequent displacement. Flood water recedes after 3-4 days (sometimes it stays up to one month) whereas erosion takes away the whole land.

Case 3: Bridge versus waterways

Waterway is the single mode of transport to connect Majuli, the largest river island in Assam, to the nearest district of Jorhat. There are nine *ghats* in Majuli of which only two (The Kamalbari ghat and Aphalamukh *ghats*) are under the jurisdiction of the Inland Water Transport Department, the rest being under the purview of the local panchayats. Till last year, the island was part of Jorhat district and the local people had to use ferry to reach Jorhat for administrative work.; Agriculture is the main occupation of the people living in the island which is constantly gripped by the claws of rapid erosion. The loss of agricultural land has forced people to look out for other livelihood options. In this island women are mostly engaged in household work and crafting activities like weaving. Men in the family go for wage labour as alternate livelihood.

Fishing is another important source of income of the local people. The small ponds, wetlands and depressions get filled with water during floods and become fish rearing area. There is great demand for local fish within and outside Majuli.

Access to market is the key hindrance in the economic development of people in Majuli. Whether it is fish or the traditional handloom products, the traders have to come to the island to buy them. Sometimes women cooperatives set up stalls/ small counters in exhibitions /*mela* in Jorhat. Majuli is a culturally significant location especially for the Vaishnava sect of Hindu religion. The months of November- February are the peak period of tourism which has also increased the business opportunity of handloom products.

“If we have to buy something from Jorhat, the price is high on account of transportation charges but we don’t get better price for our produce since there is no direct access to market. The traders come here and fix the price” says Bibidas, 27-year-old housewife in Kamalabari. Her family owns around 4 *bigha* land, wherein they grow mustard and rice (*bao-dhan*- a traditional deep water paddy variety). Other than agriculture, her husband is engaged in fishing in the wetlands and natural ponds. He also does wage- labour (@ INR250/day). There is significant difference in the wage rate for women (INR 50-100) and men and hence women prefer to work under MGNREGA. “Better connectivity can improve our life,” she says. “Bridge connectivity will be extremely helpful particularly during medical emergencies when we have to pay high transportation charges for using the ferries.”

Mr. Thanu Krishna Dutta from Garmur, Majuli has a different perspective. Majuli’s unique land feature and its rich culture and biodiversity have gained the attraction of tourists. “To conserve and protect its unique identity, water transportation has to be developed” he says. “Small boats or even water taxi should be there in every 15 minutes so that people need not have to wait for more than 30 minutes”. This is contradictory to the point of view of youth and women who see bridge as the means of economic and social development.

Majuli is connected to Lakhimpur via road. For those who travel to upper Assam, a ferry to Majuli and then road transport saves much time rather than direct road transport from Jorhat to Lakhimpur. This also has enhanced the number of passengers availing ferry services from Nimatighat to Majuli.

Expanding Tradable Benefits of Trans-boundary Water: Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra Basins

The Himalayan rivers of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra have created extensive systems of inland waterways in the region consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal – BBIN region. The current political discourse on trans-boundary cooperation among these countries has set the stage for institutional analysis of policies, laws and regulations governing inland waterways in the BBIN countries. This study aims to contribute to improving institutions (i.e. policies, laws, and regulations) for inland waterways governance with particular emphasis on transport connectivity and livelihood in the BBIN region. More details about the project can be accessed here: <http://www.cuts-citee.org/IW/index.htm>

CUTS International

Established in 1983, CUTS International (Consumer Unity & Trust Society) is a non-governmental organisation, engaged in consumer sovereignty in the framework of social justice and economic equality and environmental balance, within and across borders. More information about the organisation and its centres can be accessed here: <http://www.cuts-international.org>.

This document is a compilation of field insights which aims to capture the stories of gender discourses revolving around the waterways of Brahmaputra and Ganga. The field insights are part of a four country study designed and implemented by CUTS International and its strategic partners – Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) and Unnayan Shamannay which contributes to the project 'Expanding tradable benefits of trans-boundary water: Promoting navigational usage of inland waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra basins'. More details are available at: www.cuts-citee.org/IW/

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