

Land Tenure and Erosion as Determinants of Guerrilla Violence in Assam, India: An Ethnographic and Remote Sensing Approach

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Abstract : India's Brahmaputra River Valley has, since independence, experienced consistent low-intensity guerrilla warfare between ethnic and religious groups. These groups are often organized around perceived ethnic territoriality, and target civilians, communities, and especially migrants belonging to other ethnic and religious groups. Intense flooding and erosion have led to widespread displacement, and disaster relief funds are largely tied to legal land tenure. Displaced residents of informal settlements receive little or no resettlement aid, and their subsequent migration strategies and risk from guerrilla violence are poorly understood. Semi-structured interviews and comprehensive surveys focused on perceptions of risk, efficacy of disaster relief, and migration and adaptation strategies were conducted with households identified as being 'at-risk' of catastrophic flooding and erosion in Majuli District, Assam. Interviews with policymakers and government workers were conducted to assess disaster relief efforts in informal settlements, and remote sensing methods were used to identify informal settlement and hydrogeomorphic change. The results show that various ethnic and religious groups have differential strategies and preferences for resettlement. However, these varying strategies are likely to lead to differential levels of risk from guerrilla violence. Members of certain ethnic groups residing in informal settlements, in the absence of resettlement assistance, are more likely to seek out unofficial settlement on land far from the protection of the state and experience greater risk of becoming victims of political violence. As climate change and deforestation are likely to increase the severity of the displacement crisis in the Brahmaputra River Valley, more comprehensive disaster relief and surveying efforts are vital for limiting migration and informal settlement in potential sites of guerrilla warfare.

Keywords : climate, displacement, flooding, India, violence

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