

**REFLECTING ON THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF  
DISPLACED WOMEN: THE CASE OF *GANGA*-EROSION  
IN *MALDA*, WEST BENGAL**

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**Abstract**

*One of the major fallouts of the new development paradigm in India is the huge displacement of human population. In the wake of this, the government has come up with the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy. But the policy has failed to address most of the crucial issues of resettlement and rehabilitation, especially concerning gender. One important but often ignored reason behind this is the inadequate attention given to various local institutions that play a very crucial role in the everyday survival and coping of the displaced population, particularly women. Based on an ethnographic study of the women displaced by Ganga erosion in Malda district of West Bengal, the present paper examines the role of such local institutions in the everyday lives of these women. The main finding is that the degree of vulnerability of displaced women depends upon their institutional affiliations and hence any rehabilitation and resettlement policy should take into consideration the vitality of these institutions in its policy formulation.*

**Introduction**

Over the last two decades, there has been an enormous increase in the number of Internally Displaced People (hereafter referred to as IDPs) in the developing economies of South Asia. The heavy emphasis on large-scale development projects, various natural disasters and man-made tragedies like wars and riots have led to involuntary displacement of millions of people from their ancestral homes in these countries (Cernea, 1999; Banerjee, et.al., 2005; Hussain, 2008). This is true for India as well. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) [2014] as of May 2014, the number of displaced people in India exceeded 531, 000. But as there is no reliable nationwide reporting on the issue of internal displacement, the number could be much higher.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the 20th century can be identified as the age of displacement in India, caused by natural calamities and man-made tragedies like wars and riots, apart from the 'efforts' in the name of 'development' (Fernandes, 1991; Parasuraman, 1999; Parasuraman & Unnikrishnan, 2000; Banerjee et.al, 2005).

Whatever may be the cause of internal displacement, the situation of the IDPs is more vulnerable and insecure when compared with refugees (Das, 2005; Hussain, 2008) because for a long time there had hardly been any legal mechanisms to guide their rehabilitation in India. Only recently, legal mechanisms like the United Nations Guiding Principles on internal displacement (1998) and the National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy (2007) of the Government of India have come up to address the problem of internal displacement.

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The consequences of involuntary displacement, especially for the poorest, backward and marginalized sections of the Indian population like the tribals, dalits and women are well documented (*Fernandez and Ganguly Thukral 1989; Ganguly Thukral 1992; Kothari 1996; Pervez, 2008; Asthana, 2012*). Various studies (*Parasuraman 1993; Colson 1999; Mehta & Srinivasan 2000; Mehta, 2000; Scudder 2005; Kumar 2005*) that focus on women's experiences of displacement in India, have pointed out that women as marginalised members within the highly patriarchal and impoverished communities, are often forced to shoulder the ordeal of displacement far more intensely in the form of loss of livelihoods and property rights, exposure to physical violence, bad marriages and overall deterioration of status. Scholarly works in the Indian context (*Ganguly Thukral, 1995; Parasuraman, 1999; Verma, 2004; Dewan, 2008*) have also shown that breakdown of the system of family, weakening of community structures, social networks and dispersion of kin groups and diminishing of traditional authority and potential for mutual help, which all form essential part of the everyday lives of the backward and marginalised communities, further result in the overall disempowerment and marginalization of women after displacement.

However, little work has been done to understand the specific ways in which the local institutions, which are still surviving or which evolve in such circumstances, play a vital role in the everyday coping and survival of displaced women. More concretely, we do not know how these displaced women, having different personal and household attributes, cope up and survive multiple disasters and subsequent displacements in rural areas, and the role that the local institutions play in this process. This finds reflection in the National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy (2007) of the Government of India. Sadly, this policy framework does not take into consideration the importance of these institutions in the everyday lives of the displaced women, in the process of formulation of resettlement and rehabilitation policies for them. This field-based ethnographic research in two most erosion-prone blocks in *Malda* district of West Bengal, which represents a unique situation of displacement, caused both by a development project, namely the *Farakka* Barrage, and an ecological factor, i.e. the shifting of the course of river *Ganga*, attempts to fill this gap by documenting the everyday experiences of 60 women in overcoming their multiple displacements caused by river-bank erosion, a process which has been aggravated by a development project.

## **Institutional Impact on Women in Displacement Contexts: Evidence from the Literature**

The previous section is a brief discussion on how any form of involuntary displacement is a traumatic experience for everyone undergoing it. This section is a review the existing literature pertaining to displacement, caused both by development projects and ecological factors, as the *Malda* case reveals, and the relationship between gender and institutions, mainly in the context of developing countries like India. The reviewed literature provide clues on how these two are interlinked and influence each other.

Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, humanly devised formal and informal mechanisms that shape social and individual expectations, interactions, and behavior (*North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990*). Institutions structure and shape outcomes through the actions of individuals and decision makers associated with them (*Agrawal, 2010*). Given this apt definition, this

section explores how institutions, especially local institutions, in the context of developing countries do matter in the lives of the displaced population, especially women. Also attempted in this section is to find out whether the degree of their vulnerability in such contexts depends on their respective institutional affiliation.

As institutions are the of means for holding society together, for giving it a sense of purpose and enabling it to adapt (*O'Riordan & Jordan, 1999*), in the post-displacement context, the existing role of local institutions needs special emphasis. A number of scholars (*Watts and Bohle 1993; Bohle et al. 1994; Adger 1999; 2006; Cutter, 1996; Brooks et al. 2005, Eakin 2005*) have highlighted the fact that vulnerability to climate change is a function of socio-political and institutional factors that can vary significantly at a relatively fine scale. They have further argued that institutional interconnections, density and effectiveness affect the degree of vulnerability of the local population displaced by ecological factors in various developing country contexts. However, despite the fact that institutions, especially local institutions are of crucial importance in structuring and impacting the degree of vulnerability of the displaced population in their role as mediating bodies that connect households to local resources, determine how flows of external support will be distributed among different social groups, and link local populations to national policies and interventions, literature on this subject is still sparse and in infancy (*Agrawal, 2010*). This is especially true in the Indian context. Though there is no dearth of literature in India pertaining to involuntary displacement caused by various factors, there are hardly any study exclusively devoted to studying the role of local institutions in structuring and impacting the degree of vulnerability of the local population, especially women, in the context of displacement involuntary.

Moreover, to better understand the impacts of institutions in a post-displacement context, as argued by Agrawal (*2010*), it is necessary to examine their linkages with different social groups because of the differential impact of institutions across various social categories. A vast body of literature (*Quarantelli, 1994; Blaikie et al., 1994; Enarson, Morrow & Hearn 1998; Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2003*) has further pointed out that vulnerabilities to ecological factors and disasters are not equally distributed across various social groups. This is because unstable global patterns of settlement, resource management, social organization<sup>2</sup> and political economy increasingly put some population groups more than others at risk from disaster by impacting on the degree of their vulnerability (*Cutter, Blaikie et al., Downs et. al., Anderson and Woodrow, Oliver-Smith, Anderson, Maskrey, Varley, as cited in Enarson, Morrow & Hearn 1998:2*). Cannon has thus rightly pointed out that individuals and social groups carry different and disproportionate "vulnerability bundles" (*ibid.*). Women comprise one such social group. In the developing countries, which are mostly highly patriarchal, women are already in an unequal position and at times of risk, like when extreme environmental events occur, their position is further marginalized and they become more vulnerable than their men counterparts to environmental hazards and consequent involuntary displacement that takes place (*Kafi, 1992; Akhter 1992; Ikeda, 1995; Ariyabandu, 2000*). Gender is a significant determinant of women's vulnerability in the context of environmental hazards, which has its root in the unequal power relationships between women and men and the social, political, and economic subordination of women (*Wiest et al., 1994*). Enarson (*2000:4*) has thus rightly pointed out "...gender shapes the social worlds within which natural events occur".

Similarly, Lyla Mehta (2000) has argued that there is a "double bind" which entraps displaced women. On one hand, male biases in society help to perpetuate gender inequality in terms of unequal resource allocation and distribution and also legitimize silencing of women's interests. On the other hand, biases within state institutions, structures and policies help to perpetuate and exacerbate these inequalities.

Studies, such as that of Ikeda (1995:188) in the context of Bangladesh's devastating 1991 cyclone found that many a times ideological and institutional constraints can even limit women's access to life-saving public shelters. To put it in her words:

Women are deprived of the capacity to cope with disasters by being kept in dependent positions in terms of accessing information from the world outside the *bari*, and by being denied their right to take major decisions. In this respect, *purdah* as an institution which prevents women from engaging in socio-economic roles outside the household directly prescribes women's vulnerability to disaster. Prevailing gender relations are reflected clearly during the occurrence of sudden-onset disasters. Gender-related vulnerability is deep-rooted in persistent inequalities.

Similarly, Kafi(1992) has pointed out how 'Shariah law' in the context of Bangladesh was brought in by the male relatives to confiscate the family land in the event of a woman's husband's and son's deaths by a tornado, leaving her and her two daughters poverty- stricken and turning them almost into destitutes.

Not only these informal institutions, state institutions also often end up marginalizing displaced women because of their ignorance as to what constitutes gender sensitive programs that are suitable to local needs of the people (Asthana, 2012). Despite the magnitude and extent of the persistent problem of displacement and forced relocation of people due to various reasons, India lacks a comprehensive national policy for internally displaced people and has dealt with all kinds of displacement in an ad hoc manner (Kumar, 2005). The recent National Policy for Resettlement and Rehabilitation (2007) of the Government of India, which is meant only for development displacement, is very imprecise and flawed with numerous contradictions and does not guarantee proper resettlement (Kumar 2005). One such glaring flaw is that except for a mention in its definition of the vulnerable group, the policy has failed to recognize gender as an important factor to be considered, given the fact that large chunks of the displaced are women (Kumar 2005, Pervez, 2008). Similarly, neither the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) nor the National Policy on Women and the 10<sup>th</sup> Five- Year Plan (2002-2007) has any mention of the rehabilitation and resettlement of the displaced women, underscoring the fact that the national government has not comprehended the displacement issue from gender perspective (Pandey & Rout, 2004).

The National Policy for Resettlement and Rehabilitation (2007) which is particularly aimed at ameliorating the distress of the population displaced by development projects, however fails to address the issues of gender equity by systematically ignoring women's interests in the resettlement processes apparently because all decisions regarding compensations proposed in the policy are invariably taken with male members in view (Pervez, 2008). The policy does not provide any measures for women who are divorced, deserted or widowed as they are treated as dependent, and hence not eligible for compensation (Singh 1992; Bisht, 2009). Moreover, the policy has no provisions for empowerment of the displaced women and also does not acknowledge the fact that displaced women's distress is the

direct result of gender-specific vulnerabilities, grounded in unequal gender relations of the locally-specific contexts (Byrne & Baden, 1995; Pervez, 2008).

As displacement and disasters are very much social products and happen in local contexts, the importance of the local and cultural specific factors, as for example, the role of the local institutions, should be given due weightage while making policies rather than making national level prescriptions, especially on women's issues.

## Data Source & Research Methodology

The broad objective of this study was to gain a holistic understanding of the role of the different local institutions in the everyday lives of women in a post-displacement situation caused by the erosion of river *Ganga* in the *Malda* district of West Bengal. The research has been designed to be an ex post-facto exploratory study (as this kind of study has not been so far conducted in the present locale) based on empirical data collected through an ethnographic approach. A number of scholars (Malkki 1995; Colson 2003; Sorensen, 2003) have highlighted the significance of this method for understanding forced displacement and migrations in varied social contexts. As long-term intensive fieldwork is the hallmark of this method, an intensive ethnographic field research was conducted for six months in the two blocks of *Malda* district, namely, *Kaliachak II* and *Manikchak* during the period August 2007 to April 2008 in order to collect in-depth primary and empirical data. However, selected secondary sources of data, such as policy documents and official reports by government and non-government humanitarian agencies, secondary literature, and a content analysis of documentary films and news reports (local, regional and national) complement the primary data used in this research.

For the present study, the two blocks mentioned above have been chosen purposively as they are the ones which are the most erosion-prone in the district of *Malda*. As the displaced population in these two blocks reside in the villages, resettlement colonies, embankments and *chars*<sup>3</sup>, two such settlements from each category across the two blocks have been purposively selected for the present study.

The field research is based on a host of methods, namely, in-depth face-to-face interviews, non-participant observation and focused group discussions. For the purpose of collection of primary and empirical level data from the displaced women, the method of face-to-face interviewing, with the help of an interview guide was adopted. The questions in the interview guide were mainly open-ended, unstructured in order to easily modify them in the course of the interview. Interviews on the basis of structured and semi-structured interview schedules were conducted with the Local Administrative Officers, like the Block Development Officers (B.D.O.s) and the Social Welfare Officers, the members of the *Panchayats* and the activists of the civil society organizations working in these erosion affected areas, in order to get an idea of their perception of the role of local institutions in the post-displacement situation and also to obtain a holistic understanding of the issue. In order to gain a better understanding of the importance of local institutions in the everyday lives of the displaced women, non-participant observation method was also used by staying in the various resettlement sites selected for the study for a certain period of time. Another qualitative method- focused group discussions with the displaced women-were also used to validate the data gathered through personal interviews and to

better understand their perceptions regarding the importance of the various local institutions in the post-displacement phase of their lives.

Interviews of displaced women were based on purposive sampling method (*Bernard, 1994; Bisht, 2009*). With the help of this sampling technique, 60 displaced women were selected from the study region. Diversity among the women participants in terms of socio-economic standing was kept in mind in order to better understand the differential impact of the various institutions in the everyday post-displacement lives of displaced women. As the main purpose of these interviews was to gather information for an ethnographic description of the everyday lived experiences of women in the post displacement situation and the vitality of the role of the local institutions in their everyday survival and coping, the emphasis was on selection of those participants who could provide rich information on these issues.

Interviews were also conducted with five activists of the local civil society organization, called the *Ganga Bhangam Protirodh Action Nagarik Committee* dedicated to the cause of the welfare of the displaced people, block development officers and social welfare officers, officials and members of the local *panchayats* in the two erosion prone blocks.

All the interviews, with the displaced women, government, *panchayat* and non-government officials were recorded with their due permission. The recordings of the interviews were carefully transcribed verbatim and then translated from Bengali into English by the researcher. To maintain confidentiality, the names of the participants and informants used in this study are pseudonyms. The analysis and interpretation of the data that have been made, basically implies a triangulation of narratives, quantitative indicators and case studies. This assessment and reflection have helped to forge a connection between the data collected through the interviews during the fieldwork, and the literature reviewed, thereby point out the similarities as well as departures.

## **Women & the Displacement and Resettlement Scenario in *Malda*: An Overview**

This section contains a brief overview of the nature and problem of displacement, its enormity and magnitude and issues of rehabilitation and resettlement with particular reference to women in the context of river bank erosion in two community blocks of *Malda* district of West Bengal, namely *Kaliachak II* and *Manikchak*.

As mentioned earlier, the problem of shifting of course of river *Ganga* and the consequent erosion of riverbanks in the *Malda* district of West Bengal represents an unique case -- it is a combination of both environment related factor (shifting of the course of river *Ganga*) and a development-related project (the *Farakka* Barrage) (*Rudra 2004; Rudra 2006*). Historical records (*Colebrook, 1801; Sherwill 1858 & Hunter, 1876 as cited in Rudra, 2003*) show that this problem of shifting of river *Ganga* which can be traced back to the *Mughal* period, is a long-term phenomenon that has time and again shaped and reshaped the territorial history of *Malda*. Consequently, erosion and the displacement of human population have been an age-old problem along the banks of river *Ganga*. However, intensity of erosion of the river bank of *Ganga* in *Malda* increased manifold only after the construction of the *Farakka* Barrage in 1962 (*Rudra, 2003; Fieldwork, 2007-2008*). In this regard it is

worth-mentioning that even though the problem of river bank erosion in *Malda* accounts for a significant percentage of human displacement in West Bengal, it has never become part of the state's public agenda, like the continuing influx of refugees from Bangladesh since partition of the sub-continent in 1947, or recent displacements caused by development projects in *Singur* (2006) and *Nandigram* (2007). Even though *Ganga* erosion has been contributing to an almost continuous and sustained process of human displacement in *Malda*, because it is well spaced over a very long period of time and has not resulted in rapid human displacement, it has remained almost invisible from both public and state's attention. However, the fact that riverine changes in the post-*Farakka* situation has brought distress to the erosion-victims living on the banks of river *Ganga*, and that the problem is worsening by the day, has been categorically admitted by the District Human Development Report *Malda*<sup>4</sup> (2007:169) which clearly states that, "out of the three human vulnerabilities in *Malda* district, is losses of livelihood and property that have occurred periodically because of widening ecological imbalances, natural calamities and river bank erosion". The report has further revealed how badly the vulnerable sections living *Diara*<sup>5</sup> blocks of the district, of which women are an important segment, have regressed in human development terms, in contrast to the people living elsewhere within the same district who have advanced relatively.

Let us now look at the magnitude, extent and the impact of displacement caused by *Ganga* erosion in *Malda*. In this district five community blocks, *Manickchak*, *Kaliachak I*, *Kaliachak II*, *Kaliachak III* and *Ratua*, which are located in the upstream areas of the *Farakka* Barrage on the left bank of *Ganga*, are affected by river bank erosion for a long time (*FIAN International 2005:13*). According to the report of the Expert Committee set up by Planning Commission in 1996 nearly 4.5 *lakhs* of people have lost their homes and 22 *mouzas*<sup>6</sup> have gone under the belly of the river *Ganga* at *Manickchak*, *Kaliachak I* and *Kaliachak II* blocks (*Banerjee 1999:13-14*). Between 1931 and 1999, the land eroded from the left bank of *Ganga* in *Malda* is more than 200 sq. km. (*FIAN International, 2005:14; Rudra 2006:7*). The following tables give an account of the estimate of loss caused by *Ganga*-erosion in *Malda*.

**Table 1: Estimate of Loss by *Ganga* Erosion in *Malda***

Year	Land Loss in Hectares	Affected Population
1931-78	14335	-
1979	60	340
1980	104	552
1981	259	1376
1982	65	345
1983	92	489
1984	68	361
1985	91	483
1986	106	563
1987	240	1276
1988	72	808
1989	152	850
1990	160	887
1991	167	680
1992	130	770
1993	145	850
1994	160	770
1995	145	1687
1996	450	500000 <sup>a</sup>
1997	450	-
1998	395	-
1999	480	-

Source: Rudra, Kalyan, (2004). "Ganga Bhangana Katha", p.107.

<sup>a</sup>Together with those affected by flood.

**Table 2: Estimated Impact of River Erosion in the *Malda Diara***

CD Block	Total <i>Mouzas</i> Affected	Total Area Affected (acres)	Total land Losing Families
<i>Manikchak</i>	15	13204.02	3330
<i>Kaliachak II</i>	20	25114.67	7378
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>38318.69</b>	<b>10708</b>

Source: DHDRM, 2007, p. 11

The above tables however do not give any information about the number of women impacted by river bank erosion in *Malda* as gender-segregated data is seldom collected in the context of displacement. This is primarily because of the fact that there has been an absence of serious attempt both at the national and state level to look at the issue of displacement and rehabilitation from a gender perspective (Pandey & Rout, 2004; Dewan, 2008). The *Malda* case is no exception to this general trend. Only the DHDRM (2007: 184-185) provides data disaggregated along gender lines, which show that in *Kaliachak II block*, the number of females displaced by *Ganga* erosion till 2001 is 26, 616 and the

corresponding figure for males is 28, 616. Similarly, in *Manichak* block the number of females displaced by *Ganga* erosion till 2001 is 17, 017 and the corresponding figure for males is 18,126.

Moreover, the studies (*Banerjee, 1999; Rudra, 2003; FIAN International, 2005; Dutta 2005*) that did mention about the human cost of displacement caused by *Ganga* erosion in *Malda* have tended to subsume the impacts on women under what Dewan (*2008*) has termed 'broad analysis'. However, as part of their 'broad analysis', these few studies found that like all major dislocation process, women were the worst sufferers in this context too. Landlessness, loss of livelihoods and economic hardships have forced women to take up the burden of providing financial support to the family and adjusting to the domestic hardships. Moreover, in the post-displacement situation, all forms of social evils afflicting women, like prostitution, trafficking of women, child labour, and engagement as couriers in the smuggling nexus, have increased manifold (*Fieldwork, 2007-2008*). It has also emerged that in the resettlement processes, women are systematically ignored as relief packages are usually handed over to the men (*ibid.*)

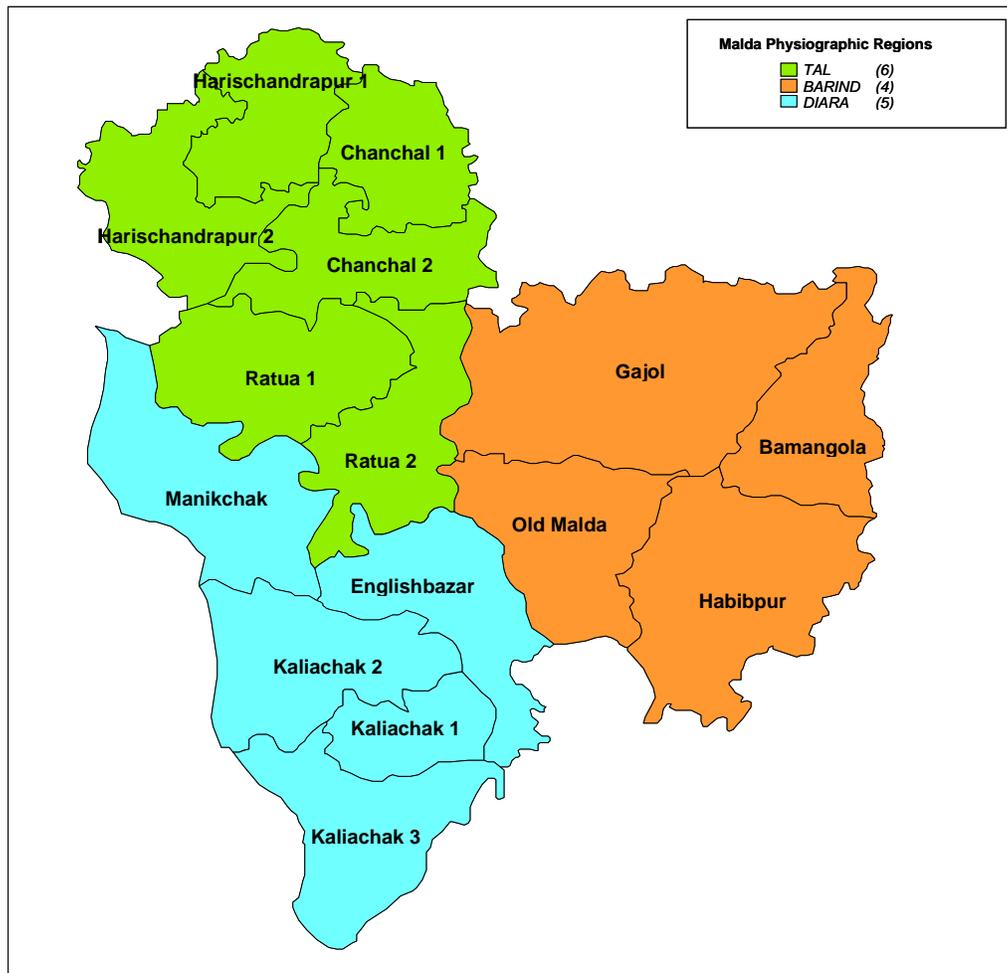
However, what is striking that in spite of the enormity of the problem of human displacement caused by *Ganga* erosion in *Malda*, the question of rehabilitation of the erosion-victims have not been given any heed. Only temporary and short-term relief measures are provided as and when the calamities strike and there are no provisions of long-term and adequate rehabilitation (*Rudra, 2003; FIAN International, 2005*). In this context, it is worthy to note that there is no official rehabilitation policy for river erosion victims in India, making their conditions all the more precarious. The problem of river bank erosion is not considered as a national disaster and hence not taken seriously. Thus, while a rehabilitation policy is available for earthquake, flood and other calamities, river-erosion is not included in that list. Moreover, the erosion-victims of *Malda* do not come under the ambit of the National Rehabilitation and Rehabilitation Policy of the government of India, as this is meant exclusively for those displaced by development projects.

The above account very clearly brings out the impact of *Ganga* erosion on the lives and livelihood pattern of the people of this region, with special reference to women. Given the enormity of the problem, there is a pressing need for a proper rehabilitation and resettlement policy for the displaced population, which would help them to cope up in the post-displacement situation. However, despite the long-term existence of the problem, there is no rehabilitation policy meant for them. Moreover, how far that policy, if and when formulated, will be successful would depend a lot on whether it takes into account the role of the various local institutions in determining the degree of vulnerability of the displaced people, especially women, in a crisis situation like this.

### **A Brief Description of the Locale of Study**

Spreading over an area of 3733 sq. km with a population of 32.91 lakh in 2001, the district of *Malda* covers 4.2 percent of the total landmass of the state of *West Bengal* and is home to 4.1 percent of the state's total population. It consists of 15 community development blocks, which have been grouped into two subdivisions for administrative reasons.

Visual 1: Map of *Malda* District



Source: *Malda District Portal*, <http://malda.nic.in/>, accessed on 20.06.2013.

Among these 15 community blocks, *Kaliachak* II and *Manikchak* blocks have been chosen for the present study as these two blocks are the ones most affected by the oscillation of the course of river *Ganga*. The following table gives a very brief comparative profile of these two blocks selected for the study.

**Table 3: A Brief Comparative Profile of the Two Blocks Selected for Study**

<i>Kaliachak II</i>	<i>Manickchak</i>
Sub-division- <i>Sadar</i>	Sub-division- <i>Sadar</i>
Area-209.17 sq. km	Area-316.39 sq. km.
Population-2,11,533 Male-1,08,955 Female-1,02,578	Population-2,40,123 Male-1,110,407 Female-1,03,716
Major Religion-Islam	Major Religion-Hinduism
Literacy Level-	Literacy Level-

Source: *Malda District Portal*, <http://malda.nic.in/>, accessed on 20.06.2013.

The field study for this research was carried out at specific places of the erosion-prone regions of *Malda* district in West Bengal, namely, *Khatiakhana Char* (part of *Hamidpur Gram Panchayat*) and *Banuatola Char* (part of *KP Jhowbana Gram Panchayat*, which has now been abolished), *Asoktola*, and *Aladitola* (part of *Uttar Panchanandapur I Gram Panchayat*), *Akundabaria Madrasapara* and Field Colony (part of *Bangitola Gram Panchayat*) in *Kaliachak II* Block and in *Shibontola Bundh-an* embankment of the Public Works Department-PWD (in *Manickchak Gram Panchayat*) in *Manickchak* Block.

### **Findings from the Field: Voices of the Displaced Women**

The displaced women in the two erosion-prone blocks of *Malda* are embedded in various kinds of local institutions and are either marginalized or enabled in multifarious ways, both as individuals and as members of a group. Moreover, as they

do not constitute a homogenous group, it is very critical to recognize and reconcile their differences and integrate them. Thus, women from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds in terms of having differing socially significant personal attributes (age, marital status, religious background) and household-level attributes (asset-ownership, political affiliation, gender of the household head etc.) have been chosen for the study. Such groupings are used as analytical categories to capture how their experiences vary across these categories, mainly in terms of deciding their institutional affiliations, which in turn determine the degree of their vulnerabilities in the post displacement situation.

#### ***Religion***

In everyday life context of any community, religion, as a social institution, plays a very vital role. It plays an equally important role, if not more, in the post-displacement phase lives of the women, as the present study reveals. There are certain systems and practices associated with various religious communities which define the imperative of helping the poor and at the same time promote social and personal bonds among the members of that community. These practices basically form part of the traditional ameliorative system of these communities.

In the two erosion-prone blocks of *Malda*, among the Muslim community, a system called '*mutthi*' is widely practised wherein every household which can afford, save a handful of grain everyday and at the end of a month, this grain is collected from the households and given to the most poor

household of the village. In most cases, the recipient households are women-headed, where the head is either a widow or one deserted or abandoned by the husband or has a disabled husband. An almost similar community level charity scheme to meet everyday food exigencies, called the *paichu* (a system of everyday exchange) was reported by Bisht (2009) in his study of the women displaced by Tehri Dam in Uttarkhand. There are other charity practices prevalent among the Muslim communities of this erosion-prone region, like the *Fetura*, *Asul*, *Zakat*. In case of *Fetura*, every person in the month of *Ramzan* gives money equivalent of three kilograms of wheat, to poor persons of the community. *Asul* refers to the charity of two and a half kilogram per *mon* (*maund*) of the produced cereals, given to the poor people. In case of *Zakat*, two and a half percent of the total savings made, after incurring all the expenditure is given to the poor people (*Malda Samachar*, 2006; *Fieldwork*, 2007-2008). Many of the erosion-victim Muslim families in *Malda*, which are mostly headed by women, sustain out of these charities. As pointed out by *Lilufa Bewa* (*name changed*), a young widow displaced by *Ganga* erosion multiple times,

"Amader mosolmander mutthi namer babosthar janya-e ekhono amar poribar beche ache...."(My family is surviving now only because of the mutthi system prevalent in our Muslim community) [Excerpts from the Interview, January 18, 2008].

However, no such system of charity was found among the other religious communities of the region. Thus, it demonstrates that belonging to a particular religious category determines the degree of women's vulnerability in times of displacement and also how various systems and practices associated with social institutions, like religion, prove to be very important for women in meeting the various exigencies of their post-displacement everyday lives. At the same time, these practices clearly bring out how the community processes help in meeting the problem of food insecurity created by river erosion. This is primarily the reason why women-headed families of this region always try to stay near their neighbours or those from their places of origin, rather than residing in the place of rehabilitation, if provided.

### ***Panchayati Raj Institutions***<sup>7</sup>

Not only religion, affiliation to political institutions also plays a very important role in the post-displacement situation, particularly in matters relating to relief and rehabilitation benefits to be received by the displaced people, as it has been found in the *Malda* context. In fact, these institutions determine the kind and quantity of resettlement and rehabilitation benefits earmarked by the government for the erosion-victims that would actually reach to the actual beneficiary. For the present study, the role of the local political institutions like the *panchayati raj* institutions in routing rehabilitation benefit is investigated.

There are several published studies in the pan-Indian context as well as in the state of West Bengal, where the present study is based, on the important role of *panchayati raj* institutions in the overall rural development (*Pramanick & Datta*, 1994; *Kuhn*, 1998), and therefore repetition is avoided. Their role becomes all the more important in the rural contexts, where there has occurred a natural disaster (*Lieten & Datta*, 1995) or a huge displacement of human population, as one finds in the context of *Malda*. Two sets of opinions about the role of the local *panchayats* emerged from the in depth

interviews with the displaced women. While one set of women expressed that *panchayats* were inefficient and had even totally ignored displaced women, another set expressed that they had been benefitted in various matters by the local *panchayats* in the post-displacement phase of their lives. A further analysis of the interviews with these displaced women revealed the fact the women respondents who reported that they benefitted in various ways from the activities of the local *panchayats*, were under women-headed *panchayats*. In the words of *Tarulata Pramanik (name changed)*, a middle-aged widow having two dependent daughters:

*Bhangan e jara sob hariyeche, sarkar tader dui katha jomi noyto pach hajar taka khotipuron daye sunechilam. Panchayat er kache roj roj giye o kono upokar hoyni.....amake kono khotipuron e dichhilo na! Tarpur.....didi jokhon panchayat prodhan holo, uni amake khotipuron er babosthore dilen!* (I heard that the government gives two *kathas* of land or a cash of Rs. 5,000 as compensation for the erosion victims. In spite of going to the *panchayats* everyday, I was nowhere near getting any compensation. But when.....*didi* became the head of the *panchayat*, she arranged the compensation for me!) [Excerpts from the Interview, November 22, 2007].

Because of entrenched vested interests and the unholy nexus between the government officials and *panchayat* members, it was very difficult for the erosion victims of *Malda*, to receive the benefits of various government schemes announced for them. It was all the more difficult for women like *Tarulata*, who are further marginalized in the local community in the absence of any male member in her family. However, the presence of a woman as local *panchayat* head acted positively in her getting the benefits of the resettlement and rehabilitation programmes.

It has also been revealed from the interviews that women, who were members of the *gram sabhas* or ones who attended the *panchayat* meetings regularly, were the ones who got benefits from the various rehabilitation schemes announced by the local administration from time to time. It was primarily because they had better information of the various schemes of the government. This has special relevance for women-headed households, whose number is increasing because of huge migration of male population from these villages to far off cities like Mumbai and Delhi in search of work.

It has also been found that affiliation to political parties also decided the kind of rehabilitation that the victims would receive. Even if somebody was not a member of a *panchayat*, if she belonged to the political party which heads the *panchayat*, she was entitled to get more benefits than others. This has its impact on the distribution of relief materials because in the women headed households, relief received depends many a times upon the political affiliation of the absent male heads of these households.

### ***Household***

The household is an equally important social institution, which plays a great role in deciding the degree of vulnerability of the displaced population, especially women. The nature of the displaced household, in terms of asset ownership, gender of the household, etc. becomes a determining factor in deciding the

relief and rehabilitation needs of its members, and thereby in determining their degree of vulnerability. Scholarly works (*Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2003; Ray-Bennett, 2009*) in the South Asian context have well documented that absence of male members makes a household more vulnerable in the post displacement situation in multiple ways. The author's field work among the displaced population in *Malda* also corroborates the findings of earlier research.

The term 'women-headed households' encompasses a wide range of domestic arrangements (*Chant, 1997*), like a woman taking over as head when the male head of the household is ill or expired or has migrated. In the context of *Malda*, one finds a high incidence of male migration from the erosion-affected blocks to other parts of India in search of livelihood, (*Banerjee, 1999; DHDRM 2007; Fieldwork, 2007-2008*). Such high incidence of male migration puts a lot of burden and responsibilities on the shoulders of the female heads, whose duties increase manifold after being displaced, in the form of taking care of the children and elderly, managing the household and going out for work in order to fend their families. Women often have to earn a livelihood because in many cases the husbands sever all contacts with their families after migrating elsewhere (*Fieldwork, 2007-2008*).

To quote *Sima Mandal* (name changed) of *Shibontola Bundh* (embankment), whose husbands had to migrate in search of job, after losing their cultivable land to *Ganga* erosion:

*'Sami Dilli chole gele ghar-bar dutoi shamlate hoy. Jowan meyeder dekhashuna korte hoy. Kintu O Dilli na gele obostha aro kahil hoye jeto! Na khete peye morte hoto hoyto. Tai sami chole gele kharap lagleo kichu korbar nei!'* (When my husband goes to Delhi, I have to manage both the household as well as do the outside work. I have to look after my young daughters. But if my husband did not go to Delhi for work, our condition would have been even worse off. We have to then die out of starvation. So, even if I feel bad, when my husband is at Delhi, nothing can be done!) [Excerpts from the Interview March 21, 2008].

Moreover, women-headed households, undergo more losses in the process of relocation, as found in the case of *Bharati Bewa* (name changed) of *Khatiakhana char*. She and her family are victims of multiple displacements and they could not bring most of her belongings over to their new settlement in the *char*, as there was no male adult in the household (*Excerpts from the Interview on December 19, 2007*).

Asset ownership, or to be more precise, land ownership is another important criterion which determines how well a household can cope up in the post-displacement situation. Land is the most important asset upon which a displaced family can fall back in a crisis situation like displacement. Women belonging to households that have not lost cultivable land to river erosion are less vulnerable than those who have lost their lands. As for example, *Sima Mandal* and *Saraswati Mandal* (name changed) of the *Shibontola Bundh* (embankment) shared equal socio-economic status before coming to the embankment after being displaced by *Ganga* erosion. While *Sima's* family lost their house as well as their cultivable lands, *Saraswati* and her family were lucky in the sense that the *Ganga* had engulfed their house only and spared their cultivable land. This alone made a lot of difference in their everyday lives in the post displacement phase. Even though *Saraswati's* family had to suffer a lot in the process of relocation in the embankment, yet they could rebuild a house in the new place of relocation, which

*Sima's* family could not, because the source of their livelihood had been destroyed completely with the loss of their cultivable land. This made her husband migrate to Delhi in search of jobs bringing more sufferings for her (*Excerpts from the Interview September 2, 2007*).

### **Media**

Mass media, be it electronic or print, as a major purveyor of information and images, 'mediates' the socio-political problems of the day and brings them to the public domain in the way it has 'mediated' them (*Bandyopadhyay 2004:51*). In the context of displacement, as seen in the present context, mass media, especially local media, has emerged as a social institution of great importance. Based on a content analysis of 52 issues of the century-old weekly Bengali local newspaper *Malda Samachar*, (July 2005 to August 2006), which had extensively covered the issue of *Ganga* erosion in *Malda* under the feature head of "*Malda Samachar Er Antartodonto*", (*Investigation by Malda Samachar*) and a documentary film called *Bhangan (2006)*, the author has tried to see how the local media addressed the issues that are of great concern for the displaced women. It was found that out of these 52 issues, only four issues, namely, issue no. 28, 29, 30, 31 had focused exclusively on the issues concerning displaced women of this region by giving voice to their everyday sufferings and struggles. The paper vividly portrays how these women, on losing everything to *Ganga* erosion and in many cases being deserted by their husbands are surviving, braving all difficulties that come in their way. Moreover, these reports also bring out the expectations of these women from the media.

This is in utter contrast to the mainstream media which seldom brings out news on sufferings of the displaced population in *Malda*, especially women. Nilanjan Dutta's (2005) study which analyzed the print media content relating to floods and river-bank erosion in West Bengal from 2000 to 2005, which include both 'mainstream' i.e. *Kolkata*-based big newspapers and national dailies and the this author's own earlier content analysis of the three *Kolkata*-based popular daily newspapers (one English and two Bengali) from 2006-2008 has found that rapid human displacement which is happening in the few erosion-prone blocks of *Malda* for many decades have failed to elicit the same kind of outrage from the mainstream media as one finds in case of *Nandigram* and *Singur*<sup>8</sup>. The following short sentence, as quoted in Dutta (2005:1) sums up the response of media, especially mainstream media to natural disasters in West Bengal: "Nobody ever goes to Bhutni<sup>9</sup>. Except when a calamity strikes." The above content analysis further shows that the plight of women in *Nandigram* and *Singur*, has been highlighted disproportionately high coverage in the mainstream media, much to the neglect of the women displaced by ecological factors in the state, like the *Ganga*-erosion in *Malda*.

Moreover, the way in which media portrays the condition of local displaced population determines to a great extent the kind of relief and rehabilitation offered to the beneficiaries, at least in the short-term. Thus, the women who got relocated in the various remote and almost inaccessible *chars* in *Malda*, are mostly out of coverage of the media and hence receive much less attention from the various government agencies in the matter of distribution of relief materials and in getting the benefits of the various relief and rehabilitation programmes than those residing in the villages, embankments or resettlement colonies for obvious reasons (*Fieldwork, 2007-2008*).

## Conclusion

Based on the case study of displacement caused by *Ganga* erosion in *Malda* district of West Bengal, the present paper highlights the importance of local institutions in the everyday lives of the displaced women. It also brings out clearly the multifarious ways in which local institutions exert a strong influence on their day to day lives. Moreover, it throws light on the fact that the degree of their vulnerability in the post-displacement situation depends to a great extent on their affiliation or connection to these institutions. The importance of such local institutions has been time and again ignored by the policy makers in framing various rehabilitation and resettlement policies and programmes, particularly pertaining to women. Their affiliation or connection to these institutions both tend to enable or marginalize them, and herein lays the vitality of these institutions in displacement contexts, especially for women. However the manner in which institutional affiliations would impact the everyday life and experience of the displaced women and their capacity to negotiate with the challenges of survival vary according to both the differences in their individual life situations and their location in the socio-economic hierarchy.

Thus, in the present situation, when development has become the buzzword of the modern Indian state and visitation of ecological disasters a regular phenomenon, it is necessary to involve local institutions in framing rehabilitation and resettlement policies, especially those concerning the displaced women, if we want to successfully deal with the rapid human displacement associated with the above contingencies. Last but not the least, it is hoped that this paper would be a valuable addition to the existing body of literature pertaining to the debate on the role of the state versus community in matters of rehabilitation of the displaced population, especially women.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Moreover, this figure does not include internal displacement of people caused by development projects.
- <sup>2</sup> Organizations are concrete manifestation of institutions with an identifiable location, personnel, and rule structure (Agrawal, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> *Chars* are the riverine islands that emerge on riverbanks after floods or erosion of the riverbanks.
- <sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as DHDRM, 20007.
- <sup>5</sup> *Diara* is the piece of land that has got created in the middle of the river.
- <sup>6</sup> *Mouza* is a type of administrative unit, corresponding to a specific land area within which there may be one or more settlements.
- <sup>7</sup> *Panchayati raj* institutions are local self- governments at the village or small town level in India.
- <sup>8</sup> These two are places in state of West Bengal where huge population displacement has happened due to acquisition of land by the government for private initiated development projects.
- <sup>9</sup> *Bhutni* is the name of one of the remotest *chars* (riverine islands) in the erosion-prone region of *Malda*.

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