

The AIBS Fellowship Final Report

I conducted nine months of field research in Bangladesh during my AIBS fellowship tenure. My specific field site is a silt island in the middle of the River Jamuna in between the districts of Sirajganj and Tangail of Bangladesh. This site was selected as one that well depicts the capacities of the River Jamuna to both accrete and erode land. It holds a sizable population that has experienced repeated displacement and migration due to the workings of the river. My effort was to study how this society has accommodated river erosion within its major institutions such as kinship, land tenure and economy. In understanding this accommodation of erosion within societal institutions, I sought to understand how the population was experiencing and adapting to climate change, increasingly evident in heavy and untimely rainfall, increased erosion, and changes in seasonality. The AIBS fellowship was crucial in making possible this extended field research. In addition, conferences and talks hosted by the AIBS office in Bangladesh during my research tenure, such as the “Water, Waves and Weather Conference” were valuable sites of information, discussions and networking with international and national scholars.

In my field site, I first mapped the villages to achieve a household census of each. By means of village land records keepers and door to door questioning I plotted the place of origin, land holdings, livestock, employment sources and village based kin relations of the head of each household. By means of random sampling I selected 10% of each village amongst whom to carry out an extensive survey, some 40 pages long, requiring two sessions of 4-5 hours each. This gave me a baseline profile of a representative group of households in terms of size, composition, housing, material goods, land holdings, livestock, education, employment, diet, income and expenses, credit history, health, social situation, historical memory, experience of

extreme weather events and perceptions of climate change. This survey will be followed next year by another amongst the same group of people in order to record changes, particularly if they have experienced erosion or not and/or if they moved or not to see how movement affects this profile. The survey gave me an “in” into the houses allowing me to select those amongst my study population amongst whom to carry out further exercises, such as individual interviews, participant observation, kinship charts, movement maps and so on. I have also been attending various events in each of these villages, such as weddings, religious lectures, dispute resolution meetings, land surveys and measurements, local theater and performance and I have been “hanging out” in the village markets at night drinking copious cups of tea. This extended exposure has given me an overview of each village, allowing me to understand how distinct each is despite surface similarities and how these differences in villages translate into different experiences of both erosion and climate change.

The biggest realization for me has been the understanding that erosion is not seasonal but a part of everyday life. Consequently my intuition to locate erosion within social institutions was not misplaced as where people go to and whom they turn to in the face of erosion, what claims they make when they return to their newly constituted villages if these are reconstituted, and how they undertake life knowing that it may all be otherwise at any moment is both very telling of the everydayness of erosion and indicative of the resources they will draw upon as the weather becomes more extreme. I am hopeful that my research will be of use in the climate change adaptation related efforts of local and international NGOs and the government.