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To cite this article: Mausumi Moran Chetia (25 May 2026): Invisibilized displacements, Climate and Development, DOI: [10.1080/17565529.2026.2676802](https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2026.2676802)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2026.2676802>



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Published online: 25 May 2026.



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ABSTRACT

Climate-related displacements can lead to the loss of a sense of (in)security. Often, the lack of acknowledgement of the losses by the State lead to a deep sense of abandonment among the affected communities, imposing invisibilities. These are invisibilised displacements that are left out of formal structures of governance. Invisibilised displacements exist because they are deliberately made invisible by power structures like the State and exacerbated by Media, absolving their responsibility and accountability; underlining historic continuities of violences compounded by slow and lesser spectacular effects of climate change. The article is based on my doctoral research and professional experiences with erosion-displaced and self-rehabilitated communities in Assam, India, for nearly two decades. I argue that the concept of Invisibilised Displacements repoliticises climate-related displacements by framing the condition of being unseen not as accidental neglect but as the result of systemic erasure. It does so by pushing for the acknowledgement of slow, long-lasting, collectively lived invisibilities of communities, by shifting the gaze from the injured communities to the perpetrators in a way that facilitates the former's agency and refusal to being invisibilised, and by guiding us in comprehensively recognising the powers that create this invisibilisation and holding them accountable.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 August 2025
Accepted 23 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Climate vulnerable communities; climate displacements; climate disasters; invisibilized displacements; invisibility; erosion; Assam; Northeast India; India; climate violence

I. Introduction

Climate-related displacements unsettle more than just the tangible grounds of people's lives. Such displacements lead to the intangible losses of the feeling at home, definitively for a lifetime. Additionally, there is the loss of familiar surroundings, the loss of a sense of collective belonging and identity and the loss of political-emotional securities. Such displacements can be intergenerational, often leading to lived but invisibilized forms of insecurities. The full or partial loss of land plays a key role in sustaining such insecurities. For the displaced communities, land makes its presence felt by its absence. Often, the lack of acknowledgement of such losses by power structures, like the State, only amplifies the deep sense of abandonment among the affected communities.

I propose the concept of *Invisibilized displacements* to help us understand climate-related displacements. Invisibilized displacements are displacements that are deliberately made invisible or invisibilized; they are often intentionally carried out by the State and/or related private actors, thereby absolving them of their responsibility and accountability. Such displacements are invisibilized through short or long temporal periods. The concept nudges us to interrogate displacements and their problem-solving approaches in a way that makes explicit as to who is being made (accounted for as) into displaced people and whose voices are to be (not) listened to. It points towards a historic continuity of violence that is compounded by slow and less spectacular effects of

climate change, especially on colonized and enslaved communities. Such displacements are exacerbated by the media's lack of coverage of non-spectacular processes that are nevertheless devastating.

Drawing on Nixon, Knowles conceptualizes processes such as the Anthropocene, climate change, and nuclear disasters, as slow disasters in which 'violence is invisible' (2022, p. 312). To me, the questions of what becomes (in)visible, by whom, and why are central to understanding climate-related displacements as slow disasters. Slow-onset processes, including erosion, landslides, and sea-level rise, become more political over time (Olson, 2000), intersecting with shifting socio-political contexts. Together, these dynamics produce slow, often invisible, long-term impacts such as climate-related displacements that are hard to render visible (Adey et al., 2020), owing to their lack of dramatic spectacle (Nixon, 2011), yet remaining 'devastating' (Vaz-Jones, 2018, p. 711); thus resembling slow and fast violences simultaneously (Tyner, 2020). At every stage of such displacement and rehabilitation processes, the State plays a critical role (Baruah, 2022).

I turn to Assam in the northeastern part of India to elaborate on invisibilized displacements. Assam is India's topmost climate-vulnerable state (Mohanty & Wadhawan, 2021) with a population of approximately 31 million (Population Census of India, 2011). Floods and riverbank erosion¹ are endemic in the state (Hussain and Phanjoubam, 2007). This article is based on my research of nearly two decades with riverbank erosion-displaced and self-rehabilitated communities along

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the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries in Assam, and engagement with policymakers across levels in India. I particularly draw from my doctoral research, including thirty in-depth interviews with affected communities, twenty-one structured interviews with government officials, discourse analysis of the Assam State (Legislative) Assembly Questions and Answers,² five policy and political texts,³ grey literature and fieldnotes. Community names are withheld for confidentiality.

Through five sections, I introduce the article, framing Invisibilized Displacements in section two, followed by evidence from Assam located within the Indian context, and the granular acts of resistance to Invisibilized Displacements in sections three and four, respectively. I conclude that *invisibilized displacements* repoliticize climate-related displacements by framing the condition of being unseen not as accidental neglect, but as systemic erasure.

II. Framing matters: bringing (in)visibility back to climate (in)justices

A diversity of framing matters because they can ‘alert us to the political risks and opportunities posed by particular framings’ (Li, 2000, p. 151). The way an issue is framed can ‘implicitly guide the interpretation’ while seeking to “contain, convey, and determine what is seen” (p. 224 citing Burkett, 2009; Dehm, 2020). For instance, under neoliberal regimes, legal meanings of responsibility have been increasingly individualized and rearticulated as *responsibilization* – a process through which individuals and communities are governed via external moral imperatives to self-manage and self-discipline (ibid., p. 225 citing Brown, 2016). This shift depoliticizes structural harms and relocates accountability onto those least capable of effecting systemic change.

Accountability for violence characterized by a clear subject-object relationship is manifest and visible, aligning with conventional notions of action. It is perceived as personal, as identifiable agents enact harm upon others, lending itself readily to verbal expression. Contrastingly, when violence lacks a distinct subject-object relation, accountability is often difficult to clearly establish. Such violence then becomes impersonal and latent, embedded within structural arrangements rather than enacted through discrete, observable acts (Galtung, 1969). As such, it often remains invisible and difficult to articulate within dominant representational frameworks.

Acts of violence that spread over non-linear temporal scales are forms of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). Slow violence refers to ‘a calamity that patiently dispenses its devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans and outside the purview of spectacle-driven corporate media’ (Nixon, 2011, p. 6). By unfolding gradually and without spectacle, slow violence resists standard forms of representation and recognition, rendering its human and environmental impacts largely overlooked and politically sidelined. Its incremental nature encourages public forgetfulness and weakens institutional and legal accountability. This invisibility is exacerbated by media systems that prioritize speed and drama, making slow violence difficult to articulate, grieve or address within dominant narratives of justice, causality and remembrance.

The climate crisis is one of the most contemporary forms of slow violence. The delayed and dispersed nature of the harms

of climate change complicates causal attribution and fosters erasure, legal inertia, and public indifference (Nixon, 2011, pp. 7–8). The notion of cultural displacement is particularly resonant here: individuals may remain physically in place, yet their environments become uninhabitable, a condition that drives many environmental justice movements (ibid., p. 19). Approaching climate change as slow violence not only helps us in visibilising its effects but also enables us to work towards its redressal, restitution and prevention (Cusato, 2025; Dehm, 2020; Nixon, 2011).

Climate-related hazards caused 9.8 million internal displacements globally in 2024 (IDMC, 2025), with India recording its highest figure since 2012 and ranking third worldwide (ibid., p. 10). Over the past two decades, scholarship has emphasized the complex causalities, temporalities (Boano et al., 2008; Kälén, 2010), and rights dimensions like climate reparations (Burkett, 2009; Chapman & Ahmed, 2021; Moran Chetia & Moran, 2025; Táíwò 2025) of climate-related displacements. That said, there is consensus that Anthropogenic climate change intensifies forced environmental (im)mobilities within and across borders (McAdam, 2010), particularly for island communities (Farbotko, 2005), generating diverse (im)mobilities (Farbotko, 2022) and climate (in)securities (Barnett, 2006). Such displacements, therefore, must be viewed as combined consequences of environmental changes interacting with political, social, economic and demographic processes, including historical exclusions such as colonial land alienation (Chetia, 2024).

I understand climate-related displacements as those initiated by affected families/communities that ‘obviate all but the most desperate of coping strategies’ (Johnson, 2018, p. 43). They result in the ‘uprooting of people from a home territory’ (Levine et al., 2007, p. 6) and can therefore be understood as ‘dislocations from home’ (Adey et al., 2020, p. 9). They result from the unavailability of choices (Adger et al., 2009) and limited resources to stay back (physically) or move farther distances, such as across international borders. Such displacements – physical, and therefore cultural and emotional – are multiscalar, subjective, heterogenous and political in nature, shaping climate regimes (Boas et al., 2022), emanating from slow violences (Nixon, 2011).

For climate-related losses, such as those resulting from riverbank erosion, the presence of land is felt by its absence (Chetia, 2024). The risk here is that such physical or imminent losses of land lead to the loss of a security (or birth of an insecurity) around familiar environments, resources, cultural continuity and identity. Such intangible losses remain unacknowledged precisely because they do not conform to dominant paradigms of measurable or visible violence and specter. Here, the concept of (in)visibility can guide us in exploring such intangible losses further.

In their seminal work on invisibility among refugee and displaced communities, Polzer and Hammod remind us that ‘by directing our gaze, we also avert our eyes’ (2008, pp. 417–418). Their thesis argued for the recognition of a subjective, partial view of the world. When we see, describe and categorize a social reality, we often tend to make processes and people (in)visible. They define invisibility as the ‘relationship between those who have the power to see or to choose not to see, and

those who lack the power to demand to be seen or to protect themselves from the negative effects of imposed visibility' (ibid., p. 421).

Visibility and invisibility can be sources of agency and empowerment when those in positions of vulnerability have the choice to be visible or remain strategically invisible (Gordon, 2002; Lollar, 2015). Such (in)actions are the 'contingent products of agency and the cultural and political work of articulation' (Li, 2000, p. 151). Visibility practices were found to be a prerequisite for justifying political claims, as Feldman showed in their research with Palestinians (2008). Strategic (in)visibility often entails surveillance and control, while those who opt for invisibility do so from a position of disempowerment, using it as a protective strategy in the absence of adequate legal, political, and social safeguards.

It must be reiterated here that neither visibility nor invisibility inherently ensures empowerment. Their impact is contingent upon the relationship between the actors and the functions that visibility plays, including for displaced persons themselves. 'Invisibility is therefore a survival resource for many displaced persons, including, for example, many urban refugees in Africa or 'failed asylum seekers' in Europe' (Lollar, 2015, p. 418); which many refer to as strategic invisibility (Haile, 2020; Lollar, 2015).

That said, I would like to redirect your attention to the question of invisibility from the perspective of the powerful in this Viewpoint – 'for to look at the events only from the side of the victim' can result in formal but not meaningful forms of 'apologetics' (Arendt, 1958, p. 77). The inherent question of power is inevitable in the process of describing the world. The act of rendering people (in)visible or (de)allocating resources, to (de)legitimize whose voices are acknowledged and to (dis)enable harm or neglect to occur without accountability. For instance, research shows that the manipulation of 'official statistics' in order to make certain groups invisible (or visible) has also been observed as an often-employed tactic of 'legitimizing a lack of protection or service access' (Polzer & Hammond, 2008, p. 424). Here, the concept of (in)visibility leads us to a few fundamental questions that can guide us in critically interrogating power relations and representational practices of power.

Who possesses the authority to determine (in)visibility, why would they do that, and in what ways are those decisions made? Whose interests are served by rendering certain individuals or groups visible or invisible? Furthermore, how do those subjected to invisibility navigate, resist, or strategically employ their marginal status: whether through subversion, adaptation, or the pursuit of protection and material gain? Finally, what are the broader implications of these visibility regimes for both dominant actors and those situated in positions of relative disempowerment? My interest lies in bringing the first set of questions – of those with power and authority to render individuals, communities and processes invisible – to broaden the vocabulary of climate-related displacements.

Intentionality plays a key role in the process of invisibilization of certain groups such as child migrants, wherein, 'there is a deliberate intention to exclude certain groups from services, rights or protection on the grounds that those excluded are undeserving, not in need, or do not fit into the legal categories

being used to define inclusion' (Humphris & Sigona, 2019, p. 1497). Empirical evidence from conflict settings suggests that sometimes states impose invisibility on displaced persons. At other times, hyper-visibility is imposed by the use of labels and categories, depending on the aim of that strategy. What is common in both cases is the State's control and definition of who the displaced persons are.

Using invisibilization or invisibilize introduces intentionality and political critique into climate-related disasters and displacement-governance discussions. It reframes questions from 'Who is not seen?' to 'Who is doing the not-seeing and why?'. Invisibilization (noun) or invisibilize (verb) can (add)erode agency of a people differently in different contexts. It frames invisibility as something *done* by someone, often *deliberately*, often by power structures such as the State, while exposing intentional erasure. I elaborate this further with empirical evidence from Assam, India.

III. India's invisibilized erosion-related displacements

Assam's erosion and flood-related scholarship shows the Indian State's persistent reluctance to recognize disaster-displaced communities or provide consistent compensation (Baruah, 2022; Jana, 2008; Sahay, 2017). Many are systematically excluded from post-disaster entitlements (Chetia, 2013; Krishnan, 2022; Sahay, 2017), contributing to their absence from global displacement counts (Chetia, 2024). Rehabilitation policies remain poorly implemented due to socio-political complexities (Manuvie, 2023).

India's climate governance reinforces these contradictions of making the relationship between climate change and displacements explicit. A 2021 government report proposes resettling erosion-displaced communities and acknowledges 'staggering land erosion' in Majuli (Jena et al., 2021, pp. 7–8). Yet India's first climate assessment omits riverbank erosion and highlights only coastal erosion and floods in the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin (Krishnan et al., 2020, p. 129). Despite evidence of worsening erosion in Assam (NDMA Report, 2021; Sharma et al., 2010), explicit linkages of displacements to climate change remain limited and politicized (Narang, 2017; Sahu, 2022).

Further, India is not a signatory to major global frameworks on disaster displacement, such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) or the Nansen Initiative on Disaster-Induced Cross-Border Displacement (2012). Global agencies note that India's displacement data carries only 'medium confidence' because self-relocation and informal sheltering are often uncounted, and data may be absent in some regions (IDMC, 2022). This points to both explicit denial and implicit avoidance of disaster-related displacement. Without official recognition or a rights framework, displaced communities are rendered invisible, materially and 'from the world of law' (Das, 2008, p. 28), losing 'the right to have rights' (Arendt, 1958, p. 296).

The State reinforces this invisibility by refusing to recognize communities as disaster-affected/displaced and by distancing itself from responsibility for anthropogenic causes of flooding and erosion (Baruah, 2016; Sharma et al., 2012). Planned

relocation, though widely promoted, can deepen exclusion (McNamara et al., 2018). In India, eligibility depends on land documents, despite secure tenure being rare globally (Caron et al., 2014). This requirement excludes many erosion-affected families from relief and resettlement in Assam, reproducing invisibilized displacements (Chetia, 2024).

IV. Riverbank erosion, displacement, and the (Re)production of invisibility in Assam

Land is not merely a resource but is perceived as a symbol of identity (Li, 2000) and cultural stability in Northeast India. The immense significance of land in Assam is also a consequence of the colonial and postcolonial administrations' systemic control over land and prioritizing it as a resource (De Maaker and Tula, 2020). Today, land has become 'the single most valuable asset in rural Northeast India, including Assam' (ibid., p 8).

Riverbank Erosion – the slowly unfolding disaster of the loss of land – adds to such contested questions around land, belonging and identity in Assam. It is the removal of soil along both riverbanks through erosion (Das et al., 2014; Das et al., 2017), referred to as *gora-khohoniya* or *khohoniya* in Assamese. The disaster often follows or is accompanied by floods in Assam. 178 million people were approximately affected by floods between 1953 and 2020 (World Bank, 2023) in Assam. Between 1954 and 2008, erosion claimed around 5% of the state's land. By February 2019, 301,824 families were officially recorded as landless and erosion-affected (Dekaraja & Mahanta, 2021). Although recognized as a state-level disaster, riverbank erosion is not classified as a national disaster in India, restricting displaced communities' access to official entitlements (Sahay, 2017).

Assam's complex socio-political history and contemporary politics. A historical inquiry into the state's contemporary political economy inevitably leads us to the colonial and postcolonial perception of the region as a resource frontier (Baruah, 2020). Ethnic and tribal communities, as well as migrants, were compelled to settle in government-designated 'waste-lands', including riverbank grazing zones, tea garden surroundings near rivers, and riverine islands (Barbora, 2019; Saikia, 2019). In present-day Assam, the descendants of the most wronged and exploited colonial-era communities are the ones who remain most vulnerable to erosion and floods (Chetia, 2024).

Assam has data on the amount of land lost to erosion, but there is no central database of people displaced by such erosion. This is primarily because the (Indian) State lacks care towards the displaced communities, many of whom consequently get struck off the electoral rolls from their original places of residence (Islam, 2008). Baruah reiterates that 'political sensitivities prevent the government (in India) from releasing data on displacement' (2003, p. 46) related to conflict, development, and disasters. The policy and political complexities extend to the granular level. For instance, in recent decades, while some erosion-displaced families have been rehabilitated by the state, many have been excluded (Chetia, 2024). Moreover, displacement as a key disaster risk for communities facing perennial or urgent climate disasters is not a

part of humanitarian programming in Assam (Chetia Moran, 2022).

Erosion, when viewed as an everyday process and its impacts as a point in a series of historical events, resembles the slow unfolding of a disaster – the impacts of which become less visible over long periods of time. Here, I would like to reiterate that the occurrence of erosion as a single, sudden event can be highly disruptive and pronounced, in terms of how it is experienced at a material level.

Reduced visibility of erosion-related displacements is exacerbated by the media, especially national media. Media is attracted towards the biggest stories in their coverage of disasters (Monahan & Ettinger, 2017) while minimal or almost no attention is drawn by everyday, regular processes (Palen & Hughes, 2017). Thus, while erosion accompanies or follows floods in most cases, it is less visible in the national media comparatively (Chetia Moran, 2022), with implications for its governance.

Erosion-displaced families have no home(s) to return to when flood relief shelters are closed, unlike flood-affected families. Those with resources relocate independently, while those without often live on embankments in the absence of long-term solutions. People living in overcrowded relief shelters are often asked to vacate them when floods abate, which is a challenging ask for erosion-affected/displaced families. This is why many such families choose to stay out of camps and instead in their relatives' houses (Chetia, 2024).

When families do not live in the relief camps, they are not included in the enumeration of displacement in Assam. That is, only those individuals or families that report their loss of land/house by documentary evidence to the respective local officials or those who move into a government relief shelter, are officially counted as erosion-landless families. This sustains the vicious cycle of forced invisibility of erosion-displaced communities by the State (Chetia, 2024).

The generous use of the metaphors of homeland in political and policy discourses of erosion and floods also makes explicit the State's role in determining who (does not) belong in Assam, as erosion-displaced persons. The State therefore contributes to the invisibilising of certain communities that are not *indigenous* from the State's perspective while hyper visibilising others (Chetia, 2024).

i. Granular resistance to invisibilized displacements

To fully comprehend the use of (in)visibility in discussions on climate justice, we must intricately analyse the 'agency of those directly affected' (Adey et al., 2020, p. 7) as well. I underline two such processes of collective agency in Assam that are socio-political acts of resisting Invisibilized Displacements: Self-rehabilitation and strategic visibility practices (Chetia, 2024).

Self-rehabilitation refers to the mobilization and organization of displaced communities who identify, clean, and settle on land, often without formal legal entitlements, after exhausting attempts of relocation or rehabilitation by the State. The process is marked by long-term settlements where displaced groups recreate life for future generations, frequently without State support and with the support of identity-based power

groups. In Assam, such practices have long defined the responses of floods and erosion-affected rural agrarian communities to their disaster-fatigued lives (Baruah, 2016, 2020; Lahiri, 2017; Pegu & Pegu, 2018). They commonly relocate to State-owned land (Saikia, 2019) or ambiguously demarcated reserve forests and wildlife sanctuaries (Baruah, 2020), often provoking conflict with political actors and legal battles with private owners of the relocated land (Chetia, 2024). Such erosion and flood-affected communities have been left to self-care (Manuvie, 2023) and self-initiate resettlement (Kipgen & Pegu, 2018) despite the presence of policies ostensibly designed to support them.

Second, the self-rehabilitated groups employ strategic visibility and invisibility practices vis-à-vis the everyday State (Hilhorst, 2003). Communities often prefer remaining indistinguishable from non-disaster-affected communities to avoid attracting scrutiny, aligning with Haile's (2020) notion of strategic invisibility. This choice is shaped by past experiences of home demolitions and fears of eviction. Conversely, during political threats, the same groups employ 'strategic visibility', emphasizing their disaster-affected identity to claim rehabilitation rights, garner support from ethnic organizations and negotiate security over contested land (Chetia, 2024).

A recent global example of an unapologetic refusal to be silenced and therefore invisibilized is the process that led to the landmark outcome of the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on Climate Responsibilities (AO). The movement to launch the AO was led by climate-vulnerable and historically violated (enslaved) communities, such as the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, Vanuatu, along with other countries (Chetia & Moran, 2025).

V. Conclusion: why must invisibilized displacements be visibilized?

Climate-related displacements depend on the capabilities and aspirations of affected communities (Boas et al., 2022). In Assam, the Indian state selectively invisibilizes and hyper-visibilizes affected groups by delinking climate-related disasters such as riverbank erosion and floods from processes of colonial land alienation, development and reclassifying displacements through socio-political markers such as religion, language, ethnicity, and belonging to Assam. This approach securitizes Assam's climate-mobility regime as a borderland state (Chetia, 2024) and deepens the exclusion of historically marginalized communities.

'Invisibilized', therefore, repoliticizes climate-related displacements by framing the condition of being unseen not as accidental neglect, but as the result of systemic erasure. It reassesses power structures such as the State that actively render displaced communities unacknowledged, unsupported and unprotected. Therefore, Invisibilized Displacements is a response to the call for developing narrative strategies for visibilising the 'amorphous calamities' (Nixon, 2011, p. 8) related to slow violences of anthropogenic climate change. Critical discourse analyses of international climate negotiations often show how language depersonalizes and therefore depoliticizes responsibility even while invoking justice frameworks (Susan, 2022).

Instead of more neutral terms such as 'underrepresented,' *invisibilized* must be added to the glossary of climate-related (im)mobilities. For, it carries a critical charge, making structural violence explicit, signalling historical continuity and the intentional marginalization of certain groups. As such, Invisibilized Displacements function not merely as a descriptor but as an attributive term that demands accountability.

Referring to a hypothetical conversation between Marx and Foucault on questions of visibility and invisibility, Brown underlines Marx's concern of the 'lived invisibility of the real nature of economic relations and powers (and) their opacity to their subjects'. So, she asks, 'if ordinary humans cannot apprehend the powers by which they are organized, compelled, governed or conducted, how can they be expected to target and appropriate them, rather than remaining lost to their effects ... (or suffering them)?' (2016, p. 19).

Therefore, using Invisibilized Displacements intentionally pushes for three fundamental shifts: first, it informs us explicitly about the slowly unfolding, long-lasting, collectively lived invisibilities experienced during and post displacements; second, it shifts the gaze from the injured communities to the perpetrators in a way that facilitates the former's agency and refusal to be invisibilized and third, it guides us in comprehensively recognizing the powers that create this invisibilization and holding them accountable.

I confirm the manuscript includes a description of all necessary ethical approvals. The names of Ethics Committee members include Des Gasper, Thea Hilhorst, and Sunil Tankha, International Institute of Social Studies, part of Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS-EUR), Netherlands. The approval number is Erasmus Initiative 'Vital Cities and Citizens' (EUR) – 201707.

I confirm that appropriate verbal informed consent from all relevant subjects was acquired by the author during the field-work periods.

Notes

1. Alternatively referred to as erosion unless specified.
2. Related to land, floods, erosion, disasters and citizen(s).
3. The policies included the National Disaster Management Policy of India (2009), the Prime Minister's Inaugural Speech of the Asian Ministerial Conference on DRR (2016), Assam Land Policies (1989, 2019), the Brahma Committee Report (2017) and the Rehabilitation Policy for Erosion-affected Families of Assam (2020).

Acknowledgements

A deep gratitude to the source of this research – to our Luitporia community – the numerous families, community experts and researchers, and friends along the Brahmaputra River and beyond in Assam who shared their experiences of relentless floods and erosion, displacements and collective resistances since 2009-present. Thank you to the editors of this Special Issue for this opportunity. Thank you to my parents for privileging me with higher education. A special thank you to friend Surabhi Srivastava for helping me edit a draft of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Part of this work was funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), Government of the Netherlands under Grant National PhD Scholarship Programme Experiment-2017. Part of this work was funded by the Lady Meherbai D. Tata Education Trust under the Grant Scholarship for Women-2017, India. Part of this work was funded by the European Union (REPAIR 101115769). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Notes on contributor

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