

## Revival of a movement-Sangeeta Barooah

-The Hindu

Over a decade after activist Sanjoy Ghosh was killed in Majuli in Assam, there is resurgence of a small but effective NGO movement in the erosion ravaged island

Under a clear sky, two groups of women sit in a circle, the sun rays dropping on them almost like a divine blessing. The colour of their dress, the weave on them, and the dialects easily tell apart their tribes. But there is clear camaraderie here, a sense of sanguinity, brought about by a common goal — to find a living through weaving, a skill considered a requisite for women in traditional tribal society but so far thought to be of limited use.

They are sitting on the office grounds of a little known NGO, Impact NE, in the erosion-affected Majuli island of Assam. The coming together of these women, belonging to Bodo and Mishing tribes, is perched on a hope. The Bodos — about a dozen of them in their traditional garment Dokhna — are representing their villages around Bongaigaon in Lower Assam. Villages whose weavers are already running their households through their looms and selling what they create across India through an NGO, Agor. This open air meeting is for an idea exchange with 25 “leaders” representing 687 women of Mishings, the largest tribal community in this unique island on the Brahmaputra, now badly hit by erosion. As Neelamani Gayan of Impact NE says, “It is to help them think differently and find a steady market linkage.” The Bodo weavers are prodded by Gayan and others to tell the Mishings how their lives have changed. Rekha Boro says: “I am a widow with two children. Since last two years I have been weaving for Agor, now I not only run my kitchen but can afford my children’s school fees too.” Every month, in her loom at home, Rekha weaves many metres of cloth with Bodo motifs which along with that produced by other weavers’ are turned by Agor into shirts, tops, wrappers, skirts, jackets, stoles and utility items like purses, mobile covers, etc. Impact NE is trying to replicate this in Majuli. They provide thread to the Mishing women and the products that come from this venture will be sold under the name ‘Rengam’ (community in Mishing dialect) alongside Agor products at its recently opened showroom in Bangalore. Impact NE and a clutch of local organisations are trying to bring livelihood back to this underdeveloped area of the North East, ravaged by nature and neglect of governments. Something that started years ago but was rudely halted by the sensational murder of activist Sanjoy Ghosh by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1997. Sanjoy and the development work charted out by his NGO Avard NE are sorely missed by the villagers even today.

“Avard NE’s programmes tried giving local people a sense of ownership of the island. This didn’t sit well with those with vested interest,” notes Padma Pegu, a revered village elder and retired professor of Jengraimukh College in Upper Majuli. “Ignoring an ULFA call to boycott the Independence Day function that year, a large number of villagers attended it here in silent protest,” says Bhaben Kakati, a lecturer at Garamur College and general secretary of MIPADC, one of the first NGOs to begin development work in Majuli. With the land mass of Majuli shrinking due to erosion, loss of traditional occupations have been a prime concern among locals. Farming, animal husbandry, fishing, pot, boat and mask making have been their mainstay. With land being washed away, all this is going. The Government, locals say, is doing precious little. So whatever the NGOs are doing easily catches the eye. For instance, Majuli’s mustard oil brand. Yet again, this is an Impact NE initiative to help local farmers get a good price for their produce.

Explains Arun Goswami, the unit supervisor, “Mustard is one of the main agricultural produces here but farmers are forced to sell it for little money to middlemen without a ready market.” In 2005, the NGO revived a mustard production centre of a cooperative society, defunct for 18 years. It now produces 720 litres of oil per day. The money generated from this unit is pushed back into livelihood generating work like training farmers on lemon cultivation, bee-keeping and vermi-compost, and providing fishing nets.

Yet another local NGO, RVC, stands out for setting up drinking water pumps and community toilets across 60 villages of Majuli, many in the clusters of the erosion-affected people living on embankments. Thanu Krishna Dutta of RVC says, “With floods affecting Majuli for months together, toilets and drinking water become a problem for people.

Since people are losing their homes to erosion, most temporary dwellings with no toilets have also become permanent homes. The Government is yet to address the issue. We have set up these units with UNICEF’s funding since 2009.” Over 10 years ago, Bhaben Kalita’s MIPADC founded a weaving, tailoring and embroidery centre for local women besides conducting computer courses for youth. “We also did a survey of old trees in Majuli. We were the first to work on a dossier on Majuli to submit it to UNESCO for grant of heritage status to the island.” This year too, Assam Government consulted MIPADC before reapplying for heritage status. But MIPADC’s development work has come to a halt “because of no funds.” Many local youth who worked with Avard NE seemed to have left Majuli. “There was fear then. ULFA asked Avard NE workers to leave Majuli. The prime accused of Sanjoy’s murder, Phatik Hatimata, has been seen freely moving about here till a month ago,” says a local journalist. With ULFA coming forward for talks, Hatimata was finally arrested though not on the charge of Sanjoy’s murder but in a minor case. To help one understand the pathetic condition that Asia’s largest riverine island is, one has to just listen to the local Judicial Magistrate. “There is no SDPO here for months now. I am often called to Guwahati for meetings. So if I am not around, come what may, police can’t arrest anyone here.” Bad governance has time and again come in the way of the good work of NGOs in neglected areas like

Majuli. In Sanjoy's case, it clearly did, with tragic consequences. Hopefully, the NGOs, now back in Majuli, don't meet the same fate. With Government development still on paper, they might be the only hope for the dying island's distressed people.

*(The reporter was in Majuli on Inclusive Media Fellowship 2011 of the Centre for Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi.)*