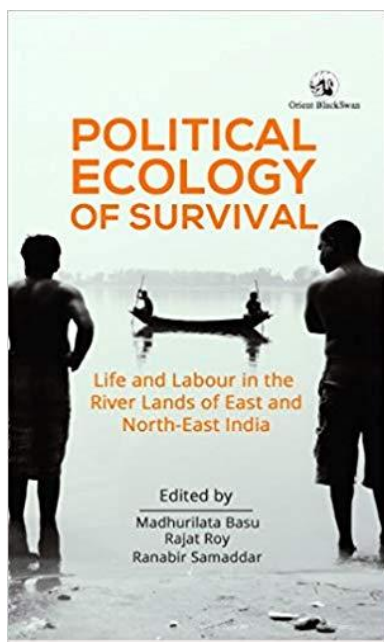


## BOOK REVIEW

# Riverine Ecology of Eastern and North-Eastern India

Arupiyoti Saikia \*

Madhurilata Basu, Rajat Roy & Ranabir Samaddar, eds. 2018. *Political Ecology of Survival: Life and Labour in the River Islands of East and North-East India*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, ISBN: 978-9352873616, pp. xvii+254 Rs. 925 (Hardbound).



How has humankind benefitted from our relentless pursuits to dominate and control Nature? For instance, are there long-term ecological benefits from those massive embankments which now crisscross much of the Indian subcontinent's sprawling flood plains? On the other hand, many argue for more prudent strategies like living with the seasonal flooding that overwhelms much of Eastern and North-Eastern India. The Volume under review, *Political Ecology of Survival: Life and Labour in the River Islands of East and North-East India* is a much needed effort to understand these questions and the many challenges confronting both the people who inhabit the flood prone

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plains of the Ganga and Brahmaputra river systems and the many governmental initiatives that have over the years been singularly aimed at trying to control floods.

In the first essay, Mithilesh Kumar discusses the entwined social and economic conditions that prevail in the floodplains of Kosi river, a tributary of the Ganga. He focusses on the floods of 2008 to insightfully reveal how caste (especially the *Mahadalit*), land ownership, flood proneness, embankment construction and seasonal migration have shaped political mobilisation in the region. Sutirtha Bedajna's essay on the Sundarbans — the dynamic deltaic edge of the Ganga system — offers us a detailed discussion on various ecological consequences and social tensions that have emerged from the reclamation efforts to settle in the highly dynamic and erosive riverine environment since the 1770s. Attempts to stabilise rice production in the Sundarbans through sustained embankment construction, if anything, Bedajna argues, has led to increased salinisation, which may force mass distress migration of 4.5 million inhabitants.. In the volume, three essays—on the districts of Nadia (Milan Datta and Madhurilata Basu), Mushidabad (Madhurilata Basu) and Malda (Milan Datta)—underline and highlight the aspects of uncertainty and tenuous life in the deltaic segments of the Ganga. These essays provide us a detailed account of how recurring floods, river bank erosion and state negligence aggravates poverty and exploitation. In particular, the essays offer compelling insights into the fate of the people who inhabit and pursue fragile livelihoods on the *charlands* — the temporary lands thrown up by the rivers.

Three essays in the volume explore issues of flooding and river bank erosion in Assam valley, through which the Brahmaputra and its various tributaries course through. Gulshan Parveen points out how the recurring displacement of peasants from their lands, because of the tentativeness of the *chars* as a geological formation, has generated a crisis of citizenship. As the 'nation-state is inseparably anchored within territory/land'(p.139), the sudden disappearance of land and the inevitable creation of landlessness by the rivers has placed a vast set of challenges before the government, who cannot effectively govern when both the populations and the land are constantly on the move. K.K. Chatradhara provides an excellent, albeit synoptic, review of the politics and ecological complications that have followed from the government's decision to build a large dam on the Subansiri river, one of the arms of the Brahmaputra river. This is followed by an essay by historian Sajal Nag, who had earlier published an important work on bamboo famine of Mizoram. Nag offers a longterm view of the Barak by first outlining how the river was sought to be controlled by the British in the nineteenth century in their quest to capture the commerce of

Bengal, which lay towards the west. The Barak, hence, was the fluvial means through which European capital and the British East India Company attempted to make deep inroads into a very complex eco-geography. The essay concludes with a compelling discussion on Tipamukh dam project that is to be built in Manipur.

The concluding essay, though not central to the structure of the book, collates some of the key international water treaties which play an important role in Indian politics. These policy and legal instruments for the governance of rivers, as the author Shuvro Sarker avers, suggest the urgency and need for more scholarly attention. In sum, this volume, which brings together micro-studies and detailed research on dynamic deltaic segments of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, makes for an important and significant addition to the study of India's volatile Eastern rivers. The Calcutta Research Group (CRG), which is behind this important work, has in fact for years now been involved in trying to explore and debate the complicated world of migration, refugee flight and environmental degradation. Previous publications of the CRG have also asked similarly provocative and meaningful questions. This volume is an important outcome of this exercise and informs us on various aspects of Eastern rivers. It is very important for those keen to study India's North East.