

Building bridges across the Brahmaputra

We got to Bogibeel ghat, about an hour's run from Dibrugarh, the last half hour taken to negotiate a short stretch that is just sand, dust and stone with huge potholes created by the trucks and vehicles busy with building the approach road to the Bogibeel rail bridge. The bridge concept was launched in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's premiership but my guess is that it won't be ready until 2012-13.

This little stretch is among the bumpiest and dustiest of country roads that I have travelled on. We loaded the Indica car on the ferry and started for Kareng ghat on the other side of the river (it's called the North Bank) at 6.45 a.m., delayed partly by the driver who vanished to eat a meal in one of the food shacks at the ghat.

I was heading to the district headquarters of Dhemaji where I had a meeting scheduled with Diwakar Mishra, the young and energetic deputy commissioner. The meeting was to discuss the innovative health programme that we are implementing in the district, in partnership with the National Rural Health Mission of the Assam government, and how to make it more effective.

The project is simple but innovative and also ambitious: it also has the potential of upscaling, which we are in the process of doing. The challenge is how to reach the hundreds of thousands in the Brahmaputra valley who are affected by diseases and lack of access to medicines and healthcare in Assam's nearly 2,500 of these chars or saporis, as the islands are called. Government outreach remains inadequate.

Not less than 2.5 million people live in Assam on these islands from the northern border with Arunachal Pradesh to Bangladesh, in the south.

Most of these islands lack all basic infrastructure and services; from health to schools, from power to roads and water supply and sanitation. In June 2005, we at the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) launched a unique initiative to bridge the health gap by designing and building a boat clinic, called Akha - described also as 'A ship of hope in a valley of flood' - to provide mobile health services to the poor and the marginalized on the river islands in Dibrugarh district of Assam. The focus has been children, pregnant women and new mothers as well as vulnerable adult groups.

Today, in partnership with Assam's National Rural Health Mission, we have expanded our services to five districts, including Dhemaji, Dhubri, Morigaon and Tinsukia and there are plans to reach more districts. In addition, the project provides training and awareness on health, sanitation, livestock care and education in one of the most under-developed parts of the country. Nearly 40,000 people have been treated and this year's goal is to try to reach not less than 100,000 on a regular basis on the islands of these districts.

Back to the current journey: we were across in barely an hour and appeared to be making good time until we realised, as we approached the docking area, that the ghat had shifted from near the highway to some distance away. We drove off the ferry and towards the other ghat only to find ourselves stuck in the thick soft sand of the riverbed. So we got out and pushed and pushed - god, why don't we have more four-wheel drives that can be hired in Assam to deal with some conditions? A Gypsy is the only thing that makes sense for such terrain but few taxi operators have such vehicles.

Anyway we got there, shouting at the driver to keep the wheels on the fresh 'lick' or path formed by wheel imprints, moving an inch here or there is treacherous, you just stall and the sand slams against the chassis and that's the end of movement as we know it. Then you begin the laborious business of digging out the sand from below the chassis as well as the wheels and the car gets going again. Needless to say we repeated the procedure on the return trip in the afternoon when it was much hotter although some kids rushed to help us and were quick, after pushing it across about 200 metres, to demand payment.

We got the car on to a small boat to cross 200 metres of water to the main ghat; the owner charged us Rs.200 for that trip although he accepted Rs.150 on the way back, with much grumbling.

The road was bad and the landscape here was not attractive, bare and full of sand and some patches of green with huge areas covered by small rounded rocks trapped in wire mesh, all for the building of the Bogibeel bridge. Large migrations are taking place as people are being displaced with farm fields being destroyed by the shifting sands of the river; rich families have been pauperised, and the district has seen the rise of both poverty and human trafficking, especially in women and young girls.

(Sanjoy Hazarika can be contacted at sanjoyha@gmail.com)

Sanjoy Hazarika (© IANS / India eNews)