

VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY PRESENTS

DETAILED SURVEY REPORT ON

# STRANDED IN THE TIDES

A STUDY OF  
THE NULIYA COMMUNITY  
IN  
MOUSUNI ISLAND

AAYUSH  
DEY

RAKHI  
MONDAL

**In July 2024, a field survey was conducted in Mousuni Island, a remote settlement in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Home to only 200 people, the island shelters the Nuliya community, whose life is inextricably tied to the sea. Their existence is shaped by the rhythmic rise and fall of the tides, the craft of boat-making, and the relentless struggle against an unforgiving climate. Their voices—drowned in the vastness of the Bay of Bengal—remain unheard in the corridors of power. This study seeks to document their daily life, livelihood, and socio-economic struggles, offering an intimate portrait of a community surviving at the margins.**

**Mousuni is no ordinary island. Located where the river meets the sea, it is small, fragile, and constantly threatened by erosion and cyclones. The Nuliya people, known for their expertise in fishing, form the backbone of this island's economy. Every day, at dawn, the men—both young and old—venture out to the coast, their small wooden boats braving the rough waters. Some return by sunset; others spend days at sea, relying on the stars to navigate their way back. Those who do not fish engage in boat-making, carefully shaping timber into vessels that will one day ride the waves.**



## L I V E L I H O O D   A N D   S T R U G G L E S

**When asked about their occupation, 52-year-old Mahin Nuliya, a seasoned fisherman, explained:**

*“We have been fishing for generations. My father fished, his father before him fished. We know the sea better than anyone, but the sea is not the same anymore. The storms come more often, the fish are fewer, and the government does not help us.”*

**This sentiment was echoed by Arif Nuliya, a younger fisherman:**

*“Some days, we return with empty nets. The sea is changing, but what else can we do? There is no other work for us. We survive on whatever little we catch.”*

**Women play an equally significant role, though their labor remains invisible to the outside world. They spend hours weaving and mending fishing nets, their fingers working tirelessly under the open sky. Hasina Bibi, a 40-year-old woman, described her routine:**

*“We start our work early in the morning. We sit together, making nets, sometimes repairing the old ones. The men cannot fish without these nets, so our work is important. But we never earn money from it. We work for the family, for the community, but not for ourselves.”*

**The community’s diet reflects their economic precarity. A typical meal consists of rice and salt, sometimes accompanied by dried fish when fortune allows. Fresh vegetables and fruits are rare, and protein-rich food is a luxury few can afford.**



THE ABSENCE  
OF  
EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE

**Children, both boys and girls, roam the island freely, playing near the shore and in the narrow lanes between the huts. Rafiq, an 11-year-old boy, when asked about school, smiled and said:**

*“School? The nearest school is too far. My father says I will learn fishing instead. My hands will learn, not my mind.”*

**His words reflect a systemic issue—the nearest school is 25 kilometers away, making education an impossible dream for many. Young boys grow up learning to fish, and young girls assist their mothers in net-weaving.**

**Healthcare is equally inaccessible. There is no hospital on the island, only a small primary health center with limited medicines and no full-time doctor. Jamila Begum, a mother of three, shared her concerns:**

*“When our children fall sick, we have to take them to the mainland. But the boat fare is high, and we cannot always afford it. Many times, we just wait and hope they get better on their own.”*



# THE ROLE OF THE CHIEF

**At the heart of the Nuliya society stands the chief—a man of considerable influence. Unlike the others, his wealth is measured not in cash, but in kind. He owns the largest boats, the best fishing nets, and exercises the highest authority. His decisions shape the community’s internal affairs, settling disputes, dictating fishing territories, and maintaining order.**

**Kamal Nuliya, a fisherman, explained:**

*“He owns the biggest boats, so we depend on him. If we need a loan, we go to him. If there is a fight, he settles it. But he also decides who gets to fish where. Not everyone agrees with his ways, but what choice do we have?”*

**This localized power structure creates an internal hierarchy, where the chief’s influence dictates the survival of others. The unequal distribution of wealth within the community mirrors larger societal inequalities.**



# CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE FUTURE

**The impact of climate change has further deepened their vulnerability. Cyclones—once occasional—are now frequent and devastating. Afsar Nuliya, a fisherman who lost his home to a storm, described the situation:**

*“Every year, the sea takes a little more of our land. The water comes in, the houses fall, and we rebuild. But how many times can we keep rebuilding?”*

**For them, climate change is not a distant, abstract concept—it is an everyday battle.**



# POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS AND GOVERNMENT NEGLECT

From a postcolonial perspective, the Nuliya community embodies what Gayatri Spivak called the subaltern—a people whose voices are systemically ignored. Their marginalization is not accidental; it is a direct consequence of governance structures that prioritize urban centers while neglecting peripheral populations. Homi Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness resonates deeply here. The Nuliyas belong to the land, yet the land itself is unstable, constantly threatened by climate change. Their existence is thus liminal—caught between belonging and displacement, survival and loss.

Michel Foucault's idea of governmentality is evident in the selective presence of the state. While policies exist on paper, their execution remains questionable. The absence of accessible education and healthcare speaks volumes about the state's neglect. The Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana, a housing scheme meant for the poor, barely reaches them. Those who do receive funds report only partial payments. Hasmat Ali, an elderly fisherman, remarked:

*“They promised us money to build better houses, but we never got the full amount. Now, when the storm comes, our walls fall again.”*



# C O N C L U S I O N A N D R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

The condition of the Nuliya community is not just an isolated tragedy—it is a reflection of a broader pattern of socio-economic exclusion. Any meaningful intervention must begin with recognition—acknowledging their presence beyond census figures and policy drafts. Immediate steps must include the establishment of primary education centers, sustainable fishing policies, and disaster-resilient housing. Additionally, alternative livelihoods beyond fishing must be encouraged, ensuring that the younger generation is not solely dependent on the precarious marine economy.

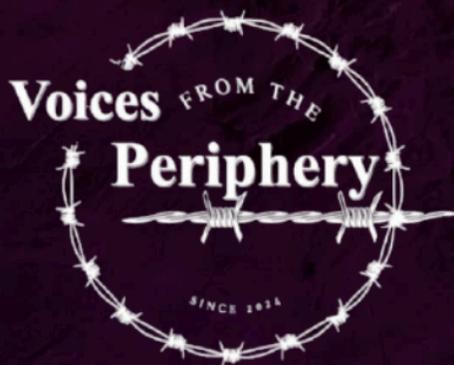
In the end, the Nuliyas are not just fishermen or boat-makers; they are custodians of the sea, keepers of an ancestral tradition, survivors of an indifferent state. Yet, if left unaided, their island—both literal and metaphorical—will erode, and with it, a way of life that has withstood the test of time. The tides are rising, and so is the urgency to listen before their voices are forever lost in the waves.





F O O T N O T E S  
A N D  
R E F E R E N C E S

1. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Columbia University Press, 1988.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Foucault, Michel. *Governmentality*. In *The Foucault Effect*, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
4. Field Interviews conducted in July 2024.



COPYRIGHT

KHĀTIRĀT-E FĀRĀMŪSH SHODE  
FORGOTTEN MEMORIES.

PRESENTATION BY PALLAB BAIRAGYA