

A Glimpse of Socio-Economic-Political Condition of People of Char Area in Assam

Shofiur Rahman.

Research Scholar & Asst. Prof

Dept. of Commerce and Economics

Shofiur30@gmail.com

USTM

Abstract

The mid-channel bars (locally referred as char) are an integral part of the fluvial regime of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries in Assam. The extremely braided channels of the river along with its unique gradient, suspended particles and bed load combine together during floods to give rise to 'almond' shaped alluvial formations known as chars. As these formations are built under flood environment, the height of the char is never greater than the height of the highest flood (Bhagabati, 2001). The giant river Brahmaputra is considered as one of the top five swiftest river in the world. With its swift current it has been eroding hundreds of acres of land from both banks. People who are living by both the bank as well as in the river island which is popularly known as char are suffering immense trouble since time to time. People who are living in those areas are basically of East-Bengal origin i.e. Bengali Muslim. The Bengali Muslims in Assam who live in the river islands are marginalized on multiple fronts. Not only do they face geographic isolation, the social stigma that is attached to their identity worsens the scenario. While the entire community suffers from socio-economic deprivation, women of this community are the worst sufferers. To understand their double marginalization there is a need to look at their condition separately. Often forced out of homes, they bear the brunt of such conflict induced, calamity induced displacement. Loss of homeland hearth translates to loss of identity for women as well. This paper will try to focus light on the basic condition of human being to survive with due respect and honour as human.

Key words : PQLI, Bengali Muslim, Char, Land Erosion, Displacement

Introduction

The state of Assam is a frontier state of the Indian Union situated in the far eastern part of the nation occupies an area of 78,523 sq. km. It is physically divided into hills and plains. In mainstream archaic definitions the profile of char areas or hinterlands are rarely included. Chars are river islands that dot the river Brahmaputra. They are formed by silt deposits after floods which are a yearly affair in this part of the country. Because of certain government policies, going back to the British colonial rule, like the Inner Line Permit these are as were earmarked for the settling down of Muslims of East Bengal origin. Their fore fathers were encouraged to come to this sparsely populated state of Assam by the British. They in turn have transformed the agriculture of the state. After seven decades of independence, the char areas continue to be underdeveloped. The Chars of Dhubri doubly suffer because of being in close proximity to the Bangladesh

border. The geopolitics of the region makes it a strategically crucial area for securitization. But at the same time their developmental aspect is often over looked.

Background

The Muslim peasants of East Bengal origin changed the agricultural scenario of Assam. They introduced the cultivation of cash crops like jute. But these immigrants along with changing the agrarian scenario also changed the demographic profile of the region. The erstwhile scantily populated state now had a much higher density of population. In the beginning the Assamese middle class of the Brahmaputra valley welcomed this migration as it ensured availability of cheap labour. But slowly the attitude of the locals towards immigrants changed. The local inhabitants fearing mineralization wanted some kind of safeguard mechanism to ensure their cultural dominance. Keeping such concern since mind the British government introduced the Line System in 1916 which was implemented in 1920 (Kar 2013, 01-03). This demarcated certain areas for settlement of the immigrants and tried to check their indiscriminate settlement in the state. The aim was to segregate the indigenous population from the immigrants by making interaction minimal. The Line System tried to ensure that the immigrants did not network for the local population and the immigrants did not buy lands of indigenous people. This was to ensure geographic segregation and stop the land from passing from the hands of the local people to the immigrants. But the Assamese population did often use the cheap labour of these immigrants and there was breach of the Line System. The immigrants also saw some economic wellbeing, and the scarcity of land along with newer immigrants compelled them to buy lands from the indigenous people and hence made homes in areas earmarked for the local population.

However, this System did lead to the concentration of these immigrants in certain areas like the Char or reverie islands of districts like Dhubri, Barpeta etc. These chars are sometimes temporary and flooded on a yearly basis. Char areas at present have 4.6% of land but has a higher density of population. Rafiul Rahman points out that 9.37% population of Assam live in these char areas. These people face a large array of problems which is discussed in the next section

Economic condition of char dwellers

If we consider char areas of Barpeta District as symbol of the study, we will find the harsh picture of economic condition of the people. The standard of living of those char area is lower than the people living in the African continent like Haiti, Somalia or Mozambique. The per capita income is far below than the national level. The PQLI, which measure the infant mortality rate, life expectancy rate and literacy rate is such low that it is very urgent to address the problem for the national interest.

Less than 4 per cent of the state's cultivable land is located in these areas. Cultivable land as percentage of total land has declined from 70 per cent to 67.13 per cent during 1992-93 to 2002-03 and there has also been a simultaneous decline in the per capita availability of cultivable land. The chars are densely populated (690 persons per sq.km) with a population density that is more than double the state average (340 persons per

sq.km.). The char villages account for one of the largest concentrations of illiterate population in Assam. Between 1992-93 and 2003-04 their literacy levels marginally increased from 15.45 to 19.31 per cent. On the other, it is surprising to note that during this period there has been a fall in literacy rate among the char villages of four districts namely, Bongaigaon, Kamrup, Dhubri and Tinsukia. The result of all these depressing conditions aptly gets reflected in the poverty estimates concerning these areas. It is observed that during the period of the two surveys (one in 1992-93 and other in 2003-04), the population residing below the official poverty line increased substantially from 48.89 per cent to 67.89 per cent, which for the state declined to 36.09 per cent. Thus the char areas represent one of the most backward areas in the state whose dwellers are constantly affected by adverse environment flood and also receive less than desired attention from the state in terms of provision of infrastructure both physical and human as well.

In Assam, where an important axis of sub-nationalist politics has been the question of the rights of indigenous population, citizens view each other through the exclusivist prism of 'indigenous' and 'foreigners' (Chakraborty 2012, 23). People in these char areas are extremely poor. Land ownership is dubious. Land mafias who are called 'matabbars' or 'dewanis' grab new land the moment they are not flooded. As these lands are owned by none, there is no proper document to support anyone's ownership. Level of disguised unemployment is also high. But when these people migrate for better opportunities, things worsen for them. The discourse conveniently remains trapped within the contours of 'cultural exclusivist'. People belonging to a particular cultural background are often targeted and stigmatized. While issues of deprivation, dominance and discord affecting the life and livelihood of the masses are swept under the carpet.

Despite their presence in the *char* areas for over 100 years there is severe dearth of information regarding various aspects related to these areas. In order to develop these areas, Government of Assam undertook a special '*Char* Areas Development Programme' during the Seventh Five Year Plan (1983) through a new department namely 'The Assam State *Char* Areas Development Authority'. Thereafter, the Authority was redesignated as a full-fledged Government Directorate during 1996. In due course, Government of Assam created another new department namely 'Welfare of Minorities Development', which included the Directorate of *Char* Areas during 1998. In order to develop the *char* areas, this organization undertook few schemes related to education, safe drinking water, agriculture and dairy development and training to unemployed youths for self-employment. This Authority and later Directorate conducted two benchmark surveys during 1992-93 and 2003-04, which are the only sources of information regarding *char* areas of Assam. According to the Socio-economic Survey Reports concerning the *char* areas of Assam, during 1992-93 to 2003-04, the number of *char* villages in the Brahmaputra has risen by 7.75 per cent. Decadal population growth rate, on the other, has been 55.63 per cent compared to 18.85 per cent for Assam (1991-2001). During the first survey (1992-93) Barpeta district had the highest number of *char* villages and population followed by Dhubri and Jorhat. However, following the patterns of alluvium and diluvium in the

river Brahmaputra, the next survey (2003-04) showed that Dhubri district had the highest number of *char* villages and *char* population followed by Jorhat and Barpeta. This shows the temporality or flux concerning these areas.

Social condition

The Char dwellers are often forced to migrate to other parts of the state due to massive land erosion and frequent flooding of their homes. But in their new habitats they are seen as fresh spate of possible illegal immigrants. They are victimized by excluding them from many economic enterprises. The locals have many times denied to offer them jobs. This victimization is across the riverbanks of Brahmaputra. Rohmoria, which is an area in Dibrugarh, also reports a similar case of soil erosion.

The *char* areas are geographically 'alienated' from the 'mainland' and psychologically 'detached' from the 'mainstream' population groups in Assam. Moreover, lack of proper information about the existential realities in these areas generates critical demographic gap as well. While one relates to the lack of technical details such as fertility, mortality, morbidity etc. of the *char* population, the other relates to the political aspects of demography, namely citizenship and allied issues of this population group in Assam. Lack of proper data adds fuel to the perception that the *char* dwellers indulge in rampant polygamy and uncontrolled procreation and the other situates the *chars* as the 'abode of the illegal immigrants' (read Bangladeshis) in Assam. Logically these 'perceptions' are contradictory i.e. if the *char* areas are densely populated due to higher fertility rates then can there be illegal migration to these areas so that they become the 'abode of Bangladeshis'? A higher population density cannot be a sufficient 'pull' factor to attract large scale migration to these areas. Moreover, there will also be local resistance to avoid further resource crunch due to new migration to the *char* areas. Goswami's book however does not deal with this contradiction but does a great academic service by dealing with the technicalities of demography in these areas. Both the survey reports quoted in the earlier section indicate that the *char* areas have a very high population growth rate. The decadal growth rate of population between the two surveys has been 55.63 per cent compared to 18.85 per cent for Assam. Without data related to birth rates, fertility and mortality rates, it leads to the mis-conception that these areas are therefore the 'abode of the Bangladeshis'. Goswami's book fills in this information gap by providing the household data related to fertility, mortality and child mortality in these areas. With a sample of 1000 *char* households spread over four development blocks in two districts of Barpeta and Kamrup, this book provides us with the micro-details of the *char* areas. The study finds a high TFR (Total Fertility Rate) of 4.56 amongst the surveyed households. This proves that high population growth rate in the *char* areas of Assam is due to a higher fertility rates among its dwellers rather than illegal migration.

A higher fertility rate without proper human development infrastructure does not generate social capital and this is reflected in these areas. The study reveals that more than half of the households are illiterate, 91 per cent do not have access to safe drinking water while only 1.4 per cent have sanitary latrine within their premise. Under such situation morbidity as well as mortality is bound to be higher. The study reveals that

mortality rate (CDR) is 8.6 per thousand which is higher than the state average (6.6). The biggest victim of this health scenario happens to be the infants who have a high rate of mortality rates (136.9) amongst the surveyed households that is more than double the prevailing rate in Assam. But what determines the higher fertility rates in the *char* areas? A multivariate regression analysis shows that female age at marriage (AM) to be the most significant variable that is inversely related to live births. In other words, analysis reveals that an increase of AM by one year, on an average, reduces live birth by 0.434. But with high levels of female illiteracy (55.7 per cent), lack of motivation for education of girl child and a geographical isolation that makes patriarchy more entrenched, mean age at marriage remains low (17.1 years) that results in higher fertility in the *char* areas. In such milieu boys are bound to be more preferred than girls. The surveyed *char* dwellers showed a distinct son preference amongst a third of the concerned households. Similarly, findings also reveal that 60 per cent of the infant deaths are female in these areas that enforces the lack of proper care of the girl child in the *char* areas. Access to health infrastructure is an important source for wellbeing of a population. Goswami's study shows that there were only two health sub-centres in two *char* villages out of the 23 *char* villages surveyed. This shows severe lack of access to health care facility among the surveyed households. This lack of access has been a major cause of infant mortality. The study reveals that infant mortality can be reduced significantly through ante-natal and post-natal check-up. The regression co-efficient of ante-natal check-up of the mothers is (-) 0.122, i.e. an increase in ante-natal check-up of the mother by one unit, controlling other variables, decreases infant mortality by 0.122 units. No other variable showed a higher level of significance compared to ante-natal check-up in the surveyed households. Similarly, lack of awareness generation and availability of contraception is a big issue in the *char* areas. Knowledge about contraception among the eligible couples was low (42 per cent) and even evident from the analysis of field data e.g. "number of live births ever born is higher (72.08 per cent) among couples not using family planning methods, while only 27.2 per cent live births have taken place to the users of contraceptive devices."

Political Condition

The politically unorganized *Char* dwellers are always the victim of the political parties. The inducement to migration from one state of the country to another state is also a political game with this innocent illiterate people. The process of facilitating the transfer of population could not gather momentum till the first Partition of Bengal (1905), when Assam and East Bengal became a single entity under one administration. What started during the first decade of the 20th century had a deep impact on the demographic profile of the state in the decades to come.

These farm settlers not only brought huge tracts of land under cultivation but also diversified the crop profile in Assam. It is estimated in the Census of India, 1951 that in 1951, the total number of migrants from East Bengal must have been around one and a half million, which was between one-tenth to one-sixth of the total population of the state (Goswami, 1994). On the other, according to Prof. Amalendu Guha, out of the 1.1 million acres of wasteland settled with all the migrants in Assam, East Bengal farm-settlers accounted for

nearly half a million acres (Guha,1977). Although there are no separate records pertaining to the habitation and settlement of the *char* areas in Assam yet it is a logical corollary that such a phenomenon happened during the same colonial period as well.

The Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs comprise of a large group of socially excluded people. Although their plight is similar to refugees, they are worst of as they are often left out of the Rehabilitation Packages of the government. In the entire Northeast there has been internal displacement on a large scale. Samir Kumar Das, in his *Blister son their Feet* (2008), talks about the ordeal of internally displaced people of the region. Internally Displaced Persons in Assam are categorized in three groups –conflict induced, development induced and natural disasters induced. River basins are densely populated and it leads to large scale internal displacement in case of floods and river erosions. The *char* dwellers displaced by floods and land erosion belong to the third category. Not much reporting is done on these people. As a result no authentic documentation is also available on the number of people who are displaced in this way. And in Assam the question of IDPs is complicated because it is intrinsically linked to the question of illegal immigrants. Forced to migrate to nearby places, these people face accusation of being illegal immigrants. The IDPs in other parts of India does not bear the brunt of a negative image. Their appearance in mainland town following erosion is seen as a fresh spate of immigration. This is mainly because these people belong to the cultural stock of Muslims of East Bengal origin. The political elite add a political overtone to a humanitarian crisis. Line System introduced in 1916 and implemented from 1920 separated the indigenous people from crowded migrant bustees. Small enclave and ghettos came up in the reverie districts of Assam. Monirul Hussain (2008), and Hussain and P. Phanjoubam (2007) point out that displaced persons who are rendered homeless due to river erosion cannot go back as their homes are already part of the extended riverbed. A large number of people is displaced because of floods and river erosion but there is not enough data on this phenomenon. Anindita Dasgupta talks about the plight that these *char* dwellers face. Most of the IDPs from the *Char* areas of Assam are Muslims of East Bengal Origin, a community that is commonly suspected of being fresh illegal immigrants. While this community accepted Assamese and was taken in the fold as Na Axamiya or Neo-Assamese, there was no move to address the development deficit or the stigmatisation that this constant migration to the Northeast led to a number of militant uprisings. Most ethnic groups see this migration as a threat to their unique cultural entity. The rights of indigenous communities became important for the militant groups. In Assam, groups like United Liberation Front of Assam took it on themselves to save Assam from outsiders. But despite having 1971 as the cut-off date as agreed to the Assam Accord in 1985, Muslims who came from East Bengal before this date were harassed. The descendants of immigrants also were at the receiving end. Flood induced displacement leads to a high level of internal migration. Their appearance in mainland towns followed by erosion is seen as a spate of fresh migration. Because of the larger question of illegal immigration, the *char* dwellers suffer from a negative image. As opposed to IDPs in other parts of the country, they suffer from a stigmatization of being illegal immigrants or Bangladeshis. Though the these people have their political rights in this land, still they could not able practice it properly because of

unorganized social situation. A number of so called political leaders has come out and hold responsible position (including char develop minister), but those are just like other politician. All major political parties are using them as their vote bank.

Conclusion

The discussion and explanation of the Char dweller cannot be concluded within few hours or few pages of writings. This study helps in refuting the hysterical myths attached to the *chars*. Those who are aware of these areas will agree that the char dwellers presents with many interesting features of adaptation and assimilation yet are unique and a distinct population group in their own. Their resilience to dwell in the difficult domain in which they reside, their adaptation skill to deal with flood, erosion and also cropping pattern to suit the microenvironment, their magnanimity of assimilating with the surrounding socio-cultural milieu in which they are embedded are all unique characteristics which very few population group in the region exhibit, e.g. the acceptance of declaring Assamese as mother tongue in the census declaration continuously for over half a century yet maintaining their Bengali dialect in household interaction is a rare instance in the state, similarly offering *tamul* and *paan* to greet their guest is an unique feature in Assam, which the *char* dwellers also exhibit. On the other hand they seldom drink tea which otherwise is the most common brew of the state. But in case of adoption of culture they are among the pioneer of others. Of late some elements are arising in reaction to not accepting by the main stream Assamese people as their follower or the native of the soil. So it is right time to understand them and accept them to bring in to the main stream. However while using the word illegal immigrant someone must be careful, otherwise many times it creates the confusion to some half educated so called main stream Assamese and depression to the Char dwellers. The economic deprivation, socially unorganized and being the vote bank of the political parties creates the present situation of their life.

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