



A CASE STUDY ON CHAR DWELLERS OF TELAHI DEVELOPMENT BLOCK, LAKHIMPUR, ASSAM: SOME OBSERVATIONS.

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ABSTRACT: Ensuring all-round economic development in a state like Assam with its vast geographical diversity is a challenge. The study was undertaken to observe the socio-economic impact on the people living in the char areas, the small riverine islands are termed char and chaporis occupy an important role in the contribution to the economy of the state. These areas are heavily impacted by the yearly floods. The Brahmaputra River along with other rivers in this area is creating floods and leading to severe damage and losses to mankind. Five villages in the Lakhimpur district were selected which are near the river and more flood-prone. This paper has found that in the current scenario, the revenue from traditional sources is very low. Results show that erosion has a great impact on livelihood, agriculture, and the environment. Migration is seen to be a common phenomenon in the study area.

Keywords: Char area, Brahmaputra, floods, illiteracy

INTRODUCTION

The Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam, defines char/chapori as the riverine or island areas of the river Brahmaputra. In the Assamese language, the literal meaning of char is River Island and chapori is a land mass formed by silt deposits (Barua 2015). However, it appears to be a single word char-chapori, or sometimes used interchangeably. The char areas in Assam are mostly resided by people of East Bengal origin who were brought during the British era to cultivate in the wetlands. Almost 14 districts of Assam are covered by char areas. According to the Socio-Economic Survey Report of Char Areas (2003-04), conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Development, there were a total of 2251 Char Villages and a population of 24, 90,097. The Brahmaputra River is one of the main rivers to flow in the state and creates yearly floods. This year on June 17th, 2023, Heavy and incessant rains continued for the last four days and deteriorated the flood situation in Lakhimpur District in 22 villages. (The Assam Tribune)

The Department of Char Area Development has been formed by the Government of Assam to formulate and execute schemes and policies for the development of these areas. The char areas or the riverine areas have a population which are frequently affected by floods and hence, such natural disasters affect their economic and social growth. 80% of the char population is below the poverty line. Borah (2022) has tried to understand the char areas with a very interesting viewpoint of children's life in Bhomoraguri chapori. This paper has talked about how the socioeconomic environment of char areas negatively impacts the growth of its children. Children in these areas are deprived of fundamental rights like nutrition, education, and healthcare.



Source: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/assam/>

Fig 1- Map of Assam.

The Subansiri River, a majestic watercourse of northeastern India, flows with a graceful determination through the heart of the picturesque landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. Emerging from the lofty Tibet Himalayas, this river descends through breathtaking gorges, verdant valleys, and dense forests, carving a path of natural splendor. The Subansiri is not only a lifeline for the local communities that depend on its waters for sustenance, but it also holds ecological significance as a habitat for diverse aquatic species. Known for its wild and untamed character, the Subansiri's pristine beauty is complemented by its role in energizing the Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project, an impressive engineering endeavor that harnesses its powerful flow to generate clean energy. This dynamic interplay between nature and human innovation forms a unique narrative along the river's course. The Subansiri River is more than just a waterway; it is a thread that weaves together the cultural tapestry of the region, shaping livelihoods, traditions, and the rhythm of daily life. Its journey through the rugged terrain mirrors the resilience and vitality of the communities that call its banks home. As the Subansiri continues to flow, it carries with it stories of harmony, challenges, and the enduring bond between people and the land they inhabit.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS-

Inhabitation in chars is inextricably related to the history of British authority in Assam. The majority of chars, particularly those in western Assam, are populated by Bengali-speaking Muslims. Peasant migration from East Bengal began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated in the early twentieth century, particularly after 1905, when Bengal was partitioned and Assam was joined with East Bengal. (Kumar and Das, 2019). Chars are the outcome of historical activities, not merely natural, physical processes in floodplains. In particular, the history of land and water management in deltaic Bengal was critical in the genesis of chars. (Lahiri, 2014). Inhabitation in chars is inextricably related to the history of British authority in Assam. The majority of chars, particularly those in western Assam, are populated by Bengali-speaking Muslims. Peasant migration from East Bengal began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated in the early twentieth century, particularly after 1905, when Bengal was partitioned and Assam was joined with East Bengal. (Kumar and Das, 2019)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam, defines char/chapori as the riverine or island areas of the river Brahmaputra. The severe loss and damage caused by yearly floods are one of the sole reasons why summer crops are not practiced in these areas. Winter crops like potato, brinjal, black gram, Ahu rice, maize, and jute, etc. are cultivated in the char areas (Barua et.al. 2021). Kumar and Das (2019) have found that the factors that influence the income and migration decisions of char residents are education, household size, land holdings, and land loss due to erosion. The location of the char is very important in respect of

migration decisions. National Productivity Council has given the classification of chars on the basis of existence. "Permanent chars" are the ones that have existed for more than 10 years. Those that have existed for more than 5 years and less than 10 years are classified as "semi-permanent chars" and "temporary chars" are the ones that have existed for less than 5 years. "The chars account for about 5 percent of the total area of the state spreading across 14 districts, 55 blocks, and around 2,300 villages" (Government of Assam [GoA], 2016, p. 2).

Chakraborty, 2012 has written that the population density of char areas is twice that of the state of Assam. He has also mentioned the lower literacy rate among char dwellers. Goswami (2014) has confirmed this statement by mentioning that more than half of the char dwellers are illiterate. There has also been seen a difference in the relative number of people living below the poverty line in the state and particularly in char areas. Chakraborty has also mentioned that in 2002, the percentage of people living below the poverty line in char areas was about 68% whereas it was 36% in the overall state. There has also been a decline in landholding shares of char dwellers over the years. According to the GoI (2014), 91% of the char dwellers did not have access to clean water. The Socioeconomic Survey 2002-03 suggests that only 52 PHCs exist covering 2251 char villages. The number is quite unfavorable to look at.

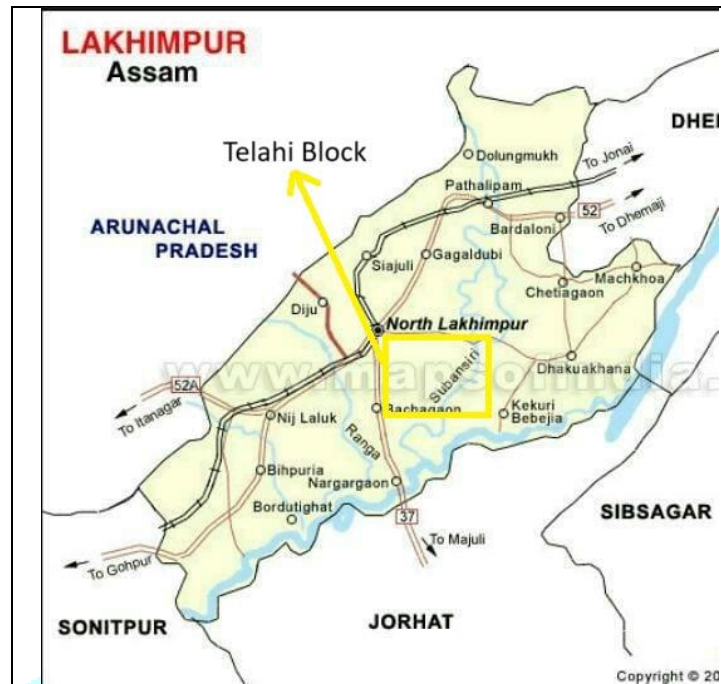
(Borah, 2022) has tried to understand the char areas with a very interesting viewpoint of children's life in Bhomoraguri chapori. This paper has talked about how the socioeconomic environment of char areas negatively impacts the growth of its children. Children in these areas are deprived of various fundamental rights like access to nutrition, education, education and healthcare.

The number of people living in a household affects both income and choices related to moving. While larger households generally have higher total income, this can result in each individual within the household having lower financial well-being. The lower average income per person in larger households is evident in the fact that larger households are more likely to consider moving to improve their circumstances. Furthermore, when there are more dependents relative to income earners in a household, it tends to lead to decreased overall household income. This implies that households that choose to have more children often find themselves earning less, especially in the short term. (Kumar, 2019)

The primary feeling of isolation experienced by those residing in char areas originates from their geographical positioning. Their remote living environment becomes a barrier to their inclusion within the wider Assamese society. When these char residents transition from their isolated homes to the mainland, whether due to erosion-related displacement or in pursuit of improved livelihoods, their situation parallels that of refugees (Chakraborty, 2011). Contrary to Majuli, the majority of recently created sandbars are naturally short-lived and delicate. Their forms shift frequently, and their boundaries are susceptible to river currents causing erosion at any moment. An entire sandbar might vanish overnight. Bank erosion is an inherent aspect of these sandbars' behavior, just like sediment buildup. Even Majuli, despite its significance, faces substantial bank erosion. Even long-standing sand areas that have been inhabited for many years by numerous families along with their residences, animals, and farmlands can swiftly be engulfed by the river due to an abrupt change in its course (Lahiri, 2014)

STUDY AREA

The Subansiri is a major tributary of the Brahmaputra River, and it constitutes one of the river's largest sub-basins, including parts of Tibet (China) and India. It is a major tributary of the Brahmaputra River, accounting for up to 11% of the total flow of the Brahmaputra. After running down the steep gradient of the Himalayas, the river spreads its massive discharge and load of sediments, generating an anastomosing pattern of its channel that assumes a meandering pattern further downstream. The basin covers around 30,000 square kilometers, including an area of 2700 square kilometers in the alluvial plains of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of Assam and Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The present study is concentrated on the Lakhimpur district of Assam. There are a total of 9 developmental Blocks in Lakhimpur. The study area of this paper is focused on the char areas of Telahi Block. A total of 106 villages are there in Telahi Block (ViewVillage). The total population of Telahi Development Block is 86162, with male and female populations of 43864 and 42298. Among the 106 villages, we have selected 5 villages namely (Alichiga Patnawala Malo Gaon, Bordubi Moluwal, Khabuli Morotpur, Chengamari Miri, Kahidhuwar, and Mudoibil) which are nearest to the Subansiri River i.e. the largest tributary of Brahmaputra River. Different communities like Bengali and Mising tribes were the inhabitants. Assamese is the main language spoken there. (India Village Data)



Source- <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/assam/districts/lakhimpur.htm>

Fig 2- The yellow color region is the targeted study area.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to understand the nature and dynamics of the impact of the river Brahmaputra on the socioeconomic life of the people of char dwellers in the targeted area.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Is the socioeconomic and geographic environment limiting the livelihood prospects for char dwellers?

DATA SOURCE AND METHODOLOGY

Based on the objectives of the present study, both the primary and secondary data have been used for the study purpose. The primary data has been collected through a structured questionnaire by personal interview method from the sample households. The secondary data has been collected from different published sources such as government reports along with non-government organizations, statistical handbooks, various journals, research works, etc.

The study is undertaken in the Telahi block of North Lakhimpur. As the people of Telahi block are facing this problem for years and this area is lagging behind. The Brahmaputra River along with other rivers in this area is creating floods and leading to severe damage and losses to mankind. Keeping these considerations in mind, the researchers believe it is important to do an analytical study on the influence of the Brahmaputra and other rivers on the char areas of some villages of Telahi Block.

DISCUSSION

“Health is Wealth” by the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1860 coined the term i.e. Human life is considered to have the highest value above all and it helps one in the creation of wealth. But during our surveys, it was found that the health care of the char areas is not taken into consideration. People have to travel a lot to visit healthcare centers. Primary health care center was not available in the targeted villages.

Many individuals in the examined area have been affected by severe riverbank erosion, with many cultivators having already lost all of their land; this is a serious challenge for them. People have been relocated to numerous regions owing to riverbank erosion, and many of them have been living on river dykes with substandard living conditions. Hundreds of people have become landless and making their socioeconomic life miserable. People who are living on the edge of banks have to migrate from one bank to the other. Floods have submerged a large amount of agricultural land, covering it in sand and silt. It is causing soil degradation, which has a negative impact on agricultural production. Due to heavy siltation, some of the available paddy fields have become completely barren.

Trees Plants are destroyed by flood. It happens as a result of plants being submerged in flood water for an extended period of time, as a result of excessive soil erosion. Hundreds of hectares of paddy and jute crops, potato crops, coconut trees, pineapples, betel nuts, papaya trees, mustard crops, black pepper, and many plants and crops are being destroyed by flood water. Deforestation has resulted in numerous areas of the district. The quality of the cultivated land changes over 5 years. To secure their livelihoods from hazards i.e. natural/man-made very less people of them tried some flood resistance crops, easy harvesting, and livestock.

A large number of domestic and wild animals have already died as a result of drowning and infections during or after the flood. The loss of domesticated birds, animals, and fish, in particular, has a variety of consequences for society. Damages from land, house, crop, and cowshed, animals were in huge amounts. It generally affects their financial stability as they are dependent on the dairy industry, poultry which is a basic source of their livelihood.

In some parts of villages who are residing near the bank of the river have to migrate every year because of heavy floods and as a result, the illiteracy rate is very high and they don't have access to schools or colleges.

In earlier times many people from those villages earn their livelihood from fishery, agriculture farming, log selling, and transport facilities. But in the current scenario, the revenue from all these sources is very low. So, for survival youth have to stay outside of their house for other income. Many of their sons are engaged as security guards and work in factories, doing daily labor while girls are in shops, parlors, etc.

Furthermore, sand and silt deposition in many ponds restricts fish cultivation, and massive siltation on roadways causes communication problems. As a result of the significant siltation, agricultural output, and fish farming are disrupted. And it leads to the extinction of fishes on a large scale. In our field survey, we have found that fishes in the private pond as well as in the river fishes like golden mahseer, zebra fish, safila fish, Pavo fish, Ilisha fish, snakehead fish, prawns, ari fish have become extinct or can be found very rare due to flood and erosion.

In the study areas, it was found that SHGs have an important role in many aspects of social life, particularly in women's economic enlistment and social mobilization. 50% of the observations are taking loans from SHG. But the SHG members are facing problems while maintaining account book records due to a lack of training facilities.

NEED OF THE MOMENT-

Appropriate measures need to be taken to better the quality of life of the char dwellers. They need to ensure basic health care facilities for each village of the developmental blocks. After the pandemic, the situations of the char dwellers have become very worse they have been facing many challenges like a drop in income, health deterioration, food insecurity, and many more. People have to migrate every year leaving their hearth to flow. Various employment generation trainings must be given to them which will empower them to look for other income generating options rather than engaging in traditional beliefs. One observer nicely quoted us "River is coming nearer and nearer to us and we are not afraid of flood now", it has become a regular phenomenon for us. To address this situation the present approach towards flood has been immediate relief, much more needs to be done before torrential rains hit the State during monsoon. The short-term measures on which flood management in the State presently depends, such as rebuilding the breached embankments, are largely inadequate. Besides, more accurate and decentralized forecasts of rain can help in improving preparedness. Weather reports should be made available on the district level and should be accessible to the public. Information should be available in local languages. With the forecast in, one can calculate how much more water will flow downstream, thereby alerting people in advance to evacuate. The nature of rivers is such that there is no way one can flood-proof the whole of Assam so one has to keep in mind that flood will happen.

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