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Poverty And It's Impact On The Char People Of Assam

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1. Introduction:

Assam since remote past has been the resort of migrants. Several streams of migration had occurred towards Assam during pre and post-independence period. Among them, a group of land needed educationally backward Bengalese immigrants came from erstwhile East-Bengal (Now Bangladesh and then undivided part of India) during the first half of the twentieth century in search of food and shelter (Rahman: 2014). The Colonial Power encouraged them to inflow into the state Assam with the plan of importing labour for raising government revenue implementing "Grow more Food" scheme. The British government introduced the facility of [family ticket] that helped them to easily reach their destination. They came to Assam and decided to settle in the sparsely populated fertile char lands of Assam. They were very skilled and hard labouring peasants who brought an extensive area under cultivation in the available virgin char lands. The Bengalese immigrants after their advent into Assam embraced the Assamese culture sacrificing their own without any hesitation and readily shifted their identity in favour of Assamese (Das: 2009).

Assam is the gateway of North Eastern Region (NER) of India occupying an area of 78,438 sq. km. Topographically; Assam is divided into two broad categories of landmass viz', the plains and the highlands. The plains comprise of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. The great river Brahmaputra covers 800 km across the length of Assam and virtually dividing the state into two halves. It touches through 19 districts of Assam and gives birth of Chars and Chapories in 14 districts as Barpeta, Darrang, Dhemaji, Dhubri, Goalpara, Jorhat, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Nalbari, and Sonitpur, Tinsukia. All along its path, the river has created sandy lands along both the banks as well as islands locally known as Char.

Family ticket here implies for the ticket introduced by the Colonial Power for railway journey at the cost of just Rs 5/- with which whole family member could easily travel.

The State Government of Assam categorically defines char as, first category, char is sandy Landmasses extended from Sadiya to Dhubri of Assam within the river Brahmaputra or surrounded by water bodies where people can live and cultivate the land. Second category, char is either sides of the river Brahmaputra extended to nearby embankment which is seasonally affected by flood and where people can live and cultivate. The second category of the char is presently known as chapori by some modern writers. So, both char as well Chapori are sometimes synonymously used words.

The reverine areas of the mighty river Brahmaputra formed either in heart or on its Bank are inhabited by large group of people specially Minorities people and suitable for cultivation. These areas are known as "Char Areas" of Assam.

Economic conditions of the Bengalese immigrants are very underprivileged who even more than a century have been struggling for reviving from starvation. This group of easy going people came from the agriculture origin and have been continuing the same profession generation after generation without any alteration. But in spite of their hard laboring in the field of agriculture, majority of char dwellers are economically poor and deprived from the basic necessities of life. About 68 percent of them belonged to the BPL families and 80 percent of them were illiterate. The living standard of the char people is extremely low and miserable. Even after 60 years of economic planning, majority of char dwellers remain under the grievance of poverty. Char area is socially as well as economically very backward who are dependent on agriculture. It is observed that the immigrant Muslims adjusted with the environment of char areas that brought positive changes in the agriculture of Assam. They have introduced a diversified cropping pattern had higher yield that could create marketable surplus. The agricultural credit supplied by the Government of Assam is not sufficient to accelerate primary Sector but it is further to be expanded to its maximum capacity especially to the rural areas. Various programmes were introduced by the government during eleventh five year plan period for the socio economic development of char areas' But all these programmes have no yield the desired result due to their inefficient implementation. The char-dwellers have been the victim of different political parties who are always being used as 'Vote Bank' in different times (Naser: 2005). They are a kind of decisive electorate factor and major part of the socio-cultural and economic mosaic of the state (Kar: 1990' Dev & Lahiri: 1985). Present study attempts to know about the economic condition of these People.

2. Objectives:

Present study focuses on the following objectives :

- a) To find out the percentage of BPL families in the char areas of Assam.
- b) To examine impact of poverty on char dwellers in terms of education and identity.

3. Methodology

Present study is an explanatory one which is basically conducted on the basis of secondary sources of data. The study will focus on the extent of poverty in char areas of Assam. Besides, it would be tried to find out the impact of poverty on them in terms of literacy rate and identity of citizenship. The data are collected from the directorate of char areas Development, Government of Assam, different books and journals, internet etc.

4. Poverty in Char Areas

According to the Directorate of Char Area Development Assam' the char areas are distributed in 23 Sub-Divisions scattering under 14 districts with 2251 villages in 299 Gaon Panchayats and 59 Development Blocks. Once population deserted chars of Assam becomes one of the population rich regions at present. Char is a locally used word in the regional studies of Assam for River Island. The state Govt. of Assam defines char in two ways firstly, char as sandy landmasses in the river Brahmaputra extended from Sadiya to Dhubri of Assam where people can live and cultivate the land. Secondly, it is either sides of the river Brahmaputra extended up to nearby embankment which is seasonally affected by flood and where people can live and cultivate. The area is segregated from the mainland by the flow of river from all sides and surrounded by water bodies that keep islands cool. Char has a distinct type of physiographic which is dissimilar to the other parts of the state. The area has its own geo-environment situation with which the char settler adapt.

4.1. Population Pressure

Char areas are generally population rich in nature. The area is densely populated. The area is densely populated that as high as 690 per sq.km (SESR: 2003). The density of population in the areas was much higher than the state average density 340 per sq.km as wells as national average density of 324 per sq.km (Census 2001). The natural growth rate of population in the area is high on the other land and artificial growth of population causes the high density of population on the other hand. The natural growth comprises high birth rate. The root factors work behind the high birth rate of population in areas are illiteracy, poverty, early marriage' religious taboo and early bedding etc. While artificial growth here means agglomeration of large number of people in the fertile land only (Rahman: 2013). Hectares of deserted lands lying there in the areas which don't come under the purview of char because of unfit habitation as well as cultivation.

4.2. Hazardous Flood

Char is temporary in nature. Its existence basically depends upon the mood and torrent of the river. The working of river (erosion, transportation and deposition) changes the existence, shape and size of the chars. When there erodes in the upper stream, it is thrown in the downstream. So, emergence of a new char is almost a common occurrence in the river Brahmaputra. Maximum height of char is up to the water level because it is formed naturally due to the working activities of the river. Heights of some chars are below the normal flood water level. So, even first phase of tide of the river may cause the flood to those areas. Chars are the open visiting field for the flood without any resistance.

Table – 4.1

Statistics on affect of Damages caused by Flood in Assam During 2003 to 2009
(Area in lakh hectare)

Years	Crop Area affected	Nos. of Cattles lost	Human Death
2002-03	2.95	4319	52
2003-04	5.22	118722	497
2004-05	0.95	15	29
2005-06	0.10	28	07
2006-07	6.75	-	134
2007-08	3.14	8002	134
2008-09	-	-	-
2009-10	1.46	3754	17

Sources: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam.

Due to the regular visit of seasonal disastrous flood. there causes hectares of cropped area damages as well as livestock lost in the char area. During 2002-03, there lost 4319 cattle along 52 human death that rose to 118772 and 497 in 2003-04. In each of the recurrence flood, there have been damaging huge areas of standing crop that impedes in sustaining agriculture.

4.3. Erosional Activities

The ferocious erosional activities river have been the cause of making thousands of char people landless as well as homeless. Since, the people of the area are solely dependent on cultivation, occurrence of flood as well as erosional activities have been reducing the cultivable land that has not only been the tension of sustaining agriculture but also affecting the sustainable development. "Soil conservation should get the top priority not for the food security but also for sustaining ecology and environment. Environment evolves dynamically depending on soil, biota, topography, climate etc that remains under equilibrium unless faced with extreme events like fire, drought, disease, erosion etc which are eventually eliminated through time" (Sahu: 2013). The slightest affect on cultivation as well as land cause huge impact on the

people of the area. Day by day, the erosional activities of the river Brahmaputra have been widening its bed that have been decaling the cultivable land in the area reducing average operational holdings.

Table: 4.2

District-wise, percentage of change of land Area in the Char Areas of Assam.

Sl No	Name of District	1992-93 Total Area	2002-03 Total Area	
1	Dhuri	86925.22	99898	14.92
2	Jorhat	5576.38	42174	656.29
3	Barpeta	27881.36	36655	31.33
4	Kamrup	5401.72	17167	217.81
5	Goalpara	11623.45	19860	70.86
6	Dhemaji	13517.00	16976	25.59
7	Sonitpur	24014.06	24168	0.64
8	Darang	6661.36	16756	151.54
9	Bongaigaon	11367.00	14256	25.41
10	Lakhimpur	12069.51	21523	75.32
11	Tinsukia	10324.00	14094	36.51
12	Nagaon	3265.25	12036	268.61
13	Morigaon	6804.66	11932	75.35
14	Nalbari		13432	56.93
Total		239000	360927	51.01

During 1992-93, the total land area under char was 2,39,000,00 hectares that had increased to 3,60,927 hectares in 2002-03. The average rate of increase of the total land was 51.01 percent. It was highest for Jorhat district with a changing rate of 656.29 percent followed by Nagaon district with 268.61 percent. The rate of increase of total land during the period for Kamrup district was 217.81 percent. A gradual increase of total area in the char signifies that the bed of the river has been increasing day by day eroding the mainland.

Majority of the population are the victims of the poverty. The char people of Assam may be considered as one of the world class socio-economically backward communities who have been passing their lives in the misery of poverty. They are backward almost in all socio-economic aspects (Chakraborty:2009). Flood and river erosion are the two major menaces in the area that make them landless and homeless. Besides, people in the area are the victim of lack of medical facilities, lack of education and deprived of the benefit of modern facilities of transport and communication. The char people are economically poor and culturally backward who, by and large, have been passing a nomadic life (Bhagabati:2005). According to professor Nurkse 'poor people are poor because they are poor'. The Bengalese immigrants are the best instance of the statement. Table 4.3 shows the extent of poverty existing in the char areas of Assam.

Table: 4.3

Percentage of BPL Families and Literacy rate in the Char Areas of Assam

Sl No	Name of District	% of BPL Family	
		1992-93	2002-03
1	Dhuri	54.2	69.00
2	Jorhat	25	64
3	Barpeta	55	66.78
4	Kamrup	53	68.00
5	Goalpara	53.2	68.57
6	Dhemaji	46.8	70.93
7	Sonitpur	43	68.00
8	Darang	55	66.94
9	Bongaigaon	54	67.50
10	Lakhimpur	49	69.02
11	Tinsukia	34.5	68.90

12	Nagaon	55	66.79
13	Morigaon	52.5	67.00
14	Nalbari	54.2	68.36
Total		48.9	67.88

Majority of the char people are under the grievances of poverty (Rahman: 2016). In 1992-93, as much as 48.9 percent of the char people were under the BPL family. Percentage of BPL family in 1992-93 was highest (55%) in Darang district followed by Nalbari and Dhubri districts with 54.2 percent each in the char areas. It was lowest (25%) in the char area of Jorhat district in the corresponding year. In Tinsukia district it was 34.5 percent. In rest of the districts, it was almost uniform.

Percentage of BPL family in char areas increased to 67.88 percent in 2002-03. It was highest (70.93%) in Dhemaji district followed by Lakhimpur & Dhubri district with 69.02 & 69 percent respectively. Demaji district is one of the most flood prone areas in the state. Each of the years, ferocious flood causes windfall damages to the agriculture in the area' BPL families in rest of the districts record almost equal varying from 66 to 68 percent. An interesting point is that in reality number of BPL family either in a country or state can't increase. In case of such situation, it signifies the failure of government policy. Whatever policies are undertaken, it is either insufficient or misused of fund. There are several reasons for increasing poverty in the area. Since the area is dependent on agriculture, the frequent occurrence of flood causes the disastrous damage of standing crop as well as livestock. Besides, river erosion hawks the base of agriculture that deteriorates the economic condition of the people.

5. Impact of Poverty

Poverty is almost a common feature in the char areas of Assam. It is seen from the above discussion that majority of the char people are involved in poverty. Poverty is the most burning question in the char areas of Assam. Poverty has certain impact on the living standard of the people. Here in the present study' it is tried to focus its impact on the education and identity

a) Education: Education is the most important criteria of HDI. Economic development is no longer measured in terms of income alone rather it is the development of human resource which is taken as the base of measuring it. Hence, here impact of poverty is tried to explore on the base of education. The area is suffering from both qualitative as well quantitative educations (Mazid: 2005). The extreme poverty has educationally crippled the people. Table 5.1 gives an idea about the educational status of char areas of Assam.

Table: 5.1

Percentage of Literacy rate in the char areas of Assam in 2002-03

Sl No	Name of District	% Literacy Rate
1	Dhuri	14.46
2	Jorhat	60.55
3	Barpeta	17.63
4	Kamrup	15.16
5	Goalpara	13.65
6	Dhemaji	15.69
7	Sonitpur	16.93
8	Darang	12.34
9	Bongaigaon	12.46
10	Lakhimpur	18.5
11	Tinsukia	14.0
12	Nagaon	17.59
13	Morigaon	18.5
14	Nalbari	16.24
Total		19.31

Source: Directorate of Char Area Development, Government of Assam

The above table shows that literacy rate in the char area was 19.31 percent in 2002-03. Literacy rate in the char of Jorhat district was 60.55 percent. The world biggest riverine Island Majuli is located in Jorhat having facility of sub-division, central jail etc. to name some. The overall situation in the char areas is distinguished from of Majuli. Majuli is regarded as one of the important tourist places Literacy rate in the rest of the char districts show almost similar figure varying from 12 to 18 percent.

According to Population Census 2011, the literacy rate in India was 65.38 percent against its counterpart Assam 64.28 percent. The literacy rate in the char area is not comparable with the literacy rate of India as well as Assam except Jorhat district is in better position. The reason behind mass illiteracy in the area is unavailable access of education. The area has very less number of educational institutes on the one hand and poverty prevents them accessing education.

Besides, poverty causes them to suffer beyond economic purview. For their extreme poverty, even they have been suffering from doubtful citizenship as discussed below.

b) Identity Threat:

Assamese people are segregated into two different identity groups viz Bhumiputras (son of soil) and Na Asomiya (New Assamese). In the discourse of regional studies, it is found that the pre Ahoms as well as the descendants of Ahom demand themselves as the Bhumiputras in the context of local people. While, the Bengalese immigrants or char dwellers are christened as Na Asomiya who are junior to them and having less right or authority in the internal matter of the state. If we look into the evolution of naming the immigrants Muslims then it gives the following identity conflict chain as,

Immigrant> Settler>infiltrator r>Na Asomiya>Miya etc' (Rahman: 2011)

Some of them have been facing the problem of 'D' voter which means doubtful voter. They are prevented in enjoying their political right in casting their vote in election. In the name of doubtful citizenship' the char people have been facing severe insults even physical atrocities by some aristocrat people as well as nationalist organization till date. It is seen that when they go to urban area for daily laboring, some of such working people are seen to bear harassment in public place even physical tortures like nailing down' walk over catching ear in the name of doubtful citizenship. So, in this way, the char people are in the thrust of identifying themselves. It is due to the existence of excessive poverty as well as illiteracy among the char people.

6. Findings:

- a) Majority of the char people are involved in poverty. Poverty in the char area more compared to the state level as well as all India.
- b) It is found that poverty in the char area increases over the years.
- c) Char people are the victim of poverty in terms of education. More than 80 percent of the char people are illiterate.
- d) The literacy rate of the char of Jorhat district is comparable to the state as well as all India level.
- e) The people in the area are also sufferer of identity crisis. It is due to their poverty and illiteracy. They are ignore about most of the happening the society.

7. Policy Suggestion

- I. Since the people in the area are dependent on agriculture. modernization of agriculture should be introduced in the area.
- II. Erosion of the river Brahmaputra should plan fully be undertaken. For doing so, the bed of the river may be dug as to increase flowing intake capacity of the river which will sure to save the cultivator from the first set flood.
- III. Right to Education Act 2009 should properly be implemented in the char areas.
- IV. Government should take utmost care of proper implementation of the schemes sanctioned for the char areas.

- V. Char area should be used as resources rather than neglected. They are to be used as the hub of Tourists Place.

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