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The Fluid Lives of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Comprehensive Study of Riverine Culture in the Char Areas of Assam

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Abstract: The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, subjugated by one of the world's most sediment-heavy and hydrologically unstable rivers, is the setting for a unique anthropological and geological phenomenon known as the *char-chaporis* which is the shifting riverine islands and sandbars. These amphibious landscapes, which make up about 4–5% of Assam's landmass, are home to almost 2.5 million people, most of them are the Bengali speaking Muslim. They have developed a unique riverine culture based on being mentally strong, moving around the chars, and having a close relationship with water and river. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the char areas, transcending the simplistic dichotomy of land and water to investigate the intricate liquid geography that characterizes the region. The study examines the geomorphological formation of the chars by utilizing geological data, historical records, ethnographic insights, and uses primary data which are collected from the selected char villages, while tracing the sediment dynamics that consistently create and erode these islands seasonally. The focus of the study was on the practice of living with water, which includes the indigenous ways of adapting to a constantly changing landscape through architecture like dismantlable housing, raised platform for housing, agriculture (flood-synchronized cropping), and transportation (the boat economy). By analyzing the relationship between the fluvial environment, socio-economic and cultural identity, this study claims that the riverine culture of the Char areas of Assam is not merely a survival mechanism but a profound expression of resilience.

Index Terms **-** Riverine Culture, Resilience, Adaptations, Coping Mechanisms.

1. Introduction:

To discuss Assam, one must mention the Brahmaputra, known as Burha Luit (Old Luit) or Bor-Nodi (Great River) in Assamese. It is an ocean on wheels that divides the state into two almost equal parts; it determines life, livelihood and lifestyle (Thakkar & Saikia, 2013). But in the braided channels of this massive watercourse is a world seldom seen from the mainland: the chars. They are more than islands, however, ephemeral banks of mud and sand that have been deposited by the river as it receded following flood and then snatched back from the river sometimes within a generation. The areas of char are a point of human habitation but an area where definitions such “home,” “land,” “permanence” don’t readily apply. The question of geography is not where scenes are set but who plays them. A village shown on a map sketched in 2010 may turn out to be open water by 2020, or a new landmass where there had appeared to be deep channels. Miraculously, somehow, despite the poverty of that environment, close to 10% of the population of the state not only survived but has fashioned a very specialized culture for survival within it (Chakraborty, 2017). This riverine culture, believed to be amphibious in the deepest sense of the term, is

neither fully terrestrial nor aquatic but existing as an ecosystem all its own that meditates between one world and another.

Riverine culture shows how human communities are interconnected to fluvial systems, acting as social-ecological systems that can adapt to floods, droughts, and water availability (Folke, 2006; McGlynn et al., 2023). Concentrated and traditional ecological knowledge on river dynamics supports community-developed practices that preserve ecosystem functioning and protect river-dependent livelihoods (Berkes et al., 2000). In riverine cultures, human-river relationships go beyond physical risk management and use. They also involve intangible connections. Human well-being, spiritual fulfillment, cultural identity, and a deep sense of place are linked to specific flow conditions and seasonal hydrological rhythms. Floods, drought and erosion structure ritual calendars, festivals, and ceremonial practices in this cultural-spiritual context, turning water cycles into a governing force for communal cultural existence and spiritual connections with rivers. Hydrological rhythms sustain cultural ecosystem services including holy meanings, symbolic stories, and experiences that build identity and enhance communal relationships and moral obligations to riverine environments in many river-dependent communities. These relational values are becoming difficult to maintain due to environmental changes (Anderson et al., 2019).

Many study has been done on the Brahmaputra and its chars in terms of floods, erosion, and vulnerability, but most of which are on Assam's riverine habitats that treats char regions as dangerous or requiring administrative monitoring. But the relationship between cultural practices and livelihood issues has not been studied much. Therefore, this study is intrigued to know river-centric rituals, festivals, daily material and spatial adaptations like house construction, agricultural decisions, and mobility, and economic resilience strategies like migration, livelihood diversification, and community-based coping mechanisms across Brahmaputra valley chars (excluding Chapori).

2. Demography and the twin peril of the chars of Assam:

Contrary to the perception of isolated, poorly inhabited islands, the chars are abundant with life. As per the Char Areas Development, Government of Assam. (2004) report the population density in char regions is estimated at 690 individuals per square kilometer, above the Assam state average of 340. This substantial strain on land engenders a highly competitive atmosphere in which every inch of silt is disputed and exploited. According to Chakraborty (2017) and the Assam Human Development Report (2014), the demographic mix of the char regions is diverse. The predominant inhabitants of the char regions in Lower and Central Assam are Bengali-speaking Muslims, but the upper Brahmaputra Valley, including Majuli, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, is home to substantial indigenous communities like as the Mishings, as well as smaller groups of Bengali Hindus (Namasudras). The characters represent enclaves of severe poverty. The literacy rate ranges from 19% to 30%, much below the state average. More than 68% of the population is behind the poverty threshold. Physical isolation results in financial exclusion; banks are few, and institutional credit is almost absent, necessitating dependence on informal moneylenders (Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam, 2004; Chakraborty, 2017).

The inhabitants of the char regions in Assam mostly confront two threats resulting from the Brahmaputra: Baan (flood) and Gora-khahaniya (soil erosion). In the riverine char landscapes of the Brahmaputra, floods are perceived as both a considerable threat and an ecological need. Although high-intensity events can impair physical infrastructure and disrupt local economies, seasonally "normal" floods are essential for replenishing floodplain soils with nutrient-rich alluvial silt, thus improving fertility for crops like jute and rice and diminishing dependence on chemical fertilizers (Ahmed and Kalita, 2025).

Erosion, on the other hand, is an unequivocal catastrophe. It constitutes a permanent loss of space. The banks of the Brahmaputra consist of unstable alluvial material, readily eroded by the stream. A change in the river's thalweg can result in the rapid erosion of acres of land into the water within hours. The damage resulting from erosion amounts to several hundred crores annually. Riverbank erosion has been a significant problem for the past sixty years, affecting around 427,000 individuals. Since 1950, hectares of land have been eroded by the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, constituting 7.40% of the state's area (Government of Assam, 2022).

3. Research Objectives.

The study consists of two main objectives

1. To document and analyse how seasonal and long-term alterations in the Brahmaputra's flow and flooding patterns influence ritual practices, material culture, and indigenous knowledge systems in the char regions of Assam.
2. To investigate the influence of river morphodynamics on the livelihood patterns and economic resilience of riverine communities.

3. Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative, mixed-methods research design to address its twin objectives .Primary data were generated through focus group discussions (FGDs) with different socio-economic and gender groups, and semi-structured interviews with key informants such as community elders, religious specialists, local leaders, and knowledgeable practitioners of ritual and craft traditions. Ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and life-history interviews, was conducted across different agricultural and flood seasons to capture temporal variation in cultural practices, risk perceptions, and adaptive strategies linked to erosion, accretion, and displacement.

These primary materials were complemented by a systematic review of existing research papers, reputed books, peer-reviewed journals, and government reports on the Brahmaputra, floodplain livelihoods, and riverine cultures, as well as relevant flood and river-change records, in order to situate local experiences within wider scholarly and policy debates. Qualitative data from FGDs, key informant interviews, and ethnographic observations were coded thematically to trace how environmental flux informs belief systems, ritual calendars, material culture, and intergenerational knowledge, and to interpret how char residents understand and negotiate risk, loss, and continuity in their everyday lives. Triangulation across different qualitative sources and secondary literature enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed the study to link cultural and economic dimensions of “fluid lives” in the Brahmaputra valley in an integrated manner.

Analysis and Discussion

4. Riverine Cosmology, Culture, and Adaptive Life-Worlds in the Chars:

a. Ritual Life and the Spiritualization of Riverine Flux:

The environmental variability of the Brahmaputra has intensely influenced the belief systems and ritual practices of the communities inhabiting in its Chars. In the absence of physical stability, the river is deified as an eternal, albeit unpredictable, force. This spiritualization of the riverine terrain allows the dwellers to process the shock of loss and the uncertainty of the future through collective ceremony and narrative (specially in Majuli) (also see, Saikia, 2019).

Ethnographic studies among chars also indicates that these perceptions are underpinned by an extended cultural and ritual complex that animates the Brahmaputra’s hydrological rhythms. The monsoon season itself (usually June–July) not only marks an ecological and agricultural boundary but is also a ritual one, marking occasions where preparations are made in the form of offerings to river gods or making ritual markings, practices that rely on an ontology which regards rivers as intentional agents who require respect and pacification. Among the Mising (Mishing) people, who inhabit numerous riverine villages and chars in Upper Assam, the flood season is an occasion to invite the restorative forces of the river in: they welcome fertile alluvial deposits, which are expected after inundation, a sentiment echoed in both their flood-resistant stilted houses and harvest celebrations. Rituals associated with the termination of the flood season and start of cultivation, such as pre-sowing festival Ali-Ai-Linga are explicitly synchronized to hydrological changes, this forming the ritual calendar keyed onto rise and fall of water in river system rather than to an abstract chronological timescale.

This spiritualization of riverine flux informs not solely religious practice and agriculture but also modes of mobility, sociability, and quotidian planning on the chars. Households often schedule visits to relations, participation in festivals and other kinds of social travel at times the river is high enough for quick boat transport and when agricultural labour needs in their home are low. Access to markets, schools, health care and government offices is critically tied to country boats and ferries and becomes especially constrained during low water levels when people walk long distances over exposed sand bars or eroding riverbanks. Thus, both work commitments and holidays/vacations, or kinship visits are organized around the seasonal

pulse of the Brahmaputra, wherein all about every big decision when to sow, when to pray, when to travel and when to rest is still calibrated with the river's shifting mood. The result is a riverine life-world in which environmental variability is not simply coped with, but ritually and socially absorbed, turning the vicissitudes of flood and flow into spiritual-laden and practically negotiated beat or rhythm to everyday living.

During my fieldwork across the chars, it is also found that residents in many chars do not necessarily perceive floods as a disaster, but rather "a blessing from the river," especially if inundation does not go beyond certain moderate seasonal level of flooding. Yearly floods deposit virgin alluvial soil on lower lands of farmland, which, in their opinion enrich soil fertility and enhance crop output in the next season, even wipes out wickedness from the land. This emic perspective is consistent with studies of floodplain agriculture, as those areas flooded with alluvia containing enough nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and micronutrients to naturally restore soil fertility provide the ecological basis for high levels of agricultural productivity in riverine ecosystems. This also mirrors the "flood pulse concept," which suggests that recurring, predictable floods in river–floodplain systems play a primary ecological role in the transfer of nutrients and the regulation of primary productivity rather than being a uniformly negative event (Junk *et al*., 1989). In spite of the view expressed by village residents that the years without floods are years in which crop yields are poor and people's financial condition is not very good, they also distinguish these "normal" floods as an entirely different phenomenon from extreme, high-magnitude events: the latter unfold as a clearly destructive and catastrophic force, with devastating effects for livelihoods and agriculture more easily distinguished; a contrast consistent with wider evidence around the severe crop and livelihoods losses associated with intensified flooding flows in Assam.

b. Syncretic Traditions and Nature Worship:

The religious context of the char areas is marked by a mix of local animistic practices and established religions including Hinduism and Islam. In earlier times, tribes such as Bodos, Mishings and Karbis worshipped nature calling it the main deity where rivers, forests and soil were considered sacred. With the advent of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, these animistic beliefs are not lost but transformed into a syncretic religious culture (Phukan 2025). For example, when erosion becomes intense, islanders pray collectively to the river Brahmaputra to stop it from destroying their homes, epitomising a relationship of affection and hatred, depending on whether the river is behaving (Saikia, 2019).

A major event in the spiritual calendar of this myth is the Ashokastami being celebrated on eighth day of waxing moon that symbolizes a common psychological belief that here all gods and goddesses gather under water (Mahanta, 2025). The holy bath, or 'gangasnan', is a mystic purification of the human being with the cosmic cycle of the river. So do celebrations aimed at the river's monsoon beat, such as the Ambubachi Mela at Guwahati's Kamakhya Temple, which commemorate the Earth's fertility symbolized by her annual menstrual cycle; a time when the temple shuts for three days to acknowledge creation itself.

c. The Cultural Fabric: A Syncretic Tapestry of Faith and Ecology:

The cultural identity of the char dweller in central and lower Assam is a complex weave of Islamic faith and the riverine ecology of Assam. It is a culture of loss and longing that lives on tenterhooks because the peril of displacement perpetually looms, and the profound spiritual hope needed to endure for generations through shifting sands. Although the population is almost wholly Muslim, their practice incorporates jet (Sufism) and a local form of Vaishnav practices. This has been no mere historical artifact; rather it is a dynamic adjustment that facilitated their acculturation within the larger Assamese cultural realm, even while retaining their distinct ways of life (Hussain, 2019).

Spiritual environment Fakirapanth and Marfati are two other important elements of spiritual panorama. Several Sufi orders or panths have Their prominent presence like Fakirapanth, Paglapanth. These sects privilege the spiritual direct over fixed orthodoxy and frequently draw from Assamese devotional concepts. In the sonic landscape of the chars, characters like Krishna or Ram, Hari or Allah come together in a vernacularization of Islam that is specially designed for the watery matrix in folk forms such as kobigaan (lyrical poetry) and magongeet (agricultural songs) (Begum, 2020).

Bhatiali and Shari gaan (boat race songs) form an essential part of this tradition, which also links the community with the rivers. Bhatiali, whose very name means 'of the downstream' is a song that reverberates with languor and the soul's yearning (Arora, 2016). Its notes are long drawn out, and its lingering, same as

the flowing waves of Brahmaputra. These are frequently surrendering to God's will, for the boatman is aware of the sweep and scale of the river in comparison with human effort.

d. Material Culture Adaptation to Flooding:

What one call material culture of the char areas, including the architecture and craft tradition, is not a mere aesthetic expression but a technology response to the river's annual flood regime. The char dwellers have built up a composite of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) to enable them to occupy an environment that would be untoward for normal mainland dwellers (Das et al., 2009). The formation of a special "transient architecture" to easily disassemble is the most obvious expression of resilience in Char areas.

In contrast to an inland preconception of poor huts as experimental (temporary) structures, in the Char, such dwellings are understood as a deliberate precaution against riverbank erosion. These facilities are "dismountable" in nature, and the roofing/walls are made of CI (Corrugated Iron) sheets, placed on bamboo/wooden frame with nut-bolt connection (dovetail) and not nails so that they can be easily dismantled when needed (Chakraborty, 2017). Designed to leave no trace of their existence, these "mobile homes" make a whole settlement disappear anytime that erosion encroaches so close that within a few hours' families are able take apart and stack, on boats, the entire house—pillars and roofing included—to reestablish it elsewhere (Das, 2023). In this chaotic riverbank environment, the pucca structure is considered a weakness as it means that capital has been lost once and for all whenever riverbank collapses.

The char settlements bear a conspicuous architectural deviation from the other riverine tribes of Assam. The Mishing of Upper Assam is recognized for building 'Chang Ghars' as a traditional flood-adaptive house. These houses (Ghars) are constructed over bamboo/wooden stilts at 2 m to 2.5 m off the ground level so as to keep the habitation above known levels of floods (Aaranyak, 2009). The structure is able to bend but not break, a principle of resilience that only recently has the disaster reduction establishment began to acknowledge (Bharadwaj, 2023). Inside too, the internal arrangement of the chang-ghar is functional. Above the central fireplace, three raised shelves store items such as apong (traditional alcohol) at first shelf level, food at second shelf level and seed grain to be maintained dry for the next planting season in third shelf levels (Bharadwaj, 2023). This system is portable; the house could be taken down and relocated, if the river takes another course or the bank starts to erode in a few days.

On the other hand, the char residents of lower and central Assam, who are predominately Bengali speaking Muslim have evolved various housing adjustments to survive the annual rush of floodwaters, in an attempt to preserve more than just their houses but also grain storage, animals and homestead assets. One common method is called plinth raising (Uzzaman, 2014), in which families build tall earthen platforms and raise their houses on top of them, several feet higher than the previous year's floodwater level, so that water does not seep into the living space. The soil is consolidated and stabilized, and grass or other vegetation are planted on the slopes, creating a dual purpose raised plinth that operates as much like a flood-safe homestead as it does productive space for kitchen gardens and fruit trees. In addition to these household-level measures, numerous villages allocate collective labor through the construction of community bhiti or raised village platforms that function as shared sanctuaries during peak floods, accommodating several families and their animals as well as essential goods in a higher location, which remains relatively safe. These elevated community spaces are being increasingly buttressed and formalized by state-funded flood management programs: raised multi-purpose platforms and shelters have been constructed in chronically flood-prone districts such as Barpeta (in central Assam) that can become everyday forms of infrastructure year-round before becoming critical, needful household support during inundation.

e. Boat-Making and River Lines of Life:

Life in the char lands, the boat-ride is an indispensable aspect of life in the char areas as people continue to use water transport for trade, education and during incidents of medical emergencies (Poverty Alleviation). Villages like Salmora and Borgayan in Majuli are known for their tradition of building boats, a living "intangible cultural heritage", which dates back to the Ahom regime (Dey, 2021). The craft of choosing the correct wood—by using Sal, Ajhar or Gunsiri—and calculating the perfect construction procedures results in boats capable of transporting up to 35tons of goods. For these communities, boat building is a "living culture," not simply a skill but an identity and way of life in the face of a landscape on which ground is literally moving (Dey, 2021; Chakraborty, 2017). Their dependence on boats has also resulted in specific 'amphibious mobility,' where the river becomes the main highway (Das, 2023).

f. Ethno-Meteorology and Navigational Heuristics: Local knowledge System:

Ethnographic study shows complex local knowledge systems with which char populations comprehend and articulate river processes. Rather than perceiving flooding as an event that occurs with some probability or random, communities' express systematic knowledge about the causes of floods, predictability of seasonal occurrence and the relationships between events in their local areas and those occurring upstream. For the Mishing, for example, oral histories of flood elevation and erosion events and individual memories going back generations are preserved. These indigenous knowledge systems of flood forecasting and water evacuation not only support traditional management of disasters but also help predict probability of floods to plan for evacuation and agriculture timing.

This understanding is generations in the making as fed by direct practice and experience with the river, empowering to forecast environmental change and resource management which even formal sciences are just now starting to get a feel of (Das et al., 2009; Detroja & Kanhare, 2025). Elders interpret subtle interactive shifts in fauna; for instance, the upward movement of ants carrying eggs (Leptogenys processionalis) is universally documented as a precursor to imminent inundation (Bordoloi & Muzaddadi, 2015). They also watch the color and the type of sediment in the river; soil sediments seen downstream before monsoon indicate that rains are going to be very heavy (Dey, 2012). Duration of observation of number of bird nesting and behavior of some aquatic species as well as intensity (say, ten days abnormal rain fall) during early stage per season are utilized to generate community-based evacuation protocol (Das et al., 2009).

The riverine transport network also relies completely on the "embodied geography" of the boatmen (Majhis). Without modern navigation aids, such as GPS, these men depend on their ability to read the surface hydrodynamics. They have a sort of instinctive sense of being able to tell by the coloring and rippling of the water—which may not suit our A B C—whether it be is navigable deep channel or dangerous submerged sandbar (Dubochar). Such hydro-morphological literacy, specific to a region like Assam, is vital for ensuring safe navigation through the volatile monsoon-time waters and forms a terrain of practice-based resilience in a transforming fluvial territory (Das, 2023; Dey, 2021).

5. Adaptation to Environmental Shocks: Erosion and Asset Loss

Char dwellers' economic life is characterized by a high degree of vulnerability and hence the need for an extreme level of resilience. Char areas are one of the most deprived regions of Assam (Assam Human Development Report, 2014) and some estimates suggest that about 80 per cent of population in these areas live below poverty line—double the rate for the state as a whole (Ahmed and Kalita, 2025). The "intractable poverty" is the result of this loss cycle; it causes a persistent and severe poverty, which means that every year floods or erosion destroy homes, cattle as well as crops standing in the field at this time, households experience several major setbacks and must ready to start life again on an economic basis (Haque & Ahmed, 2025).

a. Agrarian Adaptation Strategies:

Char economy is largely agrarian based as more than 83% households are farmers (Saikia et al., 2025). The agricultural year of the char-dwelling households on the Brahmaputra is organized not so much along Gregorian months as along the annual cycle of flood, sedimentation, and recession. It is the seasonal replenishment of fresh alluvium deposited by annual flood pulses, locally called poli, which farmers consider improving the productivity potential (organic matter and nutrient status) under sandy loam soils. Under this hydrological regime, cropping is generalized along two major seasons: summer (Kharif) and winter (Rabi), which not only provides foundation for the household food security but also cash crops to fill in banks.

Cultivation during the summer monsoon Kharif is highly uncertain because a narrow window before peak monsoon flooding must be found to put crops in. In the season of the char dwellers does also gives maximum importance to produce of, jute (pat), ahu rice (autumn rice), Boro rice (summer rice) and, maize. After the receding of flood water by, say October, chars stabilize and the deposited moisture rich sandy loam is there with a bearing soil condition for intensive Rabi crop (Kalita, 2023; Ahmed and Kalita, 2025). The post-flood period is commonly referred to by the farming community as the best part of the agricultural year, due to minimal risk and larger spectrum of cropping possibilities. With the ground stable and cans accessible, families divide plots among oilseeds, pulses and vegetables. Char soils texture and drainage

properties are ideally suited to rapeseed–mustard, several pulses like lentil, black gram and winter vegetables (potato, pumpkin and brinjal) as well (Kalita 2023). In several chars, mustard, in particular has emerged as the predominant Rabi oilseed, interlocked with paddy and pulses in crop rotations such as rice–mustard/toria or rice–mustard–maize.

Maize: This is a newly introduced cash crop into the study villages, and its cultivation is recently taken up by almost all households in both Kharif and Rabi calendars. This has been corroborated by state-level data, from which it is evident that maize has emerged as an important cereal and cash crop in the State of Assam (Kalita & Bahadur, 2026), with area and production increasing over time and the crop promoted for both Kharif and Rabi seasons on rice-fallow lands since of its low water requirement and ability to grow under upland followed grading into medium-land conditions (Kalita & Bora, 2019). In char households, maize is produced mainly for sale (not home consumption) in response to increasing demand from the feed and Agro-processing sector —poultry and livestock— while crop residues and by-products provide a basis for small ruminant holding/netting activities (rear make–eat sell linkages), thus linking up-field cropping and diversified livelihood portfolios as in the case of the Brahmaputra valley.

b. Livelihood Diversification Strategies:

Diversified livelihood is an important factor in resilience capacity of the dwellers. The analysis at household levels in char areas depict that income does not flow only from agriculture. The study of Saikia et al. (2025) reported that 53.8% of households were involved in at least two livelihood strategies and 65.7% combined farming occupation with non-farming work (Saikia et al., 2025). The trend is in line with other evidence from the Brahmaputra chars where agriculture is still the dominant occupation for some two-thirds to four-fifths of households, yet it has been augmented by livestock and fisheries, casual wage labour and petty trade as secondary income streams. In micro-studies carried out by Masoom & Khatoniar (2025) in sample villages, for example, 70 out of every 100 households cite farming as their principal form of livelihood while only 9 mention animal husbandry and 2 owe employment to the government service sector—vividly illustrating the scant availability of productive positions in the formal economy on these riverine islands. Official surveys of the Directorate of Char Areas Development (2003-04) also detail that char people are some of the poorest and most livelihood-insecure groups within Assam and call for non-farm employment and credit access to be strengthened alongside agriculture. In this situation, diversification becomes a kind of informal insurance: precluding flood or sand deposit a loss of main crop can be compensated at least temporarily with earnings from day labour, seasonal migration, riverine market support service supply, small trade or fishery. Animal husbandry is also an important component of this risk-reducing mix, offering both food security and an asset base that can be capitalized in periods of emergency (Saikia et al., 2025). Despite the specificity of this particular context in Assam, these findings are consistent with international evidence from smallholder areas of Nigeria, Ethiopia and Bangladesh, where quant studies repeatedly demonstrate that households that derive their income from more diverse sources have both significantly increased food security and adoption of improved agricultural practices, supporting the conceptualization of livelihood diversification as a key pathway to resilience in flood-prone rural environments (Tasnim et al., 2025).

c. **Migration Patterns and Risk Distribution:**

Seasonal and permanent migration is a significant part of the livelihoods of char households. When there is no source of income in the chars, no work in the agricultural field or land is depleted due to soil casting during flood, or any other reasons, members of these families often migrate to urban centers such as Guwahati or even leave the state altogether to work as daily wage laborers in construction, transportation, informal sectors. These migrants remit money which is necessary for the survival of the family that remains and to facilitate reconstruction of new houses on different chars (Dekaraja & Mahanta, 2022). But such migration is also a “forced” one rather than voluntary, where the loss of major agrarian asset (land) makes no other option for existence survival (Ahmed, 2025; Dekaraja & Mahanta, 2021).

In another study by Kumar and Das (2019) found that, in western Assam, migration propensity also significantly associated with land loss due to erosion, number of household members, education level and proximity to urban areas. Households who suffer land losses from erosion are much more likely to send family members out for temporary migration. Migration itself is seasonal, with maximum outmigration occurring in the agriculture off-season and in-migration associated with monsoon onset and resumed agricultural work. This seasonally varying migration pattern allows households to stay involved in

agriculture while generating additional income from urban wage labor. There are longer-term migrations as well, with certain char population settling in other non-char areas, and even some within urban locations or improved less flood-prone non-char agricultural land. Yet study shows that people even in established urban households maintain links to their villages, sending remittances, returning for festivals and rituals, and maintaining char-based language, diet and culture.

Here, in this context, we see as migration is one that "distributes risks" across geographic space – by keeping some household members in rural areas and others in urban ones, and by rotating between those involved in agricultural versus wage work – households are sharing the economic risk rather than being wholly dependent on subsistence farming within an environment prone to risk.

6. Findings:

The local life in the Brahmaputra's char areas is structured by a unique riverine cosmology where the river is spiritualized as a potent, ambivalent deity, and seasonal flood pulses are re-conceptualized believed ritually and emotively as ecological necessity and moral force rather than solely disasters. Religion just as much as culture in the chars are deeply syncretic, combining Islam with vestiges of Sufi and Vaishnav devotion alongside old-world nature worship (this is faith in hybrid form), apparent in rituals such as festivals, collective prays during erosion, and also a wealth of musical genres like bhatiali or boat songs that really tie community identity to the river's rhythms. Material culture and settlements are extremely flexible in relation to environmental variability, with collapsible mobile houses, stilted chang-ghars building plinths 1.5–3.0 meters above ground, and raised homesteads floors/ platforms operating as local flood-proof technology that preserves lives, grain production by availing dry-surfaces for paddy drying; livestock protection; sometimes even away from the pull push impacts of predatory human communities here-and-there within struggling territories marked poetically colour-coded under monsoon water nuances endlessly shiftable terrain. The everyday mobility and economic life of the itinerant people is organized around the river as chief transport corridor, based on specialized boat-building know-how and navigational skills, ethno-meteorological forecasting and fine-grained reading of water, animals and sediments enabling residents to predict floods or navigate dangerous channels without modern instruments.

Economically, char dwellers are characterized by chronic poverty and repeated asset loss due to flooding and erosion, but they adapt through flood-synchronized agrarian systems that take advantage of nutrient-rich alluvium, strategic diversification of crops (such as recent adoption of maize as a cash crop), intensive livelihood diversification in farming, livestock production, fisheries, casual wage employment, petty trade and small-scale migration-based income. In this way, seasonal and long-term migration becomes a key risk-spreading strategy; redistributing household labour between char and urban destinations in an attempt to generate remittance revenues for rebuilding back on the char (as well as sending savings home), while also making some provision for the development of multi-locational families who continue to see themselves as culturally-rooted within chars, even as they grapple with loss of property rights and economic precarity. Above all, however, the section contends that char societies have evolved a complex layering of approaches to adversity in which ritual life, syncretic religion, architecture, agriculture, mobility systems and knowledge spheres are different meshed responses to "living with water," and claims that this logic needs to be built into - rather than elided or ignored through - mainland-oriented policies for the region.

7. Conclusion and the Need for Context-Sensitive Policy:

The riverine culture of Assam chars bears testimony to human resilience. It is a society built on sand, and it holds. But the char dwellers have developed a way of life that makes room for the radical uncertainty of the Brahmaputra. They build houses you can take with you, charts for the circuits that run through every terrain, and lyric meditations on the strength it takes to keep dreaming. These towns and communities don't just survive the river but have evolved into a highly sophisticated, multi-layered culture which mirrors its essence. Their rituals worship their power, their architecture reflects its versatility, and their economy is a lesson in risk-freeing. But now that extreme weather events are becoming more common, and the wrath of the Brahmaputra is growing, those lessons from the chars, on living with water, adaptive architecture, on collective survival have implications not just for Assam but for a world increasingly in peril from rising waters. The char culture demonstrates that even if the land is gone, people persist.

In the future, interventions will have to be based on the "intrinsic logics of the territory," rather than attempts by conventional mainland logics to shape a highly fluid landscape. The analysis of char institution by Adaptive Capacity Wheel (ACW) reveals that the formal arrangements are mostly relevant only in a limited

way as it does not take into account the particular environmental and social contexts of riparian communities (Saikia et al, 2025).

Some of the policy recommendations for the region include:

1. Soil Erosion Management and Rehabilitation: Going beyond just providing temporary compensation to flood affected people towards permanent erosion control measures through development of rehabilitation programs for 'environmental refugees'.
2. Infrastructure Innovation: Building public buildings like schools and clinics in the chang-ghar model, which are operational even during floods.
3. Financial Inclusion: Making microfinance and SHG networks robust to act as hedge against asset loss.
4. Cultural Barriers: Developing locally driven tourism models that preserve the sanctity of traditions and spread financial thanks to local proprietors.

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