



Char residents in Assam whose life is a constant struggle weathering nature, prejudice and poverty.
(Photo: Abdul Kalam Azad)

Char Residents of Assam

Abdul Kalam Azad

Reviewed by Munirul Hussain, Gorky Chakraborty

Forty three year old Baharuddin Ali is among one of the estimated 2.5 million people living in char or river island areas of Assam. The way mighty Brahmaputra changes its shape and route; Ali's life has also been shaped and re-shaped over the last few decades. As the char he lives in is susceptible to unruly floods and destructive erosion, his life is also vulnerable to state sponsored persecution, unending cycle of violence and multi-pronged exclusion. On 30th July 2018, more than four million people found themselves missing from the final draft National Register of Citizens (NRC)¹ and the state effectively pushed them to the verge of losing their citizenship right – a right to have rights! The representation of char dweller like Ali in the 4 million excluded is speculated to be higher in proportion to their share the state's population². This is not the first instance when Ali and his ancestors find themselves doubted to be alien to this land and ousted from the political community.

Ali lives with his seven member family in a remote but fertile char of river Brahmaputra called Fuhorotoli in Darrang district of middle Assam. In 2017, more than seven hundred families living in Fuhorotoli and nearby chars were forcefully evicted by government³ in league with the members of vigilante right wing groups like RSS and Pra-

brajan Birodhi Manch. Ali and his villagers were branded as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh by the right wing groups and the state backed this claim with the inhuman action of evicting them from their homes and by destroying their crops. Their houses were burnt down; crop fields were destroyed using elephants, tractors and earth movers. In the bone chilling winter, they were rendered homeless and forced to live in a makeshift camp set up on the bank of the river. Neither did the government provide any emergency relief to the displaced char dwellers, nor did they allow other organizations to carry out relief operations in the area.

The cycle of violence and displacement started much before Ali was even born. Ali's grand-father Mafiz Uddin Mia settled in Deorikuchi area of the Barpeta district during the initial years of the twentieth century. In the year 1933, his grand-father got the land allotment (Annual Khiraj Patta) from the then British rulers. But the post-partition riot⁴ (Barua, 1962) in Assam rendered him homeless. Mia went back to East Pakistan and came back to Assam in 1964 as a refugee. However, as he couldn't settle in the earlier place, he built a new home in the flood affected Bharbhita in Barpeta district. After few years Ali's grand-father died but the cycle of displacement continued. His father Mokched Ali lost his land to erosion and came to know that cheap land is available in Sipajhar circle of Darrang district. Along with many other families his father migrated to Fuhorotoli and settled in the current place.

In 1983, during the peak of Assam Agitation, Ali was a young kid. An estimated 1000 char dwellers were killed by the agitators in Chaolkhuwa (Sarma, 2012), a few kilometres from Fuhorotoli char. Many of the victims of Chao-

1 Assam: Some four million left out of final India NRC draft list, Al Jazeera 30th July 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/4-million-people-left-final-draft-nrc-list-assam-180730044002717.html>

2 In Assam's Mangaldoi, struggle to get listed on NRC emerges as major poll issue; Muslims determined to vote in large numbers, First Post 20th March 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/in-assams-mangaldoi-struggle-to-get-listed-on-nrc-emerges-as-major-poll-issue-muslims-determined-to-vote-in-large-numbers-6289511.html>

3 Amanbiyo ucchedor birodwe xorob birodhi, GanaAdhikar 7th February <http://ganaadhikar.com/ganaadhikar/07022017/page1.html>

4 In 1950, Assam witnessed a communal riot; a large number of Muslims were driven away to East Pakistan. Under Nehru-Liaquat pact 53000 of them came back to Assam.

lkhuwa Massacre also affected by the brutal eviction drive in 2017.

Char people are one tenth of Assam's total population but living on little over four percent of state's total geographical area. Though the fertile land makes agriculture their prime occupation however, the perennial flood and erosion the vicious cycle of poverty continues. Since most of the char people belong to the Miya Muslim or Bengali origin Muslim community, apart from the geographical exclusion from the mainland, they face discrimination, persecution...because of their religious-cultural identity. The recurrent violence, displacement and the high level of exclusion has effectively kept Ali and his community within the vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and poor living and health conditions. This chapter is an attempt to understand the lives of char people and their multiple vulnerabilities. This chapter is built upon the data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions conducted across the char areas of seven districts i.e. Dhubri, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup (R), Morigaon and Darrang and a survey conducted in three char villages of Sipajhar under Darrang district. Data collection was done from January 2016 to December 2018.

The Geographical Peculiarities of Char

Assam, one of the eight states in India's northeastern region has a geographical area of 78,438 sq.km with a population of 312.06 lakh⁵. One of its uniqueness lies in its geography; marked by one of the world's biggest rivers – the Brahmaputra. As a giant water body, the river is blessed with significant choreography of nature, one of which is called 'Char'– the riverine islands. These chars or river islands are the result of complex ecological processes of Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna plains of the Indian sub-continent (Lahihi-Dutt, 2014). During monsoon, the flood water of rivers carries sand, silt and other suspended particles to give rise to "almond" shaped chars. Because the chars are created under the flood environment, the height of the char is lower than the height of the highest flood (Bhagabati, 2001).

5 Directorate of Economics and Statistics – Govt. of Assam, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEW-jqsLXuJHiAhWC8HMBHTKbD0kQFjAAegQ-IAxAAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdes.assam.gov.in%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fswf_utility_folder%2Fdepartments%2Fecostat_medhassu_in_oid_3%2Fportal%2Flevel_1%2Ffiles%2Feconomic_survey2014-15.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2luujGaekUqMtdRxdHPjSg

Among various major braided rivers in the world, the Brahmaputra is one of the largest and the most active river (Basar, Thian, & Gan, 2012). A braided channel is characterized by numerous chars and mid-channel sandbars which separate the flow into several channels, and they tend to widen the river through bank erosion. This process of river widening and the sediment load due to eroding banks enhance the continuous formation of sandbars. As a result, clusters of sandbars could eventually merge to form larger and more permanent islands, or chars (Sarker, Huque, Alam, & Koudstaal, 2003) and the abandonment of any outflanking channel can convert islands into attached chars. The development and abandonment of channels are very common phenomena in a braided river like Brahmaputra. A river becomes braided when the incoming sediment load exceeds the sediment-carrying capacity of the flow, resulting in an aggrading channel bed characterized by islands or locally known as "chars", and sandbars. The sediment particles of a braided river tend to settle down to the river bottom due to gravity, but may remain suspended if the upward turbulent currents manage to overcome the gravitational force (Alam, et al., 2007), leading to a significant amount of suspended fine sediment load in the river. When the flow velocity decreases, the sediment suspended in the water deposits on the river bed and river banks, a process known as 'River Bed Aggradations' or 'Bank Accretion'. The deposited sediment reduces the effective channel cross-section, resulting in the formation of sandbars or chars.

Gorky Chakraborty (2012) describes *Char* as 'mid-channel bars' that are an integral part of the fluvial process of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries in Assam. The chars in Brahmaputra valley are extremely unstable and can be wiped out by erosion during recurrent floods (Chakraborty, 2012). *Chars* are also remarkably different from wetlands such as marsh, fen, peat etc. The delta mouth, inter-fluvial areas and *haor* basins are the closest equivalent to chars (Lahihi-Dutt, 2014).

In Assam, char areas extend over 3608 sq km, or 4.6 per cent of the geographical area of Assam. These char areas are distributed over the entire course of the river Brahmaputra from Sadiya in the east to Dhubri in the west and distributed across 23 sub-divisions of 14 districts, with 2251 villages in 299

Gaon Panchayats with an estimated population of 25 lakhs.⁶ Though the char has less than five percent of total geographical area of the state, it accommodates nearly ten percent of Assam's total population. The population density in char area is more than double that of the state average. In the char areas population density is 690 persons per sq.km against the state average of 340 persons per sq.km.(Chakraborty 2014). Char dwellers are hard-working and painstakingly laborious, rich in cultural heritage and have adapted effectively over the years to adverse situations like floods, erosion, storms etc.

Every year flood causes huge damage to crops, lives and properties. The annual flood water from river Brahmaputra and its 28 northern and 18 southern tributaries and river Barak affects $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total number of districts (Phukan, 2005). The intensity of flood and erosion has terribly increased in the last few decades. The weather has become more unpredictable, impact of flood and erosion has been more destructive.⁷

For char areas, erosion is the bigger problem than floods. According to an official report, the river Brahmaputra eroded 4,29,657 hectares (Monirul Hussain and Pradip Phanjoubam, 2007 – an amount of land nearly thrice of total land area of New Delhi) of prime agricultural land. Roughly, 7% of the land in the plains has been eroded between 1951-2000 (Monirul Hussain and Pradip Phanjoubam, 2007). The Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG)'s study estimated that 30 lakhs people has been displaced by erosion in 50 years (*ibid*). Quoting Assam Water Resource Department, Gorky Chakraborty wrote “the average annual damage since 1954 has been over Rs 124 crore, estimated average annual erosion rate has been 8,000 hectares, which have affected more than 90,700 families spread over 2,534 villages” (Chakraborty, *The Char Dwellers of Assam: Flowing River, Floating People*, 2012).

6 Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03 of Char Areas of Assam conducted by Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam.

7 Curse of the Brahmaputra: Assam Drowns Every Year and Rest of India Turns a Blind Eye, 18th July 2017, CNN News18 <http://www.news18.com/news/india/assam-floods-brahmaputra-curse-1464781.html> Last accessed on 2nd October 2017

The extent of flood and erosion in char area due to their location, is naturally higher than the plain area. Since the height of the char is never greater than the height of highest flood, the char areas suffer from devastating flood and erosion. There is no data on the level of devastation in char areas or the plight of the flood and erosion affected char dwellers (Chakraborty, *The 'Ubiquitous' Bangladeshis*, 2012). However, a series of micro studies conducted by a few researchers revealed massive destruction and displacement of char dwellers. The findings of one of such micro study (Ahmed S. F., 2016) conducted in Barpeta district revealed that during 1989-98 when no high intensity flood was reported in Assam, 45% of the total households of the chars were affected by flood and 51% of total land was washed away by erosion in the surveyed char area. Similar study, in another char in the river Beki (a tributary of the Brahmaputra), over a period of 25 years (1980-2004) revealed that 77% of the surveyed households were affected by erosion and 94% of their land was lost (Chakraborty, *The Char Dwellers of Assam: Flowing River, Floating People*, 2012). Another study by Seikh Faruk Ahmed found that on an average approximately 16 bighas of land property was lost by each family in the riverbank erosion since 1960 in the southern part of Barpeta district. People lost properties in many other forms also. They lost cows, goats, sheep, hens and ducks, boats, house buildings of concrete, tins and thatch, etc. Moreover, much-public and community property like school buildings, temples, masjids, market places, etc., were also lost in the river erosion (Ahmed S. F., 2016).

Who lives in Char?

As per the 2002-03 socio-economic survey conducted by Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam, there were 24,90,097 people living in the char areas across 14 districts. It is obvious that the population has increased substantially during the last 15 years, since the survey. An estimated 18 lakhs people out of the entire char population (based on 2002-03 survey data) are Muslims of Bengali origin, commonly known as Miya Muslims⁸ and the

8 The Bengal origin Muslims of Assam has been identified by many nomenclatures like immigrant Muslims, Na-Axomiya Muslims, Charuwa Muslim, Bengali Muslims, Bengali Speaking Muslims, Bengali origin Muslim etc. However,

remaining little more than one-fourth (¼) belongs to other communities like Mishing, Deori, Sonowal, Kochari, Nepali, Bengali Hindu among others. Other than Majuli, hardly any caste Hindu lives in char areas. A small number of indigenous Deshi Muslims also live in char areas of Dhubri district of western Assam (Hussain I., Collection, 2016). Today, an estimated 7 million Assamese speaking Miya Muslims live in Assam (Ahmed H. U., 2014) and one-third of all Assamese speaking Miya Muslims live in the char areas of Assam whose forefathers migrated to Assam from Myamansing, Pabna, Rongpur and other districts in erstwhile Eastern Bengal province of British India and present day Bangladesh. They were facilitated to migrate into Assam under certain historical conditions.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century a large number of Bengali peasants, mostly Muslims, migrated to Assam from the over populated provinces of Bengal in British India. By this time, with the motivation of increased tax base for colonial administration, modern enclave economy like tea, oil and coal flourished in Assam and resulted in a sharp increase in the demand for food produced for the market. The productive use of 'wastelands' led to the colonial policy of facilitating migration of peasants to Assam (Baruah, 2009). In the initial years of migration, it was reported "The men generally came first to secure the land and build houses and then the families followed. About eighty five per cent were Muslims and fifteen per cent were Hindus" (Kar, 1990). In 1841, a British military officer Maj. John Butler visited and described Assam as "it seemed totally devoid of man, beasts, or birds; a death-like stillness everywhere prevailed" (Butler, 1855). Despite availability of cultivable land, Brahmaputra Valley was witnessing stagnation in the production of food-grain. In the last decade of nineteenth century, the valley witnessed increase in food prices, with many starvation deaths being reported. Riots burst out against the food-grain hoarders in Nowgong in 1896. The slow population growth

the community has accepted Assamese as their mother tongue almost a century back as part of their assimilation process with the greater Assamese society. Recently, there has been an assertion from the community identifying themselves as Assamese speaking Miya Muslims; this author also identifies himself as Assamese speaking Miya Muslim. Professor Sanjib Baruah also identifies the community as Miya Muslim.

and epidemic of *kala azar* was one of the important among other reasons of the retarded agricultural growth in the region (Guha, 2014). Historian Amalendu Guha wrote "Had there been no continuous immigration, the population would have gone down" (ibid).

Being sparsely populated, rich in natural resources and large tracts of empty and fertile land soon motivated the colonial administrators to bring large number of people from other parts of British India, including the Bengali Muslims. An Indian Civil Servant officer, W.W. Hunter suggested that four millions immigrants should be received and settled in the province which would immensely benefit the over populated parts of India from which they might come (Hunter, 1879). Historically Bengal was much more densely populated compared to Assam. Census data of 1901 reveals that the Bengal districts like Myamansingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rongpur had a population density of 630, 776, 599 and 595 respectively. On the other hand, during the same year the districts of Assam i.e. Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon and Darrang had a population density of 116, 154, 128 and 100 respectively.⁹

The major factors behind the changing behavior were mainly inhuman atrocities of *zamindars* on the landless peasants (Consequences of Permanent Settlement in Bengal), emergence of railways and the persuasive approach of British. The British Raj introduced the Rs. 5/- family ticket¹⁰ for the immigrants to come and settle in large waste lands of Assam (Sheikh, 1998).

However, persistent effort of the British administrators, inhuman atrocities of *zamindars* in Bengal and the conducive environment in Assam including openness to welcome the migrants by the host community in Assam eventually made the effort successful (Ahmed S. Z., 2005). To ease out the migration process, the British government appointed three Colonization Officers in Nagaon, Barpeta and Mangaldoi respectively. Additional Sub-Deputy Collectors were also appointed to look after the issues of newly migrated peasants. Several western educated Assamese elites and intellectuals like Anandaram Dekhial Phukan advocated migration of Muslim

9 Census note 1901

10 A family pass introduced by colonial administration which allowed the Bengal origin peasants to settled in Assam.

peasants from famine affected Bengal province. The *Mills Report on the Province of Assam* reveals that Anandaram Dekhial Phukan even wrote to A.G. Moffat Mills, “the people from some of the badly affected parts of Bengal could be likewise invited to emigrate” (Mills, 1984).

Gradually the migration gained momentum and Muslim peasants started migrating in large numbers and settled in wasteland in Assam. The wasteland was seen as idle lands i.e. land untapped or not being tapped according to its potential. Gorky Chakraborty explained “In other words, wastelands were not barren or infertile land as one would normally interpret but rather a social category where anything beyond the domain of private enclosures (as well as state appropriated land) were categorised as the same.” (Chakraborty, 2012)

The revenue share of colonial government from agricultural land shot up. The migrants also started assimilating with the local customs and tradition along with learning Assamese language. They set up Assamese medium schools way back in 1902 (Ahmed F. A., 2016-2017) However, the large scale migration of Muslim peasants created a perception of fear among certain section of middle class Assamese people. They perceived it as a threat to their language and culture as the Bengali Muslims were settled across the province. In 1920, the leadership of the middle class Assamese Hindu under the banner of Asam Sangrakhani Sabha, Jatiya Mahasabha and the high caste Hindu leaders of Congress party forced the British colonial administrators to bring Line System so that the Bengali Muslim be stopped from settling in certain areas so that they do not encroach upon the localities of indigenous communities (Hussain M. , *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* , 1993).

The line system not only demarcated the areas where no further migrants can be settled but also affected the assimilation process. It racially segregated the Bengali Muslims from the local Assamese people. Thus this created a physical as well as psychological distance between the two communities. The Muslim peasants opposed the line system and wanted it to be abolished (Sheikh, 1998). Under leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, mobilization of the peasants gained momentum. He was popularly known as Maulana Bhasani. He fought against the line system

and compared line system with apartheid. He also propagated that the right to land is a fundamental right as it is a ‘gift of God’ and thereby should be shared by everyone irrespective of ethnicity (Bahar, 2010).

However, a good number of people still continued to settle beyond the areas demarcated by the line system. In many cases the host community i.e. the local Assamese people also helped the Muslim peasants from East Bengal to settle by selling land to them. The moneylenders in Barpeta helped the Bengali Muslims to purchase land from the local Assamese Hindus. Sometimes, the local Assamese Hindu would claim the ownership of a pam (plot of land of wasteland) and then would sell to Bengali Muslims (Hussain M. , *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* , 1993). This also sheds some light on the hollowness of the perceived fear of being getting uprooted from their own land and endangering their language and culture because of large scale migration. The common Assamese people were quite open and friendly with migrant Muslim peasants. There was hardly any report of conflict between the migrant peasants and the peasants from the ethnic Assamese community. Maulana Bhasani raised voice against the middle class Assamese and the politicians.

The line system effectively forced a large number of Bengali Muslims to settle in the areas where the local Assamese people would not be interested to cultivate, especially the ‘char’ and lowland areas. On the other hand, hardworking Muslim peasants equipped with the traditional knowledge of farming in lowland areas, who were in dire need of land to escape from poverty, economic distress and atrocities by land lords in East Bengal settled in these ecologically and environmentally vulnerable char areas. They cleared the wasteland and made it fit for cultivation. They bore ecological challenges like flood and erosion and transformed the chars into productive agricultural farmland.

Portrait of Exclusion

Despite their hard work, the char dwellers remain as one of the most under-developed community and lag behind in all major development indicators. Be it access to education, health services, livelihood, or

credit, in almost every sector the char dwellers are far behind the state and national average. Between 1992-93 and 2003-04 their literacy rate marginally improved from 15.45 to 19.31 per cent. On the other, in the same time period literacy rate declined among the char villages of four districts. Between the two surveys, the char 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 (Chakraborty, *The Demographic Question in the Char Areas of Assam*, 2014). Ecological calamities like flood and erosion are one of the major hindrances for the char community in their quest for upward social mobility. They face multiple displacements in their life time which severely affects their socio-economic as well as political status. The displacement normally happens during the most precarious time, especially at the time of erosion which is accompanied by heavy flood and incessant rainfall. Often they lose their house, livestock, furniture and valuables including documents which make them vulnerable to prove their citizenship. In an interview, 35 years old Rup Bhanu from Mazidbhita char under Mandia Development Block in Barpeta district narrated that in her lifetime she has already shifted her house five times. She said “when our house gets eroded during heavy rain, we lose our tin roof, the walls made of jute stick are damaged, we lose everything including the courage to rebuild the house once again.” She explains that though there is a strong community feeling but the neighbors can’t provide support as they also face similar situation during floods. To emphasize the feeling of suffering she said: “Allah shouldn’t even make my worst enemy homeless!” Another respondent Aklima Bewa (50) from Sutir char in same district has shifted her house seventeen times in her lifetime. She explained why they do not prefer to build their home properly. Most of the houses in char are built on an unstable plinth because of the risk of erosion. They do not want to invest their money and labour on plinth and structure of the house leaving their home susceptible to annual flood which impacts overall wellbeing of the families.

Though after the enactment of Disaster Management Act, 2005, government of Assam has formed Assam State Disaster Management Authority and every district in Assam has its own District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), the char people

hardly get any assistance apart from the nominal relief in the form of rice, lentils and salt when they take shelter in government enlisted relief camps. Siddik Ali (60) from Tapajuli char in Barpeta explains that two and half kilogram rice, half a kilogram of pulses and some salt is served as relief for a six-member family for the entire week during their stay in the makeshift camp. Often the relief camps set up by the char community are not recognized by the administration and do not receive any relief.¹¹ There seems to be a disconnect between the government agency and the char people in terms of providing relief during flood. Capacity building of the char people for disaster risk reduction is unheard of. The District Program Officer of DDMA, Barpeta Dr. Nandita Dutta said “people do not try to understand the departmental provisions, our officials get victimized because of people’s aggression during distribution of flood relief.” She said that often her officials do not understand the language spoken by the char people and char people do not understand their language. The interview also revealed that the officials perceive that the char community does not trust them (officials) and the department also views them with suspicion. She said “Water resource department is planning to establish a water gauge in Kanara village under Barpeta district but the department is afraid of that the gauge might be stolen by the char people.” This sort of trust deficit and communication gap keeps them excluded from the government sponsored schemes and programs to cope with the disaster and also to build resilience. The water gauge which is not being set up because of trust deficit is actually designed to measure the water level and send the early warning to the people living in the downstream areas to prepare themselves for the flood.

The Sendai framework for Disaster Risk Reduction focuses on four priorities i.e. (i) Understanding disaster risk; (ii) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; (iii) Investing in disaster reduction for resilience and; (iv) Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response, and to “Build Back Better” recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.¹² At least three out of four priorities

11 Flood hit Barpeta cries for help. Assam Times Dated 29th August 2015 <https://assamtimes.org/node/14740> accessed on 29th January 2019

12 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, is an international standard of disaster preparedness and

necessitates the involvement of the community for understanding the disaster risk, building resilience for success of the 'Build Back Better' slogan. But because of exclusion in several stages, the lives of char people have not been touched by the priorities of the Sendai framework. Out of all the interviews and FGDs conducted for this study, not a single participant acknowledged about capacity building training and program organized by the government agencies for disaster risk reduction or building resilience among the char community.

This portrait of exclusion becomes clearer if we look as the rehabilitation of erosion induced Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). As of date the government does not have any effective scheme or program to rehabilitate the flood and erosion induced IDPs in Assam. Though the erosion has rendered lakhs of people homeless but unfortunately the Disaster Management Act – 2005 doesn't recognize 'erosion' as a natural calamity. However, in 2015, Government of Assam vide a notification announced a scheme called Chief Minister's Special Scheme for Rehabilitation of Erosion Affected Families in Assam to provide land and monetary compensation to the victims of soil erosion. The Assam State Disaster Management Authority was entrusted to implement the scheme and sought application from the erosion induced IDPs. More than thirty thousand people applied but the nodal agency did not process a single application. This author filed an RTI application to know about the status of the application. The agency replied saying that it does not have any information in this regard. Within few weeks of filing the RTI application the scheme was modified with stricter selection criterions like only those possessing *myadi patta* land (Individual permanent land deeds) would be eligible for applying for compensation from 2014-15 onwards. Later on an official from the agency told Hindustan Times that to process 30,500 applications would have required more than 500 crore rupees whereas the agency was provided with only 5 crore

rupees. The updated circular made thousands of erosion induced IDPs ineligible for rehabilitation.¹³

There is a separate Directorate of Char Areas Development under the Government of Assam. The Directorate is mandated to 'improve the socio-economic conditions of the people living in char/chapori areas through affirmative action and inclusive development'.¹⁴ The Directorate conducted two landmark studies which brought out the dark reality of the char areas. Though the Directorate envisaged to create and facilitate access to equitable opportunities among the char community in terms of providing education, employment, economic activities etc. to ensure their social upward mobility, it has miserably failed to work on its own vision and findings. During the 15 years of Congress rule in the state, the Directorate ended up in implementing few schemes benefiting few hundred youths and farmers in skill up-gradation. The current BJP led government has almost throttled the Directorate by cutting the minimum fund allotted by the previous government. Further, the current government has also terrorized the char community by evicting thousands of erosion induced char people taking shelter on government land. A detailed analysis of this is provided in the latter part of this paper.

In char areas, the only means of transportation is the country made engine boat commonly known as *bhutbhuti*. There is hardly any boat operated by the Inland Water Transport department in char areas. These private boats are often unregulated and ill-equipped to sustain the natural calamities like high current of the flood water during monsoon and storms. The incidents of boats capsize and drowning is very common phenomenon in the char areas. In a focus group discussion held in 4 No. Bhera char in Barpeta, one of the survivors of the boat capsize said that when they travel in an overcrowded boat, they carry their lives in their hands. In 2018, when repeated incidents of boats capsize were reported from char areas, the government of Assam didn't take any step to provide alternate transportation

response framework adopted by world leaders Sendai city of Japan under the aegis of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. <https://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/43291> Last accessed on 29th January 2019

13 Brahmputra threat creates no ripple in Assam's election politics. Hindustan Times, Dated 9th April 2016 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/brahmaputra-threat-creates-no-ripple-in-assam-s-election-politics/story-ofgPzk6S3BDi07yNadXVwO.html> Last accessed on 29 January 2019.

14 <https://dircad.assam.gov.in/about-us/what-we-do-1>

but banned plying of all the country made engine boats in the river. This move has legally stranded the entire the char community from accessing market, health care and education. In fact, their connection with the mainland is jeopardized and they are forced into breaking the ban which results in penalties and provides an additional opportunity for officials to collect bribes.

All these instances of state apathy have a huge impact on the overall wellbeing of the members of char communities. Some of the aspects are examined here:

Education

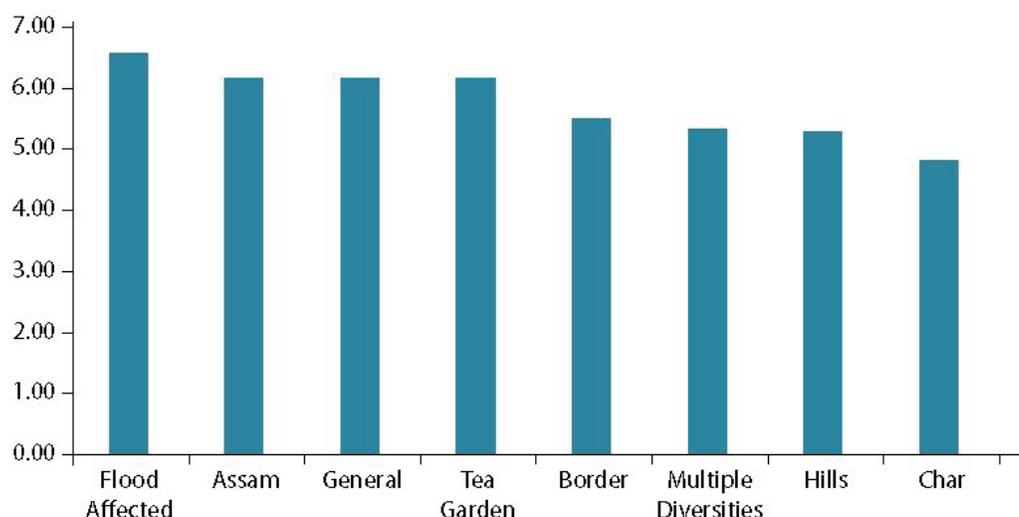
Education is believed to be one of the greatest equalizers. But for a community facing poverty and suffering from the curse of child labor and child marriage, education has always been at the bottom of the priority list. As per recent Human Development report of Assam, 2016, the Mean Year of Schooling (MYS) in char areas of Assam is 4.76 years. This is the lowest among all marginalized communities in Assam and much lower than the figure for Assam which is 6.17 years. In a char called Uttar Ghudhuni in Barpeta district of Assam, as per 2011 census data, the female literacy rate is as low as 6 percent.

This high level of exclusion is often linked with the non-availability of educational institutions as well as poor quality of educational services in the char areas. We do not have latest and comprehensive data regarding the availability of educational institutions in char areas, so one has to use the last socio-economic survey conducted by the government. As per the 2002-03 data there are 1852 lower primary schools, 574 Middle English schools, 218 high schools, 8 higher secondary schools and 16 colleges. These educational institutions cater to a huge population of nearly 2.5 million people. There were some initiatives to set up schools in char and other excluded areas during previous government. But there have been drastic policy changes and the current government is shutting down schools or merging two or three schools into one. A scheme called Siksha Khetra was brought by the BJP government to merged schools in the same campus or in any nearby area.¹⁵ The Telegraph reported on 17th July 2017 that government has amalgamated around 1900 schools across the state¹⁶. This policy has affected the schools

15 Department of Education, Government of Assam website, link <https://education.assam.gov.in/portlets/amalgamation-of-schools>

16 LP, ME, high schools clubbed, The Telegraph 17th July 2017 <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/lp-me-high-schools-clubbed/cid/1435648>

MYS across spatial diversity categories



Source: HDR Assam 2014

in char area severely due to several reasons. One of them is the unequal distribution of schools in char areas. Because of erosion the schools have been moved to either river bank (mainland) areas or relatively stable chars. This has created concentration of schools in some places whereas some char doesn't have any school at all. This author filed RTI petition across 17 districts where there were chars in 2002-03 (as per the socioeconomic survey of char areas) and asked the current status of educational institutions. Many districts evaded the questions either by returning the RTI or giving incomplete or irrelevant information. Only few district provided accurate information as sought through the RTI petition. One of them is Nalbari district. The data shows that in 2002-03, the district had 31 char villages but in 2016, out of 31 char villages 10 char villages have been completely eroded. The schools from those eroded villages got concentrated in three villages. One of those three villages is Bhangnamari, where now, as per the reply, 31 LP schools are located. Whereas there are many char villages in the district which doesn't have a single school. This amalgamation scheme actually shut down schools without establishing new ones.

The result of this acute shortage of educational institutions is reflected in the latest Human Development report 2014. The report says that the children living in char areas hardly get access to educational facilities beyond the primary level. The dropout rate shoots up drastically after primary education.

In a FGD conducted in Jahanarpam char in Barpeta district of Assam, the participants said that apart from an Anganwadi centre there is not a single educational institution in the char. The children have to cross the mighty Brahmaputra to get to the school in a nearby Gasbari char. The condition of the schools in Gasbari is again pathetic. There are two Lower Primary schools in Gasbari with 150 students in #1077 Sapor School and 100 students in #749 Gasbari LP School with three and two teachers respectively. During floods the school remains closed for periods of upto three months. Even in normal times crossing the river by boat remains a risky proposition. As mentioned earlier, boat capsizes and drowning is a very common problem in char areas which affects education adversely.

Since most of the char areas do not have educational institutions beyond primary level, the students need to cross the river to get access to secondary and higher education institutions. The deadly combination of poverty and lack of educational institutions in the char areas makes the educational attainment among the char community one of the most toughest targets to achieve. Rup Bhanu (35) from Mazidbhita char narrates how challenging it is to send the children to school. She says, "Two of my daughters (youngsters) study in this char, the other two go to the schools outside the char. Attending the school on the other bank of the river and crossing the river every day by boat is a painstaking task for the children. If they somehow reach a little late, they miss the boat and there are no other boats to reach the school." She also explains how challenging it is for her to manage the educational expenses for her children. "They can't cross the river without payment; often we run out of cash and it is very painful to see children unable to go to school because we fail to provide them with just five rupees." The char children hardly get the opportunity to carry their tiffin. They have breakfast early in the morning to catch the boat and have the next meal once they come back home in the late afternoon. The midday meal is only served till the age of 14 years. The parents explained that these are some of the major reasons behind the high dropout rates at the post primary level. The post-primary level dropout is much lesser in the non-char areas.

In the three char villages of Darrang district where the quantitative study was undertaken, there is only one Lower Primary school. Most respondents were illiterate and hardly received any formal education. The survey captured the number of boys and girls who are currently going to school. Out of 307 children below the age of 14 years from 95 households, 255 children were going to school and 52 children were not receiving any elementary or formal education. After the completion of primary education, students mostly have to go to Mangoldoi town boarding the *bhutbhutis*. This leads to huge number of school dropouts. Upon dropping out, girls mostly do not end up completing their education and are forced to get married.

Out of 255 children who are going to school 138 were boys and 117 are girls. This specifies that 54% of total children below the age of 14 who are attend-

ing school are boys and 46% are girls. Further, out of 55 children who are not receiving any formal education 26 are boys and 29 are girls. Gender plays a part in the way exclusion plays out as bias against the girls in education is evident in the qualitative data.

School dropout is seen in almost every household after the completion of primary education. Overall, a large number of girls, as well as boys are never enrolled because of poverty. Many boys drop out from school to assist their father or elder brother in cultivation or to migrate outside in search of livelihood as daily wage labor or street vendor. Moreover, the perpetuation of patriarchal norms in char is such that even if a girl receives education beyond class X it becomes difficult for the parents to find an equally qualified spouse. So, parents of girl child refrain from educating their daughters beyond a certain level.

Health

The availability of health institutions is very limited in the char areas. Gorky Chakraborty observed “people either rely upon self-medication, which is a strange mixture of various commonly available medicinal herbs, witchcraft (in many cases) followed by ‘over-the-counter’ allopathic drugs” (Chakraborty, Assam’s Hinterland: Society and Economy in the Char Areas, 2009). As per the last socio-economic survey, only 132 sub-centres and 52 primary health centres (PHC) are available in the char areas for a population of nearly 2.5 million. It is also observed that doctors and health service providers often remain absent. The health conditions of char dwellers is in pathetic condition for two major reasons. One, the lack of government sponsored health services, and the other, the abject poverty among the population to avail other options beyond char.

Rahima Begum, a 35 year old woman from Rubi village in Barpeta district told in an interview that her husband is paralyzed since he met with an accident while working as construction worker in Guwahati. He can’t work anymore. She herself has been suffering from severe bodyache for the last couple of months. Yet, she has no other option but to continue with physically demanding, labour intensive earthwork to feed her children. She said “I can’t sleep properly at night due to severe body pain. Almost

entire night, I spent changing my sleeping position to get relief and some sleep. In the morning it almost blackout; I move my body slowly as if I am doing some exercise and get ready for work”. Neither she nor her husband has been able to get any medical assistance for months.

In case of emergency char dwellers arrange motor boat and take the patient to the nearest hospital by crossing the river. Often they fail to manage the motor boat and also fail to get emergency health services. Manowara Khatun (47), who lives in char called Paglartek in Bongaigaon district lost her three year old son during one of the nights when it was raining heavily. The boy was suffering from cold and fever, and his health deteriorated after sunset. But they could not move as it was water logged and there was no transport available. Manowara’s husband said that many children from the char were suffering from various waterborne diseases like cold fever, jaundice, scabies, pneumonia etc. Manowara, also recalls that two children were sent to hospital by her husband that afternoon but he couldn’t manage a boat for his own son and he died within their undated house.

A participant of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in the same district remarked, “the people who are poor and unable to afford to hire machine boat, carried the patient on raft made of banana stems. People who live in lower part of the char suffer more than us. They have to be taken by boat or by banana-raft to the hospital. People living in the char face more problem as they are not connected with the roads. During high flood it becomes too risky to use the boat or rafts to carry the patient.”

In FGDs, women in the char areas narrate that majority of the births take place at home, as the family members do not take the expecting women to hospital unless they face some kind of complication during delivery. Non-formal service providers, such as traditional birth attendants and traditional healers, are the primary providers of maternal health services. Though there are boat clinic services¹⁷ available for the char areas, the clinic visit each of

¹⁷ Boat clinic, an initiative started by Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research supported by National Health Mission has been providing limited primary health services several char villages. The project has been one of the most successful models but it has still waiting to see scale up in entire char areas.

the chars at one month interval. Further discussion with the women indicates that many pregnant women in the char areas do not go for institutional delivery out of religious belief as delivering baby in the hospital or medical facilities is often considered as detrimental to their culture and traditions. Of late, importance of birth certificate has been encouraging more char dwellers to go for institutional delivery wherever facilities are within their reach.

Our survey data exhibits that the average size of a family in the char area is 7.5. More than 42 percent of population is under the age fourteen years. In other words, on an average each family has more than three children aged below fourteen years of age. The mean age of marriage for girls was calculated to be 13. It leads to high fertility rate with time. The number of children below 14 years of age in 96 families is 307 i.e. on an average family of each respondent have 3.23 children below the age of 14 years which essentially points to a higher birth rate.

Whenever a woman conceives or bears a child, it is very important to provide her pre-natal and post-natal care. Pre natal and post natal care involves preventive health care. This includes regular health checkups to prevent any health related problem during the entire course of pregnancy and to ensure the perfect health of both the mother and child. These preventives health care facilities are generally provided by doctors or midwives. Out of the 96 respondents, 64 claimed that they have not received either any pre natal or post natal care, 2 respondents didn't answer the question and only 29 confirmed that they have received pre natal and post natal care. The number of respondents who have not received or provided the pre natal and post natal care is as high as 69% and it jeopardizes the life of both the mother and child to a great extent during each birth.

Similarly, it is well known that institutional delivery is the best approach to ensure the safe and healthy child birth. One of the most shocking revelations of our survey is that, out of the 95 respondents, 10 opted for institutional delivery in the char areas and others still follow the traditional/conventional delivery at homes. This explains that the people of the char village don't have access to modern/scientific health preventive measures which mandatorily should be followed throughout the course of pregnancy for the better health of both child and mother.

It is observed that the ASHA workers have been working very passionately in the char areas to ensure institutional delivery. 96 respondents, in the three char villages of Darrang district, said that ASHA workers provide regular visit to the area and regular immunization is provided to children among 84 respondents. But their performance is limited to Immunization only and other indicators like pre/post natal care are generally not covered. The non-availability of health infrastructure within the char areas has been the biggest hurdle in realizing the sincere efforts of ASHA workers.

Drinking Water

The source and availability of drinking water are important indicators of health, which signifies the socio economic status of a population group. Sources of drinking water in the surveyed char areas are of three categories. (1) Own tube well (2) common tube well provided by Government authorities and (3) those who don't have access to any of these and resort to collect from river. Participants of a FGD in Bhatnapaiti char in Barpeta district said that though some of the households have their own tube-well, during flood most of them are inundated and become non-operational. We are forced to drink water directly from the flood water/river water. The use of filter is not so prevalent among the char dwellers. Another study with a sample of 1000 char households spread over four development blocks in two districts of Barpeta and Kamrup, found that 91 per cent do not have access to safe drinking water while only 1.4 per cent have sanitary latrine within their premises (Goswami M. , 2014).

Sanitation

Sanitation facilities are essential part of decent living. Only 19% households have toilet facilities in the three char villages. The survey data shows that 77.15% females don't have access to toilet facility. This is the condition after 12 years of *Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan* and 2 years of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*. Which means 78% female population in surveyed households in char don't have access to toilet facilities. Human Development Report of Assam, 2016 also find similar result that 84.6% population in Char areas of Assam do not have access to toilet facility.

Toilet facility is now an integral element in calculating Multidimensional Poverty index. The definition of toilet facility by World Health Organization include flush or pour-flush to piped sewer system or septic tank, ventilated improved pit latrine, pit latrine with slab and composting toilet. Sanitation facilities are not considered under this category, when they are shared with other households or open to the public. Going by such definition of toilet facility most of the dwellers in char and chapori areas should be recognized as lacking in access to toilets.

The performance of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) is very poor in char areas. Because of poor transportation facilities, the construction cost of toilets under SBM scheme is much higher than the non-char areas, which discourages the implementing agencies to work char areas. There is no provision for the additional expenses. Moreover, the model of the toilet is also found to be not suitable for char area. There are two major issues which are ignored in the scheme – firstly, the height of the char is never higher than the highest flood, hence it carries the default risk of getting flooded. To avoid the flooding, the toilet needs to be set up in a raised plinth beyond the flood level. Again there is neither any provision in the scheme document nor any fund for the plinth raising work and secondly, since the char land is often temporary in nature, the risk of erosion is very high. A little flexibility, deployment of local knowledge and expertise and compassion could have stopped the wastage of large amount of public money and would have brought positive change to so many lives. Interviews with SBM officials revealed that in char areas of Goalpara, there are thousands of families who neither own a toilet of their own nor do they receive any toilet under SBM schemes. Even then, as per the SBM record, the district has been declared as an Open Defecation Free district with officials getting awards for achieving their targets!

Lack of proper sanitation and clean drinking water as stated above further endangers the overall health status of these families.

Livelihood (Farmers to Landless Worker)

Once upon a time the char areas were known as the food baskets of Assam. The fertile land and the traditional knowledge of multi-cropping gave farmers the

edge in char to produce high quality and quantity of food items (Sheikh, 1998). In recognition of their agricultural contribution, in 1944 Sir Syed Sadullah, the then premier of Assam said that thirty years back Assam's total revenue was only Rs. 80 lakhs and that had increased to Rs. 1.25 crore. The additional 45 lakhs was the contribution of Char-chapori farmers (Karim, 2000). That time ninety five percent of char dwellers were cultivators. (Hussain I., Nalbari Zilar Charanchalar Artha-Samajik Abostha, 2016)

The char areas are the home to 9.37 per cent of the state's population and cover 4.6 per cent of the total land area of the state. However, 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 from 1992-93 to 2002-03 and there has also been a simultaneous decline in the per capita availability of cultivable land (Socio-economic Survey of Char Areas of Assam, 2003).

The Human Development Report of Assam, 2016 also finds 50.6% population in char areas does not have any cultivable land. Data received from the micro study in the three chars in Darrang district reveals that there is a high level of land inequality in char area mostly due to crises resulting from erosion and flood. In the surveyed char villages, not even one person has more than 3 bigha (1 bigha=0.3305 acre) land for housing. That is why if we aggregate agricultural and homestead land together for each family the land inequality became sharper. In such a case 79% families have less than 5 bighas of land whereas 1% families have 20 to 25 bighas of land.

Average landholding is closely related with agricultural productivity and inversely related with disguised unemployment. Small land plots are said to be less productive and hence absorb greater number of those characterized as under conditions of disguised unemployment, particularly in an area where population density is high. Average agricultural land is 4.66 bighas per household in the three char villages surveyed. Agricultural productivity in char areas is also constrained by lack of agricultural assets of the farm households. 69.4% of farmers in char areas of Assam do not have any agricultural asset.

Human Development Report of Assam, 2016 find that 79.8% farmers in char areas do not have irrigated land. The report did not have any category

of partially irrigated land. A cursory glance at the varieties of crops grown in char and chapori areas will astonish any observer. A population group that is constantly facing threat of flood and erosion cultivate 14 to 15 different crops in a calendar year. Such a diversified agriculture is very rare in any part of India. Three varieties of jute are cultivated in char areas, namely Tusha, Deshal and Mesta. Tusha and Mesta have fine fibres and therefore used for household walls. Deshal is widely used for jute products. Wheat cultivation is also quite common. Varieties of pulses and lentils are cultivated in char which includes moong, masur, mati kalai, sesamum (til), linsheed (tishi) etc. Mustard is also cultivated in char areas of Assam as land is suited for this variety of oilseed. But large variety of vegetable (rabi crops) cultivation with HYV (High Yielding Variety) seeds using ground water during winter have become important for survival of char dwellers in last few decades.

The peasants from the char area didn't get any support from the government and gradually their agricultural practice started becoming unviable. Occupational pattern of char dwellers also started phenomenally changing since the early seventies. The intensity of flood and erosion increased manifold. During the field interviews across the districts of Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Morigaon and Darrang, the respondents informed that they have lost thousand bighas of lands due to erosion. Sixty years old Saheb Ali's family was once one of the well-off families in the char with more than hundred bighas of land across several chars in Majer Alga areas of Bongaigaon district. His father, late Pagu Dewani, was very close to the colonial tax/revenue collector and acquired land in different chars to minimize the risk of losing all land. Land possession at diverse locations acts as an insurance against the threat of erosion. But the high intensity of erosion and unpredictable flood has forced Saheb Ali's three brothers to move out of the char and settle in the mainland. They survive on a meagerly two/three bighas of land by adopting high yielding varieties of seeds along with fertilizers and pesticides etc. Though they receive a higher crop yield, in the absence of government support on agricultural produce and higher input cost, their family members are forced to work in non-farm sectors e.g. hazardous coal mines in Meghalaya, migrating to southern states to work as farm labourers, security guards,

construction workers etc. A large number of former peasants from char dwellers are working under conditions akin to bonded labour in brick kilns within and outside the state. Hundreds and thousands of char dwellers have migrated to states like Uttar Pradesh and New Delhi among others to work as rag pickers as well.

On the other hand, people like Saheb Ali who are still in the char are suffering from 'Multidimensional Poverty'. As per Human Development Report of Assam, 2016, the Head Count Ratio of multi-dimensional poor people in char area is 44.59%. This is not only far higher than the state figure of 30.10% also but also much higher than any other spatial category in Assam. People in char blocks are at least one and half time poorer than people in blocks which do not suffer from severe geographical or economical marginalization.

Saheb Ali's neighbor, 47 year old Abdul Jalil's life has been hanging between hope and desperation. Abdul Jalil's father also had land in several chars in the area but today is left with only 8 bighas of land. In his 47 years of life he has shifted his home more than twenty times in five chars in the Majer Alga area. Today he doesn't feel at home anywhere. Jalil is one of the passionate farmers and master of multi-cropping. He remembers with profound pride that he used to cultivate five to six items in a plot of land and his life was no way less happy than any of the well-off families from the mainland. But his land has been underwater since more than two decades. The government hasn't provided any rehabilitation for the loss he has incurred; rather for the last two decades he has been paying the land revenue although the land remains underwater. Now his only dream is to increase the productivity in his 8 bighas of land, save some money, leave the char, get a small plot of land in the mainland and start a grocery shop near the Jogigopa paper mill. But almost every year his dream of a bumper crop and higher income gets washed away in the flood water.

Though there has been an occupational shift in the char areas, it has not resulted in upward mobility for its dwellers. Rather, the char dwellers are messed up the in vicious cycle of poverty, perpetuated by environmental distress and state apathy. The Human Development Report of Assam, 2014 reveals that 42.4% of people in the char block in Assam are casu-

al workers. There are only 8.1% regular salaried people and 16.3% self-employed in char areas of Assam (Human Development Report Assam, 2016).

According to the survey data, 42.5% populations in char areas are financially excluded and suffer from acute financial insecurity. 83.3% population do not have any kind of insurance coverage.

Identity Based Exclusion

Char people are not only victims of environmental distress and financial insecurity due to ecological peculiarities but also because of their religious and ethnic identities. If the char dwellers wouldn't happened to be Muslims with immigrant origin from the then Bengal/East Bengal province of British India (present day Bangladesh), there is little doubt that they would have faced inhuman treatment. Since pre-independence era, the char dwellers have been demanding rights and record over the land they possess but their demand has always been dodged by various ways and means, sometimes suppressed brutally either by the state machinery or by the non-state actors. In 1946, the Gopinath Bordoloi government evicted thousands of Muslim peasants including char dwellers alleging them to be illegal immigrant from East Bengal. But the fact is that those people were facilitated to migrate to Assam under a series of initiatives by British colonial administration to increase the revenue generation potential of Assam.

In the post-independence era, few governments took steps to provide land patta to the char dwellers but the chauvinist Assamese groups heavily objected and ran malicious campaign against the char dwellers calling them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and forced the government to withdraw such initiatives. In 2003 government notified all the district authorities to process land settlement in char areas of Assam but the All Assam Students Union started campaign against the char dwellers and forced the government to stop the cadastral survey in the char. In 2006 another circular was sent to the district authorities seeking list of erosion affected families to provide the land and rehabilitation grant. Similar schemes were again instituted in 2015 to provide rehabilitation to erosion induced IDPs. But none of the notifications and circulars was practically implemented, they remained as hollow promises.

On the other hand, Assam has a long history of forceful eviction of poor and landless Muslim people who reside on professional grazing reserve (PGR), village grazing reserve (VGR), forest land, other government land including char areas. A circular issued by government of Assam vide No.RSS/99/80/61 asked the district and sub-divisional officers to identify, evict and deport illegal Bangaldeshi immigrant from “where they are more likely to be found are Fishery Mahal, Forest areas, Char areas, encroached areas in Railway lands, Tea Gardens and encroached areas in Government Khas lands, PGR, VGRs etc.” In August 1986, government of Assam vide circular No. RSS.217/86/6 gave more clear and specific instruction to evict the so called encroachers (read Muslim peasants, mostly victims of erosion and flood) and allotment of the same land to so called landless agriculturist and also deletion of foreigners from record of rights. The circular said “If possible such allotment should be made simultaneously along with the eviction operation for which list of local landless deserving cultivators should be prepared beforehand.”

Serious human rights abuse like killing, inflicting physical and psychosocial injuries and trauma, demolition of houses and dwellings, making them vulnerable towards torture, filing false cases, withdrawal of state-sponsored safety net schemes have been reported from various char areas across the state. In case of erosion affected char and chapori dwellers of Assam, the vulnerability is more acute as often they are branded as “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh (Chakraborty, The ‘Ubiquitous’ Bangladeshis, 2012). The government has been violating the established legal and judicial norms and processes to satisfy the popular and rhetorical demand of the right wing groups like All Assam Students Union (AASU), Prabrajan Birodhi Manch, Rastriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) among others to evict the erosion affected families living in char-chapori and other government land across the state.

The current BJP government in Assam has most brutally evicted flood and erosion induced IDPs across the state ever since they came to power in the state in 2016. In the name of clearing government land from illegal encroachment, the erosion induced IDPs from char and chapori areas were brutally evicted. The administration has not taken any steps

to rehabilitate the evicted people, not even providing the emergency relief to the distressed people. In case of Khuthori eviction drive near Kaziranga National Park, where two persons were killed including one 10th standard school girl, no action against the police brutality was initiated¹⁸. Moreover, the powerful minister in the Assam government Himanta Biswa Sarma, congratulated the police and civil administration for successfully evicting so called ‘illegal encroachers’ from the forest land. The politicians from ruling party and the embedded journalists framed the victims of brutal eviction as ‘illegal immigrant from Bangladesh’ (Azad, 2016). Later on the government and its propaganda machinery not only failed to prove the IDPs as foreigner, rather it has been established that the police and civil administration evicted many people from their patta land, and as a result, government had to pay compensation to the victims.¹⁹.

In several char villages under Sipajhar revenue circle in Darrang district people were living for decades. Most of them migrated from nearby districts like Morigaon, Barpeta, Kamrup, Goalpara etc. after being displaced by river erosion. Nearly two hundred (199) of those IDP families were able to receive land allotment from the government in Fuhuratoli char village.²⁰ This allotment was given under the direction of Gauhati High Court and recommendation of Land Advisory Committee, Assam (Hussain 2008). At a later stage the local MLA took initiative to resettle few more families in the char areas of Sipajhar. A good number of erosion induced IDPs also purchased land from the local people who enjoyed annual patta from the government but were reluctant to cultivate in the difficult geographical conditions such as, risk of perennial flood, pathetic transportation system and poor access to market. The erosion induced IDPs from char just started rebuilding their lives once again but the right wing groups AASU

and RSS opposed the land allotment and wrote to the then Chief Minister and questioned the identity of the erosion induced IDPs. Within four months government cancelled the land allotment through a circular dated 9th May, 1994 and asked the district administration to evict the people living in the village²¹. The reason for quashing the land allotment was shown as that the land falls under the category of ‘PGR’ or professional grazing land.

However, an RTI petition filed in 2015, revealed that government neither have any record of the land being notified as ‘PGR’ by the revenue department nor the revenue department used the land for professional grazing.²² However, despite the cancellation order, they were paying the revenue against the annual patta and were struggling to rebuild their lives under constant fear and anxiety of eviction.

However, after BJP came to power in the Centre as well as the state their life have become miserable. The Prabrajan Birodhi Manch led by Upamanyu Hazarika, a close associate and junior of Union Minister Arun Jaitley mobilized the local people against erosion induced IDPs and continues to put pressure on the government to evict them. A collective of the local people called Sangrami Satirtha Sanmilan filed a petition in the court of Additional District and Sessions Judge, Darrang under Assam Land Grabbing (Prohibition) Rules 2013 to clear the char land from alleged encroachment²³. In many instances, it was

18 The Communal Politics of Eviction Drives in Assam, Economic and Political Weekly 24th February 2018 https://www.epw-in.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/engage/article/com-munal-politics-eviction-drives-assam?0=ip_login_no_cache%3D9d8e8dc1f1f695469da0ef00d414098c

19 Govt aid for park evictees The Telegraph, 24th December 2017, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/govt-aid-for-park-evictees/cid/1404011>
The author also interviewed the victims after getting compensation

20 Government circular vide order No. CAN/CON-1/94/26

21 Revenue (Settlement) Department, Government of Assam circular vide No. RSS. 307/93/71 dated 9th May, 1994

22 The RTI petition was filed by Nazrul Haque Mazarbhuiyan. The Circle Officer of the concerned Sipajhar circle said vide letter No. SPR (RTI) – 12/2015 that the Circle Office doesn’t have any information whether the disputed land belong to PGR category or not. The circle officer also informed that the office doesn’t have any record about the notification declaring the land as professional grazing land. The RTI petitioner also asked to provide whether the land was used by any professional graziers at any point of time and whether anybody paid the professional grazing taxes/revenue; the circle officer informed that he is not aware of any such information and his office also doesn’t have any information on this regard. Mr. Mazarbhuiyan’s last question was “when and by which communication you informed about the encroachment over the land for the first time to your higher authorities.” This time the circle officer replied that the files were being searched but the information was not found at that point of time.

23 Ref: Spl. (I/G) Sess – Case No. 1/15 Sangrami Satirtha Sanmilan and others v/s State of Assam and others

observed that the local people sold their annual patta land²⁴ to the erosion induced char people and at a later stage the sellers themselves reported cases of land grabbing or illegal encroachment. In this case, the petitioners Mr. Satya Rajbangshi had sold his annual patta land measuring 9 bigha and 38 lecha of Fuhuratoli village under Dag No 7 to one Uhab Ali at Rs. 2,24,400/- (Rupees two lakhs twenty four thousand and four hundred). Satya Rajbangshi expressed his eagerness to sell the land and approached Uhab Ali who owns an adjacent plot. Uhab Ali purchased the land through an agreement signed on non-judicial stamp paper in presence of witnesses. Later on the seller Satya Rajbangshi along with others filed land grabbing case against the purchaser Mr. Uhab Ali.

The circle officer of Sipajhar revenue was asked to provide the list of 'land grabbers' by the court. The circle officer enlisted all those IDPs who were enjoying the annual land patta and were paying revenue regularly.²⁵ Mr. Ali along with other villagers has submitted all the relevant documents before the Honourable Court and the trial is continuing till date. It is a cardinal principle of law that when a matter is pending before a Court of justice nothing should be done which might interfere with the due course of justice and no attempt should be made by any executive or official, however high a position he/she may hold, to prejudge the merits of a case and to usurp the functions of the Court.

However, despite ongoing legal case before the Honourable Court the right wing groups led by Upamanyu Hazarika (Prabrajon Birodhi Mancha) continued their mobilization to liberate 'mother land' from the 'encroachers'. In the month of November 2016, an anonymous pamphlet was distributed asking the people of Sipajhar to take law into

their hands and evict the 'illegal immigrants' who 'encroached' their mother land. On 17th December 2016, Upamanyu Hazarika, gave a televised call to the local people to participate apparently in a 'peaceful' mission to graze their animal in the paddy fields of the Char dwellers'. The government neither took any action against Upamanyu Hazarika for his call to destroy the paddy fields of char dwellers nor did it provide any security to protect them. Rather on 19th of December 2016, Darrang district administration filed a case of illegal encroachment vide no. 7/2016 dated 19th December 2016 and issued eviction notice same day to the people of Fuhuratoli char and asked to clear the land with immediate effect. The notice was served on 20th December between 6pm to 8 pm. The notice was served in the name of one person along with other unnamed people. In one case, a notice was served to one Ainal Haque and other 106 unnamed persons. In the *tapsil* (land measure and land boundary) column of the notice, it was mentioned as "PGR land of Fuhuratoli village under Sipajhar Mouza". It didn't mention the *dag* number and *patta* number of the land; whereas that particular person living in the land has *dag* number and annual *patta* as well as paid land revenue regularly.

The eviction was done without giving minimum time to the people to relocate themselves with families and other belongings. The 'Other 106' families didn't even get the eviction notice from the administration and were evicted without any notice. As proper land *tapsil* was not mentioned in the eviction notice, it is crystal clear that the administration bowed down to the demand of the right wing group and evicted people because of their identity. The administration violated every tenet of the law and justice.

Arbitrariness and brutality shown in the eviction drive in the chars of Sipajhar area is not an isolated case. The BJP government conducted similar eviction drive to uproot the erosion induced IDPs from char areas across the state. In another case, nearly 200 erosion induced IDP families from Gasbari char from Darrang district took shelter in Hatimuria village in Morigaon district in 2008. Initially the host community provided shelter on humanitarian ground; later on the IDPs paid rent to the individual land holders of the host community. After five years of peaceful co-existence, the rise of right wing pol-

24 As per Assam's land law, the annual patta holders cannot sell or transfer the land to anyone. But as local/community arrangement the annual patta land is sold on mutual agreement and the same is recorded in non-judicial stamp papers.

25 Mr. Ali has paid the revenue against his annual patta land in 8th December 2014 vide receipt Sl. No 0485831/Form No. 15A to the Mouzadar of Sipajhar Mouza. His family migrated to Fuhuratoli from erosion affected Tapabari in Hajo under Kamrup district of Assam. The legacy data provided by Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC) Assam vide Code no. 150-4059-4663 revealed that Khalek Ali's father Gadhu Mandal was a voter in 1966.

itics made their lives vulnerable to social exclusion, boycott and eventually faced eviction.

Though the district administrations of both Darrang and Morigaon acknowledged them as victims of erosion and exchanged several official letters, they did nothing to rehabilitate them. The right wing groups like RSS and PVM with active support from some major media houses campaigned for their eviction. In October, 2015 around 50 IDP families relocated themselves to Hiloikhunda char in their home district. Next day onwards media intensified its hate campaign and started calling the IDPs as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants who have settled overnight. The media campaign continued for nearly a year until they were evicted November 2016.

More than 7 per cent of Assam's total land has been eroded by river Brahmaputra in 50 years (1950-2000), resulting in displacement of a large number of people. The government doesn't have any policy to resettle and rehabilitate those erosion induced IDPs. The evicted char dwellers tried hard to convince the media to highlight their plight. They narrated their stories of multiple displacement, showed documentary evidence but the media portrayed them otherwise. The Sentinel wrote "With erosion as excuse, land grab rampant in Mayong."²⁶ On the other hand the research finds that the media doesn't highlight the plight of the erosion induced IDPs, including their question of relief and rehabilitation (Sarmah, 2004).

A content analysis of media reports reveals a trend that the media frames them as 'outsider', 'illegal immigrant', 'illegal Bangladeshi' etc. living in certain government land depriving the indigenous people of the state. There are hundreds of stories in print and electronic media calling the people living in government land as illegal immigrant from Bangladesh without looking at their nationality and

citizenship^{27, 28, 29, 30}. And thus it creates public anger against the settlement of 'illegal Bangladeshi' and how the unwanted people are depriving the majority community, endangering their language and culture or causing destruction of environment forest or creating problems to their much adored one horned rhino.³¹

Once media successfully creates conducive environment, the state machinery goes ahead with their eviction operations. The media starts praising the government for evicting the 'encroachment' as well as keep identifying others areas which needs to be cleared.³² In some cases eviction operations are carried by anti-char agitating groups and gets appreciation by the media as well.³³ Interestingly, the media outlets started crying foul when the same government started evicting tribal people to give a secular colour to the eviction. One of the news headlines reads "Massive eviction process in Amchang leave natives in tears."³⁴

State's bulldozer over the 'right' to have rights

Many people from the char community believe that their biggest tragedy in life is not the environment that is pushing their lives in a downward spiral, rather it is the state which constantly doubt them to be alien in this country and pushes them out from the political and moral community of being an Indian citizen. On the pretext of the history their forefather's migration from present day Bangladesh, they are seen as illegal immigrant not only by the right

26 <http://www.sentinelassam.com/mainnews/story.php?sec=1&subsec=0&id=280776&dtP=2016-09-10&pr=1#.V-GLTq3lw3w>

27 <http://www.newstimesassam.webcomipl.net/newsupdates/index.php?aID=8113&highlight=AASU#.WwremiDhXDe>

28 <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jun0616/state053>

29 https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170314/jsp/northeast/story_140471.jsp

30 https://www.telegraphindia.com/1151204/jsp/northeast/story_56536.jsp

31 <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/schools-toilets-how-assam-govt-legitimises-land-grab-by-illegal-migrants/story-3CryZEBs5GIPu5vRFiJtGL.html>

32 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/pvm-campaign-to-protect-rights-of-indigenous-people/article-show/57635741.cms>

33 <https://www.time8.in/suspected-illegal-bangaldeshis-behind-death-of-assamese-farmer-at-kuruwa-pvm-locals/>

34 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEiuk8T5qXQ>

wing, ethnocentric, xenophobic non-state actors, but also officially they are seen as doubtful and soft targets whose nationality can be questioned effectively demeaning their rights and entitlements as Indian citizens. The char community has been facing this distrust and doubt of being illegal immigrant since pre-independence period. The vicious cycle of doubt and allegation has been continuing till date, in fact it has been intensified over the years. In 1950, the first National Register of Citizens (NRC) was prepared based on the 1951 census record. Because of poor transportation and flood, a large number of char areas were left without any enumeration. Now the NRC is updated taking 1951 as its base. In late 1960s, several hundred thousand of Muslims were forcefully deported by the Assam Police Border Organization (APBO) to East Pakistan under a draconian scheme called 'Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP)', without following any legal mechanism of detection and deportation (Hussain M. , *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* , 1993), common knowledge is that most of them were from the char chapori areas of Assam. Assam Police Border Organization (APBO) was set in 1962 as a second line of duty to protect the international border. One of six specific objectives of the APBO unit is to "detect and deport illegal foreigners settled in riverine and char areas."³⁵ The former DIG of border police confessed in an interview with *The Wire*, "At that time, the process of deportation was on, in spite of the fact that there was no formal agreement with East Pakistan or Bangladesh on deportation. Those days, when we deported thousands, there was no hue and cry. What was happening was considered natural."³⁶ During Assam Agitation (1979-85), thousands of people from char areas were massacred. In one char 'Chaolkhuwa' in Darrang district alone around thousand people were massacred by the agitators only on the pretext of being suspected illegal immigrant from Bangladesh (Sarma, 2012). None of the perpetrators were punished. In 1997, the Election Commission of India, in the name of updating the voters list excluded 3.7 lakhs voters, a large chunk of them are from char community, and marked them as doubtful voters or D voters. Their civil and political rights got suspended; many of them are still

35 <http://assampolice.gov.in/departments/border/1index.php>

36 <https://thewire.in/rights/assam-illegal-immigrants-interview-hiranya-kumar-bhattacharya>

fighting their cases in the foreigners' tribunal. APBO has been identifying the so called suspected foreigners and their cases are referred to the foreigners' tribunals which are working under the whims of the majoritarian government and declaring genuine Indian citizen as foreigners. So far more than one lakh people have been declared as foreigner and over one thousand of them are put under indefinite detention. The people who migrate to urban areas in search of job and livelihood are being referred to the tribunal by the APBO. Sattar Ali (48) from Kamrup (R) lost his home to river erosion and moved to Guwahati and started a small bakery. One fine day police came to his factory and took their finger prints on a blank paper and collected their address. After six months he and his colleague got notice from the foreigners' tribunal alleging them to illegal immigrant from Bangladesh and had entered Assam after 25th March of 1971³⁷. Ali's father has land document dating back to 1949 and has been casting his vote since 1961. Now he has been struggling to get his name enlisted in the national register of citizens (NRC).

The government is updating the 1951 NRC and has published the draft NRC in 2018. More than forty lakh people have been left out from the list are on the verge of losing their citizenship. A large number of the excluded belong to char chapori areas of Assam. The fear of losing citizenship and of being detained and deported has created public anxiety among the community. Abdur Rashid (62) who has already been declared as a foreigner by tribunal is on run. He says that the thought of getting detained gives him 'shivers down the spine'. "My house is near the road so it is very easy to locate. I manage to stay in my house during day, but at night I usually take shelter in someone else's place. I am trying to keep a low profile in this runaway state. For the last 3 months I have been running away" said in an interview with the researcher. So far several people from the char area have committed suicide in the fear of getting detained or deported.

Conclusion

In the darkness of this magnitude, a ray of hope is being shown by the younger generation who have mastered the art of resilience against the exclusion

37 As per Assam Accord, immigrant coming from Bangladesh before 25th March 1971 would be treated as Indian citizen.

and injustice and have been trying to build a new trend of activism for the protection of civil, political and human rights of the char people through literature, community mobilization, non-government organizations, networking with national and international bodies and individuals to amplify their voice.

Policy Recommendations

Land Reform/Allotment of Patta:

The government should conduct the cadastral survey in the char area and provide the land to patta to eligible possessors.

Citizenship Issues:

Streamline NRC updating process by bringing accountability and minimizing the bias and prejudice against the char people. Bring the ongoing FT cases, D Voters, and Reference cases under the ambit of NRC.

- Appointing judicial officers as member of Foreigner Tribunal and making it independent from the control of the government.
- Election Commission should discontinue the arbitrary marking of D voters. The proposal of extensive revision of voter list in 1997 was a one-time exercise.
- Like neighboring state of Meghalaya, dismantle Assam Police Border Organization and convert them to normal police force.
- End indefinite detention and provide legal aid to fight the cases of D voters and reference cases in FT and higher courts.

Rehabilitation and Resettlement:

Both state and central government should frame rehabilitation and resettlement policies for the environment induced IDPs. The Disaster Management Act – 2005 should be amended and include erosion as one of the form of natural calamities.

Disaster Risk Reduction:

The ongoing development schemes and policies implemented in char areas should be made disaster resilient in line with Sendai framework.

Directorate of Char Areas Development:

Strengthen the directorate with funds and manpower so that it can conduct the third socio-economic survey as soon as possible, which is due since 2012-13 and recommend policy guidelines for inclusive and disaster resilient development model for char areas.

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