

CHAPTER-3

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PEOPLE LIVING IN CHAR AREA

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3.1. INTRODUCTION:

Human civilisation is the history of migration of people from one place to another. The economic growth and development of a nation or region is connected with the rate of migration. No nation in the world could be witness of development without migration. Even U.S.A, the most developed nation of the world, is also a good witness of economic development through migration of people from different countries.

It is a universal phenomenon that the people living mainly on small-scale subsistence agriculture in the rural areas do not like to move outside in search of alternative occupations unless they are pushed by such factors as increasing scarcity of agricultural land due to diminishing land-man ratio or increasing pressure of population on agricultural land, lack of avenues for alternative occupations within the rural sector and increase of literacy and educational attainment associated with unemployment. As a result of such factors, people are pushed away from their rural areas in search of other job elsewhere wherever they get the opportunity. Thus, the existing socio-cultural landscape is altered and a new landscape is created by the human action through the process of evolution (Rawntree, 1982). It is more so in the case of urban community. Even the illiterate poor people move away from their villages to do low grade non-agricultural works elsewhere when they do not have required agricultural land (Alexander, 1985). Thus, the process of occupational mobility of the rural people is caused in an agrarian situation leaving behind significant changes in the socio-economic structure of the rural areas from where they move away but not completely shedding their relationship with their rural homes.

In 1874, districts like Cachar, Goalpara and Sylhet were attached to the state of Assam and peasant migration from different parts of Bengal to Brahmaputra valley started steadily. The landless peasants of the densely populated districts of the then East Bengal always attracted by vast tract of waste land of Brahmaputra valley. By 1875-76 there were 67,79,978 acres of cultivable waste land in the Brahmaputra valley districts where only 12,58,277 acres of land were cultivated (Guha, 1984).

‘Char areas’ is a peculiar geographic feature of Assam. Those vast tracts of land found in and on the bank of river like Brahmaputra are known as ‘Char Areas’. The structure of these lands is very soft and hence temporary in nature. These areas are low lying so that found under water during the period of flood every year.

Initially these areas were waste land and used for the purpose of cow feeding and other such secondary utility till the last part of 19th century. It was the British Government of India who took initiative for settlement of farmers from then East Bengal through the middle class like *Zamindar, Jotedar, Talukdar* etc.

As per Survey report, 2003 by the Director of ‘Char Areas Development, Assam’ there are 2251 numbers of char villages scattered in 60 numbers of Development Blocks under 14 numbers of districts in Assam. Among these districts, the Dhubri district has maximum 480 numbers of char villages. In Assam, there are 24,90,397 population and 4,34,754 households living in char areas which constitute 12% of the total population of the state. The cultivable land is measuring about 2,42,277 hectares i.e., 2.98% of the total land of the state fall under char areas. Like ‘Boarder Areas’, ‘Hill Areas’, ‘Tea Garden Areas’ the ‘Char areas’ also recognised as Backward areas in the Government records. The present study is an attempt to sketch a picture on the life and livelihood of the people living in char areas in the district of Dhubri.

3.2. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY:

The habitation in char areas begins to start during the last decades of 19th century and it extends its scope from the first decades of 20th century onwards. Before that, these areas, except a few, were filled with forest and jungles. Mill's report, 1854 and Census report, 1872 mentioned nothing about the life and society of these areas. Even as per census, 1901 population was much less. The density of population per square mile in Brahmaputra Valley was as Goalpara 117, Kamrup 153, Darrang 99, Nogaon 68, Sibsagar 120 and Lakhimpur 82. On the other hand, there were a different picture in province of East Bengal adjacent to state of Assam (and were part of Assam for 1905-1911). The density of population there were as Rongpur 617, Bogura 619, Pabna 772, Dacca 952, Moymonsing 618, Nowakhali 694 and 416 in Silhet district (Guha, 1984). These odd balance and distribution of population leads people to migrate from bulk to thick density areas.

River bank erosion causes displacement of inhabitants who previously lived near river banks. 'Those erosion-affected people loose not only their homes, means of livelihood and assets but also their previous identity, and they, therefore, often try hard for recognition of an identity (Das, 2010)'. Flood and river bank erosion are almost regular disaster in the world. Between these two types of disaster, the loss due to flood is temporary, but the loss of land due to river bank erosion is not compensable any way and hence there is a long-term impact on the society and economy. Once residential and productive land is lost due to erosion, it cannot be replaced. Generally, provision of institutional compensation is not available for erosion affected people. This undesirable experience needs an appropriate policy, so that the conflict between river dynamics and human settlement could be minimized.

Erosion is a natural phenomenon. Rivers especially the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries erodes vast areas of land every year in Assam. As it is well known fact that more

than 70% of the population are depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Agriculture or cultivation requires fertile land which erodes by the river every year. People displaced due to erosion become more and more in recent years. The occupational structure, income, living standard of the people of the agrarian society hamper greatly due to the continuous erosion especially of the agricultural land. It stands as a challenge for the people as well as the Government for the resettlement of displaced people.

The present study is confined to the char areas covered by the boundary of the Administrative District of Dhubri. The District of Dhubri is situated at the western part of Assam and is known as the 'Gateway' into the North Eastern states of India. It is the entrance point into the state of Assam as well as North East for the people of other parts of India.

The Geographical and Political situation of the Dhubri District is also suitably important. It touches the International border with Bangladesh and hence serves as one of the 'Gateway' of Bangladesh to Assam.

During the period of Mughal, this area was included into three Zamindary Estates viz. Gauripur, Porbotjowar and Chapar Zamindary Estate. The Gauripur Raj Zamindar family is well-known to whole of India after the name of late Pramathesh Barua, one of the pioneers of Indian Film Industry and were the Director of 'British Dominion Film Company' and '*Hostir Konya*' Padmasree Protima Pandy Baruah, the 'Empress of *Goalparia* Folk Song'.

During British Period, this region was transferred into various administrative blocks. Once it was attached with Rongpur district of East Bengal. Then it was separated from Rongpur and attached with Greater Cooch Behar administrative block. Finally, it was given an identity as a district and named it as 'Goalpara District' including Dhubri as a sub-division and attached with the Province of Assam.

The mighty river Brahmaputra passes way from the East to the West in Assam as well as in the District of Dhubri. There are six tribute rivers of the Brahmaputra in the District. During rainy season with the effect of Monsoon, heavy rain fall in the upper stream causes heavy flows of water into mighty Brahmaputra and its all-tribute rivers. This heavy flow of water causes flood in the district and consequently erosion takes place. Both flood and erosion cause much damage of lives and property including agricultural land in the District as well as in Assam. The process of damaging lives and property occurs every year recurrently. The impact of flood and erosion fall on the people basically live in *Char areas* in the district.

3.3. IMMIGRATION INTO CHAR AREA:

Immigration into char and its neighbouring low-lying areas were due to some geographical and socioeconomic factors. Though the process of immigration was started in the last part of 19th century but it accelerated in the beginning of 20th century (Sheikh 2013, p25). During pre-independence period, the major reasons of immigration were as follows:

1. Long lasting oppression and suppression by Zamindars and Mahajan leads the farmers to become landless farmer. Due to increasing rent and taxes farmers were bound to resort loans from Mahajan. Though interest was paid to Mahajan but principal amount was always unpaid and lands owned by the farmers were went to the hands of the Mahajan. So, most of these types of landless farmer were used to migrate into Assam in search of cultivated land.
2. During 1905 to 1911, Assam was attached with East Bengal and both comprise the same state. There exchange was taken place on Government employees, education, culture etc. between two provinces. Many of students were studied in different schools and college in Dacca and Calcutta.

3. Land tenure system in Bengal and Assam was another factor that encourages much the farmers of East Bengal to migration into Assam. In Bengal where Zamindari system was prevails under permanent settlement but in Assam (except Karimganj sub division and Goalpara district) there prevails Ryotwari land tenure system. The extent of rent and suppression in Bengal was higher than in Assam.
4. In the year 1893, 1897, 1898 and 1915, famines taken place in most of the places of Bengal and thousands of people were died in famine. Many of subject in Bengal were migrated into Assam in rescue of famine.
5. Caste and culture were another element of immigration in to Assam. The south part of Assam was a part of Bengal years after year. People resides here were Bengali and they occupied majority in every time. Similarities of language, caste and culture of the residents were made easy to immigration from Bengal.
6. Before the beginning of 20th century, most of the land in Assam was full of forest and jungles. Proportion of non-cultivated land to the population were much high and the fertile non cultivated land were attracted much landless farmers of Bengal.
7. The indigenous local people show no interest on the char and low lying riverine remote areas. These areas lying as grassing and waste land.
8. Another important factor for immigration was the economic condition of then Assam. Population of Assam was drastically decline due to Cholera, Kalazar, Malaria like epidemic dieses and the Burmese invasion. Report said, population declines in Nogaon district by 25 percent, 7 percent in Kamrup and 9 percent in Mongoldoi sub division during the decade 1891-1901. Some places in upper Assam found to be uncultivated due to lack of people. In such a situation some prominent figures like Gunabhiram Barua were prayed then British Government to import farmers from outside to settled in Assam.

9. Colonization scheme of the British Government was an important factor that extends the size of immigration into Assam. Like Bengal, land in Assam was found to be suitable for jute cultivation and from the inception Government was encourages outside farmers for the jute cultivation. They like laborious and skill farmers of Bengal for the purpose of extension of jute cultivation and other cash crops. Farmer of East Bengal was known for more production in less amount of land.

Though immigration was taking place due to factors mentioned above, but the colonial policy of the British Government was mainly responsible for the immigration (Sheikh,2013 p26). In order to attract more immigration into Brahmaputra valley Francis Jenkins, Commissioner and agent of Governor General for North East Frontier, emphasize on the extension and development of road and communication system. He wrote letter to the Director of Assam Company, Lord Dalhausie, to extend the shipping from Guwahati to Dibrugarh. Mr Anandaran Dekial Phukan, an Assamese figure was also a supporter of the immigration policy of the Government. In a letter written to Mills, he expressed his willingness as ‘the people from some of the badly provided parts of Bengal could be invited to immigrate.’

However, there were found no immigrant people in char areas till 1874. In order to attract immigrant people to the province of Assam, the Assam valley District commissioner Mr Johnson made a proposal on 8th May, 1885 that provides cheap ticket facility for Rail and Ships and rent-free land for three years to the immigrants. In those days, a family could go anywhere of the state from Bengal simply by collecting a ‘Family ticket’ of Rs 5 only. This proposal was taken place in the Government policy (Sheikh, 2013).

But the rate immigration was very slow till the beginning of the 20th century. E.A.Gait wrote in his census report, 1891 ‘It might have been thought of the amount of available land,

the fertility of the soil, and low rents, prevailing would have induced some portion of at least of the overcrowded cultivators of Bengal to find their way to Assam and take up land here, But this does not appear to be the case.’ (Census of India, 1891, Assam, Vol 1, Report p 67). Only a few numbers of people were immigrating into Goalpara district from Moymonsingha, Dacca and Rongpur.

The process of immigration becomes easier when communication has been established between Assam and East Bengal. The first Railway connection between Assam and Bengal starts in 1891-92 from Chittagang to Tinsukia. People came into Assam in ships and railway and they first settled in waste alnd like low lying char areas, grassing field and forest areas of Goalpara, Kamrup and Nogaon district. Some people were also used traditional boat and foot to migrate. Once Dhubri, Fulkatari, Bahadurkati, Goalpara, Palashbari, Tarabari were the shipping port. People who came into Assam by ships were boarded at these ports and scattered in different char areas.

In the year 1903-05, partition of Bengal opened a flood gate of immigration of farmers from East Bengal into Assam. Immigration became easier when Assam was attached with East Bengal. This has increased the size of jute cultivation in Assam as well. The extent of jute cultivation increased from 30,000 acres in 1905-06 to 106,000 acres in 1919-20 (Hussain, I, 1997).

During the period 1904-11, 54,000 people were migrated into Assam from adjacent Bengal district like Moymonsingha, Rongpur and Jalpaiguri. Of these 51,000 people were settled in Goalpara district and 3000 in other districts of Assam. By 1921, altogether 141,000 immigrants had settled down in Goalpara and 117,000 in Assam proper. The number of East Bengal settlers together with their children in the Brahmaputra valley were estimated at 3,00,000 by the census authorities in 1921 (Guha, 2016). During the decades 1921-31, the number of immigrants rose to 5,75,000. Among the immigrant’s majority of were from the

district Moymonsingha of East Bengal (Hussain, 1997). The Colonial Government and some middle-class Assamese people were encouraged the large-scale immigration. Providing financial support, some Marwari and Assamese businessman were helped those immigrant farmers to start plough in the virgin soil. It was those immigrant farmers to introduce the cultivation of jute and mung mah (a kind of pulse) on the land in Assam (Guha, 2016)'.

3.4. LAND TENURE IN CHAR AREAS:

There is no special land tenure system for Char areas in Assam. Based on the Colonial exploitable land system and land laws introduced in post-independence era, land tenure system is running in Assam and in Char areas. The Land and Revenue Law, 1886 is the foundation of land and revenue policies in Assam. In this law, there is no provision of ownership of land by the farmers, though all other matters related to land were mentioned. For the purpose of farmers right on land, there were three tenancy laws viz. Goalpara Tenancy Act 1929 for Goalpara, Silhet Tenancy Act 1963 for Karimgnj sub division and Tenancy Act 1935 for other part of valley district. To overcome the inequalities and conflict on the rights of riots, The Assam Temporarily Settled Areas Tenancy Act, 1971 was introduced in the year 1971.

Hunter report (1879) mentioned that char areas of Brahmaputra extent from Rongpur to Bijni was full of jungles and this land was used to feed cattle. Later these lands become cultivable and Government provide one-year settlement (*eksona*) to the farmers of neighbouring villages. When immigration takes place, Government has settled East Bengal farmers in these areas. Zamindars of Gauripur, Chapar and Karaibari were allotted these lands to rich farmer as *Jotedars* who were imported laborious farmers from Rongpur and Moymonsingha district.

Though the method and process of cultivation was same in all char areas, but the land tenure and occupation were found not to be uniform. When the Goalpara district was under the Permanent Settlement system, all other districts of Assam were under Raytowari settlement. Hence, land system in char areas of Goalpara district was separate from that of Raytowari system. In Goalpara, there was a middle class e.g., Zamindars, Jotedars, Talukdars etc. in between the Government and farmers. This middle class was exploited farmers in all the way. Farmers were bound to pay rent along with other taxes. Above all, majority of farmers was landless. Either whom Zamindars or Jotedars, rent was paid they were treated as landless by law (Guha, 1984). On the contrary, farmers in char areas in other district were allotted land on yearly basis and they were paid rent to the Government directly. There was no middle class in between Government and farmers (Sheikh, 1993).

Under the permanent settled area, the existing chars of the river Brahmaputra were owned by the Zamindars. In order to get land in Assam, the immigrant farmers were used pay high rate of salami and rent to the Zamindar and hence they were always preferred to settled down here (Das, 1990). The Zamindars did not bother about keeping the chars as professional Grazing Reserves or other reserves as in the temporarily settled areas and a newly emerging borderline char was often the scene of armed fighting between different parties engaged by neighbouring Zamindars (Das, 1990). The Zamindars of permanently settled estates claimed full ownership of the chars and the riverine areas thrown up by the Brahmaputra and the prospect of augmenting their revenue by selling these tough hard-working immigrant cultivators on sandy lands which had hitherto no value for them made them extremely happy (Das, 1990).

In Assam, during 1897 and 1929, for 32 years 'The Bengal Alluvion and Diluvian Regulation, 1825 was in force. Section 4(3) of this Act mentioned that when a char rise in the middle of Shipping River shall come be under of the Government if the channel between

chars and the bank neither cross by walk. In the district other than permanently settled, when a new char is grown up it become the state property. New char was used kept either as catling land or else. Generally, competition begins among the farmers when a char land becomes cultivable. No one waits for Government steps to allotment of such land. That is why much encroachment and boundary related disagreement found in chars. As there is no provision to settle down of such disagreement in either 'Assam Land and Revenue Act' or 'Alluvion and Diluvian Act', very rare numbered case was settled under revenue law. In whole of the country, the law is in force that 'Eroded land reformed on the old site continues to be the property of the owner provided it has not been completely abandoned meanwhile. Abatement of revenue is said to be an indication of complete abandonment' (Das, 1990). The District Collector has the authority to cut in rent of the land. But these will loss the owner because if the owner applies for rent relief then certainly, he will lose and the land shall become as Khas land. If the owner continues to pay rent even after the land eroded then he will get back the land after due time. Provision under the 'Goalpara tenancy Act' is that the 'tenants' interest in the diluviated land subsists till 20 years or till 3 years after the appearance whichever is less' (Das, 1990). The interest of the owner of eroded land is mentioned under Section 83 of the Goalpara Tenancy Act as 'If the entire land of the tenure or holding or a portion of such land is lost by diluvian. 'The rent of the tenure or holding shall be abated by an amount which bears the same proportion to the rent of the whole tenancy, as the area lost bears to that of the whole tenancy' (Das, 1990)'.

Land laws, those were in force, in pre independence era were not able to secure the interest of the riots on land in char areas. Land allotment system was not error free and farmers in char areas were suppressed and exploited. Even after the independence, situations remain same. Government measures in case of allotment and settlement of char land and impact of erosion of Brahmaputra can be understand as that there is no system to settlement

of temporary char land, so clash and disagreement on the ownership are always to be found in char areas. Char land becomes under frequent erosion and people residing there were scattered in different places. After few years when eroded land thrown up, it becomes tough to establish the ownership by the old farmers. If the eroded char thrown up in the same place and owners was paying rent regularly then it creates no difficulties. But after erosion a char can be thrown up as a set of many chars. Again, owners are leave to pay rent after the land eroded and the land become *khas* land. In such situation, it becomes difficult for the revenue department to return the land to its owner.

The nature of chars is not same. Some chars are semi-permanent and some other is most temporary. Those chars are situated on the north bank of Brahmaputra are found to be more permanent to that of on the south bank. Many of the farmers have *patta* on their occupied land. Of course, these are also not free from flood and erosion. But the stability and protection capacity are more than other char lands. On the contrary, conditions of char lie on the south bank are more acute and their both stability and protection capacity is very poor and uncertain. These chars have rare *patta* lands and even if few have *patta* but they are not certain because once land eroded by Brahmaputra, *patta* become valueless.

Loss of ownership of land due to nonpayment of rent is a normal fact to the farmers in chars. Very few numbers of farmers are able to pay rent regularly and the causes of nonpayment of rent are due to:

- (1) In many cases, the revenue department denied to receive rent of the eroded land,
- (2) Due to acute poverty among cultivators, it is not possible to pay rent for the eroded land,
- (3) After alleviate the land, farmers become landless and in search of livelihood they travel long distant. For such farmers it is very difficult to deposit rent in Government office,

(4) In some time, land less farmers went to cities and town to earn their livelihood. They become familiar to the job that has no relation with agriculture and they lose their interest to pay rent of their eroded land,

(5) Sometimes Government declares some rent relief schemes after flood. Due to illiteracy among the farmers, they did not have the accurate information about for how many years and for what class of lands the rent is relieved and hence the leave to pay rent.

Lack of proper survey of land is another problem in chars of Brahmaputra valley. In Goalpara district (permanently settled areas) re-survey of char land starts in 1979 but the initiative stopped down due to movement on foreigner's issue. In 1983, surveying of char land re started but due to lack of sufficient manpower like *Mondals* etc process become at a slower rate. In 1994, in few selected districts of lower Assam issuance of *patta* starts to the household up to 6 bighas of land who occupied it for 15 years or more. Again, the issue of foreigner has become a hindrance in the process.

Government should come forward with some remedial measures to overcome the problems related to the settlement of char land. Normally the government personnel of revenue department show no interest to visit the char areas. When a *char* is thrown up in the bed of river and no immediate measures taken to survey then it became difficult to hand over the land to its owner. The opportunist *Matabar* in char areas become self-declared owner of new chars.

Because of the temporary nature of char land, in order to identification and rent fixation, frequent survey and demarcation of holding is urgently need. If the revenue department is not conscious about the quick survey of newly thrown up chars normally there will be some clash on claims of holdings among the public. Sufficient numbers of survey personnel are necessary otherwise the Government will lose its revenue. The method and

process of determination of rent should simple and the temporary nature of settlement should apply at the beginning.

During post-independence period several land laws has been introduced. In tribe belt areas farmers right has been protected by law, but till the day, no such land law is prepared for char land. Keeping in mind the special nature of chars, the Government should come forward with a special law for char areas land. This will help in rising of land revenue of the Government as well as it will stop the oppression made by *Dewani* and *Matbars* in chars.

3.5 CROPPING PATTERN:

Cropping pattern reflects the production behaviour of the farmers in their agricultural operations. In a traditional society due to lack of knowledge and capital, use of new technology is remain absent. Again, the possibility of crop shift is much low by the illiterate and poor farmer (Sing 1964). Cropping pattern is an important indicator to show the proportion of land area under different crops at a particular point of time. At the beginning of the 20th century 90 percent of the cultivable land was used to produce food crops and remaining 10 percent were under nonfood crops. The change in cropping pattern starts in 1950's (Sheikh, 2000). The ratio of land used for food and nonfood crops become 84:16. The change in the cropping pattern takes place due to increase in the price of nonfood or cash crops.

After independence a lot of change has been recorded on cropping pattern. The following table shows the change in the cropping pattern in Assam since 1960.

TABLE 3.1: Change in percentage of area under different crops:

Crops	1960-61	1980-81	1990-91	2004-05
Food grains	84.9	84.2	83.5	80.0
Rice	80.2	75.9	76.5	73.8
Wheat	0.16	3.4	2.5	2.0
Cereals	--	--	--	0.8
Pulses	--	--	--	3.3
Nonfood grains	3.4	3.8	3.4	20.0
Oil seed	15.1	15.8	16.5	9.0
Jute	5.7	7.8	9.7	1.8
Cotton	5.5	3.7	2.9	--
Mesta	--	--	--	--
Sugarcane	--	--	--	0.7
Potatoes	--	--	--	2.2
Others	1.4	1.2	1.6	6.1
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Source: Sheikh, 2000.

The table shows that the proportion of area under cultivation of food and nonfood crops has recorded a little change from 85:15 in 1960-61 to 84:16 in 1980-81 and then 80:20 in 2004-05. In recent years