

## **Children and their Rights: Reflections on the Everyday Life of the Children in the Char Areas of Assam**

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**Abstract:** *This paper is an ethnographic account of children's experiences in char areas of Assam from a sociological lens with special reference to child rights. From the 1970s onwards, social scientists have begun to consider children as social actors, as opposed to the idea of children as 'incompetent and dependent beings'. It is argued that it is not always enough to make legal policies to solve children's problems or see children's well-being from an adult's perspective, without considering them as their own agents. Children are now deemed as active members of society and they have the same rights as that of an adult to make their own understanding of the world. It is through the narrative of five children, selected from the char area, that I have analyzed various dimensions of their everyday life. The primary objective of this study has been to understand the everyday life of children in Bhomoraguri charpori from children's perspective. Besides, this paper also explores various issues and challenges associated with the violation of child rights in the charpori.*

**Keywords:** Child Rights, Children's Perspective, Sociology of Childhood, Interdisciplinarity, UNICEF Assam.

### ***Introduction***

Till the end of the twentieth century, children's representation was mostly through the voices of adults. Children were treated as different from adults, that is, as 'incompetent and dependent creatures' (Prout and James 1990; Mayall 2000). As Jenks writes: "The child is familiar to us and yet strange, she/he inhabits our

world and yet seems to answer to another, she/he is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a different order of being” (Jenks 2012: 3). In fact, the conventional theories studied childhood from an adult-centric perspective where children are known for their ‘lack of visibility and their muteness’ (Hardman 1973) or as an object of the socialization process. Like women’s representation in traditional social science theories (Ardener 1975; Moore 1988), it is argued that children have no control over their own representation. However, from the 1970s and 1980s, scholars have begun to develop a new approach to study childhood and to reconsider the conceptual error that conventional theories made for a long time (Prout and James 1990). This new approach in social sciences contends that children can also create their own understanding of the world and have the same set of rights as that of an adult; have their own perspective/voice, their social position, and their own world of experiences. On the one hand, the social condition can influence the growth and development of children; on the other hand, children can also influence their social surroundings through their actions and interaction with adults around them (Christensen and Prout 2005).

While all children can be seen as vulnerable on account of their age, some are more vulnerable than others as the circumstances in which they live or their developmental pathways are more adverse. According to Skinner et. al. (2004), children experience vulnerability at three levels: at the individual level, family level, and community level (Skinner et. al. 2004). However, one has to admit that vulnerability is a ‘situational state, rather than a dispositional state’. As Yaqub (2007) has observed: “Children’s vulnerability is not an absolute state. There are degrees of vulnerability, depending on the situation of the child” (Yaqub 2007: 6). In her work, Samantha Punch (2010) has argued that migrant children experience vulnerabilities in different spheres of their life, determined by different social settings and circumstances they are in (Punch 2010). In the same way, children in Char areas of Assam are vulnerable due to various factors, namely, geographical isolation, socio-economic backwardness, and the problem of migration. In other words, the socio-economic structure of Char areas has a negative impact on the growth and development of children. The socio-economic backwardness, inadequate infrastructure and relative isolation of the area deprive children of various rights, such as access to education, healthcare and nutrition, a safe environment, and so on. This paper makes

an attempt *understand children's experiences with special reference to child rights in Char areas of Assam through a sociological lens.*

### ***Char areas in Assam: A socio-demographic picture***

Char chapori is an integral part of the fluvial process of the Brahmaputra river. As per the Government of Assam, char area refers to “the sandy land area extended from Sadiya to Dhubri within the river Brahmaputra or surrounded by the water of river Brahmaputra, where people can live and cultivate. It also includes areas on either side of the river Brahmaputra extended up to nearby embankment which are recurrently affected by floods and where people live and cultivate the land” (as cited in Chakraborty 2009: 9). In the pre-colonial period, char areas were part of natural habitation in Assam. However, it is the British who opened up the areas for human habitations by encouraging the Muslim agricultural labourers from East Bengal (Nayak and Panda 2016) with a view to bring more areas under cultivation.

In order to understand the problem of char areas and work for their better living conditions, the Government of Assam has established ‘Assam State Char Areas Development Authority’ in 1983 (it was upgraded to a full-fledged Directorate in 1996). The char areas cover the geographical areas of almost 14 districts of Assam. According to the Socio-Economic Survey Report of Char Areas (2003-04), conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Development, there were a total of 2251 Char Villages and a population of 24, 90,097. In this survey, the highest number of chars was found in Dhubri District (480) and the lowest in Nalbari (32). However, no survey has been conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Development after 2003-04 on the socio-economic status of char dwellers in Assam (*Times of India* Report 2020)<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from government initiatives and policies, various scholarly works have been done on the problems of char areas like population growth, livelihood, education and health status, and so on. In the report, *Brahmaputra and the Socio-Economic Life of the People of Assam* (2016), Nayak and Panda provide a vivid description of the economy of the char area in Assam. They observe that the char dwellers of Assam live in an environment of uncertainty, illiteracy, poverty, and inadequate basic

infrastructure. Another scholar, Manoj Goswami (2014), has found that people of the char area are affected by floods and also lack the desired attention from the state in terms of the creation of infrastructure. He observed that these areas are detached from the mainstream population of Assam. By providing a micro detail of char areas in Barpeta and Kamrup district, Goswami finds that the high population growth rate in the area is due to higher fertility rates rather than illegal migration. Ali (2005) discusses the health conditions of the people living in char areas. He observes that the people are not aware of the importance of healthy living. Most of the people drink contaminated water, take food that is often contaminated, walk barefooted on damp and spend most of their time in an unclean and unhygienic environment. In a recent article, "Livelihood of the char Dwellers of Assam" (2019), Balram Kumar and Debarshi Das present a case study of western char dwellers of Assam, in order to understand the reasons for seasonal migration. In examining the effectiveness of government policy for the development of char area in Barpeta District, Geetali Sarma (2013) has found that char dwellers (especially the Muslims) are deprived of various health and education facilities and living a miserable life. Sarma suggests that to improve the living condition of char areas, there is a need for educational scholarship, training on sewing and embroidery, weaving, public health scheme, and so on. In order to understand the condition of farming in the char area, Barman and Das have conducted a study on the farmers of Sonitpur district of Assam. They found that the farmers living in the area prefer growing crops that can escape the damage by flood. The char farmers also lack even the bare minimum of infrastructure such as road and communication networks, irrigation facilities, storage structures, distribution networks, and so on.

All these studies bring to light that the char dwellers are economically poor, culturally backward and many of them live a kind of nomadic life. Due to heavy and unpredictable bank erosion, char dwellers are forced to change their settlement site from time to time (Bhagawati 1990). Scholars have given attention to these places focusing on the issue of population growth, education, and livelihood of char dwellers. In recent times, it has also become a matter of political interest, in view of the problem of illegal

migration in Assam. However, these studies failed to address the issue of children and their experiences in char areas.

No doubt, Assam government has taken various initiatives for the development of char areas, but the implementation of the programmes is questionable. As students of social sciences we can point out the failures on part of the state, but the Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs) also have a key role to play in connecting the char people to the mainstream population of Assam. In this regard, UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund), Assam, has been playing a pivotal role in bringing out the problems of children to the academic circle and the social media platforms. In order to understand child-related issues of North East India, the Centre for Inclusive Development, Tezpur University, introduced a Post Graduate Diploma Course on Child rights and Governance in 2017 in partnership with UNICEF, Assam. Apart from this, the UNICEF, Assam, also conducts studies to explore the issues of children in char areas. Recently, two surveys have been done, in 2019 and 2020, in order to examine "the social protection system for the workforce and their families from a child's perspective" (Unpublished UNICEF Assam Report 2019-2020)<sup>2</sup>. Even though these studies have provided a macro picture of child-related issues in char areas, they failed to incorporate various sociological issues like the importance of agency in the children and their standpoints with respect to the social protection of children. Thus, this study is an attempt to understand children's experiences in char areas of Assam through a sociological lens with special reference to child rights.

### ***Methodology***

This study is an ethnographic account of children's experiences in Bhomoraguri Chapori near Bhojkhuwa Chapori Village in Sonitpur, Assam. I present here five case studies, which have been gathered from the field. It is through the narrative of these five children that I have analyzed various dimensions of their everyday life in the char area. The names of the children have been changed on ethical considerations; other research ethics have also been followed in the present research. Although this study primarily

focuses on children's points of view<sup>3</sup>, in some cases, the views of the parents have also been taken into account.

### ***Children, rights and everyday life: Towards an interdisciplinary approach***

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history with a special focus on the rights of children. In UNCRC, the rights of children have been placed under three categorized which include: a) survival and developmental rights (right to life, right to education, etc.), b) protection rights (rights against exploitation, abuse, etc.) and c) participation rights (freedom of association, freedom of express opinion, etc.)<sup>4</sup>. Even though India ratified UNCRC in 1992, the incidents of violation of child rights are large in number in the country. India is home to the largest number of children in the world with approximately one-fifth of the world's children living in India. It is estimated that 40 percent of children in India are vulnerable due to various reasons such as violence, poverty, lack of healthcare, lack of education, sexual abuse, and so on (Planning Commission 2012)<sup>5</sup>.

Since the char areas are generally backward in terms of health and education infrastructure, transport network, and communication facilities, the children living in the area are adversely affected by their surroundings, resulting in the violation of various rights of children. Nevertheless, it is not always enough to make legal policies to solve children's problems or see children's well-being from an adult's perspective, without considering them as their own agents. Everyday life of char area is not only about the adults, their interest or beliefs, but it should also take into account the perspective of children. As social actors, children have the equal right as that of the adults to make their own understanding of the world. Children are also active members of society. Without a better understanding of their own world, it is futile to talk about child rights. In this context, Berry Mayall (2000), an expert on Childhood Studies, writes: we need to give "attention to certain neglected features of childhood, to provide a better account of how the social order works; and to use this knowledge as a basis for righting children's wrongs" (Mayall 2000: 246).

Scholars, these days, have been advocating an interdisciplinary approach to investigate various dimensions of child rights and the issues and challenges of the childhood period (Moody and Darbellay 2018). This new approach allows scholars to relook and reconsider their disciplinary approach towards children/childhood. Sociology, as a discipline, has started to give attention to children and see them as active agents of society only from the end of the twentieth century onwards (James and Prout 1990). In other words, 'New Sociology' on childhood sees: 'children as social actors' and 'their activity as a source of social change' (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). Moreover, with the publication of Berry Mayall's *Towards a Sociology for Childhood* (2002), sociologists have begun to consider what we term as 'Children's Perspective' or 'Standpoint of Children'. Not only it has transformed the earlier conception of a child being an object of research to a subject of research but it also defies the adult-centric perspective on children. As social scientists, we should take into account children's standpoint, i.e., what a child thinks and how he/she makes his/her own understanding of the social world, rather than from their parents' or teachers' view on what their children might think. As Mayall (2013) suggests: "it is important, both socially and politically, to bring sociological thinking to childhood in order to give due recognition to children as important members of society, not as pre-social objects of socialization, but as contributing agents to the welfare of society" (Mayall 2013: 2).

The children, thus, are no more an object of research to be understood only in the light of the process of socialization, but children can also help in constructing a society through their intentional (or unintentional) actions and interactions, with their articulations and expressions. Hence, it is worthwhile to understand what construe their interests and beliefs and how they navigate their problems in a social setting, and how they exercise their agency to effect structural changes.

### ***Case Studies***

#### ***Seema, a 13-year-old girl***

Seema, a 13-year-old girl, lives with her mother, father and two younger brothers (one is 7 years old and another one is one and half year old). Their house is built of jute, bamboo, and *basta*, which

comprises two rooms, one kitchen, and one bedroom cum living room with a single bed. Her parents built this house four months back. She does not remember when they started to live in Bhomoragurichapori. She has completed her 5th standard in L. P. Government School, Bhojkhowachapori. She can speak Bangla and can communicate with fragmented Assamese dialect. When she reached puberty, her parents stopped her schooling and took her to Tezpur Town to work as a domestic worker. She spent 6 months as a domestic worker doing all the housework (such as clothing, cooking, and looking after a baby). But one day she came back to the chapori to live with her own family. Being asked the reason, she replied: *“Malik tu e uliaidise, kaam or pora, poisa ta u komasiltate”* (the owner fired me from work, and I was underpaid). Her parents go to work every morning and return back in the evening. Sometimes, her father returns back late around 9-10 pm. These days, her mother and father are working on the construction sites in Tezpur town. As an elder sister, she looks after her both little brothers, also cooks food and washes clothes. She remembers her playing with her friends mostly in the chapori, and sometimes her father used to take her for a boat ride to see the other side of the chapori, sometimes she also goes to market. When she reached puberty, she stopped playing outdoor games. She spends her leisure time mostly talking to her best friend, Suhali. Suhali got married two months back and Seema is also going to be married to a chapori boy soon. When Seema got her first period, her parents were not at home; Suhali’s mother helped and taught her to observe certain customs or practices. She was advised to be inside the room and not to go out until her parents arrived from work. She also mentions that during menstruation time, girls are not allowed to cross the river. Initially, she found it difficult to manage her periods with old clothes but now she has learnt to manage. She likes her life in the chapori.

### *Najma, an 11-year-old girl*

Najma is a fair-skinned, thin girl. Bengali is her mother tongue and she cannot speak Assamese. She is in 3rd standard. She did not go to school on the day I met her. She said *“ami ar amar choto bhai nije nau chaliye school jai, ajke sonibar tai school jaini”* (my little brother and I go to school by riding the boat on our own, today’s Saturday that’s why we did not go). She can ride boat and cook. She

lives with her 6-year-old brother, mother, and grandfather. Her father died two years back. Najma's family survives on poultry and vegetables business. She showed me their vegetables garden. They have 4 cows, 2 calves, and 2 kids. Her grandfather sells vegetables in the Sunday market, near Bhomoraguri. Their neighbours too come to their house to buy vegetables and livestock. In her free time, she helps her grandfather and mother in looking after cows and goats. She loves playing khokho, kabadi games with her chapori friends.

***Ashif and Salman, 10 and 13 year-old boys***

I met Ashif and Salman in the boat, while I was going to visit chapori for the next day. They are brothers, Salman is 13 years and Ashif 10. They could not interact with me on the first day because they had some other work in the town. I went to their house the next day; it was a *semi-kassa* house built of jute and *basta*. Salman and Ashif live with their father and mother. Their mother cannot walk properly due to some foot injury that she had 6 months back. The brothers stopped going to school two years back and started to helping their father in his boat-ferry business. They like to ride the boat and enjoy it. According to them, most of the youths, including girls in the chapori, are well versed in boat riding. However, they don't rely on boat service activity exclusively. The boat-ferry business is seasonal and pursued only when tourists come and visit their nearby places. For a single day, they pay 300 rupees to the boat owner out of their earning. For chapori people, they take 50 rupees from a single person for crossing the river, for outsiders they charge more, around 150-200 rupees per person. On other days, they find other work for a living. So, they go to the town with their father to work in construction sites or as a wage labour. Occasionally, Salman also works as a helper in a grocery store in Tezpur Town and gets a payment of 100 rupees a day. At home, they cultivate vegetables in their own land.

***Kamil, a 17-year-old boy***

Kamil can speak Assamese and Bengali properly. When I approached Kamil, he was listening to songs on his mobile phone. He seemed very happy and told me that he bought the phone

recently with his own earnings, and it cost 1200 rupees. He lives with his mother, two sisters, and one brother (8 years). His father died of tuberculosis (TB) when he was 13. Since then, he became the main bread earner of the family. One of his sisters got married; the other sister is 11. Initially, he used to work as a handyman in bus service for 2 years. Sometimes he also works in construction sites, along with other chapori people. He went to school till he was 12. He also said that the chapori children are not interested in school because their parents keep moving from one place to other. In his words: “ai chapori te lekha porha ke keo buje na. Enar kaam khali khawa dawa kore jibon kotano. Ai manus gular besi kisu chai nai, jemne ase sukhei ase” (education is not highly valued in this chapori as making a living is the priority).

#### *Malka, an 18-year-old girl*

Malka got married when she was 13. Her husband is a daily wage labourer. They have a small poultry and vegetable business which sustain them. They earn 2000-2500 per month by selling vegetables and chicken. She is already the mother of 2 children and is 5 months pregnant at present. Malka said that she has faced many problems because of pregnancy. Only once she got some health assistance when she went to Kanaklata Civil Hospital (in Tezpur Town). In her words, “*hashptal e onek khorsa. Bina poisa kisu pawa jai na, sobtai ashakormi niye jai*” (*Hospital facilities are expensive, and no basic health assistance is available for free*). She said that Asha workers never come to the chapori and they are deprived of various facilities provided by the government.

#### *Children's wellbeing: Limits to agency*

Bhomoraguri chapori is situated on the riverbank of Brahmaputra, near the Kaliabhumura Bridge. One has to take a boat ride to reach the chapori. I was initially referring to this place as Bhojkhowa Chapori; however, during interaction with the chapori people, I was told that they named this chapori as Bhomoraguri Chapori. Hence, I have used the term ‘Bhomoraguri Chapori’ for this study. In Bhomoraguri Chapori, people are basically migrants from nearby places such as Dhekiajuli, Nagaon, and so on. In the chapori, all people belong to the Muslim community. They mainly speak the Bangla dialect of Bangladesh. The houses are mostly of *semi kaccha type*, made of jute and bamboo and tins on the roof.

There is no permanent residence; they leave the chapori whenever required, especially during summer. Therefore, it is not possible to make an estimate about the population of this chapori. It is found that more than seventy percent of the families are nuclear families and the average age of more than sixty percent of parents is below 30 years. It implies that chapori people get married at a younger age. Moreover, most of the children in the chapori are below 10 years.

So far as the rights are concerned, the chapori children are deprived of various rights, namely, the right to a safe environment, health and nutritional care, education, leisure, and play. From the stories of five children and the field observations, I have found the following hindrances that negatively impact their basic rights, growth and development.

***Livelihood:*** In the chapori, people draw livelihood from the cultivation of vegetables, daily wage labour, poultry, fishing, and boat-ferry business. Both male and female members of the households are engaged in earning money. The male members are basically involved in cultivation, daily wage labour, fishing, and boating business while the females are engaged in poultry farming. Most of the households earn below Rs.5000 a month. Children, after a certain age (from around 10-12 years), also start earning for their family. This is a clear illustration of the subsistence economy forces the population of an area to optimise the use of family labour; the males, females, the children are made to work for their subsistence. This has a direct bearing on the education of the children and their rights since early engagement in paid work means massive school dropout, which, in turn, impairs the human resource development and the development of agency in the children.

***Education, schooling, and play:*** Bhomoraguri Chapori is backward in terms of education. Children face various difficulties in reaching school due to lack of transport and communication facilities. There is no school and no *anganwadi* in the chapori. The children go to L. P. Government School in Bhojkuwa chapori by boat. Most of them only took admission in the school but did not continue after attending one or two days. This is because the parents of the children keep moving from one place to another; thereby the children keep changing their schools. The children in

the chapori basically go to school till they reach the age of 10 or 12. Most of them then drop out of school. After leaving school, children start earning to support their family. Girls are either engaged in domestic work or get married at the age of 13 or 14, and the boys start to contribute to their family income by becoming wage earners. The children belonging to age 4-6 years help their mother in fetching water from the river and in collection of firewood.

**Health and Sanitation:** The chapori is also backward in terms of health. There is no public health facility in the chapori. Therefore, the chapori dwellers depend on the Kanaklata Civil Hospital located in Tezpur, which is 6 kms (approximately) away from the chapori. Alternatively, they have to rely on the pharmacy which is located on the other side of the river. They do not use any homemade medicine. The most common diseases among the people in the chapori are tuberculosis and diarrhoea. The children often suffer from skin rash, diarrhoea, and stomach pain. The children in the chapori look very unhealthy. The people in the chapori are not aware of the immunization programme. Only a few children have got the polio vaccine. In the chapori, pregnant women face various difficulties as well. They do not get any antenatal care. Because of their poor economic background, they cannot afford nutritious food. The sanitation facility is not good in this chapori. Most of the people in the chapori defecate in the open field. Only a few households have bathrooms, which are made of jute stick and *basta*. Women face various difficulties especially at the time of menstruation because of the deficient sanitation facility.

**Transport and Communication:** The transport and communication facilities are very poor in the chapori. There are no shops in the chapori to buy daily requirements from. Therefore, the people in the chapori totally depend on the boat, which is the only means of transportation. The people have to visit the other side of the river to buy the basic daily items like oil, rice, dal, etc. This is mainly done by the male members. The female members rarely go outside of the chapori. As the time of boat services is not fixed, people have to wait long (approximately 1-2 hours) for the next boat. Their use of boats also depends on the weather. A boat costs Rs.50 for one person at a time.

**Flood:** Since the chapori is inhabited by migrant people, the inhabitants leave the place and go to other places during summer. It is because of the unavoidable annual floods. However, some people cultivate jute in the chapori during summer. They also build *chang* and keep their essential things there and go to the other side of the river to live. In the month of October, they return to the chapori, again build houses and live there. Most of the people also leave the chapori because of eviction drives of the police. During fieldwork, I found that most of the households in the chapori were destroyed by police because they suspected that insurgents can hide in their houses. In earlier days, there were more than 30 households in the chapori, but nowadays the number of households has decreased.

Although children in Bhomoraguri chapori are vulnerable due to adverse socio-economic conditions, here the question is: how do the parents play a role in protecting their children from harmful situations, risk, and danger. As per ICPS (Integrated Child Protection Scheme) guiding principles (Ministry of Women and Child Development n. d. (c)), “child protection is a primary responsibility of family, supported by community, government and civil society” (cited in Chopra 2015: 91)<sup>6</sup>. In this study, I have found that the parents of the children are not aware of various social security schemes, or entitlements in the fields of education, and healthcare. The UNICEF Assam report (on the social protection of children in char areas, in the year 2019-2020) states that no awareness is found among the char dwellers about social security schemes and programs implemented by the Government. Although most of the households have ration cards (85%), availing of the facilities from the Public Distribution system is either very minimal or difficult to access. A 22 years old lady (wage labourer) said: “I have not received any benefit during my pregnancy. I did not have any information regarding that. I have visited the hospital in my first trimester” (unpublished UNICEF Assam Report 2019-20)<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, as migrant population, the families and parents also live a life of uncertainty and fear of periodic eviction drives initiated by the police; the chapori dwellers the ‘illegal immigrants’ in the eyes of the state administration, as Raashid Ali (a 45 years old man) has stated. It implies that the families and parents

perpetually live in a state of socio-economic vulnerability in Bhomoraguri chapori.

### *Children's 'social world': Experiences and Perspectives*

While the structural hindrances constrain children from enjoying most of their rights I have observed that the chapori children navigate the 'given' and 'existing' social world. The socio-economic structure of Bhomoraguri chapori is detrimental to children's well-being, as they are backward in terms of health and care, lack of access to schooling, and so forth. This violation of rights is due to several reasons - poverty, migration, or un-documentation of population, or what Manoj Goswami has called as 'remoteness of the area' or 'alienation from the mainstream population'. However, it is also evident from the case studies that children have their own understanding or lived experience of the chapori. It is observed that some of the children in chapori are well adapted to speaking the Assamese language; they also carry their own cultural attributes- like speaking their own dialect. It is observed that being isolated from the mainstream Assamese society they are at less risk of losing their own language or cultural attributes.

Nevertheless, there are some social evils and practices that infringe basic human rights (though they have become part and parcel of their day-to-day existence) such as child marriage, child pregnancy, working as domestic labour, or as child labour. These instances obviously have adverse consequences upon the chapori children such as their access to child care, health and nutrition, education, leisure, and play activities. We observe, on the one hand, that these factors impact the development of agency in the children and on the other, the children learn to arrange their life and everyday life to confront the constraints. Over the years the children learn to face the odds and turn out to be the responsible members of their family. Punch (2003) has argued that in most migrant families, it is seen that children contribute to their family economically from an early age. It is through this migration process they became active members of the family (Punch 2003).

Although the physical, economic and cultural conditions in the chapori do not allow the healthy growth of the physical and mental faculties of the children and their rights often stand infringed into, the children manage to participate in their family matters and take decisions for themselves and for their family in

their young age. The drive to survive while facing difficulties help them mature early in terms of early participation in economic activities and early marriage. There is no denying that domestic work can lead to exploitation as we can see in Seema's story, where she is dissatisfied with the job as a domestic worker and unhappy staying away from home. But, on the other hand, Ashif and Salman enjoy being in the boat business or in helping their family economically. In fact, they also have an understanding of business logic, as they can make the difference between charging more fare from outsiders, and less from their chapori people. These works (such as construction work, riding a boat) have some harmful/dangerous effects on children and these activities do not promise them any secure life to the children yet the children are constrained to do these activities as a part of their survival strategy. Alternatively, had the children been given opportunities to complete education and a normal protected upbringing they would have secured much better life for themselves. Recent studies on children and work show that children are mostly engaged with babysitting jobs, newspaper delivery (as paid employment) in western countries like the UK, USA (Mortimer 2003; Howieson et al. 2006). However, children in Bhomoraguri chapori earn not only for themselves but for their families as well. Not only it rejects the conventional notion of children as incompetent and dependent creatures, but also, it diminishes the adult-child hierarchy to some extent, as we can see in Kamil's case, he is the sole bread earner of the family (even though he is under 18). Nonetheless, most of the children in Bhomoraguri chapori consider the earning part as their responsibility, not as a burden.

In the case of leisure and play, chapori children also have their own time for leisure and play. As Najma said, she plays *khokho* and *kabadi* with her friends in the chapori. In the same way, Seema also used to play with her friend, though nowadays, in her free time, she goes to neighbouring houses, to sit and chat with friends and also with adults. Unlike the 21st century children, where parents mostly govern their children's leisure or free time, chapori children, as being isolated from the mainstream society (also most of the day time, parents do not stay at home) get to choose what they want to do with their free time. Although chapori children do not have many material objects to use for their leisure time (toy and other children consumer products), it is exceptional to

find in Kamil's story where we observe his affinity for his mobile phone and songs.

The case studies depict the relation between children and society where children construct their own social world by navigating the structural hurdles. Moreover, their experiences reflect various habitual activities that they perform in various phases of their childhood. It implies, on the one hand, that the children are exercising agency to choose to do the household chores, help in their family business, but, on the other hand, it shows their dissatisfaction with the kind of life they live like marriage at an early age, working as domestic labour, staying away from home, and so on. We can also see the elements of gender difference in the way the girls and a boys spend their free time in chapori and in their mode of contribution to their family economy.

### ***Conclusion***

If we look at the history of child rights, it is understood that children were earlier constructed as passive recipients of adult protection and goodwill. The rights-based approach which has evolved over the years helps understand children as social actors and active members of our society. The latter approach focuses on the holistic development of children. Despite the fact that UNCRC and other policies, along with various provisions for children with different circumstances, are essential for protecting the rights of children, it is not sufficient to just make policies<sup>8</sup>. In fact, children in various circumstances, especially migrant children rights cannot be protected only through the legal framework as specified in UNCRC, but what we lack here is to translate these rights into social practices. What we need is an understanding of the broader socio-economic and cultural factors which can influence the nature and function of various laws/policies for children. Indian government has introduced policies for the development of children since the 1970s, but for their best implementation it is absolutely necessary to understand how the children are positioned in a certain social-cultural setting and understand their worldview. Only then, we can treat them as right holders and agents for social change. In contemporary sociological theory, agency refers to the capacity to act independently, and it asserts that "while the lives of individuals are shaped by social structures, nonetheless

individuals have the capacity to impact on these structures; they have the ability to think and act in ways that accept, resist, challenge and transform existing social structures" (Leonard 2016: 80). It is absolutely essential to understand that the children, alongside the adults, can bring change to a society if they get the opportunity to exercise their agency, be it at the family or societal level. Before that it is the responsibility of the state and the larger society to create conditions and facilities that would ensure the rights-based upbringing of the children and the complete blooming of their human resources en route education and skill developments, nutritious food and proper health. While asked to grow up with heavy structural constraints and material and cultural insecurities, as in the case of the chapori children, the boys and girls will often find their rights infringed upon and their agency will be active in working out a kind of survival strategy.

Further, we need to develop methodological tools to apply in the field or in children's natural settings, not in the closed classroom or in a laboratory (which dominates the research works in disciplines like psychology)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, we have to work out a flexible and child-friendly method to understand children's world, in their everyday life, as we can see the case of Bhomoraguri Chapori. Lastly, although interdisciplinary research has opened up certain new areas in childhood studies, it should be the choice of the individual researcher, research organization/institute to select the appropriate research methods and apply them in their research.

### *Notes*

1. Times of India Report, 2020, 'No survey since 2003 on status of people living in char areas', <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/no-survey-since-2003-on-status-of-people-living-in-charareas/articleshow/79079966.cms> (accessed on 30-01-2022)
2. Unpublished Report by UNICEF Assam (2019-2020), 'Social Protection and workforce to ensure children's wellbeing: A Perspective', presented by Ananya Goswami, Social Policy Specialist, UNICEF, Assam Field Office at Online Workshop on Labour and Globalization, (February

- 8 to 12, 2021), organized by V. V. Giri National Labour Institute Noida and Centre for Public Policy and Governance, Tezpur University.
3. Children, in the 0-18 age group, are considered for this study, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This study is part of my PG Diploma Course in Child Rights and Governance, for the duration of 2016-2017
  4. United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC), 1989, The United Nations General Assembly
  5. Planning Commission (2012), Report of the Working Group on Child Rights for the 12th Five Year Plan. New Delhi: Planning Commission of India
  6. The Integrated Child Protection Scheme is a central government scheme for protecting children from harmful and dangerous situations, through government-civil society partnership
  7. Unpublished Report by UNICEF Assam (2019-2020), 'Social Protection and workforce to ensure children's wellbeing: A Perspective', presented by Ananya Goswami, Social Policy Specialist, UNICEF, Assam Field Office at Online Workshop on Labour and Globalization, (February 8 to 12, 2021), organized by V. V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida and Centre for Public Policy and Governance, Tezpur University.
  8. For UNCRC and its limitations, see Stephens 1995.
  9. The traditional psychology research works treated children as an object of various experimental studies in order to find out their liking or disliking or action, failed to provide a clear picture of children's social world (see Clausen 1968; Skolnick 1975)

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