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Char Dwellers' Plight: An Ethnographic Study of Erosion Induced Displacement in Nalbari, Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

This research paper presents an in-depth ethnographic study into the plight of communities residing in the riverine *char* areas of Nalbari district of Assam, where erosion-induced displacement has left inhabitants in a state of precarious homelessness within their own homes. The study employs highly a qualitative approach, combining participant observation, interviews, and oral history to comprehend the socio-cultural and economic impact of erosion on livelihoods and vulnerabilities of *char* dwellers. The study reveals how climate change exacerbates these challenges, leaving *char* dwellers vulnerable to environmental hazards. The study reveals that a significant proportion of *char* dwellers of Nalbari district are illiterate, influencing their perception of hazards and climate change as acts of God. Displacement disrupts homes and vital communication links, such as boat terminals, essential for their mobility. Findings underscore the disproportionate impact on women and structural inequalities perpetuated by gender disparities. Gender inequality further exacerbates their hardships, with women often marginalized and denied property rights, amplifying vulnerability during crises. Furthermore, inadequate education and healthcare infrastructure exacerbate vulnerabilities, leaving *char* dwellers reliant on makeshift solutions during crises. The study also highlights the pressing issue of land encroachment and illegal sand mining, exacerbating erosion and intensifying challenges faced by *char* dwellers. The research underscores the need for holistic approaches prioritizing equity, sustainable development, and community resilience in *char* areas. Through ethnographic methodology, this study aims to shed light on the relationship between erosion patterns, livelihoods, and vulnerability among the *char* dwellers, filling a crucial gap in the existing literature on this topic. The study also shows how people living in the *char* areas deal with hazardous situations and manage to survive in this difficult environment. By examining the socio-economic challenges faced by the *char* dwellers in Nalbari district, this research seeks to inform policy interventions aimed at enhancing the resilience and well-being of vulnerable communities in riverine areas.

Key words: Ethnographic study, Climate change, Erosion-induced displacement, Char dwellers.

Introduction

The Assamese term *char* denotes alluvial islands that signifies a parcel of land emerging from a riverbed. The Brahmaputra and other rivers of Assam are filled with numerous sandbars, which are locally

called *char*. The *char-chaporis* on the banks of the Brahmaputra, the largest river in Assam, have witnessed the ups and downs of life for a long time. However, the survival of the communities living in these areas is disrupted by erosion every year. The impact of erosion on this vulnerable topography is

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not only ecological; It creates a poignant crisis by displacing people from their habitat that leaves its inhabitants homeless within the confines of their homes. Since 1980, numerous indigenous scholars have highlighted the vulnerabilities of the *char* dwellers attributed to climate-induced hazards, as evidenced by the works of Haque and Zaman (1989), Zaman (1991), Elahi (1991), Bavisker (1995), Baquee (1998), Adnan (2013), Bokth (2014), Borah (2022), Saikia and Mahanta, (2023). Through their work, natural disaster effects such displacement, short-term settlement, unstable livelihoods, and land disputes are portrayed. Natural disaster effects like population displacement, transient settlement, precarious livelihoods, and land disputes are depicted through their work.

Chars are very unstable river islands that can submerge during strong floods and by ongoing erosion before rising again after a flood, frequently after a number of years. The majority of people living in *Chars* in western Assam are Bengali Muslims (Kumar *et al.*, 2019), who have long been subjected to discrimination and abuse from the state. The genealogy of these *char*-dwellers in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), state still see them with “hatred” and “suspicion” because they are perceived as “illegal immigrants” (Das, 2023). The *Chaporis* in Majuli, located in the north-eastern part of Assam, are home to indigenous Assamese and Nepali communities. The majority of residents in *char-chaporis* have been relocated from other erosion-prone regions to the designated *char* areas. Residing in the unpredictable and uncertain setting of *chars*, individuals are compelled to embrace risks and adjust their livelihoods to navigate through crises. The vulnerabilities caused by soil erosion and flooding make it difficult for the people living in *char* to make a living and coexist with the river on a daily basis (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014; Rakib *et al.*, 2019). A notable human concern in North East India, encompassing Assam, revolves around displacement. Those who experience displacement find themselves displaced from their residences, lands, and surroundings, causing a profound impact on their lives. Displacement is a unique type of migration where people are compelled to forcefully migrate without their consent. Black *et al.* (2011: 3) presented a novel framework interpreting the effect of environmental change on migration. Environmental change is the principal factor driving migration, exacerbating the adverse impacts and damages in the lives of refugees and

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The term Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) refers to those who are uprooted within their own “homeland,” as opposed to refugees who cross international borders. *Char* dwellers experience forced displacement, either permanently or temporarily, as a result of flood and erosion, leading to their classification as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Studies conducted by Lahiri-Dutt, (2012), Dewan, (2021), and Borah *et al.* (2022) have delved into the climate change and its impact on the people living in the erosion prone riverine areas. Research papers have explored the impacts of land erosion, as evidenced by studies conducted by Islam *et al.* (1985), Zaman, (1989), Saikia *et al.* (2019) and, Islam *et al.* (2020). Limited studies have been conducted on the livelihoods of the *char-chaporis* and the impact of erosion, as evident in the works of Chakraborty (2009), Bokth (2014), Kumar and Das (2019), and Hira and Hazarika (2023). Most other studies predominantly concentrate on examining the repercussions of climate change-induced displacement. Once more, there is a dearth of literature on land erosion in the *char* areas of Assam. These research on *char* land erosion, however, do not include any anthropological analysis and do not go into theorizing the related problems. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge in this area by using an ethnographic methodology. In order to fill this gap, the study examines the relationship between the pattern of land erosion and the livelihood of *char* dwellers, as well as the extent to which *char* dwellers are vulnerable as a result of this erosion.

Objectives of the Study

1. To conduct an in-depth ethnographic investigation into the socio-economic challenges faced by *char* dwellers in the Nalbari district of Assam, focusing on their experiences of erosion-induced displacement.
2. To examine the impact of erosion-induced displacement on the lives of *char* dwellers.

Materials and Methods

Research approach under the study involves qualitative approach. As qualitative research gives a broad understanding of the issue, by resorting to a qualitative approach the researcher attempts to expose problems faced by the *char* dwellers.

Study Area: According to the latest 2011 census

report, there are 7 revenue circles in Nalbari district, among these 7 revenue circles, only Barkhetri revenue circle has *Char-Chapari* villages. According to the 2011 census report, there are 42 *char-chapori* villages in Barkhetri revenue circle. The total population of these 42 *char-chapori* villages is about 77,561. The study encompasses all the *char* villages within the Barkhetri revenue circle of Nalbari district.

Sampling: Combination of two sampling methods has been used for data collection. The participants are selected based according to the needs of the study. The study has undertaken only erosion affected displaced population in the affected *char* villages and the nearby mainland villages where some of the IDPs displaced. Snowball sampling is used for this study because this study includes only the IDPs due to riverbank erosion in the *char* areas of Nalbari district of Assam.

No set sample size has been taken into consideration in this investigation.

Techniques of Data Collection: The study has been conducted based on the participant observation, oral history, case study, documents, the reports and various published literatures. Field diary maintained for systematic recording of observations, experiences, and reflections.

Research Participants: Here in this study, research participants include, erosion induced displaced persons, *char* dwellers, government officials (government school teachers, medical staff of sub centres, ASHA workers), local leaders, boatman and shopkeeper of boat terminal.

Results and Discussion

Climate Change Causing Erosion and Displacement

Approximately 200 million to 1 billion individuals are expected to face displacement due to environmental changes in the next 40 years (Laczko and Piguet, 2014). Laczko and Piguet, along with their colleagues in 2014, talked about how climate change and migration are connected in various places around the world. Looking at different areas, they say that the environment might not be the only reason for migration. Often, people choose to move to safer locations voluntarily. However, drawing a clear, distinct distinction between forced and voluntary migration is difficult.

In South Asian countries like India and

Bangladesh, natural disasters such as monsoon rain and river flooding often lead to both voluntary and forced migration. Climate scientists predict that by 2050, climate change will impact around 1.4 billion people in India. Those who lives in the riverine areas are currently socio-economically marginalized and susceptible to natural disasters.

The most vulnerable people to climate change are those with poor incomes and land-based livelihoods, particularly those who reside close to rivers. Put more simply, researchers studying disasters argue that there is a strong relationship between nature and society. As Oliver-Smith (2009, Pp. 120) stated that: "The impacts of global climate change, similar to any other disaster, will be socially, politically, and economically distributed, mediated, and interpreted with evaluate to alleviate and respond similarly structured."

People are uprooted by natural hazards not only from their homes but also from their communities, social networks, and the identities connected to those places. People in the local community associate various meanings with the places they call 'home'. Consequently, when individuals are displaced from a physical location, they also experience a separation from the culture and community they have built over many generations.

Most of the people living in the *char-chaporis* have less education and therefore their religion, belief in supernatural powers, their general knowledge and attitude towards the change of seasons are different, some believe that natural disasters are caused by supernatural powers. It is observed that a common belief among many elderly individuals is that hazards are often considered as an "act of God." They hold the belief that they are "helpless" and they stated that "AllaiJaane" means only God knows.

Continually Displaced Boat Terminal

Char dwellers rely solely on boats as their primary mode of transportation, linking residents between different *chars*. These boats are connected through a boat terminal, where people board and travel to their destinations. The boat terminal undergoes location changes caused by erosion and floods, resulting in displacement.

Electric Auto-rickshaws locally known as *Tamtam* have gained popularity as a mode of transportation due to their lower fares compared to manually pulled rickshaws. On the other hand, the road is filled with sand and it is difficult for manually

pulled rickshaws to drive.

Presently there are three tea shops at Bhelakhaiti ghat (boat terminal). This boat terminal serves as the primary gateway to the *char* villages of Nalbari district. All the three tea shops lack registered names; instead, they are named based on the products they sell. In addition to tea, they provide homemade sweets, a variety of biscuits, bread, Tamul-paan (betel nut and betel-leaf) and various essential items. Numerous auto-rickshaws are parked in that area. Teachers employed in schools located across the river leave their motorcycles at the *ghat*.

According to the key informants the shop at this *ghat* was originally located at the *ghat* of another *char* called Kalarchar. The *char* was almost destroyed by the erosion and its *ghat* was also relocated. The shop at that *ghat* moved to Bhelakhaiticharghat in 2020. The location of Bhelakhaitighat has changed twice till date.

The tea stall shopkeeper at Bhelakhaitighat shared his nostalgic experiences about his past-

When we were young, our Abba (father) took us to the Kalar char Ghat to show us the sunset and the river. It was at this kalarcharghat that Abba supported our family by running a shop. After my father's illness, as the eldest son, I took care of his shop. But the river eroded our house and our shop on the ghat. We moved to Bhelakhaiti char with our family and started a shop on its ghat.

Appearance of the boat terminal varies with the seasons, presenting distinct views during both dry and flooding periods. In the summertime season, the boat terminal experiences increased activity, with boats which are shifting seeds, fertilizer and daily wage labourers. Similar to other *char* areas in Assam, the *char* regions of Nalbari district are often traversed by hand-powered boats during floods, transporting goods and livestock. In summary, a distressing scene unfolded at that time, as during floods, many residents of the *chars* take refuge on the river embankments along with their livestock.

However, in winter, a contrasting scene emerges. During this season, the *char* villages become accessible on foot from the river banks as the riverbed dries up. Bullock carts become a common sight, employed to ferry goods from the *char* areas to boats. This period brings joy to the *char* residents, as they are spared from floods and erosion. It's during this time that they focus on farming and selling their produce in the market, saving funds for the rest of the year.

Through on-site observations, authors aims to shed light on the multifaceted aspects of erosion, including its impact on the landscape, human settlements, and the daily lives of the inhabitants. However, the relentless force of erosion has taken its toll, causing the complete erosion of the boat terminal. This means that the place where people usually get on and off boats is now gone. The people living in this area now face a big challenge because they still need to use boats for transportation, and it's quite risky.

Gender Disparities

Gender disparities means the disparities between men and women in terms of status, well-being, and resource availability that often favour men and are institutionalized by the legal system, the judicial system, and social norms. The historical-material method of Engels (1972 [1884]) shows how closely related the roots of political organizations, families, and private property are. In order to guarantee the passing of property to the following generation, a husband needed his wife to take care of their children. Engels was the one who first introduced the idea of patrilineal descent (1972 [1884]). Women became a lower social status during this historical phase and were supposed to support their husbands. On the other hand, men became the dominant class, ruling over their patrilineal family and standing at the head of the patriarchal hierarchy.

However, in the context of *char* villages of Assam, gender relations within households and communities are influenced by patriarchy. Men inherit more than women as a result of the unequal distribution of family assets among the following generation. As a result, there is a large gender gap in land ownership due to the dominance of men and discriminatory patriarchal practices (Arens, 2011).

Similar to other *char* areas in Assam, *char* areas of Nalbari district exhibit a male-dominated structure. Household management predominantly falls under the purview of men, with the male member typically responsible for livelihood activities such as farming, doing labour elsewhere, driving boats, carrying goods in bullock carts, running shops, driving e-rickshaws, working as a mason and carpenter, etc. Conversely, female household members primarily tend to caregiving duties for earners and children. Furthermore, decisions regarding relocation post-erosion are solely made by male family members, with women often having little agency beyond com-

pliance.

In the *char* areas, floods and erosion make it unsafe. People have to move because of these natural disasters, becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs). After floods and erosion, they try to live on higher ground or in embankments. But they still don't have enough shelter, food, or health services. Women and children, who make up a large part of these IDPs, suffer a lot and don't get their basic rights. In times of severe floods in Assam, women face greater vulnerability compared to men. Women in economically disadvantaged households experience restricted mobility and are often perceived as a "burden" to the extent that husbands may leave their wives behind in conditions of extreme poverty (Shaw, 2014). Unfortunately, after displacement, they grapple with privacy issues in their temporary settlements. The lack of adequate facilities and the sudden change in living conditions contribute to the hardships faced by women.

Structural Inequalities: Lack of Proper Education and Healthcare Facilities

The residents of *char* areas face marginalization due to their remote location and inadequate communication networks, this prevent them from using government services that are based on the mainland (Thomson, 2000). While many *char* dwellers are illiterate, they have acquired the ability to sign official records. A fingerprint is frequently used in place of a signature. A few have finished their elementary education, while others began attending school but discontinued before taking the final exam.

Despite the emphasis on education and its importance on the *char* lands, disasters continue to hinder its accessibility. Floods prevent schools from operating since the floodwaters overwhelm both homesteads and schools. Furthermore, educators who live on the mainland are unable to travel to the *char* lands during floods due to the high risk associated with boat transportation. Moreover, school going children from the neighbouring *char* villages are unable to reach schools in the *char* villages because of the flood waters. The school structures are highly vulnerable, frequently experiencing displacement.

Every year, the *char-chaporis* endure recurring floods and erosion, resulting in the loss of their homes and essential belongings. The upheaval often forces children to abandon their schooling halfway as schools relocate due to erosion. Despite education being a fundamental right enshrined in the Consti-

tution of India, accessing it has become a difficult task for *char* residents, largely unaddressed by the government (Kabir, 2006). Residents assert that school closures during floods create significant challenges for many students, making it harder for them to adjust alongside students from other regions.

The infrastructure of the schools is quite inadequate. One primary school located in surveyed *char*, consists of only two rooms, and unfortunately, the condition of these rooms is below the expected standard. The head teacher expressed that all five classes are conducted simultaneously in these two rooms, highlighting the severe limitations in space. This situation raises concerns about the learning environment and the ability to provide quality education under such constrained conditions. However, one L.P. school located in the surveyed *char* completely eroded due to erosion. In an effort to continue providing education, the school was relocated to the mainland. Sadly, upon visiting the designated site, only the school banner was visible, and no school building stood in its place. Local residents shared that the three school teachers were transferred to other schools.

A community health clinic has recently been built to offer essential healthcare services on one of surveyed *char* village of Nalbari district. Nevertheless, the expenses associated with travelling to this health clinic are beyond the means of the majority of *char* dwellers'. Contemporary healthcare is both costly and out of reach for the *char* dwellers'. When they get sick, they go to the nearest pharmacy, tell them about their symptoms and take the medicine as prescribed by the pharmacist.

Access to emergency health services is nearly inconceivable for the *char* dwellers. Getting to a hospital necessitates assistance from a group of individuals, as well as time, financial resources, and the rental of a boat. Residents of the *char-chaporis* face challenges accessing the free ambulance service 108, unlike in other areas, due to the reliance on boat transportation. Consequently, during emergencies, individuals from these communities resort to transporting patients to hospitals using bullock carts, locally referred to as "*char-ambulances*."

Issue of Char-Chapori's Land Encroachment

The *char* areas are always changing because of natural factors like erosion and formation. Because they're not permanent, it's hard to make laws for them. Even though there were laws for *char* areas

before India became independent, there haven't been any laws made for them after independence in Assam. During British rule, some parts of Assam had one land system called *Zamindari*, while the rest had another called *Royatwari*. There were three important laws that controlled land in all areas of Assam: Goalpara Tenancy Act, 1929, the Sylhet Tenancy Act, 1936, and the Temporarily Settled Areas Tenancy Act, 1936. These laws had rules about how land in *char* areas should be managed. But when these laws were combined into the Assam Temporarily Settled Areas Tenancy Act, 1971, they didn't include any specific rules for *char* areas. Because of this, land in *char* areas often causes conflicts. Formation of new *chars* as well as erosion and their re-emergence are a regular feature in the Brahmaputra River. Abatement of revenue payment, under such circumstances, leads to cancellation of rights over their land. Moreover, when the old *chars* reappear, the earlier landowner, who move to other places, seldom get a chance to resettle and take possession of these newly emerged *chars*, resulting in conflict among the *char* dwellers.

The majority of the *chars* in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries are classified as non-cadastral, where the land is referred to as *khas* (it belongs to the government) and anyone who lives or works there is considered an illegal occupier. This is because the majority of the *chars* in these areas have not yet been evaluated under cadastral survey. Furthermore, it is uncommon to find land under *meadi* (permanent rights) settlement, even in the *chars* where cadastral surveys have been finished. The majority of the land is either in *touzi* (temporary, non-annual holders with non-hereditary rights) or *eksonia* (annual revenue titles with no permanent rights).

They are forced to move from one place to another along with or as a result of erosion, and they are suspected of being foreigners as they move and settle elsewhere (Ali Zamsar, 2021). Put simply, research on *chars* suggests that people living there often deal with complicated land documents and lengthy legal disputes (Baquee, 1998). So they have to deal with powerful individuals within their own communities.

The unfair power imbalances in farming, set up during colonial times, still exist today. Roseberry (1989, Pp. 116) points out that we need to understand that the ways people interacted in the past still have a significant impact on how things work socially, economically, and politically today. According to the World Bank's estimate, 47 million people

in India continue to be impoverished. The majority, around 70 percent, reside in rural areas. More than half of the households don't own much land. Instead, many work as small farmers, sharecroppers, labourers on others' land, or rickshaw pullers (Hartman and Boyce, 2013). In rural India, not having land is directly linked to being poor, in debt, and having less power (Rahman and Manprasert, 2006). Possession of land indicates not only means having money but also carries a special meaning in society. Access to land has been the main thing that determines social class, according to Lewis (2011).

In the *char* areas located in the Nalbari district of Assam, residents have been carefully advocating for their rights, particularly concerning land rights. The demand for land rights in these riverine regions has gained momentum, as inhabitants seek recognition and ownership of their ancestral lands. Present chief minister of Assam, addressed the issue by emphasizing a cautious approach in dealing with claims over disputed lands. He stated that in "doubtful cases," circle officers would conduct inquiries, discouraging hasty decisions. He asserted that such cases could be settled later based on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and other relevant documents. Notably, he clarified that *char* areas, owing to ecological concerns, would not fall under Mission Basundhara 2.0 (launched on 2nd Oct 2023), a developmental initiative. The complex interplay of land rights, ecological considerations, and administrative procedures underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by the people living in these riverine regions. He further stated, "Land rights will be granted to indigenous people who have resided in the land for three generations. The new mission is designed to discourage encroachers, and strict measures will be taken against anyone endorsing such practices." Nevertheless, the scenario continues to be a topic of ongoing discussion and assessment, highlighting the complex challenges linked to land rights and environmental conservation, particularly concerning individuals with suspected Bangladeshi origins amid the *char* areas of Assam.

While the *char* lands lack formal land titles (*patta*), the inhabitants dwelling in these areas have not intentionally chosen to construct their homes there. Their choices are compelled by a lack of alternatives, as they find themselves at the forefront of the relentless challenge of erosion. Erosion forces them to continually relocate their houses from one *char* to another. In this process, some residents pur-

chase land from others, while others rely on borrowing. Despite the inherent hardships, these resilient individuals, predominantly engaged in agriculture, recognize the fertility of *char* area soil exceeds that of mainland regions. In their pursuit of livelihoods, they make sacrifices, enduring the challenges of living in *char* areas, where their lives become intricately intertwined with the dynamic and demanding nature of the environment.

The problem of land encroachment is a burning issue at both local and national levels. Despite the prevailing illiteracy and poverty among the inhabitants of *char-chaporis*, a select few, known as “matbars” in the local vernacular, wield significant influence. As erosion renders lands uncultivable and questions ownership, individuals bearing the “Matbar” often assume control, establishing connections with the local elite. Meanwhile, other members of society begin cultivating new surface lands without notifying the right owners. Eventually, during harvest time, the legitimate owners emerge to assert their land claims after diligent labour.

Engaging in unauthorized sand-mining serves as another instance of direct land grabbing. As floodwaters recede, they leave behind fertile muddy silt and non-cultivable sand. After the flood, sandy lands resurface, and numerous tractors can be observed collecting and transporting sand from the sandbanks to the mainland. According to a shopkeeper at Bhelakhaiti *ghat*, gathering and selling sand is a quicker and simpler way to earn money. In this process, landowners don't need to invest capital; they just have to wait for the floodwaters to recede. As he explained, influential people and landowners can afford this because it involves hiring a large tractor and several day labourers. Smallholders often form a group to collectively hire equipment, like a tractor, to extract sand from their recently emerged land. Moreover, there's no guarantee that landlords will share the income from selling the accumulated sand with the smallholders.

Extracting sand from state-owned land is considered illegal, but it appears that if the individuals removing the sand have a “good connection” with influential figures, it might go unreported. Illegal sand mining is also a cause of massive erosion in the riverine *char* areas.

Conclusion

The plight of *char* dwellers residing in the riverine

areas of Nalbari, Assam, remains a pressing issue marked by vulnerability to erosion, floods, and displacement. Climate change worsens these challenges, directly impacting the livelihoods of these *char* dwellers. The perception among *char* dwellers often attributes these hazards to acts of God, but in reality, they are compounded by various socio-economic factors. Displacement not only disrupts homes but also severs vital communication links, such as boat terminals, essential for *char* dwellers. Gender inequality compounds their hardships, with women often relegated to roles of child-rearing and denied property rights, exacerbating their vulnerability during crises. During floods and erosion, women face heightened challenges due to privacy issues and lack of agency, further highlighting structural inequalities within these communities. The dire state of education and healthcare infrastructure perpetuates the cycle of vulnerability, leaving *char* dwellers reliant on inadequate facilities and makeshift solutions like bullock carts serving as ambulances. Additionally, the rampant issues of land grabbing and illegal sand mining aggravate erosion, intensifying the challenges faced by the *char* dwellers. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires holistic approaches that prioritize equity, sustainable development, and community resilience in *char* areas.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to declare.

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