

CHAPTER – 3

CHAR AREAS OF BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

3.1 Introduction

In this Chapter we have tried to focus on Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam through four sections. The second section provides Char area development in the political history of Assam covering the question of developments before the formation of the Char development Authority and also Char Development Authority phase movement together with highlighting 73rd Amendment of the Constitution vis a vis Char areas under four sub-sections. The third section focuses on physical aspects, social demographic aspects and socio-economic aspects under three sub-sections. The fourth section is the concluding section.

3.2.1 Char Area Development in the Political History of Assam

As mentioned earlier, barring a very few almost all the 'Char' areas of Brahmaputra Valley are Muslim dominated. So the question of development of Char Areas is naturally linked with the people belonging to religious minority in the history of Assam. It is worthwhile to mention here that without apprehending the role of the Muslims in the civil society of Assam, it would be difficult to analyse the question of Char area development in the history of Assam. M. Hussain (1993: 197) has rightly observed that the Muslims of Assam are not a single homogenous community; rather they are groups of several identifiable distinctive ones and Hussain categorized the Muslims of Assam into four groups: (i) Asamiya Muslims, (ii) Na-Asamiya Muslims, (iii) Muslims of the Barak Valley and (iv) North Indian Muslims living in Assam (Hussain: 1993). At the same time it is equally true that such kind of categorization in regard to the Muslims of Assam is not made by the Census Reports. It is also noted here that major portion of Asamiya Muslims or Thaluva Musalman, meaning the local Muslims or Garia¹ are

absent in the Char areas. The second category of Muslims in Assam are known as Na-Asamiya Musalman meaning Neo-Asamiya Muslims and in Assam, they are also known as Pamua Musalman (the farming Muslims), Charua Musalman (the Muslims of river islands or banks seasonally sub-merged into river waters), Miya Musalman and Mymensinghia Musalman (Muslims from Mymensingh district of erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh) (Ibid: 1993). Some scholars used the term 'Immigrant Muslims' and some called them 'Bengali Muslims' too. Whether the terms specifying this group of people is appropriate or not and whether the nomenclature identifying this community is right or wrong, the most important question is that their role in the contemporary Assam cannot be underestimated. According to Hussain (1993) the demographic strength of this second category of Muslim population would be around 18% of the total population of Assam. Major portion of this category of population are living in the char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam too. As mentioned earlier, they migrated from Mymensingh, Pabna and Rongpur districts (from Erstwhile East Pakistan now Bangladesh) in the first half of 20th century. Hussain (1993: 201) has rightly observed regarding the migration of this category of Muslim population to Assam thus:

- 1) severe feudal oppression by landlords under the zamindari system and its resultant poverty and perpetually near famine conditions of peasants of East Bengal,
- 2) very high pressure on land in a feudal agrarian social structure,
- 3) comparatively less oppression in Assam by the earlier landed aristocracy, composed of both the high caste Asamiya Hindus and a section of the Asamiya Muslims in a semi feudal agrarian social structure within a colonial system,

- 4) operation of the relatively less oppressive ryotwari land tenure system in Assam,
- 5) abundance of land and very favourable land-man ratio in Assam, and the obvious reluctance of Asamiya peasantry to use waste and char lands,
- 6) encouragement given by the provincial government headed by the Muslim League, in the late thirties and early forties,
- 7) patronage received from Marwari traders and even Asamiya Mahajans and landlords, and
- 8) the colonial policy of augmenting land revenue in Assam which was very meagre compared to other Indian provinces (Husain: 1993, P- 201). In fact, all these factors were responsible during colonial rule for the Muslim migration in Assam.

It is noted here that in view of the increasing number of migrants in the pre-independence era, the officials of Nowgong district in 1916 devised an administrative measure to restrict the indiscriminate settlement by immigrants in the Assamese inhabited lands. This system is known as 'Line System' (Bhuyan & De: 1978). The system was first put into action in 1920 in the Nowgong district and the Barpeta sub-division in the Kamrup district. With the introduction of the Line System; however, land was classified into the following categories:

- (i) those in which immigrants might settle freely;
- (ii) those in which they could not settle; and
- (iii) where a line was drawn, only they could settle on one side of it (Ibid: 1978).

B.J. Dev and D.K. Lahiri (1985: 23) rightly observed regarding the introduction of Line System thus:

“The ‘Line System’ was a short title for the system by which Muslim immigrants from Bengal, especially from the district of Mymensingh, were required to settle in certain definite areas of the Assam valley district and were not allowed to take settlement of land under the Government in other areas. It was, in fact, a device to segregate the Bengali Muslim from the indigenous population including the tribal and backward classes. Thus it was originally intended to be a protective measure against the indiscriminate settlement of immigrants for the ostensible purpose of avoiding social conflicts and tensions. The device originated entirely with the district officers and was not adopted in execution of the orders of the Government. However, the Government did not interfere with the system which gradually developed although not on parallel lines in all the lower Assam districts, except Goalpara”.

In fact, the introduction of “Line System” failed to check immigration though it helped to develop communal turn between the migrants and the Hindu Asamiyas and the outcome of it was the politics of tension and the political divergence as observed by Rao and Hazarika (1983: 255), S.U. Ahmed (1999: 25), Dev and Lahiri (1985: 22-23) have also observed rightly thus: Maulana Bhasani’s relentless fight against the Line System led to the political mobilisation of Muslim immigrants in Assam.

According to M. Hussain (1993: 205-206) the British colonialists who introduced the Line System to regulate the inflow of the Muslim peasants later introduced another device in 1928, which virtually amounted to the negation of the Line System known as Colonization Scheme. The colonization scheme was first introduced in Nowgong

district in 1928, and thereafter in Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup district and the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang district. A family was to be provided with about 20 bighas of land on payment of premium under the new scheme.

The British colonialism created a contradictory situation wherein they forced the push factor in one region and the pull factor in another region. If contingency demanded, they would also surprisingly impose restrictions only to remove it again, whenever it was necessary in the interest of maintaining colonial hegemony (Hussain: 1993).

Probably M. Kar (1990) has rightly observed regarding both the schemes in connection with facing the problem of immigration. According to him "The Line System and the Colonization Scheme, the only steps taken by Government, did not solve the problem but only perpetuated it by the gradual induction of communal, racial and political questions into it (M. Kar 1990). In the subsequent period it is found that the immigrants, as the Muslims in general, more and more veered round the Muslim League (Ibid: 1990) at least during the pre-independence period as Syed Mohammad Sadulla though an Asamiya Muslim, under the banner of Muslim League, formed the Provincial Government for five times in seven years between 1938 and 1945.

Thus, during pre-independence period very few Muslims of Assam were sided with the Congress party and its ideology. Of course, the attitude of the Muslims had changed after the independence as B.J. Dev and D.K. Lahiri (1985) have rightly observed thus:

"The creation of Pakistan on the basis of two-nation theory and the coincidence of post-independence Assam politics with Congress monopoly in the corridors of power had demoralizing influence on the bargaining potential of the Muslims of Assam, many of whom, also, felt

let down by the failure of the Muslim League to ensure Assam's inclusion in the Pakistan Zone. This was clearly reflected in the dramatic political developments preceding the First General Election in Assam when a staunch Leaguer of the stature of Md. Sadulla communicated to the Provincial Congress chief Siddinath Sarma on 30 August 1951, the final decision of the Muslims to join the Congress *en masse*."

In fact, in the post-independence period the immigrant Muslims and their leadership not only sided with the Congress party but also extended their desire to assimilate in the Assamese society. Election to the Legislative Assembly of Assam was held in 1952, 1957, 1962, 1972 in which Congress obtained people's mandate and Congress-led ministry was installed in 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1972. But in the year 1978, the Congress failed to obtain majority in the Election of State Legislative Assembly. Thus the Congress-Muslim alliance, which came into existence since 1952, continued unbroken till 1977 as large sections of Muslims during this period constituted a vote-bank of the Congress. In the sixth general elections to the Legislative Assembly held in 1978, the Congress was defeated. No party secured an absolute majority in the Assembly and the party-wise seats are as under Janata-53, Congress (R) 26, C.P.I.-5, C.P.M. 11, Independents-15, R.C.P.I-4, P.T.C.A. - 4, Congress (I) - 8, a total of 126. We would like to analyse the result of Sixth Assembly Election in the subsequent analyses.

3.2.2 Development in Char Areas before the formation of Development Authority

According to M. Kar (1990) discontent of the Muslims with their new allies, however, became evident from the proceedings of their Gauhati Convention of February 1975 held under the inspiration of the

then Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Syed Ahmed Ali and the support of Moinul Haque Choudhury as Ali presided over the open session of the Convention highlighting the 'problem faced by 40 lakh Muslim population of Assam'. The Convention also pointed out the obstacles to Muslim participation in all spheres and branches of life and the speakers opined that their condition had allegedly gone down since independence particularly in respect of employment, representation in public bodies, nationalized banks, co-operatives, public undertakings, universities and Islamic education. Thus, the convention decided to form a "Muslim Parishad" with Syed Ahmed Ali as the President for safeguarding and promoting Muslim interests (M. Kar: 1990). The Parishad was formed only as a handmaid of the ministers, as alleged by a section of the Muslims in connection with strengthening their own position yet some scholars (e.g. M. Kar) opined that it was suspected as a Congress stooge. The Parishad was dissolved in 1975 by the President without any cogent justification (Ibid: 1990). As mentioned earlier, the congress-Muslim alliance in Assam continued till the elections of 1977. According to M. Kar (1990) "Following the Congress debacle in the Lok Sabha Election of 1977, a section of educated Muslims gathered at Haji Musafir Khana, Islampur, Gauhati on 8 May 1977 and the meeting was presided over by Mr. Ajmad Ali, Advocate, Ex-Vice President, Assam Provincial Muslim League and Ex-M.P. and attended by delegates from all over Assam. The speakers were of opinion that there was chaos and confusion in the political field. After a frank discussion, a perfect unanimity was reached about the urgent necessity of a party which alone could look after their political and economic interests (M. Kar: 1991)." The meeting unanimously decided to form a new political party under the name of Eastern India Muslim Association (E.I.M.A.). And on the eve of the Assembly elections of

1978, selected Muslim leaders met at Gauhati and decided to form the Progressive Democratic Front, which consisted of the E.I.M.A., Kamata Rajya Parishad, Janata Congress, Yuva Linguistic Minority Committee and the Citizens Democratic Front. Though the front fielded seventy-one independent candidates including twenty-one Muslims from almost all the districts of the state yet the front did not fare well in the election. Eastern India Muslim Association was formally dissolved and merged in the Indian Union Muslim League in October 1977 to re-emerge as the Eastern Zonal Muslim League.

In fact, no significant Muslim Groups or Forums can be witnessed and no movement was launched by the Muslim leaders in connection with ventilating the grievances of the socio-economic condition of the people of Char-areas before the origination of Char Area Development Authority in 1983-84. Even the Muslim Parishad and Eastern India Muslim Association failed to highlight the socio-economic problems of the people of char Areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

3.2.3 Development Authority led Development

The Government of Assam constituted "Assam State Char Areas Development Authority" in the year 1983 during Saikia regime. According to B.J. Dev and D.K. Lahiri (1985) some of the decisions of the Saikia Ministry have restored the morale of the Muslims of Assam. The decision to create a Char Development Authority for the development of 1100 Chars of Assam predominantly peopled by immigrant Muslims is one such example. The decision of the Ministry to reserve 24 percent of the Government posts for the Muslims of Assam is another example, which raised the eyebrows of the caste Hindus delaying ultimately the process of implementation of the

promise..... The Governmental decision to create a separate and a full-fledged Police force consisting of the minorities is equally viewed with alarm in some circle but this is only intended to combat communal riots (B.J. Dev & D.K. Lahiri: 1985). As mentioned earlier no significant movement was launched by the Muslims of Assam in general and the people of char areas in particular yet the decline in the popularity of Congress amongst the Muslims in 1978 Assembly Election can be discernible. In the 1978 election out of 28 Muslim MLAs only 11 belonged to Congress. The position, however, changed in December 1980 when the political situation took sudden turn as a result of defection and 19 Muslim MLAs then owed their loyalty to the Congress, 18 with Congress (I) and 1 with Congress (U) (Ibid: 1985). It is worthwhile to mention here that socio political instability can be observed in Assam during 1978-1985 because of All Assam Students' Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad led anti-foreigners' movement. We can witness four Ministries during 12-03-78 to 18-03-1982 as the Ministry of Golap Chandra Barborra (12-03-78 to 04-09-79), as the ministry of Jogendra Nath Hazarika (9-9-79 to 12-12-79), as the Ministry of Syeda Anwara Taimur (6-12-80 to 28-6-81) and as the Ministry of Keshab Chandra Gogoi (13.01.82 to 18.3.82). Politics of defections can also be observed during this period. Assam during this period was under President's rule in several times. Due to the disturbed conditions arising out of the anti-foreigners' movement and to avoid constitutional crisis, the Election Commission of India announced on 6 January, 1983 that bye election to the 12 Vacant Lok Sabha Seats (vacant since 1980 as Lok Sabha Election was not held in 12 seats of Brahmaputra Valley because of disturbed social unrest) and the general elections to the State Legislative Assembly would be held at the end of President's rule. Elections were to be held on the basis of 1979

revised electoral rolls and the scheduled dates of elections were 14, 17, 20 and 21 February, 1983 alongwith two phases. Except Congress (I), Congress (S), PTCA (Plain Tribal Council of Assam), Independents and the Left Parties, all other parties and forums boycotted the elections because of intense pressure pursued by the agitationists of Assam Movements. Thus, before and during elections massacre took place in several places of Assam. In Nellie near Jagiroad of Marigaon district, a largest number of innocent Muslims were brutally killed (S. U. Ahmed: 1999). Nagabandha, Dalimbari, Samaria, Kashimpur, Gohpur, Bhabanipur, Bijni, Kharupetia, Chawlkhowa, Silapathar, Sarupathar etc. were also badly affected as rightly observed by S. U. Ahmed. After the elections, the Congress (I) came to power in Assam and the party obtained 91 seats out of 109 seats for which elections were held and in the subsequent period 6 independent MLAs joined Congress (I). Thus, it rose to 97. Though Mr. Hiteswar Saikia formed the Govt. yet the Saikia Govt. faced strong social boycott from the mainstream Asamiya Society. According to S. U. Ahmed (1993) 32 Muslims were elected in the Assembly Election of 1983, of whom 22 belonged to the Congress. He also maintained that the cabinet of Saikia was consisted of 29 Ministers, of whom six were Muslims and two of them belonged to Cachar and one each to Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong and Sheikh Chand Mahammad from Kamrup was elected Speaker of the Assembly. It is undeniable that the minorities had unflinchingly voted in favour of Congress (I) in 1983 election to Assam Legislative Assembly though innumerable people belonging to minorities were massacred before and during election as mentioned earlier. Probably, Hiteswar Saikia wanted to restore the morale of the Muslims of Assam and as a follow-up action Char Development Authority took birth in 1983 alongwith perpetuating the support of the Muslim voters, which was

eroded in the 1978 Assam Legislative Assembly election. The observation of B. J. Dev & D. K. Lahiri is also noteworthy who rightly observed thus: "Besides any precipitate action also encourage the swing of the Assam Muslims towards isolationism to seek refuge under the Muslim League, Jammat-e-Islam and Tablige Jammat. The killings of the Muslims at Nellie had provided these organizations a platform for their political and propaganda activities. The Muslim sentiment cannot be easily brushed aside for they constitute about 30% of the total population of Assam. An additional reason for Congress (I) wooing the Muslims is to combat the possible growth of extremism banking on discontentment and neglect. A significant development in Assam politics has been the recent allotment of Home Portfolio to a Bengalee Muslim from Cachar which is something unique in Post Independent Assam" (B. J. Dev & D. K. Lahiri: 1985). Another achievement of Mr. Hiteswar Saikia was the enactment of Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983 as along with Mr. Abdul Muhib Mazumder probably Saikia succeeded to manipulate the Government of India in order to enact the said Act for the protection of minorities.

Of course, Assam Accord (1985) changed the scenario of Assam politics. Asom Gana Parishad led Government a regional party-development of post-Assam Accord under the Chairmanship of P.K. Mahanta came to power. The United Minorities Front- the regional party belonging to religious and linguistic minorities is also the development of Post- Assam Accord. It is interesting to note here that the Muslims, who traditionally supported the congress barring 1978 Assembly election, were not interested in this party after the Assam Accord. Out of 17 wining seats 13 Muslim candidates belonging to United Minorities Front came out successful to the election of 1985 Assam Legislative Assembly whereas Indian National Congress (I)

succeeded to send only 5 candidates from the Muslims community. It is also noted here that the United Minorities Front in its Election Manifesto relating to Assam Election, 1985 contained a number of proposals before the electorate in Assam alongwith highlighting the problems of char areas. Though it contained a number of economic proposals yet it is observed that it focused the problems of char areas thus:

- (i) The problems—legal, social and economic— of the peasants in the riverine (char) areas shall be enquired into and adequate steps shall be taken for the development of the char economy.
- (ii) A fair and equitable representation of all communities in Government services including police forces shall be made (Election manifesto of UMF: 1985). In the subsequent period both the AGP and UMF had to split. In the Assembly Election of 1991, Congress (I) under Mr. Hiteswar Saikia came to power in which 15 seats won by Muslim candidates within Congress (I) fold out of 66 won by Congress (I) and 36 members of Saikia Ministry included 8 members belonging to religious minority. The survey on char areas also started during Saikia regime (1991 – 1996) as it is found if we look at the socio-economic report of the Director, Char Area Development, and Assam 1992-93. Of course, survey on Char areas also started during AGP regime (1985-90) too in which Mr. Golam Osmani, leader of UMF taking part in the Assembly said: “In char areas people are generally displaced because of erosion and there are facts of life and nobody deny this fact. The congress party, which was at the helm of affairs in this state did not make any survey for the last three decades. We welcome the proposal of the present Chief Minister of Assam to survey the Char areas No settlement was made in Char areas by the then party in power. There are lots of anomalies. If an enquiry is made it will be revealed that right

from the Mondal to the highest position there is a chain of vested interest who made gains from irregularities. Now if it is found by survey that 15 to 20 lakhs of people are inhabiting in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley as encroachers our honourable Chief Minister will have to think twice before evicting them. In the forest areas mostly tribal people have been occupying land. The Janata government with which I happen to be associated had to face the problem of such encroachment. The then Janata Government took a decision that up to 1978 whoever occupied Govt. land will not be evicted and later on Hiteswar Saikia's Government made 1980 as the date line. So about land policy the UMF demands that the people living in the Char areas must be given the pattas and permanent settlement. Mr. Osmani also said let there be an Accord, the UMF is willing and they do not say no and no to any other point of view (Osmani's Speech, Assam Assembly, Vol. I No. 4, 21.01.1986).

Though AGP contains one sentence in its Elections Manifesto of 1991 Assembly Election regarding the welfare of Char areas yet it is found that the party gave more impetus in its Election Manifesto to the Assembly Election of 1996 regarding the char areas. The AGP emphasizing on char areas along with electoral understanding with CPI, CPI (M) and United Peoples Party of Assam succeeded to form the Government in Assam in the year 1996.

Congress (I) came to power in Assam again in 2001 and 2006 under the leadership of Mr. Tarun Gogoi. On the eve of the Assembly Election of 2006 Assam United Democratic Front took birth under the leadership of Md. Badduddin Azmal in which erstwhile leaders of United Minorities Front had taken active part. It is noted here that the constitution of AUDF recognizes the Char Parishad as one of the Fifth

Frontal Organisation of the Party and some of objectives of the Party are:

- Permanent solution for infiltration problem.
- Flood and erosion problem and control of Brahmaputra.
- Rehabilitation of displaced person affected by flood and erosion.
- Survey of Char land areas and execute permanent pattas.
- To protect the rights and interests of the minorities and to respect their aspirations etc. AUDF succeeded to capture 10 seats to the Assam Legislative Assembly and Congress (I) securing 53 seats compelled to form coalition government making understanding with Bodoland Peoples' Front during the post poll scenario. Thus almost all the parties since the 1980s had to highlight the problems of the religious minorities particularly of char dwellers and without whose support the formation of stable government would not have been possible though it is undeniable fact that no organized significant movement could be witnessed relating to the problems of char areas even during authority (Char Area Development Authority) phase. Of course, some non-governmental organizations (For instance, Char Areas Welfare Society for Socio-Economic Research) and political parties (For instance, United Minorities Front) organized seminars regarding the socio-economic problems of the char dwellers in which academicians, journalists, intellectuals, social scientists, politicians actively participated in those seminars and raised the problems in depth.

3.2.4 73rd Amendment of the Constitution Vis-à-vis Char Areas

Assam is one of the most leading states in India Union, which had passed "The Assam Panchayat Act 1948" immediately after India's independence. Nevertheless, the state has not succeeded to institutionalize participatory democracy at the local level even after passing of six decades. Of course, the problem of institutionalizing participatory democracy is not only the problem of Assam as UN-Human Development Report - 2002 raised some significant questions about "true democracy and voice" which Jayati Ghosh (2002) rightly pointed out and stated that HDR- 2002 did not go far enough in identifying some of the major obstacles to democracy in the world today, or the means to achieve it. Some scholars, like Niru Hazarika (2005) has mentioned regarding "traditional Villages" in Assam which worked as essentially democratic institutions on the basis of social customs and traditions. Of course Niru Hazarika's traditional villages are not covered the Muslim dominated 'Char' villages. Though V.V. Rao (1967) does not agree with S.K. Bhuyan who termed 'Namghars' established by Shankara Deva as "Village Parliaments" yet it cannot be denied that rural community life veered over the 'Namghars' and 'Gaonburas' through which a code of humanism, morality and selflessness were imbibed and discernable among the rural people of Assam and Niru Hazarika (2005) has rightly justified about these moribund and decaying condition of democratic institutions at this present juncture. It has been found that during that period the villagers had the enviable spirit of unity, discipline along with social Consciousness. But now probably even after 73rd Amendment of Indian Constitution and passing of Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 on the spirit of 73rd Amendment the very spirit of true participatory democracy i.e. deepening democracy has not yet developed and matured in Assam in

general and 'Char' areas in particular and as a result of which the problem of institutionalization has cropped up. It has been observed that the Government of Assam has also failed to take sincere effort with regard to paying respect to people's participatory democracy as even after passing of Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, Panchayat elections were not held (which was scheduled to be held in 1997) till 2001. 'Gram Sabha' has indeed played a significant role in connection with peoples' participation at the grassroots level together with governance and development in some states of Indian Union i.e. Tripura, West Bengal, Kerala, Rajasthan etc. But it is unfortunate that being a homeland of traditional democracy (excluding all the immigrant Muslim dominated Char Villages) the peoples' participation at the grassroots level of Assam particularly in the 'Char' areas of Brahmaputra Valley is in a nascent stage although last Panchayat Elections in Assam were held in four stages covering the 'Char Areas' starting from the 31st Dec/2007, culminating in January 2008.

3.3.1 Physical Aspects

Assam with a geographical area of 78,438 sq. km., which accounts for about 2.4 percent of country's total land area. In terms of both area and population, Assam ranks 14th among the states of India as per 2001 Census. The state divides itself into two distinct natural divisions, viz. the Brahmaputra Valley comprising 22 districts of plain area and 2 districts of hill areas with a total area of 71,516 sq. kms. and Barak Valley comprising three districts with an area of 6922 Sq. Kms. At present, the state has 27 districts including the newly created Kamrup urban district and 4 districts under the newly created Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas viz. Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri and all these newly created districts have fallen in the Brahmaputra Valley (Economic Survey Assam: 1996-97 & 2004-

05). The state has 49 Sub-divisions, 219 Blocks as on 31-3-2004 and 155 Revenue Circles, 26247 villages along with 1188 uninhabited villages including 125 towns as per 2001 Census; the state has also 2489 numbers of gaon Panchayats as on 31-08-2004 (Statistical Handbook of Assam: 2004). B. K. Kar (2002: P.17) has rightly divided the region of Brahmaputra Valley into three sub-regions – Western Brahmaputra valley, Central Brahmaputra Valley and Eastern Brahmaputra Valley comprising 18 districts of Assam including 4 districts of BTC; Western Brahmaputra Valley covers Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup; Central Brahmaputra Valley comprises Darrang, Sonitpur, Morigaon and Nagaon and Eastern Brahmaputra Valley includes Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia.

According to A.K. Bhagabati (2001) the Brahmaputra plain covers an area of 56,339 km (72 percent of total area of Assam) and the length of this plain is about 725 km. in east-west direction and an average width of 80 km. The Brahmaputra plain is an important physiographic unit of Assam and the largest plain of Northeast India and the entire Brahmaputra plain is enclosed by hills and mountains from all sides (Kar: 2002). The width of the Brahmaputra river channel varies considerably from one point to another as it largely depends upon a number of geological and geomorphological factors and on the way from Dibrugarh to Dhubri, numerous river islands locally called 'char' or 'chaponi' are found to occur inside the channel (Ibid: 2002). Within the Brahmaputra plain we may further divide three middle sized/shaped geographical region; narrow hilly region of North and South, central plain region and char/chaponi (river-islands) region of the Brahmaputra (Bhagabati: 2001). Taher (1997) has rightly shown that there are 105 major tributaries of the Brahmaputra in Assam, 64 of which are on the

left bank and 41 on the right bank; in addition to 105 numbers of first grade tributaries, there are 126 numbers of second grade, 52 numbers of third grade, 20 numbers of 4th grade and 15 numbers of fifth grade rivers besides a large number of small rivulets which have fallen into the Brahmaputra.

The formation of Char/Chapori is very complex. Though the 'Chars' are formed inside all the rivers, yet the 'Chars' are fully developed in some particular rivers. Char areas are also recognized as 'other special area' because these areas have also possessed topographical and natural features like the desert areas, hilly regions and border areas etc. In fact, 'Char'/'Chapori' are two names based on topography of Assam. Raised land surrounded by water is locally called 'Char'. When 'Chars' get perpetuality then they are locally called 'Chapori'. In other words, after changing of the course of river if the 'chars' are connected with or linked to the original soil then the 'chars' are identified with 'chapari'.

'Chars' are inside the river and 'Chapori' are on the bank of the river.

In connection with carrying silts, the Huangho in China ranks first while the Brahmaputra ranks second in the world. The quantity of silts is so huge that in the water of Brahmaputra per sq. km is 1495 tons at Pashighat, 1313 tons at Pandu (Guwahati) and 120 tons at Dhubri respectively (Taher: 1997). It is found that the quantity of silt carried by the river decrease gradually down to its lower destination. In addition to the silts carried by the main river (Brahmaputra), its tributaries too carry huge amount of silts to it and thus contribute in the formation of a large numbers of Char-Chapries (mid-channel bars) generally on the opposite sides of their confluence. According to Bengal

Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation, 1825, the char areas were defined as “small islands in the river bed, which are formed by either frequent changes of the river or by shifting of the sands which lie on beds of those rivers”.

The char areas are an integral part of the very complex fluvial regime of the Brahmaputra river and in Assam, the river Brahmaputra flows through a highly braided Channel with numerous lateral and mid channel bars (chars) (Bhagabati: 2005). According to Bhagabati (Ibid: 2005) the bars are composed of both bed load and suspended load and are generally triangular in shape. Their height naturally can never be greater than the height of the highest flood since they are built under flood environment (Coleman, quoted in Bhagabati: 2005).

The beginning of human habitation in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam is of recent origin in comparison to other parts of Brahmaputra Valley. In fact, chars are the last spaces of attraction of so far as human habitation is concerned. It is worthwhile to mention here that the settlers of char are mostly immigrants Muslims, Bengali refugees, Nepali immigrants along with a very small number of indigenous people. Muslim immigrants and Hindu refugees migrated from erstwhile East Bengal (present Bangladesh) and the Nepalis from Nepal. The first significant migration from East Bengal took place in the beginning of the 20th century (Hussain/Guha/Kar).

The census of India for the first time recorded the Muslim peasant migration in 1911 and major portion of this migration took place from Mymensingh district of East Bengal (Present Bangladesh) to Assam's wastelands. Guha has rightly observed (1977) about this peasant migration thus:

“Immigration was no doubt a welcome phenomenon for labour short, land abundant Assam from the economic point of view. Landless peasants from the overpopulated East Bengal – of them 85 percent were Muslims – found land in Assam’s waterlogged, jungle-infested, riverine belt. Used to an amphibious mode of living and industrious, these immigrants came by rail, steamers and boats up the Brahmaputra to reclaim these material areas. All that they wanted was land. From their riverine base, they further pressed themselves forward in all directions in search of more living space in the areas held by the autochthons

P.C. Goswami (1994: 22) observed thus: “The settlers from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rongpur began to flow to the ‘Char’ lands (i.e. lands formed by the deposits of alluvium from rivers) in Goalpara district. The population of Goalpara, which increased by 2 percent in 1891-1901, increased by 30 percent in 1901-11 due to the inflow of immigrants. In 1911 the immigrants formed of fifth of the total population of Goalpara district.” In the subsequent period the immigrants started to settle in other districts and subdivisions of Brahmaputra Valley. In fact, Nowgong, Barpeta (sub-division of Kamrup district), Darrang, North Lakimpur were other favourable areas of the Muslim immigrants next to Goalpara district of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. It is important to note the observation of Guha (2000) who has rightly observed: “As the chars of Goalpara district were nearest to East Bengal, the immigrants first settled in this district. Later they scattered in the char areas of Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon and in the chars of upper Assam. When the char lands became cultivable with crops, pam (temporary) cultivation was allowed to be done on the annual leases by the neighbouring areas in isolated patches. When the pressure of immigration from East Bengal

increased, large tract of land were dereserved from each of the Professional Grazing Reserves part by part, till the whole reserve was ultimately settled with the immigrant population” (Guha: Quoted in Sheikh: 2005). The Assam Land Revenue Manual also states: “From about 1915 onward the immigration of residents of Eastern Bengal from the over crowded districts of that area mostly Mymensingh, Pabna and Rangpur, has been a very marked feature. Large area of land which the indigenous inhabitants could only use for fluctuating cultivation especially in Barpeta, Nagaon and Mangaldoi, have been brought under cultivation, the soil being very favourable to the growth of Jute.” (The Assam Land Revenue Manual: Vol. I: 8 edition: 1968) It is worthwhile to mention here that these migrants from East Bengal comprised of both Muslims and Hindus. Of course, about 85 to 90 percent were Muslims and the remaining belonged to Hindus. Thus the human habitation of the Char areas started during first part of 20th Century as the cultivators and settled in these uninhabited and inhospitable areas leaving their mother-land for good (Chakraborty & Alam: 2005). The population of Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley, Assam is 24,90,097 and about 85 to 90 percent people are belonged to Muslims.

The process of formation of these chars of the mighty river Brahmaputra is primarily two. If we look at the “Chars” of lower Assam particularly the chars of Dhubri, Goalpara, Kamrup, Barpeta and Nalbari we can observe that silts carried by the current of the river Brahmaputra precipitate for the emergence of Chars and these chars are transformed into chapories because of the perpetual nature. It does not mean that all the chars of these districts are permanent in nature. Some of them are destroyed because of occurrence of heavy flood and cyclone.

On the other hand, the Char-Chapories of Central Assam particularly the char-chapories of Nowgong, Morigaon, Darrang, Sonitpur etc. are emerged due to heavy erosion of the river Brahmaputra. It is observed that almost all the char-chapories of these districts were permanent villages adjacent to other permanent villages. But because of heavy erosion of the Brahmaputra a number of villages remaining as marooned for years and as a result of which chars-chapories are formed. For instance Rangrai Chapori, Chitlamari Char, Ganimunchi Char, Garu Char etc. from the vast Goroimari villages areas were emerged in the erstwhile Nowgong District (at present Morigaon district) after a long gap of 20 years remaining as marooned because of heavy erosion in the river Brahmaputra. Thus, it is our observation that these are the two processes in connection with emergence of chars and chapories of Brahmaputra.

According to UNDP Human Development Report 2007- 08 "Monsoon floods and storms in South Asia during the 2007 session displaced more than 14 million people in India and 7 million in Bangladesh. Over 1,000 lost their lives across Bangladesh, India, Southern Nepal and Pakistan.

Gender bias in the impact of disasters is also under reported. When disasters strike, they hurt whole communities but women often bear brunt. Floods frequently claim for more female victims because their mobility is restricted and they have not been taught to swim. When Bangladesh was hit by a devastating cyclone and floods in 1991 the death rate was reportedly five times higher among women. In the aftermath of a disaster, restrictions on the legal rights and entitlements of women to land and property can limit access to credit needed for recovery." (UNDP – HDR report: 2007-08).

The observation of UNDP-HDR report cannot be under estimated as during the last six decades large numbers of 'chars' along with human lives were washed away by the river Brahmaputra. Ismail Hussain (2005) has also rightly observed that with the intensity of recurring flood, devastating erosion has been continuously taking place on the banks of the Brahmaputra as well as in the Char areas causing damages to cultivable land, homestead, public and private properties and prosperous settlements of the state during the last few years. Of course, large-scale deforestation, influence of embankments along with frequent occurrence of earthquake have influenced much to the occurrence of floods and erosion in Assam. The other factors causing extensive floods are adverse physiography of the region, heavy rainfall, excessive sedimentation, hill/land sliding, encroachment of the riverine area. It is worthwhile to mention here that though these significant factors have influenced much to the occurrence of flood and erosion yet it has been observed that because of devastating earthquakes of 1897 and 1950 a number of areas were dislocated along with unprecedented change of human habitation as well as occurrence of flood and erosion of the Brahmaputra are on the rise gradually.

Assam has witnessed successive waves of devastating floods during the last few years. The Economic Survey has observed thus: In Assam, the flood and erosion cause enormous damages to the crops, livestock, land, property and bring untold miseries to the people at large. The major flood that had occurred in the state was in 1954, 1962, 1966, 1972, 1977, 1984, 1988, 1998, 2002 and 2004 though the flood of less magnitude occurs almost every year. The National Flood Commission had estimated the area vulnerable to floods in Assam as 31.60 lakh hectares against 335.16 lakh hectares for whole India. Assam thus accounts for 9.4 percent of total flood prone area of the

country. (Economic Survey, Assam: 2004 – 2005). The Table No. 24 and also the Figure No. 3 show the extent of damages/losses caused by flood in the state over the last few years.

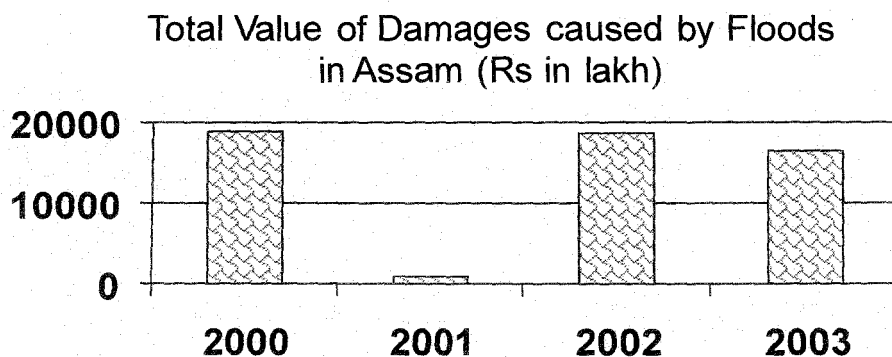
Table No. 24
DAMAGES CAUSED BY FLOOD IN ASSAM

Item	Unit	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Area effected	Hectare	966053.00	239511.00	674148.00	932113.00	3142685.40
2. Population affected	No.	3888385	542634	7550581	5651954	13493392
3. Human lives lost	No.	36	4	65	52	497
4. Loss of Cattle	No.	19988	15	4294	4319	65967
5. Villages affected	No.	5090	1277	6807	7565	12235
6. Area eroded	Hectare	-	5348.00	429657.00	12589.60	7829.72
7. Value of crop loss	Rs. In lakh	17351.57	835.79	14559.95	14700.00	-
8. Value of houses damaged	Rs. In lakh	1648.45	259.49	4118.65	1869.22	-
9. Total value of damages	Rs. In lakh	19000.02	1095.28	18678.60	16569.22	-

Source: Economic Survey, Assam: 2004-05.

Figure No.3

Bar Diagram of total value of damages caused by floods in Assam (Rs. In lakh).



Source: Economic Survey, Assam: 2004-05.

In fact, though all the districts of Assam were affected by floods of 2004; yet 10 numbers of districts namely, Kamrup, Nalbari, Darrang, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, Nagaon, Morigaon, Dhubri, Lakhimpur were the worst affected districts. The flood caused large inundation wide spread devastation to standing crops, homestead, life and property, disruption of road and rail communication, public utilities, water supply installation, irrigation structures and flood control structures etc. As per Economic Survey Assam 2004-05 On 10 July, 2004, at 5-30 P.M. the artificial lake which was formed at about 30 Km upstream of Kurichu Hydel Project in Bhutan gave way due to retention of successive rain water and the entire volume of water rolled down with tremendous velocity through the Kurichu river (Manas – Beki – Aie river system) and finally entered into the Indian territory at Mathanguri and created havoc downstream with inundation and avulsion; Barpeta district was the worst affected due to avulsion of Beki river (Ibid: 2004-05). The year 2004 also witnessed large-scale erosion at numerous

places by the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. A poor peasant once affected by flood cannot make up his loss by hard toil afterwards.

The resultant affect of heavy flood is erosion. In fact, it is more dangerous than flood as it can turn 'prince' into a 'pauper' over night. Innumerable villages and several thousand hectares of land in average are damaged by flood annually. A large areas are badly affected by erosion in the State annually too. On December 15, 2003 Shree Tarun Gogoi, the Chief Minister of Assam declared that about 4 lakh hectares of land had been eroded by the Brahmaputra in recent times.

These are:

Rohmoria (Dibrugarh)	298 hectares
Nemati (Jorhat)	328 hectares
Majuli (Jorhat)	42000 hectares
Kareng Chapori	
Arney Chapori	
Matmora, Balighat (Dhemaji)	10,000 hectares
Moirabari, Bhuragaon	
Lahorighat (Morigaon)	15,000 hectares
Palasbari-Gumi (Kamrup)	10,000 hectares
Mukalmua (Nalbari)	80,000 hectares
Bohari, Baghbar (Barpeta)	8,000 hectares
Chunari – Hajirhat (Goalpara/Dhubri)	40,000 hectares
Patabari (Dhubri)	2500 hectares

Source: Hussain: 2005

During the recent years erosion have rendered more than five lakhs of families landless (The Dainik Agradoot: Dec. 16, 2003). Though damages due to erosion have been going on in almost all the districts of the state, five districts of lower Assam namely, Morigaon, Nalbari, Barpeta, Goalpara and Dhubri are the worst affected.

3.3.2 Social and Demographic Aspects

It is very difficult to present the exact number of char villages and population of char villages of the mighty river Brahmaputra because of uncertainty of their existence. In this context it can also be said that it is very difficult to determine when a particular 'char' would appear and when that 'char' would extinguish /liquidate. Naturally, it is very difficult to furnish the exact number of char villages and population. Yet, Assam Govt. Char Development Authority prepared a list of char villages in 1985 and as per the survey 1256 char villages comprising 11 districts were in the Brahmaputra River.

Of course as per socio-economic survey report of the Directorate of Char Areas Development, 1992-93, fourteen numbers of districts comprising 2089 char villages having population of 16,00,244 and 2.39 lakh hectares of land. Out of 2.39 lakh hectares of land 1.68 hectares of land was suitable for cultivation and out of 16,00,244 lakh of population 8,01,261 lakh of population were below the poverty line. The Table no. 25 shows the name of districts covering the char villages along with district wise population of char areas as well as the rate of literacy.

Table No. 25

Districwise Char villages along with Population and Rate of Literacy, 1992-93.

Sl. No.	Name of District	No. of Char villages	District wise population of char areas	Rate of literacy %
1	Darrang	121	135876	10.12
2	Barpeta	351	275525	12.90
3	Kamrup	148	105687	16.85
4	Nalbari	58	62892	7.90
5	Bongaigaon	150	110215	12.58
6	Goalpara	187	130007	8.38
7	Dhubri	313	233206	19.06
8	Morigaon	41	55581	8.02
9	Nowgong	29	45161	9.44
10	Dhemaji	95	68998	14.44
11	Lakhimpur	182	110200	14.01
12	Sonitpur	118	92061	12.63
13	Tinsukia	86	33034	14.20
14	Jorhat	210	141901	31.90
Total		2089	1600244	15.45

Source: Socio-Eco. Survey, Assam - 1992-93

Another survey was conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Development, Assam in 2002-03 and according to survey report 2002-03 the char areas of the river Brahmaputra constituted around 25 lakhs population covering 2251 villages and 14 districts. The related information regarding profile of Char areas along with district wise population, rate of literacy, land etc. are shown in Appendix. I & II.

Thus it is seen that the exact number of char villages and char population always are in a flux.

The State's profile of Char areas has been shown in Table No.26 along with literacy rate, educational institutions and medical facilities. The total Char areas in Assam is estimated as 3.60 lakh hectares out of which 2.42 lakh hectares is suitable for cultivation. Though the major portion of Char areas is dependent on agriculture yet the cultivable land is not adequate. There is growing pressure on land as it is also found that 9.35% of the state's char populations are living in 4.6% of state's total area. Density of population for the state happens to be 3.4 persons per hectare whereas in the char areas it is as high as 6.9 persons per hectare. The poor literacy rate, higher sex-ratio, extreme poverty, lower medical facilities are some of the instances of deplorable socio-economic condition of Char people.

Before going to analyze social and demographic aspects of the char areas of Brahmaputra Valley we would like to mention here that barring a very small number of indigenous people almost all the Char-dwellers are immigrant Muslims along with a small portion of Bengali refugees and Nepali immigrants. According to Abani Kr. Bhagawati (2005) all these population groups have cultural background of their own to characterize the Char landscape. It has been observed that major portion of these char areas are the Muslims. Muslims belong to religious minority under the constitution of India. Several studies and reports consider the Muslims as the marginalized groups. For instance, Sachar Committee Report has sketched the deplorable socio-economic condition of the Muslims in India. In connection with throwing light on socio-economic development of any marginalized group the utmost necessity is to peep into the demographic profile. Here lies the significance of demographic study as it can give us the socio-economic reality. It is observed that some scholars for instance, Bimal K. Kar (2008) has rightly argued in connection with analyzing changing

demographic structure of Assam that the Muslim witnessed a significance increase in their population from 24.56 percent in 1971 to as high as 30.92 percent in 2001. According to Kar (2008) the prevailing varying pattern of population growth among different groups in Assam is likely to bring about even more change in the demographic structure in near future with far-reaching socio-economic and political implication. Probably Kar (2008) did not take into account the prevailing socio-economic condition of the Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam along with backwardness in educational level which have tremendous influence in the demographic structure of any cultural group. Thus, a reputed scholar on demography Ashish Bose (2005) has rightly remarked in the following manner:

“It is important to go beyond the population growth rate figures of Hindus and Muslims and give a thought to other demographic, economic and social variables..... From a study of the 2001 Census data from 49 districts around the country with a substantial Muslim population, it appears that more than religion, it is the geographical location and economic conditions prevailing there that influence the condition of the people” (Ashish Bose: 2005).

Table No.26 (districts wise) has been shown the district wise demographic char profile and other socio-economic information along with rate of literacy, density per sq. km. of the Char areas and also the percentage of Char area under cultivation.

Table No. 26

District wise Demographic Profile of Char areas of Assam

District	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Area (Sq. km)	Total Char Population		Total	Total Number of Chars /Village	Area Under Chars in sq. km.	% of area under chars	% of char population	% of char area under cultivation
M		F							
1. Dhubri	2798	346996	342913	689909	480	999.0	35.20	42.20	67.19
2. Bongaigaon	2152	70345	65464	135809	117	142.5	5.68	14.98	66.78
3. Goalpara	1824	95521	91305	186826	179	198.6	10.89	22.72	66.68
4. Barpeta	3245	137708	130636	268344	277	366.5	11.30	16.34	67.48
5. Nalbari	2257	42702	40900	83602	32	134.3	5.95	7.34	66.97
6. Kamrup	4345	78258	76250	154508	175	171.7	3.95	6.14	67.88
7. Darrang	3481	74269	68136	142405	134	167.5	4.81	9.47	67.07
8. Sonitpur	5324	75119	70610	145729	145	141.1	4.62	8.68	67.90
9. Lakshimpur	2277	73216	70019	143235	109	215.2	9.45	16.10	67.14
10. Dhemaji	3237	47689	43514	91203	149	169.8	5.24	16.01	66.84
11. Nagaon	3973	45302	44501	89803	43	120.4	3.14	3.88	66.93
12. Morigaon	1551	47912	43412	91324	39	119.3	7.00	11.77	66.66
13. Jorhat	2851	109617	105478	215095	293	421.7	14.80	21.31	66.43
14. Tinsukia	3790	27234	25371	52605	79	140.9	9.71	5.57	67.37

State's Total * 78,438-1271588-1218509-2490097-2251-3609.1-4.60-9.35-67.17

* State's Total Area 78,438 sq. km. also includes 9 other district's area which are not shown here.

Contd.. Table No.26

District	10	11	12
	Sex Ratio of Char areas (female per 1000 males)	Percentage of literacy in char areas	Density Per sq. km. Of the char areas
Dhubri	998	14.60	690
Bongaigaon	930	12.46	953
Goalpara	955	13.65	940.70
Barpeta	948	17.63	732.18
Nalbari	957	16.24	622.50
Kamrup	974	15.16	899.87
Darrang	917	12.34	850.17
Sonitpur	940	16.93	1,032.80
Lakshimpur	956	18.50	665.59
Dhamaji	912	15.69	532.12
Nagaon	982	17.59	745.87
Morigaon	906	18.50	765.50
Jorhat	962	60.55	510.06
Tinsukia	931	14.00	373.34
	958	19.31	689.94

Source: Socio-Economic Survey, 1992-93 & 2003.

As mentioned earlier, major portion of char-dwellers are the Muslim immigrants migrated from erstwhile East Bengal (now

Bangladesh). According to Ismail Hussain (1998) almost 90% of their forefathers are converted Muslims, they converted from Hinduism few decades ago; 99% of these converted Muslims are belonged to lower castes of Hindus.

In fact lower-caste Hindus and tribals who converted to Islam were oppressed peasant community. Educationally backward, weak socio-economic foundation, religious conservatism, leadership of Matabbars (literally means Head) etc. are some of the features of Char society. Hussain has rightly observed thus:

Na-Asamiya Muslims are also at present, lagging far behind, economically and culturally, than most other communities, including the Asamiya Muslims and the Muslims of Barak Valley. Nevertheless, they have been striving hard to assimilate into the larger Asamiya nationality, and have contributed decisively in giving the Asamiya language an absolute and dominant majority status in Assam (M. Hussain : 1993).

The rate of literacy of char areas (except Majuli island) is very poor; naturally Moulavi and Mollahs (clerics of Muslim society) played a significant and dominant role over the lives of char-dwellers and as a result of which at times they are being misled by these clerics. In this way, fundamentalism and obscurantism have penetrated into the lives of illiterate Char-dwellers. These are considered as impediment relating to the development of progressive thinking in the Char society. Worst victims of fundamentalism are, of course, womenfolk of Char society. In other words womenfolk of Char society have failed to do any significant change in their lives because of prevalence of rigorous fundamentalists' control and influence in the society. In fact, 'purdah system' early marriage of girl child (before the completion of 15 years), illiteracy so far

as girl children are concerned etc. are some of the features of Char society in which, dominant role played by the fundamentalists can be experienced. Apart from this, almost all the brides fail to see the bridegrooms before the completion of marriages as restricted by the society; and as a result of which many brides who are at the age of 15 fall to the prey of so-called husbands (bride-grooms) who have to attain the age of 60. Economic backwardness has also been playing a contributory role in connection with making such kind of unscientific arrangement as many guardians make such arrangement of their daughters being allured to earn more wealth. In this way the womenfolk of char society are not only neglected but also the worst victims of the society.

According to Ismail Hussain (1997) Char areas of lower Assam are dominated by Dewanis or Matabbar (literally Head of the society) and they are considered as feudal lords. They have free hands so far as police station, Mandal, Kanungoo, Anchalik Panchayats, Mahakuma Parishads etc. are concerned. Even their influence relating to the affairs of the courts can also be observed. Thus they can play the role of adjudicator in matters relating to emergence of new 'Char' or having the proportion of share on the 'Khasland'. It also found that the central cause of conflict and clash of 'Char' areas is land and it is worthwhile to mention here that behind such a conflict or dispute there must be the role of 'Matabbar'. Even some teachers have been playing the role of Dewani in the Char society though, of late, their role (Dewani or Matabbars' role) has been challenged due to the emergence of educated youths in the Char society.

Though Manirul Hussain (1993) has remarked that due to certain historical reasons the process of middle class formation has

been very weak among the Na-Asamiyas, yet we can probably share the observation of Ismail Hussain who has rightly observed thus:

Middle class has also been emerged in the char areas because of acquiring some land, engaging in small trade along with engagement in government jobs by a small portion of char population. Their active participation can be observed in matters relating to the establishment of educational institutions and part played by them in several developmental activities. On the other hand, a portion of this class is also engaged to appropriate the resource of panchayats, co-operatives, haat-bazaar (market area) and other social institutions. Their exploitative nature can also be experienced in other activities as they are appropriating land as mortgage of poor people, offering loan imposing high interest, acting as mediator of conflict and disputes. In fact, they have been earning money by adopting any foul means, as their primary objective is to acquire asset so as to build house outside the Char areas. (Ismail Hussain; 1997 Translated from Assamese).

3.3.3 Socio-Economic Aspects

It can be stated that backwardness, illiteracy and extreme poverty are linked with Char dwellers. According to Bhagawati (2005) the Char-dwellers are economically poor, culturally backward and many of them live a kind of nomadic life. He has also rightly maintained that Char dwellers are to change their settlement sites mainly due to heavy and unpredictable bank erosion of the Brahmaputra; they often move by small country boats along with their little belongings in search of habitable and cultivable land from one area to other and thus hold a semi-nomadic character; such a situation has entitled many of them to be called a kind of 'river nomads'; it is because of environmental uncertainty and poverty, the Char-dwellers

cannot afford construction of modern permanent dwellings; they rather have to be content with small and temporary huts and sheds made of locally available building materials just to accommodate the family and the domesticated birds and animals (A.K. Bhagawati: 2005).

Major portion of char dwellers are not only the cultural groups belonging to Muslims but also the poor peasants. In fact, the economic condition of these poverty stricken peasants is determined on the basis of agriculture. It is noted here that around 95% of the Char dwellers are cultivators and a very small portion of the population are engaged in service, small trade or other occupations. Though the poor people of Char areas are hard working peasants yet they are socially and economically backward. Outmoded agricultural systems, lack of adequate land and capital, flood and erosion are some of the reasons for which the peasant community have failed to raise their standard of living though it is observed that there is Zeal in producing paddy, pulse, mustard seeds, jute, sugar-cane, potato, ginger, onion, garlic, gourd, pumpkin, cucumber, brinjal, tomato etc. Ismail Hussain (1998) has remarked thus: Mazuli island is also considered as the notable Char of Assam. It can also be witnessed that there is workable communication system in Mazuli along with all the characteristics of modern Asamiya Villages. But the Char areas having dominated of immigrant Muslims are some thing different. The geographical and social picture of these Char areas are deplorable..... The economy of inaccessible Char areas dominated by immigrant Muslims is basically agriculture. Almost 99 percent people of these areas are related with agriculture. Cultivation methods are also ancient. There is no system of high yielding seeds, manure and irrigation facilities. There is no security of raiyats. Common cultivators are dependant on the kindness of Dewanis (headmen). If someone intends to go to char areas

he or she would reach the destination after using country boat along with walking on foot several miles inside the sandy areas. Thus the peasants are compelled to sale their products (fish, milk, eggs, curd etc) at cheaper rate. Due to lack of proper daily market the peasants do not get real price of their produced crops. They also fail to store their products, as there is no arrangement of cold storage. They also face inconveniences in connection with marketing. That is why they take their products to the distantly situated weekly haats. The immigrants are supposed to fight constantly with flood and erosion. They are also supposed to leave the place losing the living land because of erosion. Despite this disadvantaged position the peasants of Char areas are enriching the economy of Assam because of their hard working nature. Though they are living with extreme poverty yet they fail to consume their own products adequately. Apart from this, a portion of their labour goes to the pocket of Mahajan or Matabbars and these Matabbars are the owners of Char land. Appearance of new Chars are generally occupied by the poor farmers not only the cause of poverty but also enhances the property of Matabbars. Because of this exploitative nature of the Matabbars a large number of peasants compel to leave the household (Ismail Hussain: 1998).

Apart from this, illiteracy, lack of communication, lack of proper markets for products, lack of medical service, lack of consciousness about family planning etc. are some of the other major obstruction in the path of socio-economic development of Char dwellers which we have shown earlier in Appendix-II. Thus the observation of Manirul Hussain cannot be underestimated and whose observation runs in the following way:

Due to certain historical reasons, the process of middle class formation has been very weak among the Na-Asamiyas, which is

decisively a peasant community in an agriculturally backward, but largely agrarian state. They are highly exploited by the landed aristocracy belonging to their own community known as Matabbars (literally means Head), in collaboration with the state police and bureaucracy. The Matabbars are socially orthodox, politically conservative, and obviously they have the vested interests in keeping the entire community backward in order to ensure their own economic and political dominance in the existing exploitive system. Na-Asamiya Muslims are an under-utilized and oppressed community of the Asamiya nationality (M. Hussain: 1993).

It is significant to note here that no separate land tenure system for the char areas is to be witnessed in Assam. The prevailing land tenure system is the legacy of British administration and the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 is the foundation of the land revenue policy and land administration in Assam. This Land Act covers all the matters relating to land revenue. Of course, as A. Sheikh (2005:18) has remarked that this Land Act does not deal with the rights of the raiyats who took agricultural land directly from the Govt. Thus to serve the rights of raiyats on land three different Tenancy Acts viz. (i) The Goalpara Tenancy Act, 1929 (applicable to the permanently settled areas of Goalpara), (ii) the Sylhet Tenancy Act, 1936, (applicable to the settled areas of Karimganj sub-division), and (iii) the Assam (Temporarily Settled Districts) Tenancy Act, 1935 (applicable to the temporarily settled areas of the plains districts) were enacted (Ibid: 18). Mention may be made here that all these Tenancy Acts were also replaced by the new Assam Tenancy Act of 1971 as the security provided under the Tenancy Acts was inadequate and this Act, too, replaced by the Adhiar Protection and Regulation Act of 1948 since Assam Tenancy Act of 1971 gives the Adhiar the status of a Tenant

(Ibid: 18). The people of rivarine areas have been facing acute problems relating to land revenue and patta in the char areas of Assam. In this context it is worthwhile to mention here that the exact number of Char villages, land area, area of agricultural land is not possible as the char areas in Assam have not yet been properly and systematically surveyed though there is a Directorate of Assam Char Areas Development. However, according to Assam Land Records Deptt. approximately 159203.21 hectares of land are covered by char areas in the four undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong and out of this an area of 13,316.74 hectares are professional and village grazing reserves, 25474.57 hectares are under regular settlement, 12975 hectares are occupied by persons who have not given any pattas but who are required to pay tauzi-bahi-ra revenue and 15655.81 hectares are under unauthorized occupation. Of the total area (25474.57 hectares) under settlement, 3654.15 hectares are under annual leases and 21820.35 hectares under periodic lease and the periodic leases relate mostly to lands which were previously chars but later on become joint with the main banks after gradual silting up of the intervening channel (A. Sheikh: 2005).

It is interesting to note here that the method of agriculture is to some extent similar in the riversine areas of Brahmaputra whereas the land tenure system is totally dissimilar in all the char areas. It is also to be noted here that permanent settlement was prevalent in the Chars of Goalpara because of historical reasons. But in other chars of Brahmaputra valley the ryotowary system was prevalent. Because of these two systems the nature of land settlement in char areas also differ. The Zamindars settled the Char Lands to the immigrants on periodic lease in the permanent settled areas of Goalpara. But in temporarily settled areas of Assam when a new char is emerged in the

Brahmaputra is to be taken as the property of the state government which either keeps it as a grazing reserve or settled it with the cultivators as per Land Settlement Policy Resolution in force (Ibid: 2005). The Zamindars, under the permanent settlement, were the owners of the existing chars and welcomed the immigrants from East Bengal who were good cultivators and used to pay high rents and salamis. Disputes and conflict was the regular feature in the char areas of Goalpara District for the possession of newly char land so long as the Goalpara Tenancy Act was in vogue. In other char areas too, a newly emerging char in the Brahmaputra is often the incident of armed clashes and conflict between different groups under the leadership of Dewanis and Matabbars for the possession of land. Land disputes do occur frequently in the riverine areas as systematic and scientific survey along with systematic enforcement of revenue administration is still yet to be enforced.

According to Char Area Development Authority, 1999 the total number of Chars of Assam is 2230. In order to implement developmental schemes in these huge areas the Govt. of Assam through Char Area Development Authority since its inception (1983), allotment of fund and expenditures in different heads have been made in the following way:

Table: 27

Budgetary Allocation for Char Area Development by Government of Assam.

Year	Budget (Rs. In Lakhs)	Fund Allotted (Rs. In Lakhs)	Estimated Expenditure (Rs. in Lakhs)	Expenditure (Rs. in Lakhs)	Total (Rs. in Lakhs)
1985-86	50	50	16.84	33.16	50.00
1986-87	60	60	14.22	45.78	60.00
1987-88	78	78	19.36	58.57	77.93
1988-89	83	39	11.19	27.81	39.00
1989-90	83	83	20.96	62.04	83.00
1990-91	96	96	27	69.61	96.61
1991-92	110	109.77	34.86	74.91	109.77
1992-93	110	66.66	28.25	38.41	66.66
1993-94	110	110	36.35	73.65	110.00
1994-95	110	105.10	42.27	62.83	105.10
1995-96	110	107.78	50.40	57.38	107.78
1996-97	110	98.72	47.14	51.58	98.72
1997-98	110	89.52	47.44	42.08	89.52
1998-99	121	87.30	59.32	27.98	87.30
1999-2000	115	102.72	75.06	27.66	102.72
2000-01	118	94.30	75.09	19.21	94.30
2001-02	96	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.

Source: Ismail Hussain (2002: p. 2-3)

It is observed that the people of Char areas have been experiencing acute discrimination relating to the question of economic upliftment. As per Table 28 it is found that the total fund amounting to Rs. 50 lakhs only was allocated during 1985-86 for the development of Char areas. Out of this total outlay 16.84 lakhs was spent for the payment of the officials and 33.16 lakhs was spent for the purpose of development. In other words, it can be said that out of total budget allocation 66.32% was spent for developmental schemes whereas 33.68% was spent for the payment of officials as salary. During 16 years (from 1985-2001) as per table, it is found that allocation in the budget was not at all enhanced as per ratio of the people of Char areas. During 2000-2001, an amount of Rs. 118 lakhs was earmarked in the budget for Char Areas Development and out of this releasing amount of Rs.94.30 lakhs was released and out of Rs.94.30 lakhs Rs.75.09 lakhs was spent for development. In other words, out of releasing amount

79.63% was spent for salary of the officials and schemes as well as Rs.19.21 lakhs was spent for salary and preparation of schemes and 20.37% was spent only for development. It is noted that total population of Char areas in 1997 is 21,60,024 and the population was increased to 23 lakhs in the year 2001. Thus it is said that Rs. 19.21 lakhs was spent against the population of 23 lakhs, which meant Rs. 0.83 was spent per individual. In this way it can be stated that the people of Char areas have been facing acute discriminatory treatment.

Of course, the total outlay under different developmental schemes for its development has been increased since 2002-03. For instance, the total outlay has increased from Rs. 108.00 lakhs in 2002-03 to Rs. 188.00 lakhs in 2003-04 and again it has been enhanced to Rs. 224.00 lakhs in 2004-05 (Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03 of Char areas of Assam).

Apart from this, the Directorate has been implementing various developmental programmes as a "Special Areas Programme" in char areas like Agriculture, Vety. & Dairy, Drinking water facility, Cottage Industry and Education schemes. The components of the Developmental programmes are in brief stated below:

(I) Agriculture:

- a) Distribution of HYV Rabi Seeds.
- b) Distribution of STWs
- c) Tillage Operation by Power Tillers.

(II) Veterinary and Dairy

- a) Construction of Raised earthen Platforms for Sheltering cattle and human being during the flood season.

(III) Drinking water Facility:

- a) Distribution of Hand Tube Wells.

(IV) Cottage Industry:

- a) Distribution of Sewing Machine.
- b) Distribution of Handlooms.
- c) Six Months Training Programmes for Weaving, Sewing, Cutting-knitting etc. unemployed educated girls of Char Areas.

(V) Education Schemes:

- a) Aid for improvement of School buildings.
- b) Computer training for educated unemployed youths.
- c) Nurse-cum-Midwife training programme to educate girls.
- d) Distribution of Sports goods/Books to School/Club/Library etc.

Source: Economi Survey Assam 2004-05.

3.4 Conclusion

In fact, the lives of char people are closely bound up with the flow of rivers – and with flooding. Chars themselves face constant erosion and reformation, as rivers wash away soil and deposit silt. Thus, almost all the char villages are vulnerable to erosion and flooding, though people living by unprotected river channels face special risks. As mentioned earlier, the question of land remains unresolved so far as 'pattas' are concerned as Chakraborty and Alam (2005) have rightly observed. Till now there has been a total lack of co-ordinated approach regarding various aspects of tenancy, rent, riverine, ownership and patta settlements in char areas. Due to the absence of cadastral survey the situation has worsened as limited number of char dwellers have meadi patta over their land while majority possess Ek Chona and Touzi

Patta while the rest are considered as Khas or Government land. According to a survey on char areas of Barpeta district conducted by Atul Goswami (2000) it is found that only 17.76 percent of the land is under meadi settlement, out of the rest 38.76 percent is Touzi settlement whereas 43.48 percent of land is under Ek Chona settlement. In others, in 82.24 percent of land the cultivators have no legal rights and ownership title (Atul Goswami: 2000). It can be said that the situation is no different in char villages of other districts of the state. As the major portion of char people have no right and ownership title on the land they have failed to get loan from recognized financial institutions even mortgaging their land documents. At times, they also fail to prove as Indian citizens because of land documents.

As mentioned earlier the char villages of Brahmaputra valley are inhabited by large group of people specially Minorities people. Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03 of Char Areas of Assam, conducted by Directorate of Char Areas Development (Vide Appendix II) has reported that there are 2251 numbers of Char villages from Sadiya to Dhubri with a population of 2,490,097 and the male-female break-up is (M) 1,271,588 and (F) 1,218,509 with a sex ratio of 958. The total number of family in the char areas are 434754 and 67.88 percent people in average are living below the poverty line which indicates the poor socio-economic condition of the people. The total literate persons are 480,807 and the percent of literacy of the char areas is 19.31. The low literacy rate, poor medical facilities, lack of proper means of communication, lack of pure drinking water etc. have turned the people of char areas into a nomadic tribe. In the next chapter economic and political empowerment of women we would like to focus our attention on the char areas of the Barpeta District.

Notes:

1. Garia: Sometimes this term is used to denote the entire Asamiya Muslims. According to Gait, the word Garia is an indication of their claims to have come from Gaur, the medieval Mohammedan Capital of Bengal.

Source: Gait: 1983 and Hussain: 1993.