



# The Economic Status and Poverty of Residents in the Char Region of Assam.

**Dr. Ashique Elahi**

Assistant professor

Department of Economics

Batadraba Sri Sri Sankardev College

Nagaon, Assam

## Abstract :

The current investigation delves into an examination of the socio-economic status of farmers residing in the Char area of Assam. The findings of this study unveiled a concerning reality – farmers in these areas exhibit a state of impoverished economic conditions, coupled with low levels of literacy and limited knowledge concerning advanced agricultural methodologies. Notably, the agricultural pursuits of these farmers are confined to the cultivation of rice, jute, summer, and winter vegetables, with a conspicuous absence of awareness regarding improved management practices. It is imperative to recognize that the introduction and incorporation of modern agricultural technologies have the potential to significantly elevate the prevailing socio-economic status of the farming community in the Char areas. By addressing the current lack of awareness and implementing advancements in agricultural practices, there exists a tangible opportunity for transformative change, thereby enhancing the overall well-being and economic prosperity of these farmers. The Chars situated along the banks of the river Brahmaputra in Assam are highly susceptible to frequent floods, rendering them socio-economically disadvantaged areas amid diverse spatial challenges. These ephemeral sandy bars pose significant risks and prove to be highly calamitous regions. The inhabitants of these areas, predominantly comprised of Muslim peasants who migrated from the former East Bengal (now Bangladesh), endure a life marked by severe hardships. The perpetual inundation from the Brahmaputra leads to extensive land erosion and the loss of cultivated lands in the Chars, as well as the settled areas within them. Given the lack of alternative employment opportunities in these regions, a substantial portion of the populace, grappling with larger family sizes, deems agriculture and related activities as the most viable means of livelihood. The scarcity of land in the Chars has compelled some to inhabit small sandy Chaporis in the midst of the powerful Brahmaputra's flow.

**Keywords :** Farmers, Socio- economic, Cultural, Muslim, Women, Vegetables, Cultivations.

**Introduction:**

Assam has a rich historical background as a convergence point for diverse racial groups, contributing to the formation of a distinctive cultural heritage. Renowned for its abundant agricultural and forest resources, the district primarily relies on paddy cultivation for income, yielding surplus production. Cash crops such as jute and rapeseed, alongside summer and winter vegetables, constitute significant contributors to the agricultural landscape. Assam comprises 2,251 Char villages, characterized by impermanence due to frequent flooding and erosion linked to the Brahmaputra's shifting courses. Approximately 8% of Assam's total population resides in Char areas, with a staggering 67.88% below the poverty line. Previous studies identified low literacy rates, high poverty levels, and a lack of essential amenities in Char areas. The Char population faces numerous challenges, including high population growth, inadequate communication, drinking water scarcity, and limited medical facilities. Contributing factors to the high birth rate and overpopulation include illiteracy, limited access to birth control measures, early marriages, religious and social attitudes, polygamy, and group politics. Additionally, false notions regarding birth, superstitions, traditions, customs, social factors, poverty, and natural environments play roles in influencing high birth rates. The inhabitants of the Char areas currently grapple with the challenge of securing basic necessities for life, and for many, even the struggle for survival is palpable in these flood-prone regions. The recurring and persistent floods pose a significant threat, resulting in catastrophic consequences such as land loss and displacement due to erosion. Consequently, the primary driver of underdevelopment in these areas lies in the physical vulnerability imposed by perennial floods. Furthermore, the demographic composition of these regions proves highly detrimental to socio-economic progress. The population in Char areas is experiencing exponential growth, leading to a reduction in the average size of land holdings among Char dwellers. This reduction creates impediments to productive and scientific cultivation practices. Notably, the population density in Char areas surpasses twice that of the overall state of Assam. Compounding these challenges, a considerable portion of the Char population lacks literacy.

In the convergence of these demographic, socio-economic, and environmental factors, the residents of Char areas endure a markedly impoverished quality of life within the ill-suited Chars nestled in the Brahmaputra River's expanse. The Assam Human Development Report of 2014 highlights the Char areas in Assam as the most economically deprived region, exhibiting the highest multidimensional poverty among all regions in the state (Assam, 2014, pp.198). The socio-economic survey conducted by the Char Area Development Authority in 2002-03 further reveals that the percentage of Char population living below the poverty line was approximately twice as high as the state average in Assam. The Brahmaputra River and other waterways in Assam host numerous sandbars locally known as Chars. These Char areas harbor nearly 10% of Assam's population. Unfortunately, these regions face considerable challenges, particularly from severe floods that not only impact the Chars but also curtail economic opportunities for their inhabitants. Spread across 14 districts, 55 blocks, and around 2,300 villages, Chars encompass approximately 5% of the total state area, with inhabitants enduring a precarious existence marked by recurrent floods and soil erosion. In western Assam, Char dwellers, predominantly belonging

to the migrant Muslim community of East Bengal origin, grapple with backwardness and poverty. Government records indicate that Char Chapori covers 3,608 km<sup>2</sup> of the Brahmaputra basin, constituting 4.6% of Assam's total area. Chars, defined as river islands, or chaporis, formed by silt deposits on riverbanks, face economic limitations that constrain livelihood options for their inhabitants. Given the economic challenges faced by Char dwellers, understanding the contribution of various economic activities is crucial for effective development programs. While several studies have explored the socio-economic conditions of farmers in India, research on Char areas remains limited. The arable lands in these areas are predominantly low-lying and scattered, lacking essential irrigation facilities. Moreover, farmers in Char areas lack familiarity with modern agricultural inputs and practices.

This study was undertaken with the objective of investigating the socio-economic status of farmers in the Char areas of Assam district, aiming to provide valuable insights for informed policy-making and targeted development initiatives in this unique and challenging geographical context.

### **Objectives:**

1. To Evaluate poverty and Socio-Economic Condition of Farmers in Char Villages.
2. To Analyze Existing Cropping and Resource Utilization Patterns.

### **Statement of the Problems :**

The farmers residing in the Char areas confront significant economic challenges, characterized by a state of impoverished financial standing, coupled with low levels of literacy and limited awareness regarding modern agricultural methods. The prevailing economic backwardness serves as a critical constraint, restricting the livelihood options available to the inhabitants of the Char areas. In light of these challenges, this study endeavors to systematically identify and address the issues faced by the Char areas within the district. The overarching goal is to enhance the livelihoods of Char dwellers through the implementation of effective measures grounded in sound agricultural practices.

### **The significance of the present study:**

i. Poverty, as a profound social issue, manifests in various distressing forms. The residents of the Chapori and Char areas in Assam endure a particularly dire existence in highly flood-prone regions where the creation of socio-economic amenities for civic life remains a formidable challenge. The perennial floods from the Brahmaputra River not only devastate properties painstakingly acquired through hard labor but also thrust the affected population into impoverishment. This vulnerable segment constitutes a substantial proportion (9.36% in 2002-03) of the state's total population (Assam). The acute and prolonged poverty within this demographic poses a significant obstacle to the developmental aspirations of both the state and the nation. Urgent and targeted measures are thus imperative to alleviate their harsh circumstances and enhance their socio-economic conditions.

ii. Char areas serve as hotspots for population growth and the emergence of slums. The population in Assam's Char areas has experienced a staggering growth rate of 55.56%, far surpassing the state's overall rate of 18.85% from 1992-93 to 2002-03. Amidst pervasive poverty and a dearth of socio-economic amenities, this substantial population has struggled to transform into social capital. The inquiry into the influential factors driving this heightened population growth in these areas poses a crucial question for government authorities, academics, researchers, and community leaders. Determining whether the elevated fertility rate (2.8) alone is the primary factor or if other influential elements have contributed to this trend necessitates a thorough and comprehensive investigation.

### **Research Design and Methodology:**

This research employs a combination of descriptive and analytical research methods to conduct a thorough investigation of the Char areas spanning 14 districts in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The study incorporates diverse approaches, including personal observations, consultations, indirect oral investigations, scrutiny of documents, reports, and an extensive review of various literature sources pertaining to the Char areas of Assam. It is essential to underscore that the study predominantly relies on secondary data, drawing extensively from primary sources such as: Socio-Economic Survey Report 1993-94 of Char areas of Assam, Directorate of Char Areas Developments, Assam; Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03 of Char areas of Assam, Directorate of Char Areas Developments, Assam; Census Reports of 1991 and 2001, Government of India; Assam Human Development Reports, 2013; and Economic Survey Assam, 2004-2005 & 2007-2008.

### **Literature Review :**

Limited studies have focused on the socio-economic status of farmers in Char areas. Talukdar et al. conducted a study on crop suitability for Char areas in Nalbari district, Assam, using remote sensing and GIS for effective crop diversification. They suggested that a cauliflower-knolkhol-summer rice cropping sequence was suitable for Char areas in Nalbari district.

Goswami and Bhattacharya reported that 55.24% of women derive their income from sericulture, compared to 10% deriving income from agriculture, despite the economy being agriculture-dependent.

Deka studied the socio-economic status of tribal farmers in Tinsukia district of Assam, revealing their status as very poor farmers with low literacy and knowledge about agricultural methods. They primarily cultivate rice, tea, and oranges, lacking awareness of improved management practices. The introduction of modern technology facilities could elevate their socio-economic standards. Sericulture was identified as playing a vital role in the socio-economic status of the tribal population in Assam.

Deluwar Hoque and Chandan Hazarika, in their study, revealed that the absence of basic civic amenities in Char areas leads to a significantly diminished quality of life for residents. The recurring floods, contributing to physical vulnerability, ensnare them in a relentless cycle of poverty. Despite a predominant reliance on agriculture, the agricultural practices are characterized by primitiveness and backwardness. The authors propose a set of measures aimed at enhancing agricultural development, mitigating unemployment, and addressing the challenges posed by floods and erosion in Char regions (Hazarika, Deluwar Hoque & Chandan, May 2020, pp.35-41). However, it should be noted that the authors overlook the provision of power tillers and tractors in certain Char areas, such as Latiamari and Batamari on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Many Char dwellers inhabit the sandy shores of the mighty Brahmaputra illegally, where constructing any infrastructure proves to be exceedingly challenging.

Balram Kumar and Debarshi Das, in their examination of the income and seasonal migration patterns of Char dwellers, identify land ownership and its size as the most influential determinants of income. Loss of land significantly influences migration decisions, and they recommend diversification into non-farm livelihoods to reduce dependence on land and mitigate the hardships associated with abrupt migration decisions (Balram Kumar & Debarshi Das, 2019, pp.90-101).

In the Dhubri district of Assam, almost all families residing in Char areas live below the poverty line, relying on daily wage labor for sustenance. Land ownership is marginal, with 43% of households being landless. The lack of adequate health care facilities in these temporary Char areas exacerbates the challenges faced by residents, especially in the aftermath of annual floods. The relentless inundation by the Brahmaputra leaves them destitute and socially excluded (Khandakar, 2016, pp.79-85). Paradoxically, immigrants from Bangladesh feel safer and happier in the precarious conditions of Chaporis and Chars in Assam.

Humayun Bokth's study in the Char areas of Nalbari District, Lower Assam, underscores the absence of basic infrastructure and civic amenities, with residents living in slum-like conditions in temporary hutments. Landless farmers face exploitation by intermediaries, and despite agriculture being the backbone of the Char economy, its condition remains primitive (Bokth, 27th December 2014, pp.2840-2844).

Drawing from the Assam Human Development Reports (2014), a researcher examines the human development dimensions of Char inhabitants in Assam. The findings indicate that, in various parameters such as mean years of schooling, annual per capita income, poverty ratios, and health indicators, Char areas lag significantly behind other rural areas of Assam. The study recommends measures such as proper vegetation to control soil erosion and financial inclusion to improve the economic conditions of Char dwellers (Nath, 2020, pp.287-294).

In a review of Monoj Goswami's book, "Char Settlers of Assam: A Demographic Question," Gorky Chakraborty contends that the perception associating Chars with illegal immigrant Bangladeshis is based on insufficient statistics regarding unchecked polygamy and procreation. He emphasizes that the higher population density in

Char areas, possibly due to a higher fertility rate, cannot be a primary factor attracting large-scale migration. Recognizing their contribution to Assam's agricultural growth, he highlights how immigrant peasants have toiled to cultivate vast waste and fallow lands in Char areas, diversifying the crop profile of the region (Chakraborty, 2014, pp.113-117).

P. Hazarika, in an examination of population growth in Chars and its potential future threats to Assam's economy, expresses concerns about the burgeoning population among Muslim immigrants. He posits that this growth could lead to issues such as land scarcity, poverty, anthropogenic pollution, slum development, famine, and plundering. To mitigate these potential challenges, he advocates for rigorous measures to reduce the higher fertility rates among married couples in Char areas (Hazarika, 2021, pp.1-11).

### **Result and Discussion:**

A majority of the Char population (69.4%) lacks agricultural assets, a figure higher than the 53.72% observed for the entire state of Assam. Similarly, the percentage of Char residents without non-agricultural assets (24.4%) closely mirrors the state average of 24.26%. However, when it comes to transport assets, household appliances, financial assets, and insurance coverage, the percentage of Char population experiencing deprivation surpasses those at the state level. Despite the formation of the Assam State Char Area Development Authority, the socio-economic infrastructures in these frequently inundated Chars remain at a considerably poor level, primarily due to the challenges of development in these areas. The lack of a portable road transport system to isolated Chars necessitates arduous journeys, often involving travel by ferry or large country boat, followed by an hour-long trek on foot across the sandy and dusty surfaces of the Char areas to reach Char villages. Except for bicycles, other forms of automobile transport are not available within the Char areas. During the flood season, large country boats, known as 'Bhutbhuti,' serve as a means of transport. The inadequacy of educational institutions in the Chars is further exacerbated by the reluctance of parents to send their children to school, often due to obsolete infrastructure. The scarcity of health-care centers and private clinics, deemed inconvenient to establish, compels many Char dwellers to resort to ancient and unscientific remedies for disease treatment. The perceived futility of banking facilities for mobilizing savings discourages financial inclusion, leaving a significant portion of Char residents excluded from formal financial systems. Mahatma Gandhi aptly characterized poverty as the most insidious form of violence, encapsulating the societal condition where a segment lacks access to fundamental life necessities. While conventional metrics gauge poverty in terms of consumption and income, such measures often prove insufficient, particularly in evaluating the multifaceted deprivation prevalent in economically disadvantaged regions such as the Char areas in Assam. In these areas, where a majority experiences deprivation across multiple dimensions, the residents grapple with pronounced inadequacies in three pivotal facets of human development: education, health, and standard of living. The literacy rate in Char areas, for instance, remained notably low, standing at a meager 15.45% in 1992-93, with a marginal increase to 19.31% by 2002-03.

Shockingly, approximately 91% of the Char population lacks access to safe drinking water, and a mere 1.4% have sanitary latrines within their premises. The extent of poverty in Char areas becomes starkly evident when examining the population living below the poverty line. In 1992-93, a staggering 48.89% of the Char population fell into this category, a figure that surged significantly to 67.89% by 2002-03. This contrasts sharply with the average poverty rate of 34.4% (poverty headcount ratio) for Assam in 2004-05, which declined to 30.1% in 2011-12.

Furthermore, the headcount ratio of the multidimensionally poor in Char areas, at 44.59%, surpasses the state's average (30.10%), as well as the figures for flood-prone areas (27.74%) and hill areas (33.7%). Similarly, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) for Char areas, standing at 18.57%, exceeds the MPI of Assam (12.49%), flood-prone areas (11.70%), and hill areas (13.86%). While the headcount ratio of vulnerability in Char areas (17.60%) surpasses the state average (16.54%), it remains lower than that of flood-prone areas (21.21%) and hill areas (17.78%). Chars are the most remote, socio-culturally, and economically underdeveloped areas of the state, suffering from a lack of transport and communication facilities until the establishment of the "Assam State Char Areas Development Authority" in 1983. The government has since implemented various development schemes, aiming to uplift the Char-dwellers. However, these areas remain socially and economically backward, exacerbated by frequent flooding and erosion. These distressing statistics underscore the profound and pervasive nature of poverty in the Char areas, necessitating targeted and comprehensive interventions to uplift the living standards of the residents. The annual per capita income in Char areas, amounting to Rs 21,156, falls below both the state average of Rs 24,660 and the figure for flood-prone areas, which stands at Rs 23,604. However, it slightly outpaces the per capita income in Hill areas, recorded at Rs 18,060. In the realm of educational attainment, gauged by mean years of schooling (MYS) and expected years of schooling (EYS), Char areas consistently exhibit lower levels in comparison to flood-prone areas, Hill areas, and the overall state average of Assam. Similarly, concerning the health indicators of the population, specifically measured through life expectancy at birth (LEB) and maternal mortality rate (MMR), Char areas fall behind the state's average. While gainful employment and a steady income serve as fundamental components in elevating the standard of living, housing conditions and the availability of amenities within households are equally crucial indicators of living standards. In the Char areas, a notable 53.4% of the population resides in kutcha houses, surpassing the state average for Assam, which stands at 43.7%. It is imperative to note, however, that among these kutcha houses in the Char areas, a majority are temporary hutments characterized by densely packed housing units, contributing to the development of slum-like conditions. Conversely, a mere 11.7% of the Char population resides in pucca houses, contrasting with the slightly higher state average of 27% for the proportion of the population residing in permanent structures. Examining the amenities within Char area households, it is evident that 47.1% of households lack access to an electricity connection. Moreover, a staggering 84.6% of households do not have sanitary latrines within their premises. These statistics underscore the challenging living conditions and the inadequate access to basic amenities faced by the population residing in the Char areas.

However, widespread deprivations persist among the inhabitants of the Chars in terms of crucial assets. Many Char dwellers lack land ownership, rendering them landless. A significant portion faces inadequacies in proper housing, household amenities, and possesses inadequately sized land holdings. Specific household assets such as agricultural assets, private land for agriculture, basic household appliances, and insurance coverage are grossly inadequate for a substantial portion of the population, entailing them into long-term poverty. The study underscores the socio-economic backwardness of farmers in Char villages and emphasizes the need for policymakers to identify and quantify inhibiting factors for their growth and development.

- Agriculture serves as the primary source of livelihood for the majority of farmers in Char villages.
- The majority of farm families are nuclear, and male literacy percentages surpass female literacy across all villages.
- Agriculture and livestock rearing are the predominant occupations.
- Landless, marginal, and small landholding patterns vary across villages, indicating diverse economic landscapes.
- The cropping pattern includes both rabi and kharif crops, with rice covering over 50% of the total cultivated area.
- The river Brahmaputra is the primary source of irrigation water for all villages.
- More than 70% of households have access to electricity.
- Livestock populations include cows, poultry, goats, and ducks.
- Extension staff, radio, and relatives are the primary sources of agricultural information.
- Annual flood damage affects Sali paddy (winter rice).
- Limited awareness of developed agricultural practices.
- Challenges related to the cost of production, flood-related limitations, and economic constraints.
- Issues with pricing of agricultural products and inadequate knowledge about pest and disease management.

### **Suggestions :**

#### 1. Educational and Infrastructural Development:

- Provision of educational facilities and reliable transport and communication infrastructure.

#### 2. Agricultural Practices and Income Diversification - Encouragement of multiple cropping and intercropping.

- Government support for permanent asset creation and infrastructural development.

### 3. Extension Services and Training - Increased interaction between extension agencies and farmers.

- Training programs for different income-generating activities.

### 4. Technology Adoption:

- Introduction of modern technology to enhance socio-economic standards.

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) emphasizes quality education for all. In Char areas of Assam, educational development is crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty, ensuring gender equality, and empowering women. Unfortunately, the literacy and educational scenario, especially for women, is alarming. According to a survey by the Directorate of Char Areas Development (DCAD) in 2002-03, approximately 81% of males and a staggering 92% of females in Char areas of Assam are illiterate.

### Conclusion:

Assam's Char areas present a complex set of challenges, with the local population grappling with socioeconomic disparities, environmental vulnerabilities, and insufficient government interventions. Efforts to address issues such as poverty, education, healthcare, and population control must be targeted and comprehensive. A nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by Char communities is essential for devising effective policies and development strategies. The government's commitment to improving the quality of life in Char areas is crucial to fostering sustainable development and alleviating the hardships faced by the residents. The educational status of women in Char areas of Assam remains dismal, hindering progress toward Sustainable Development Goals. Urgent interventions are required to address the systemic barriers, including limited access to educational facilities, high dropout rates among girls, and societal attitudes discouraging higher education for women. The empowerment of women in Char areas necessitates comprehensive strategies that prioritize education as a fundamental right, laying the foundation for socio-economic upliftment and breaking the cycle of generational poverty. The Char areas of Assam grapple with deep-rooted issues of gender inequality and health disparities. Urgent interventions are needed to improve educational facilities, promote gender equality, and enhance healthcare infrastructure. Empowering women in Char areas requires a comprehensive approach that addresses cultural norms, provides accessible healthcare, and ensures the fulfillment of reproductive rights. Only through concerted efforts can these areas break free from the cycle of inequality and contribute meaningfully to the broader development objectives outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals.

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