Exploring Char Dominated Blocks of Assam: A Study of Socio-Economic Dimensions

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Abstract: *'Char'* area is a important geographic division of Assam, which contributes a significant portion of State Gross Domestic Product. 'Char' is a Assamese term which is used to denote a river island or mid channel bar. The majority of Char dwellers are Muslim. Their means of living is mostly limited to agriculture. In spite of being a contributor of agricultural production, economic progress is not seen among them. This may due to traditional agricultural practices. More over, they are facing various livelihood problems in the area. Vicious circle of poverty, backwardness, illiteracy, fundamentalism, superstitution, poor living standard etc. are inherent problems of the area. Beyond these various demographic issues like high Total Fertility Rate(TFR), high Infant Mortality Rate(IMR), high death rate etc. are working as impediment towards development of the area. Natural calamities, Soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, lack of proper vegetation, no environmental ethics are also responsible for poor environment and thereby low economic growth in the region. Present study is used to identify various socio economic aspects of char- chapari people of Assam. An attempt was also made to provide some specific suggestions for the betterment of the same.

Keywords: Vicious Circle of Poverty, Infant Mortality Rate, Maternal Mortality Rate, Biodiversity.

Introduction:

Economic development is the major Concern of any economy. Economic Development is a broader concept than Growth, which includes some progressive changes in certain socioeconomic phenomenon like education, health, cultural, cultural and social wellbeing etc. including growth. Classical views on development was purely income oriented. Various quantitative measures like Gross Domestic Product(GDP), Net Domestic Product(NDP), Gross National Product (GNP) etc. are used to measure the development path. But the new version of economic development is quite different from the older one. New version asserts that development is multi dimensional which incorporates changes in institution, popular attributes and various social structures as well as poverty eradication, reduction of inequality, maximum human welfare, cleaner environment, more opportunities, holistic approach to nature and less global environmental stress and accelerated economic growth. Gerland M. Meier asserted,*" Economic Development of a country is mainly concerned with the achievement of better nourishment, better education, better living conditions and expanded range of opportunities in work and leisure for poor people of the world. If these are the ultimate objective of economic development, then a rise in per capita real income is surely a relevant and necessary means for their attainment."* Qualitative measures like HDI, PQLI, UNITY index, UNIRDS approach etc. are indicators of development which go beyond income. Development in real sense is development of all the section of a nation. If a section of people remains in a poorer state, then development will be lopsided. Hence, each and every section of individuals should be enriched with the capabilities of enhancing their choices.

Assam is a diverged state with various social, cultural and spatial diverged categories. Spatial categories are mainly Tea garden community, Char chapari blocks, Hills block, Flood affected block etc. Among these spatial categories Char chapari block is the most backward block of Assam. Present paper studies the various socio-economic dimensions of development in Char areas of Assam.

Study Area:

The study area is the Char areas of Assam. Char is a Assamese term which means river island or mid channel bars. In Assam, the area is surrounded by the mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The area accounts for 5% of Assam's total area. It includes 14 districts, 55 blocks and around 2300 villages. There are approximately 27 lacks of population and majority of them are Muslim. Almost 95% of people in char are as are poor peasant.

Research Questions and Methodology:

The primary objective of the paper is to explore various dimensions of socio economic status of char chapari areas of Assam. To do the same, author tried to answer the following questions.

What is the nature of human development in the region. Whether the region is suffering poor human development as compared to other spatially diversed categories.

What is the extent of poverty in the region. Is it significantly different from overall poverty scenario of Assam.

What is the nature of employment in the area. What are the major sources of income in the area.

What is the scenario of literacy and education in the study area. Is it significantly different from overall scenario of Assam.

What is the current scenario of health and health care services in the area. What is the role of government as healthcare service provider in the area.

To answer the above questions author used only secondary data from various sources like NSS 66th report, Assam Human Development Report(2013, 2014, 2016), Census data, Statistical hand book of Assam, Statistical handbook of India etc.

Hypothesis:

Depending on available literature and book study the author set the hypothesis that, 'The condition of Char Areas in various aspects like Human development, Poverty, Literacy and Education, Income and Employment, Health and Healthcare Services are below the Assam standard.'

Limitation of the study:

Although an attempt to study the complete scenario of social and economical aspects by this paper, yet it has some shortcomings. This paper could not touch the aspects like- political, cultural, land right, isolation etc. More over, the complete discussion is based on secondary data analysis.

Findings:

Human Development: Human development is the ultimate development goal of any economy. Humanistic approach of development ensures all round development of human being with the enlargement of choices and the expansion of capabilities. Traditional economic development is substituted by human development. The Human Development Report published in 1990 asserted that, *"The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environ-ment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. It is a process of enlarging people's choices, and strengthen human capabilities" in a way which enables them to lead longer, healthier and fuller lives."*

Although there are many aspects of human development, we will use the basic indices of human development as used in HDI to explore the scenario of human development in the area. These are namely life expectancy at birth, Mean Year of Schooling Index(MYSI), Expected Year of Schooling Index(EYSI) and Per Capita Income(PCI). Life expectancy at birth is the average number of years that a new born child is expected to live, except unforeseen circumstances. It is used to analyze the health dimensions. MYSI is the index of measuring average number of years of education attained by a country's population. It was used by UNDP as an index of HDI. While EYSI measures the expected number of years of school education to be received by a child if current enrollment is maintained throughout the child's life. It replaced Gross Enrollment Ratio(GER) in 2010. Per capita income is the average income earned by a people in specific period of time. It is used as an indicator of standard of living.

The following table, table1 reveals the structure of HDI related indices in the region.

Table:1: HDI related indicators

Category	Life expectancy	MYSI	EYSI	Annual PCI(Rs)
Flood affected	50.22	6.54	11.9	23,604
Hills	67.42	5.25	11.87	18,060
Char-Chapari	63.8	4.76	11.76	21,516
Assam	54	6.17	11.85	24,660

Source: HDR Survey: 2013

Table1 reveals that the life expectancy of Char is higher than the state average. But MYSI and EYSI in the area is quite lower than the Assam standard. If we compare the same with the other spatially diverged categories, we can see that life expectancy of char area is less than hills area but higher than the flood affected block. MYSI and EYSI for Char area are lower than hills area and flood affected areas. Further, the annual PCI of Char block is less than the state average and annual PCI of flood affected areas, but slightly higher than the hills areas' PCI.

6.2: Poverty: Poverty is the inability of people to afford the basic needs. It is intense in Assam. In Assam, 30% of population are multidimensionality poor. Moreover, larger proportion population is facing asset poverty. In Char areas the situation is quite worse. Poverty ratio in the area is 42.6% which is quite higher than that of Assam. To analyze the intensity of poverty in the area two indicators are used- Multidimensional Poverty

Index(MPI) and Head Count Ratio(HCI). MPI uses a set of indicators to calculate poverty of a region in a specific period of time. It takes into accounts the factors like health, education, standard of living etc. in calculating poverty. It examines multidimensional deprivation for both breath and magnitude. On the other hand, head count ratio is the ratio of people which are on or below the poverty line to total population. Table2 reveals the intensity of poverty in the Char blocks of Assam.

Table2: Indicators of Poverty

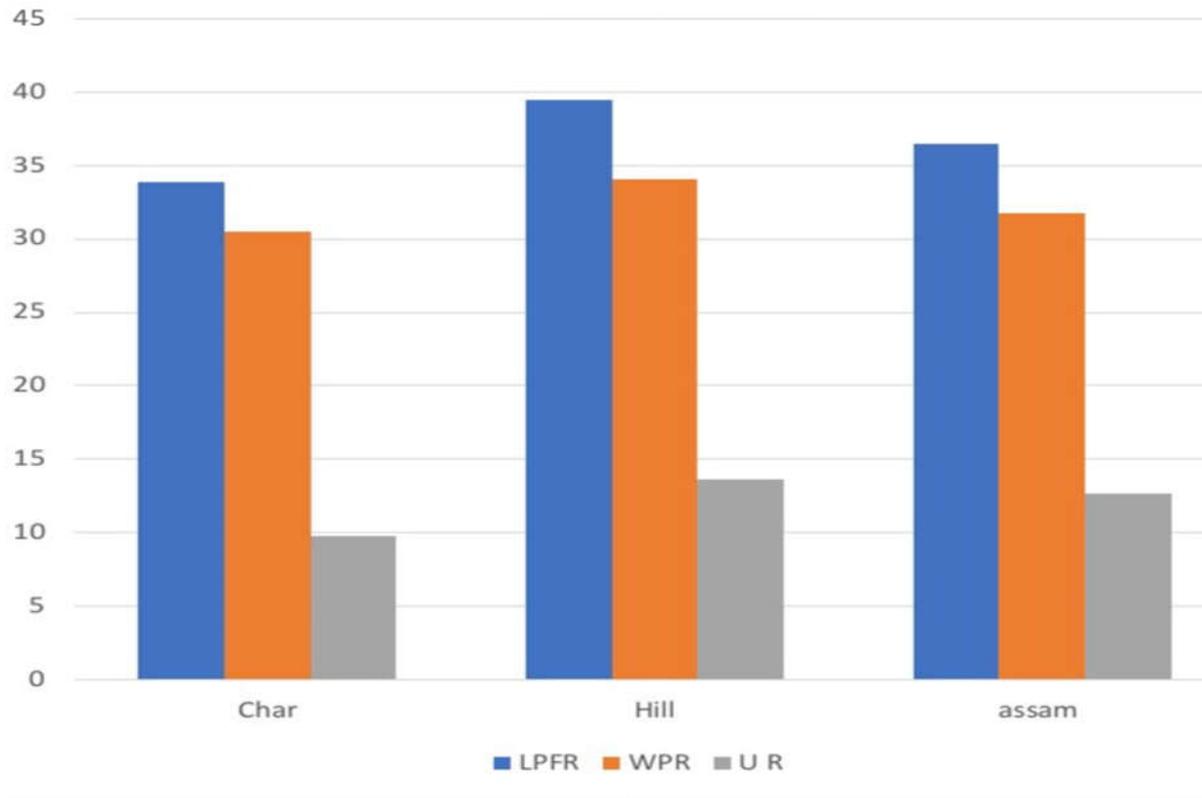| Areas	HCI of multidimensionality poor	HCI of vulnerable	MPI
Flood affected	27.74	17.78	11.7
Hills	33.7	21.2	13.86
Char chapari	44.5	17.6	18.57
Assam	30.1	16.54	12.49

Source:HDR survey:2013

Above table reveals that MPI, HCI of vulnerable and HCI of multidimensionality poor for Char area are higher than that of Assam. If we compare the same indicators with other spatial categories the we will see that the scenario is worst in Char area (except HCI of Vulnerable of Hills area).

Moreover, data on asset poverty reveals that, 69.4% population in the area do not have agricultural asset, 83.3% population do not have any insurance cover, 91.1% of population do not have some household appliances and 50.6% of population do not have cultivated land. Thus we can say that, poverty is very intense in the area and it is higher than state level.

6.3: Employment and Income: The nature of employment and income are also strategic factor in determining the socio economic phenomenon of a country. In Char areas, nature of employment is generally bounded by agriculture. A report stated that 95% of char dwellers are cultivator. Annual per capita income is Rs 1793 only in the area. Very small portion of population are engaged in small trade and service sector.

To understand the scenario of employment Labor Force Participation Rate (LPFR), Work Force Participation Rate(WPR) and Unemployment Rate (UR) are used. LPFR is the proportion of total population who are willing to work and actually working in any productive activity during a specific period of time. LPFR includes both the working population and population who are willing to work. WPR, on the other hand, is the percentage of population which are actually working in productive activity. It excludes the unemployed segment of population. UR is the number of people who are not employed as a percentage of labor force. Figure1 reflects all the statistics related to employment in Char block of Assam.
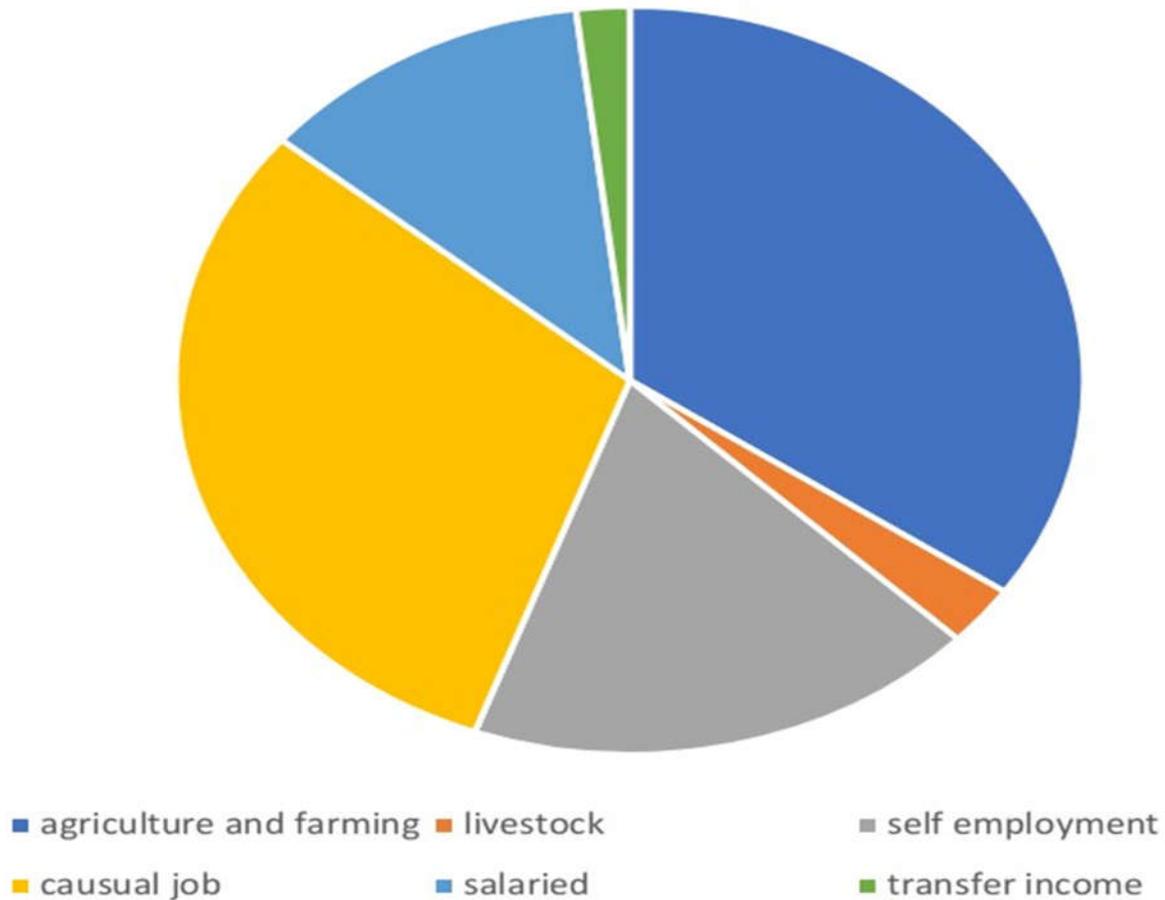
Figure1: Statistics of Employment:

Source: HDR,2013

All the indicators of employment reveals a inferior scenario in Char areas (except unemployment rate). LPFR is 33.9% in the area which is lower than that of state and hill areas. Same scenario is seen in case of WPR. But, the interesting fact is that UR is lowest in the area.

Another attempt was made to analyze the nature of engagement in the Char block of Assam. Following pie diagram(fig.2) reveals the nature of engagement in the sample area.

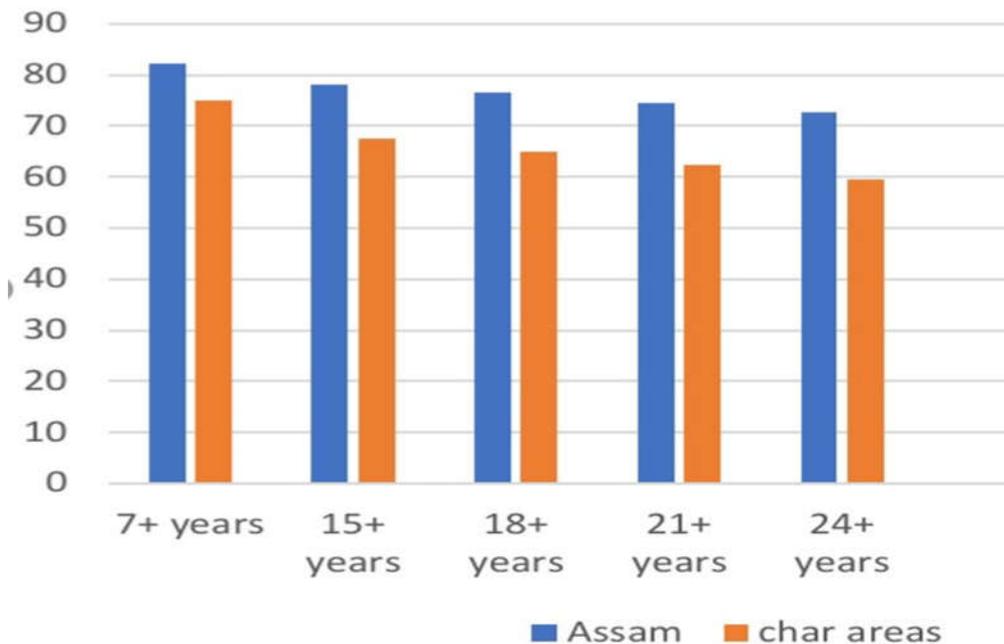**Fig:2:Engagement**   **percentage**

Source:HDR 2013,Assam

In Char area agriculture and farming contributes 34.6% of annual income, while 30.6% of income comes from casual jobs. Lowest income providing source in the area is transfer income. Thus, we have seen that the scenario of income and employment is not satisfactory.

6.4: Literacy and Education: Education is very important determinant of socio economic life. Literacy standard of char chapari of Assam is very low except Majuli Island. Such areas possesses majority of Muslim population who are entrapped in poverty. In such circumstances it is better for them to think about basic needs only. Generally Mollas and Moulavis plays a dominant role over the lives of char dwellers. This creates impediments for the development of their society. In this way, obscurantism and fundamentalism arises in the areas. According to some researchers early marriage of girls is because of fundamentalism in the areas. Except these, all bride fails to see bridegroom before marriage due to their social norms. Thus scientific and modern education system should be developed in such areas. To explore the literacy scenario, age specific literacy rates are presented for the area.

Fig:3: Age specific literacy rate(ASLR) of Char areas.

Source: HDR, Assam2014

From the above figure it is obvious that literacy scenario in Char areas is lower than Assam standard as literacy rate for all age group of the area is less than that of Assam. It is observed here that ASLR falls for higher age groups.

In Char areas, the rate of dropping out is very high. In fact, 33.2% of children who are out of school do not even enrolled in any school. Assam HDR, report asserted the reasoning of dropout in Char areas are as follows: 13.51% of dropout is because of working at home, 35.83% of dropout is because of supporting income at home, 10.87% of dropout is because of failing in exam, 4.13% of dropout is because of inability to afford, 1.13% of dropout is because of ill health and 29.83% of dropout is because of no faith in education.

6.5 Health and Health Care: Health hygiene is one of the most important factor of socio economic scenario. Higher income and social status are linked to better health. Similarly a better health can helps in increasing economic gain. The collected data from various sources reveals the following facts:

Life expectancy at birth is 63.8 years which is significantly higher than the state average of 56.25 years.
b) Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) is 328 for Char areas which is higher than Assam' s MMR of 330.

Data on Nutritional status of children reveals that 51.5% is stunting which means low height for age, 16.1% is wasting which means lower weight for height and 38.1% is underweight which means lower weight for age. All these statistics are below Assam standard.
d) Health Care Providers- informal drug stores provide 9.7%, private clinics provide 30.4% and government hospital/ dispensaries provide 59.6% health care services for short term morbidities. On the other hand, informal drug stores provide 3.4%, private clinics provide 34.6% and government hospitals/ dispensaries provide 62% of services for long term morbidities.

e) Total fertility rate in Char area is 2.8 which is significantly higher than Assam's TFR.

f) In Char area almost 84% of dwellers do not have toilet.

Specific Suggestions:

Char chapari area of Assam is very poor. Various projects or schemes should be taken to improve the livelihood of the area. There are some suggestions by the author to improve the Char area.These are:

Frequent flood and soil erosion are very critical problem in char areas. Modern science and technology needs to be used to controls such problems. To tackle this problem proper vegetation should be maintained in such area, even in the bank of the river also. Thus plantation is crucial.

Char dwellers of Assam are entrapped in vicious circle of poverty. External intervention by civil society agencies and government is necessary to breaks the circle.

There is heavy dependence in agriculture in Char areas of Assam which creates excessive pressure on land. Government and concerned authority should provide alternative job opportunities for them. Even the lack of modernized agriculture productivity remains poor.

People of the area are heavily dominated by unscientific social, religious norms. These norms are the cause of poor socio economic status and gender disparity. Awareness should be created against such norms by disseminating proper science based education.

Social isolation is very critical problem in Char areas excluding some blocks. Such isolation should be immediately removed for the effective development of the community.

Financial inclusion is very poor in the areas. There is very low institutional saving and investment. Saving and investment habit should be increased. Government should take the responsibility of increasing financial inclusion in the area.

Medical facilities in the area seems to be very poor. Which may lead to ill health and hence low productivity and low economic wellbeing. Such problem should be removed as soon as possible.

Conclusion:

Balanced development is very essential for the development and wellbeing of humankind. From the above analysis, we have seen that, almost for all the cases Char dwellers are lagging behind. Which means the hypothesis which was based on available literature review and book study proved to be true. In fact we can say that, the socio economic status Char people is not only below the Assam standard but also poorer than some other spatial categories of Assam.

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