Book Review

The Demographic Question in the Char Areas of Assam

Gorky Chakraborty

Manoj Goswami (2014), Char Settlers of Assam: A Demographic Study, MRB Publishers, Guwahati, 156 pages

Introduction

The mid-channel bars (locally referred as char) are an integral part of the fluvial regime of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries in Assam. The extremely braided channels of the river along with its unique gradient, suspended particles and bed load combine together during floods to give rise to ‘almond’ shaped alluvial formations known as chars. As these formations are built under flood environment, the height of the char is never greater than the height of the highest flood (Bhagabati, 2001). The chars follow a peculiar pattern of migration. They are subjected to erosion on their upstream and deposition on the downstream, due to which they migrate downstream. This affects the geometry and location of the chars during floods almost every year. Their extremely unstable nature makes the dwellers unstable too and a minute observation of a char dweller will reveal their ‘agitated’ and/or ‘disturbed’ nature, as if they are haunted by an unknown force which drives them to be always in a state of flux.

Historically, these natural habitats of the river flood plains got gradually converted into areas of human habitation during the colonial period, when the British administrators induced large number of peasants from the densely populated districts of erstwhile East Bengal to migrate and settle in Assam in the name of revenue generation. The process got impetus through the colonial construct of ‘wasteland’, whereby the usufruct community space of the people was initially granted to individual European planters for tea plantation in upper Assam. What started with tea later on was used for cultivation of jute and food grains with the same alibi of revenue generation in lower Assam. While the domain of plantation was for the Europeans the latter was meant for the population groups from East Bengal (of course after much debate and deliberations).

Gorky Chakraborty (gorkybob8@gmail.com) is with Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK), Kolkata
The process of facilitating the transfer of population could not gather momentum till the first Partition of Bengal (1905), when Assam and East Bengal became a single entity under one administration. What started during the first decade of the 20th century had a deep impact on the demographic profile of the state in the decades to come. These farm settlers not only brought huge tracts of land under cultivation but also diversified the crop profile in Assam. It is estimated in the Census of India, 1951 that in 1951, the total number of migrants from East Bengal must have been around one to one and a half million, which was between one-tenth to one-sixth of the total population of the state (Goswami, 1994). On the other, according to Prof. Amalendu Guha, out of the 1.1 million acres of wasteland settled with all the migrants in Assam, East Bengal farm-settlers accounted for nearly half a million acres (Guha, 1977). Although there are no separate records pertaining to the habitation and settlement of the char areas in Assam yet it is a logical corollary that such a phenomenon happened during the same colonial period as well.

The crop and productivity details referred in the Statistical Abstract of Assam 1951 shows that the selected crops cultivated by the farm settlers in the immigrant prone districts (Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang) and their productivity were substantially higher vis-à-vis the crops where their involvement was minimal, e.g. acreage of crops such tobacco, sugarcane, rape and mustard etc. showed a substantial rise whereas cotton, a crop where their involvement was nominal, showed a stationary trend (Doullah, 2004).

Contemporising the Char Areas

Despite their presence in the char areas for over 100 years there is severe dearth of information regarding various aspects related to these areas. In order to develop these areas, Government of Assam undertook a special ‘Char Areas Development Programme’ during the Seventh Five Year Plan (1983) through a new department namely ‘The Assam State Char Areas Development Authority’. Thereafter, the Authority was re-designated as a full-fledged Government Directorate during 1996. In due course, Government of Assam created another new department namely ‘Welfare of Minorities Development’, which included the Directorate of Char Areas during 1998. In order to develop the char areas, this organization undertook few schemes related to education, safe drinking water, agriculture and dairy development and training to unemployed youths for self-employment. This Authority and later Directorate conducted two benchmark surveys during 1992-93 and 2003-04, which are the only sources of information regarding char areas of Assam.

According to the Socio-economic Survey Reports concerning the char areas of Assam, during 1992-93 to 2003-04, the number of char villages in the Brahmaputra has risen by 7.75 per cent. Decadal population growth rate, on the other, has been 55.63 per cent compared to 18.85 per cent for Assam (1991-2001). During the first survey (1992-93) Barpeta district had the highest number of char villages and population followed by Dhubri and Jorhat. However, following the patterns of alluvium and diluvium in the river Brahmaputra, the next survey (2003-04) showed that Dhubri district had the
highest number of char villages and char population followed by Jorhat and Barpeta. This shows the temporality or flux concerning these areas.

The chars are the home to 9.37 per cent of the state’s population and cover 4.6 per cent of the total land area of the state. However, less than 4 per cent of the state’s cultivable land is located in these areas. Cultivable land as percentage of total land has declined from 70 per cent to 67.13 per cent during 1992-93 to 2002-03 and there has also been a simultaneous decline in the per capita availability of cultivable land. The chars are densely populated (690 persons per sq.km) with a population density that is more than double the state average (340 persons per sq.km.). The char villages account for one of the largest concentrations of illiterate population in Assam. Between 1992-93 and 2003-04 their literacy levels marginally increased from 15.45 to 19.31 per cent. On the other, it is surprising to note that during this period there has been a fall in literacy rate among the char villages of four districts namely, Bongaigaon, Kamrup, Dhubri and Tinsukia.

The result of all these depressing conditions aptly gets reflected in the poverty estimates concerning these areas. It is observed that during the period of the two surveys, the population residing below the official poverty line increased substantially from 48.89 per cent to 67.89 per cent, which for the state declined to 36.09 per cent. Thus the char areas represent one of the most backward areas in the state whose dwellers are constantly affected by adverse environment flood and also receive less than desired attention from the state in terms of provision of infrastructure both physical and human as well.

**Contextualising the Demographic Question**

An introduction to the char areas as elaborated above is necessary prior to the review of Monoj Goswami’s book *Char Settlers of Assam: A Demographic Study* so as to not only make any reader aware about these areas but also to contextualise the issues concerning the char areas.

The char areas are geographically ‘alienated’ from the ‘mainland’ and psychologically ‘detached’ from the ‘mainstream’ population groups in Assam. Moreover, lack of proper information about the existential realities in these areas generates critical demographic gap as well. While one relates to the lack of technical details such as fertility, mortality, morbidity etc. of the char population, the other relates to the political aspects of demography, namely citizenship and allied issues of this population group in Assam. Lack of proper data adds fuel to the perception that the char dwellers indulge in rampant polygamy and uncontrolled procreation and the other situates the chars as the ‘abode of the illegal immigrants’ (read Bangladeshis) in Assam. Logically these ‘perceptions’ are contradictory i.e. if the char areas are densely populated due to higher fertility rates then can there be illegal migration to these areas so that they become the ‘abode of Bangladeshis’? A higher population density cannot be a sufficient ‘pull’ factor to attract large scale migration to these areas. Moreover, there will also be local resistance to avoid further resource crunch due to new migration to the char areas. Goswami’s book however does not deal with this contradiction but does a great
academic service by dealing with the technicalities of demography in these areas.

Both the survey reports quoted in the earlier section indicate that the char areas have a very high population growth rate. The decadal growth rate of population between the two surveys has been 55.63 per cent compared to 18.85 per cent for Assam. Without data related to birth rates, fertility and mortality rates, it leads to the mis-conception that these areas are therefore the ‘abode of the Bangladeshis’. Goswami’s book fills in this information gap by providing the household data related to fertility, mortality and child mortality in these areas. With a sample of 1000 char households spread over four development blocks in two districts of Barpeta and Kamrup, this book provides us with the micro-details of the char areas. The study finds a high TFR (Total Fertility Rate) of 4.56 amongst the surveyed households. This proves that high population growth rate in the char areas of Assam is due to a higher fertility rates among its dwellers rather than illegal migration.

A higher fertility rate without proper human development infrastructure does not generate social capital and this is reflected in these areas. The study reveals that more than half of the households are illiterate, 91 per cent do not have access to safe drinking water while only 1.4 per cent have sanitary latrine within their premise. Under such situation morbidity as well as mortality is bound to be higher. The study reveals that mortality rate (CDR) is 8.6 per thousand which is higher than the state average (6.6). The biggest victim of this health scenario happens to be the infants who have a high rate of mortality rates (136.9) amongst the surveyed households that is more than double the prevailing rate in Assam.

But what determines the higher fertility rates in the char areas? A multivariate regression analysis shows that female age at marriage (AM) to be the most significant variable that is inversely related to live births. In other words, analysis reveals that an increase of AM by one year, on an average, reduces live birth by 0.434. But with high levels of female illiteracy (55.7 per cent), lack of motivation for education of girl child and a geographical isolation that makes patriarchy more entrenched, mean age at marriage remains low (17.1 years) that results in higher fertility in the char areas. In such a milieu boys are bound to be more preferred than girls. The surveyed char dwellers showed a distinct son preference amongst a third of the concerned households. Similarly, findings also reveal that 60 per cent of the infant deaths are female in these areas that re-enforces the lack of proper care of the girl child in the char areas.

Access to health infrastructure is an important source for wellbeing of a population. Goswami’s study shows that there were only two health sub-centres in two char villages out of the 23 char villages surveyed. This shows severe lack of access to health care facility among the surveyed households. This lack of access has been a major cause of infant mortality. The study reveals that infant mortality can be reduced significantly through ante-natal and post-natal check-up. The regression co-efficient of ante-natal check-up of the mothers is (-) 0.122, i.e. an increase in ante-natal check-up of the mother by one unit, controlling other variables, decreases infant mortality by 0.122
units. No other variable showed a higher level of significance compared to ante-natal check-up in the surveyed households. Similarly, lack of awareness generation and availability of contraception is a big issue in the char areas. Knowledge about contraception among the eligible couples was low (42 per cent) and even evident from the analysis of field data e.g. “number of live births ever born is higher (72.08 per cent) among couples not using family planning methods, while only 27.2 per cent live births have taken place to the users of contraceptive devices” (p.69).

**Summing up**

The book is certainly not a description of the ‘everyday’ analogy of the char areas in Assam but certainly an in depth study of demography concerning these areas. This study helps in refuting the hysterical myths attached to the chars. Those who are aware of these areas will agree that the char dwellers presents with many interesting features of adaptation and assimilation yet are unique and a distinct population group in their own. Their resilience to dwell in the difficult domain in which they reside, their adaptation skill to deal with flood, erosion and also cropping pattern to suit the micro-environment, their magnanimity of assimilating with the surrounding socio-cultural milieu in which they are embedded are all unique characteristics which very few population group in the region exhibit, e.g. the acceptance of declaring Assamese as their mother tongue in the census declaration continuously for over half a century yet maintaining their Bengali dialect in household interaction is a rare instance in the state, similarly offering *tamul* and *paan* to greet their guest is an unique feature in Assam, which the char dwellers also exhibit. On the other hand they seldom drink tea which otherwise is the most common brew of the state. Goswami’s book also finds similar tendencies amongst his surveyed households.

This book is a good exercise in providing a rare insight into the char areas and will be of great significance for researchers, activists, administrators and policy makers. In this regards, the author deserves appreciation for doing his fieldwork in this oft forgotten yet victimised domains of the state. However, a more careful handling of the term ‘immigrant’ and the role colonialism historically played in facilitating the transfer of the char dwellers to Assam along with correction of few typographical errors can bring in more clarity in its subsequent editions.

**References**


Doullah S M (2003) *Immigration of East Bengal Farm Settlers and Agricultural Development of the Assam Valley*, New Delhi, Institute of Objective Studies
