

Dynamism in the 'Char' Lands of Bangladesh: Field Level Realities

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Abstract

As opposed to the popular belief that people started living in Char lands to accommodate increasing population and helpless victims of river erosions, controversies remain on the trends in settlement and development interventions. Hence, this study aimed at exploring the field level realities concerning trends in dwellers' settlement and development intervention in a Northern river Char 'Pepulia' and in a Southern river estuarine Chars 'Char Wadel'. Along with government officials, in Pepulia, data had been collected from the personnel and beneficiaries of Chars Livelihoods Programme and River Basin Programme; in Char Wadel, from those of Specially Targeted Ultra Poor Programme and Disaster Preparedness and Rehabilitation Management Project. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the study discovered the realities (facts) regarding settlement in Char lands and development interventions. This study has practical implication as it demands immediate attention of the academia and practitioners for ensuring sustainable and topical development interventions.

Key Words

Char Lands, Development Interventions, Settlement, Sustainability, Topicality.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, the term *Char* is used to indicate areas of new land that are formed through the continual process of erosion and deposition in the major rivers and coastal areas (Roy, Syed, & Azim, 2007). As described in Banglapedia (the national encyclopedia of Bangladesh), *Char* is, '...a tract of land surrounded by the waters of an ocean, sea, lake, or stream; it usually means, any accretion in a river course or estuary'. Estimates of the number of people who live in *Char* lands vary widely (Lein, 2009). Studies conducted for the 1990–95 Flood Action Plan 1 (FAP1), estimated that 6,31,000 people had been living on *Char* lands in and along the main rivers in 1993; amongst them, 65 percent (397000) had been living on *Char* lands of the Jamuna (Sarker, Huque, & Alam, 2003). Hutton and Haque (2004), while referred to the FAP documents, suggested that *Char* dwellers numbered 4.5 million, and that 1.8 million were located on the Brahmaputra-Jamuna alone. ISPAN (1995) study indicated that over 4 million people in Bangladesh live in the *Chars* of the country's principal rivers. Again, Ashley *et al.* (2000) estimated the population to be between 5 and 10 million who live on the *Chars* and associated flood-prone areas in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, Lein (2009) finally concluded saying:

In the absence of any standard definition for what is or is not *Char* land, the discrepancy in numbers may be attributed to different criteria being adopted – the higher figures possibly including inhabitants of 'unprotected mainland', and the lower figures resulting from narrower definitions (p. 101).

Whatever be the size of the approximate population in the *Char* lands of Bangladesh, it is evident as available literature suggest, the size is increasing (Sarker, Huque, & Alam, 2003; Ashley *et al.*, 2000; Lein, 2009). The dominant factors mentioned in different studies for human settlements in the *Char* lands are increased in population and river bank erosion (Spate, 1954; Morgan & McIntire, 1959; Ahmad, 1968; Bristow, 1987; Zaman, 1991; Roy, Syed, & Azim, 2007). For Nicholas (1962):

...population pressure and competition for land in the older settled portion of the delta forced groups of poor cultivators to search for new land in the south and east, to take their families into the newly opened territory, and to develop new communities there (p. 80).

To portray the situation frequently faced by the *Char* dwellers, Schmuck (1996) wrote:

The perception of the *Char* dwellers of their living conditions is fundamentally different from the view taken by outsiders. Life stories and accounts clearly suggest that flood and erosion do not have the Character of catastrophe to them, contrary to the reports of press agencies and development institutions. They are recurring events, forming part of the *Char* dwellers' life-world. The people have adjusted and are not helpless victims of their environment. (p. 76)

The reverse portrait, however, has also been taken into account. As stated by Baqee (1998):

Helplessness, resignation and surrender to forces unleashed by them in their struggle for existence – but over which they have no control – mark the lives of *Char*-lands denizens. Their attitudes bespeak passivity towards the misfortunes that befall them. Blind unquestioned acceptance of 'whatever will be, will be' pervades the *Char*-land ethos (p. 2).

To express their understanding about the *Char* dwellers Roy, Syed, and Azim (2007) illustrated saying that,

The riverine *Chars* in Bangladesh offer, on a continuous basis, significant areas of new land for settlement and cultivation. Living and working conditions on these newly emerged lands are harsh in terms of social and environmental context. The *Chars* are poorly connected to the mainland and are prone of acute erosion flooding which makes the inhabitants feel vulnerable.

The above mentioned literature review draws attention to the existing diversified focus of researchers with respect to their understanding of the *Char* lands as vulnerable locations, areas of new land for settlement and cultivation, places for settlement of the helpless, places for dwellers who are not helpless victims of their environment. The above mentioned deviated focuses deserve to be resolved through indepth research.

Another vital consideration in this regard is that of variations among the riverine *Chars*. There are both major river *Chars* (RCs) and river estuarine *Chars* (RECs) in the coastal areas. The island *Chars* found in the coastal areas in the river estuaries are different in numerous ways. To illustrate the difference between RCs and coastal RECs, Banglapedia provides the following description:

Known for centuries Bangladesh is a typical model of natural hazards. Some of the devastating natural hazards in Bangladesh are caused by floods, induced by the on-shore movement of cyclonic winds in coastal regions and excessive runoff water and rise in river water levels in flood plain areas. Coastal flooding associated with storm surges is always considered as a hazard irrespective of the scale of surges. This is because of the suddenness of the storm surges and the damages to lives and properties resulting from such events. Whereas, river floods in floodplain areas assume the proportion of hazards only according to the scale of the flood. Low (normal) floods are considered as a blessing because they contribute vital fertility (silt) and moisture to the land. Only an unusually high (abnormal) flood may cause widespread damage to lives, properties and crops.

Comparing RCs and coastal RECs, Saussier (1999) observed:

Human lives, however, are rarely lost on *Chars* along the Jamuna, unlike those on the coastal belt, because dwellers can forecast floods several days in advance by

observing weather conditions. The *Char* people constantly keep monitoring the water level and when the river starts to rise during the monsoon season they leave the islands with their belongings and return only after the water recedes.

The distinctions between RCs and RECs mentioned above also deserve separate and precise attention in the study of settlement and development in the *Char* lands.

With the two basic understandings that 1. diversified focus exists with respect to the understanding of the *Char* lands as vulnerable locations, areas of new land for settlement and cultivation, places for settlement of the helpless, places for dwellers who are not helpless victims of their environment and 2. variations exist between RCs and RECs; an indepth study of the trends in settlement and development interventions in the two varying contextual setting of riverine settings in RCs and RECs, appears necessary. In this context, this study was conducted to explore the field level realities in terms of trends in dwellers' settlement and development interventions in a Northern RC 'Pepulia' and in a Southern REC 'Char Wadel'.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Respondents and Study Tools

Beneficiaries of *Chars* Livelihoods Programme (CLP) and River Basin Programme (RBP) participated as respondents in Pepulia. In *Char* Wadel respondents were the beneficiaries of Specially Targeted Ultra Poor (STUP) Programme and Disaster Preparedness and Rehabilitation Management (DPRM) Project. The respondents participated in the Questionnaire Survey, House Hold (HH) Level Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The following table provides details on the respondents and the tools used to collect data on settlement and development under two specific questions.

Table 1. Research questions, respondents and tools used in the study

Questions	Tools and Respondents
What is the settlement & displacement history in the studied <i>Chars</i> ?	Questionnaire Survey: Survey of total 156 beneficiaries from all the studied programmes and project. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Executive Director (ED), Project Manager, AC-lands, knowledgeable elderly <i>Char</i> dweller. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Participation of both male and female. Case studies and House Hold (HH) Level Interviews
What trends in NGO, Government and other interventions can be traced?	Questionnaire Survey: Survey of total 156 beneficiaries from all the studied programmes and project. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): ED, Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO), project manager, elderly <i>Char</i> dweller. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Participation of both male and female. Government Documents

A total of 156 beneficiaries- 34 from STUP, 42 from DPRM, 40 from CLP and 40 from RBP participated. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted on selected government officials and personnel of the programmes and the project.