

LAND REVENUE ADMINISTRATION IN THE CHAR AREAS OF GOALPARA: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Goalpara is one of the most important districts of the state of Assam which hit by the massive immigration of the Hindu Muslim immigrants from the East Bengal districts during the British colonial rule. The Muslim peoples of the Char areas of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam constitute an important segment of the total population of Assam. History bears the testimony to the fact that the present day char dwellers were influenced by various politico-economic factors to migrate into land abundant Assam from their densely populated district of erstwhile East-Bengal. This group of people had migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley basically during the colonial period and settled in the char areas of Goalpara and Nowgong. These peoples occupied thousand hectors of char lands in the District but the Government did not take any effective land settlement policy in these areas. Therefore in this research paper an attempt has been made to study about the land revenue administration in the Char areas of the Goalpara district of Assam.

***Key Words:** Land revenue, Immigration, Erosion, Economy.*

OBJECTIVES:

To study about the land revenue administration in the Char areas of Goalpara district.

METHODOLOGY:

Historical research methodology has been used in this research paper. Both primary and secondary data has been used.

The government of Assam defines *Char* areas as “the sandy land area extended from Sadiya to Dhubri of Assam with the river Brahmaputra or surrounded by the water of the river Brahmaputra, where people can live and cultivate the lands included in the first category of char area.ⁱ The mid-channel bars (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 gradients, suspended particles and bed load combine together during floods to give rise to ‘almond’ shaped alluvial formations known as *chars*.ⁱⁱ The Char areas of Assam play an important role in shaping up the politico-economic and socio-cultural and religious traits in the unfolding history of the state. This study is a modest attempt to understand the remote, uncharted and fringe areas, which are situated far away from the cities- the Char areas of the Goalpara district of Assam, located beyond the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

The Muslim people living in the Char areas of Goalpara are named by the scholars as the *Charua Musalman* some scholar use the term as the *Immigrant Musalman* and other say them As *Bengali Musalman*. This Muslim people constitute a distinct sociological group among the ethnically diverse population of Assam. These Muslims are different from the other Muslim social groups of Assam in terms of language and culture. They are also different from the two other Muslim social groups of Assam viz, the Muslim of Brahmaputra valley and the Bengali Muslims of the Barak Valley, in many significant respects.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 and creation of the new province of ‘East Bengal and Assam’, opened the foot gates for transfer of population from the over populated districts of the East Bengal to the sparsely populated areas of Assam. People from the densely populated districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur started coming to the uninhabited jungles, marshy and char lands in the Goalpara districts. The western part of the district of Goalpara was to be the earliest and most effected by migration. The census of 1911 is the first report of Bengal immigrants to the *Char* lands of Goalpara.ⁱⁱⁱ The principle char areas of the District where these immigrants settled are the Alopoti Char, Nisan Char, Budu Char, Kadamtola Char, Bolodmari Char, Lakhipur, Sunari, Maukhuwa, Simlitola, Moanbori, fulora, Kumri etc.

The population of the district increased by 1.4 per cent between 1881 and 1891 but during the next decade it shot up by 30 mainly because of migration from Mymensingh. From 1901 to 1930, there is a huge migration of the East Bengali cultivators from the districts of East Bengal and they mostly settled in the *Char* areas of Goalpara. By 1911, all the available land in the district had been explored by the ‘industrious agriculturalists’. Among the immigrants 85 per cent was Muslim and rest were Hindus.^{iv} According to the census report of 1931 the immigrant

Muslims mainly live in the districts of lower and middle Assam such as the Goalpara, Dhubri, Barpeta, Morigaon, and Nowgong.^v

The following table 1.1 shows that of all the Bengal districts Mymensingh supplied the highest number of immigrants to the Brahmaputra valley which stood at 37,000 in 1911 and 1, 72,000 in 1921 and 3, 11,000 in 1931.^{vi} The figures given in the bracket is the number migrated from only Mymensing out of total.

Table 1.1

Table 1		(000's omitted)				
Year	Goalpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Nowgong	Sibsagar	Lakhimpur
1911	77(34)	4(1)	7(1)	4(1)	14(nill)	14(nill)
1921	152(78)	44(30)	20(12)	59(52)	14(nill)	14(nill)
1931	170(80)	134(91)	41(30)	120(108)	12(nill)	19(nill)

Source: Kalita: 2011: 92

LAND REVENUE ADMINISTRATION IN THE CHAR AREAS:

During the pre-British era, *faringati* lands were not under the purview of taxation as because settled cultivation was not possible in these types of land. Similarly in *chapari*, marshy and *char* lands, wherever cultivation was practiced during this period was revenue free. The British administration in order to bring more and more land under cultivation wanted to use these lands for cultivation and placed them under annual settlement. It was during the British Colonial era that these lands were brought under the purview of revenue administration.^{vii}

James Mills was of the view that since the *chaparies* are not permanently inhabited these should not be heritable right in them. He recommended that maximum one *chapari* should be settled with one *Mouzadar* at one time. The *Mouzadar* further settled land directly with the ryots temporarily who can undertake cultivation. In Goalpara district the small *char* lands formed by the river Brahmaputra was used as pasture for herds of cattle, brought from the districts of East Bengal primarily from the Mymensingh District.^{viii} The district of Goalpara went under the British political control much earlier than the rest of Assam. The Koches, who were the last ruling power in Goalpara, lost their independence to the Mughals at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The battle took place in 1612 between the Koches and the Mughals and after the complete defeat of the Parikshit Narayana, his kingdom was ceded to the Mughal Empire with the title of *Baliyat Koch Hajo* in 1614.^{ix}

In 12 August 1765 British obtained *Farman* from emperor Farukshiya, which granted East India Company *Dewani* or collection of revenue in Bengal Bihar and Orissa. The *Farman* of the *Dewani* marks on of the most

conspicuous era in history of the British East India Company, which made them real political authority of the Bengal Bihar and Orissa.^x After the English obtained the *Dewani* of Bengal in 1765 Goalpara continued to the frontier outpost of the Mughal Empire.^{xi} In the same year the whole area of *Koch Hajo* including Goalpara with the rest of the Bengal passed into the control of the East India Company.^{xii} Subsequently British introduced Zamindary Settlement system of land administration in Goalpara.

There were altogether 19 permanently settled Estates covering an area of 2,884 square miles which were distributed among six *zamindary* families. These families belonged to the former Bijni Estate, Mechpera Estate, Karaibari, Purbajoar and Chapar Estate.^{xiii} These Estates were acquired by the Government during 1957 by the State Acquisition of Zamindari Act (Assam Act XVII of 1951) and their revenue administration was vested in the Government.^{xiv} Since the district of Goalpara was under the *zamindary* and these lands belonged to the *zamindars*. They levied an annual tax upon the cattle herd owners known as *Kahachariya*. These *zamindars* for administrative efficiency divided total land under their possession into some *paraganas* and each of the *Paragana* was settled with the *Jotedars* (intermediary). The *Jotedars* on the other hand settled some portion of their land to the *Ryots*, *Adhiyars*, *tenants* and *Chaukanidars*. These intermediaries who cultivated the lands of the *zamindars* on contract basis, often failed to pay the demanded revenue to the *zamindars* in due time. The local tenants were also not able to pay the revenue in right time and they defaulted again and again in terms of the payment of revenue and finally they had to surrender the land under their possession to the *Jotedar*. Therefore in order to increase the revenue, these *Zamindars* invited thousands of East Bengali cultivators to the Char areas of Goalpara mainly from the East Bengal district of Mymensingh, Rangpur, Pabna and Dacca.

In 1911 the East-Bengal district of Mymensingh, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri provided 51,000 immigrants to the district of Goalpara and 3,000 to the other five Brahmaputra valley districts. Whereas, in 1921 the number of East-Bengali settlers in Goalpara increased to 141,000 and in the Brahmaputra valley it increased to 258,000. There were also 6,000 people of Mymensingh, and Rangpur settled in the Hill tracts of Assam in 1921.^{xv} These cultivators had been offered favorable terms by the *zamindars*. The *ryots* were provided with remission of rent for the initial years which was known as *pali* and the *patta* so allotted was known as *pali patta*.

At present day three different types of land revenue settlement exist in these areas such as *touzi*, *ek-choniya* and *meadi*. There exists another kind of holding called *khas* land. This kind of land is not allotted by the Government but encroached upon by the *Char* dwellers. In case of *touzi* land, the cultivators do not enjoy the right of ownership but he could use the land by paying demanded revenue for the land. But this kind of land settlement is very rare in the char areas. The Government can easily take legal action and can issue order to vacate such lands

at any time. But there is an option to convert these lands into *ek-choniya* or annual settlement. After a long possession of the *touzi* land, it may be converted into *ek-choniya* settlement. The annual leases are issued for one year and do not confer the owner with any right of transfer or sub-letting and the right of inheritance is limited to the year of issue only. The periodic leases or the *madi* lands are very rare in the char areas as people who migrated mainly from the East Bengal district did not show any interest for it. Because for this kind of land holdings demanded proper revenue by the Government.^{xvi}

Another most important reason for the absence of the *mayadi* land or the periodic lease land in the *char* areas is the strain economic condition of the peasants. Most part of the *char* is covered with sandy soil which is not fit for cultivation. The land near the river areas not only sandy and unfit for cultivation but there is also the risk of erosion which makes the cultivable land very limited in the Char areas. On the other hand the heavy flood caused by the river Brahmaputra destroyed the crop fields every year which makes a very heavy loss to the peasants. Therefore peasant did not show interest to pay revenue for such a kind of land which is not only unfit for cultivation in some sense but also not secure from erosion.

Table 1.2
Land details in Char areas of Goalpara
(Land in hector)

	1992-93			2003-2004		
	Char Villages	Total land	Land Suitable For Cultivation	Char Villages	Total Land	Land Suitable for Cultivation
Goalpara	187	11623.45	8136.41	179	19860	13728

Source: www. Goalpara.govt.in: accessed date 25-10-2016

Above table shows that the out of total land in the *char* areas of Goalpara district almost one third of the total is not suitable for cultivation. From the last two decade decades the population of the char areas of Goalpara has phenomenally increased. Erosion mainly cause by moving river waters very often compel the men to move. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the moving waters of the mighty Brahmaputra are carrying away villages after villages and, after hiding them from some time in the bowels of the river, delivering them in the form of *char* or river-island.^{xvii} The peasants from East-Bengal of whom an estimated 85 percent ere Muslims started settling down in their thousands since about 1905 on the uninhabited riverine tracts of Assam and Goalpara in particular.^{xviii} The East-Bengali farmer who had started to migrate from the Bengal districts to Brahmaputra valley

and settled in the riverine areas of the district of Goalpara, Nowgong and kamrup, had to face the problem of erosion.

In the district of Goalpara the number of displaced persons continued to be increased and in 1951 the total number of displaced person in the district of Goalpara continued to be 44,967. The principle reason for this massive increase in the number of displaced persons in in Goalpara was the erosion in the both banks of Brahmaputra.^{xix} The flood of 1948 brought innumerable miseries to the thousands of people, especially those settled in the riverine areas of the district. Since the Partition of India erosion in the South bank of Brahmaputra caused heavy damage to the *char* areas of Goalpara district. Every year sand imposition due to the flood not only makes the soil infertile but also decreases the amount of cultivable land in the char areas.

Therefore, annulment of *pattas* (legal title applicable in case of *meyadi* land) is the main hazard in the lives of the displaced persons in the char lands. There are many reasons for which the *patta* get annulled. After erosion, many inhabitants move to another places and started their career with a new job settlements. Sometimes the displaced persons move to a distant place from where they failed to keep contact with the revenue department where their land is registered and thus failed to pay revenue regularly.^{xx} Poverty is of course an important factor but sometimes revenue department refused to accept rent for the land which has no physical existence. On the other hand though an eroded village appears as *char* there is no guarantee that the original inhabitants will get the possession of their own plots of land. Manpower, money and muscle-power play an important role in deciding the ownership of plot. The powerful men of the riverine areas occupy the whole or part of the char land, divide it into plots and sell them to the affordable men with lucrative price. These powerful peoples of the rural areas thus became *de facto* landlords of the *chars*.^{xxi} These landlords can sublet the lands can evict the ryots with muscled power. This kind of landlordism in the char areas of Assam and Goalpara in particular is not recent phenomenon; it had started much before 1938.^{xxii}

After post-independent three major attempts had been taken by the government in the matter related to the revenue settlement of land in the *Char* areas of Assam but was not successful due to the lack of political will. First attempt had been taken in 1979 but it was the occurrence of the historic Assam Movement which overshadowed the whole arrangement. Next another attempt had been taken in the year of 1983 but this time due to the lack of revenue stuff the task got discontinued.^{xxiii} The process was restarted in 1994, when it was decided that in the selected districts of the province where Char lands has been in existence and occupied for more than 15 years, settlement measures would be taken. It was also decided that in the process six *bighas* of land would be settled per household. But the whole process failed because the migrants who had been occupying the land since

Colonial rule haunted the political establishment of the state. In the recent years the Government of Assam started eviction against the illegal occupation of the forest land in the different areas of the province but still no action had been taken against the occupation of *khas* lands in the char areas.

GLOSSARY:

Adhiyar: a landless peasants who receives half (*adh*) produce of the land he cultivates

Bigha: a measure of land equal to 14,400 square ft., approximately one-third of an acre.

Chapari: land formed by the deposit of silt and sand on a riverbank.

Char: a river-island.

Khas Land: kind of land has no legal allotment generally encroached and controlled by muscled power.

Meyadi Land: periodic lease land allotted by the Government with a specific rate of revenue.

Mouza: a fiscal division of a district under the charge of revenue collecting officer.

Mouzadar: a revenue collecting officer of a *mouza*.

Pargana: administrative division of a state evolved under the Mughals.

Patta: the title deed of a plot of land.

Zamindari System: land revenue settlement introduced by the British Government where the landlords enjoyed absolute authority of land.

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