

Changing Land Relations of *Char-Chapari*: A Study on Koroyoni Chapari of Sonitpur District of Assam

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Abstract

Chars are mid channel sand bars. On the other hand, *chapolis* are attached sandbars or those sandbars which gets attached to the mainland due to the changing direction of river. Land relations of both *chars* and *chapolis* merits special analysis and these lands are fluid and impermanent in nature. This paper attempts to understand different dynamics of land relations in a riverine *chapari* village which once showcased the characteristics of a *char* area. A sociological Lense was applied to understand different dynamics of land relations in this riverine village.

Keywords: *Char*, *Chapari*, Land Relations, Fluid, Riverine, Impermanent

Introduction

Land can be regarded as the most fundamental means of production in any agrarian society (Rawal, 2008, 44). People's relation to land is very pertinent in these societies. Ownership pattern of land, land use, land tenure, land lease, land grant, land control and land transactions, all these are outcome of the people's relation to land (Potekhin, 1963, 23). According to Potekhin (1963, 23), these features of people's relation to land can be regarded as land relation. Land relation of the people of any agrarian society has direct link with their income, social status, prestige and power. In agrarian societies Possession of land has been considered as entitlements which brings power and privileges (Sharma, 1994, 12)). Potekhin (1963, 23), further argues that both social structure and land relation have reciprocal relationship with each other. It's the ownership, use and control of land which determine social mobility of the individuals of society, thereby it reproduces social structure.

Chars are considered as alluvial formations or those lands which has been surrounded by river water (Chakravarty, 2009, 2). *Chars* are triangular in shape and unstable in nature. On the other hand, *chapolis* are considered as attached chars or the chars attached to the plain areas. As almost 90 percent of the population of *char-chapolis* are solely dependent on agriculture, it can be regarded as agrarian societies (Hussain, 2008, 64). In this context, proper study of the land ownership, land tenure, use and control of the people of *char-*

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chapari is important.

It's observed that there is difference between char and *chapari* in terms of its formation, nature and stability of land. Though the existing literatures acknowledge the difference between these two categories yet *char-chaparies* are categorised as homogenous category by undermining the differences between them. The study tries to elucidate the difference between char and *chaparies* within the framework of the study of land relations. As an agrarian society, proper understanding of the land relation of the dwellers of *char-chapari* would help us to understand socio-political life of its dwellers.

Koroyoni *chapari* is one of the largest *chapari* of Jiya Bhorali river. It came into existence in 1950s, due to the changing direction of Jiya Bhorali river. From 1950 to 2001 it has been remained as a *char*. From 2001, due to the changing directions of the jiya bharali river this land was attached to the plain areas. It became an attached *char* or *chapari*. In 2001 this *char* was renamed as koroyoni *chapari*. Though the land of this *chapari* got permanence due to its transition from *char* to *chapari* yet majority of the land of this *chapari* are non-cadastral. Here Possession and encroachment of land is the sole criteria of claiming ownership. As the *chapari* had the characteristics of char, tracing the history of its land relation would give us the clear picture of the land relations of char. On the other hand, discussion of the existing and changing land relation of this *chapari* would help us to visualise the difference between *char* and *chapari*. The study tries to examine the power structure of *char-chapari* and nature of its changes in the process of the transition of the land from char to *chapari*.

Review of Literature

A few studies on conceptual and theoretical understanding of land relation is taken into account

Binswanger, Deininger and Feder (1993), dealt with conceptual understanding of land relations. According to them concept of land relations covers land ownership, land use pattern and land tenure system as a whole. It includes tenancy, share cropping and dualistic relationship between owners of land and the cultivator. Land transaction and land conflicts are also part of the study of land relations.

Concept of agricultural land use as a part of land relation is discussed by Goswami (2002, 4891). She highlighted multiple factors which determine agricultural land use. According to her, technical agro-climatic factors are key determinants of land use in Assam. She observed these factors from different angles. From institutional angle land can be observed as social asset (Goswami, 2002, 4891). Ownership pattern of land determines land use and control. According to her land use can be seen from commercial exploitation angle where primary focus must be given on cropping and production pattern

Schickele (1952, 734) studied land relations from interactionists perspective. According to him land tenure system conditions land ownership and occupancy, therefore, in any sociological study of land relations major emphasis should be given to land tenure system. People's behavior to land as their property, sources of income, residence and family

is the subject matter of land tenure system. He demonstrated that, land tenure system and its problems cannot be studied without understanding social values, ethical norms and people's behavior to others. People's interactions within larger social structure determine land tenure which conditions land ownership and occupancy (Schickele, 1952, 734). Similar studies have been conducted by Igbozurike (1974, 132). He studied land tenure system of Nigeria. He noted that land tenure system determines and controls power of choice and action of individuals and families; it's the chief means of rationing economic opportunity and determines the interpersonal distribution of production and income (Igbozurike, 1974, 132). Both Schickele (1952) and Igbozurike (1974) have given emphasis on people's interaction and social norms in studying land relation of a particular society, Therefore, the present study has focused on the interaction between people, impact of social norms and rules upon people's interaction and its overall impact of the land relations of the people. The reciprocity between social interaction and land relations of the people has been studied.

Sharma (1994, 12) has given emphasis on importance of acquisition of land in agrarian societies. According to him possession of land provides prestige power and social security. Land holding and use works as an important factor in determining power relation in agrarian societies. Land holding and acquisition of land rights have strong influence regarding determination of social status in societies. Acquisition of land makes the landholder dominant and influential in the community decision making process. Land holding begets further land control and influential social positions (Sharma, 1994).

Oommen (1970, 228) studied power pool to analyze community power structure. According to him, power pool consists of community leaders, formal position holders, influential persons of decision making and those who have capacities to prevent any decisions to be accomplished. In small villages, power pool is clearly identified in public meetings, settlement of disputes etc. In case of homogenous population power pool is monolithic and concentrated at the hands of few (Oommen, 1970, 228). It's important to note that Oommen (1970, 228) studied power pool in cadastral and permanent village where land tenure, land control and use have official records and legal protections. On the contrary, the present study has been conducted on non-cadastral and semi-permanent land where mere possession and encroachment determine land rights. Therefore, the present study demands in-depth study to understand different dynamics of power pool.

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A few studies have been conducted on land relations of *char-chapari* among them works of Rejaul Karim, Ismaile Hussain, Gorky Chakraborty is significant.

Hussain (2008, 64) noted that the main obstacle of dwellers of *char-chapari* is land problem. Lack of land *pattas*, changes in ownership pattern, politics of land revenue administration, unequal distribution of land holding, politics of land encroachment etc are the major problems of the land relations of *char-chapari*.

Karim (2004, 55) analyzed different problems of the land revenue administration in *char-chapari*. According to him land relations of the chars of Brahmaputra River is different from the chars of other tributaries. Due to temporary nature of *char* lands, ownership pattern and land tenure system of different *chars* are not same. According to Karim (2004, 55) politics of land grant and revenue administration in *char* areas brought to light issues of identity and identity politics.

Chakraborty (2009, 73) highlighted different aspects of land relations of the *char-chaparies* of Assam. According to him, lack of adequate land settlement Act is the prime cause of the plight of the dwellers of the *char-chaparies* of Assam. According to him, semi-permanent nature of land, mixture of cadastral and non-cadastral land, problems of sudden landlessness, conflict over the acquisition of newly emerged eroded land and politics of land encroachment are the key issues of the land relations of *char-chapari*.

Zaman (1991, 32) studies land system of the *chars* of Bangladesh. According to him, land lords of the *char* areas rely on muscle power to get dominance in land holding and control. For Zaman (1991, 32) possession of land holding is the sole criteria to become religious leaders like *matbars*. These *matbars* have huge influence in the community decision making of *char-chaparies*.

Methodology

The study includes both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected directly from the respondents. For the collection of the primary data, semi-structured interview schedule was used. Secondary data are based on newspapers, journals and raw data's provided by the village headman. Both qualitative and quantitative approach has been used as part of methodology

As possession of land is the sole criteria of claiming ownership in the *char* areas, head of each household is considered as owners of their land. Therefore, head of each household is considered as respondents of this study. On the basis of the information's acquired by the pilot survey, head of 114 household have been divided into 4 stratum in terms of amount of land holding. From each stratum 50% of the head of household have been selected as sample. In this way 57 head of the household have been taken as total sample size.

A Brief History of Koroyoi Chapari

Koroyoni *chapari* is located in Sonitpur district. It has approximate population of 1600 people. Koroyoni *chapari* is circumference by Digholi *chapari*, Gotaimari, Ghahigaon and Chamdhara. From the respondents, the researchers have come to know that before 1950,

the land of Koroyoni *chapari* was part of two cadastral villages called Ghahi-bez and Moranakuri. A devastating flood occurred in 1950, eroded the land. In 1951, a new landmass emerged in the earlier position of the land. As the entire landmass was surrounded by the water of Jiya Bhoroli, this newly emerged land has been considered as *char*. From 1951 onwards, the people of the nearby villages namely Ghahi-Gaon, Moranakuri, Chamdhara have started cultivating seasonal crops in the newly emerged *char*. Within 10-15 years, *koroi* trees filled the entire land mass. For that reason, the people started calling the *char* as Koroyoni *char*. From the respondents, the researcher has come to know that people of nearby *chars*, namely Gotaimari, Singitali and Bhoroli *chapari* used to cultivate in the land, having lease out agreement with the people of Ghahigaon, Moranakuri and Chamdhara. Koroyoni *chapari* has two parts of land namely Koroyoni part (A) and Koroyoni part (B). In Koroyoni part (A), the people of Ghahigaon had conflict with Mishing people regarding the possession of land. Due to the lack of manpower and some other reasons, the people of Ghahigaon had left the land to Mishing people. On the other hand, due to flood and erosion majority of the people of Gotaimari permanently migrated to Koroyoni *char* for permanent settlement. From 1985 onwards, the people of Gotaimari had started living in the Part (B) of Koroyoni *char*. They had encroached majority of the land in Koroyoni *char*. Some migrated people had entered into lease out agreements with the people of Ghahigaon and Moranakuri. Another group of people migrated to the part (B) of Koroyoni *char* from Singitali village in 1990s. They had entered in lease out agreements with Mishing people. In 2000, due to the changing direction of Jiya Bhoroli river, a massive flood occurred, for which entire land got submerged. In 2001, the land was re-emerged. As the river changes its direction, the newly emerged land has been attached to the nearby villages namely, Ghahigaon, Chamdhra and Moranakuri. From 2001, the entire land mass has got the characteristics of *char*. gradually people began to refer it as Koroyoni *chapari*. The entire population of Koroyoni *chapari* is entirely composed of Muslim community.

Changing Nature of Land Relations: From *Char* to *Chapari*

A comparative analysis between historical account and existing dynamics of the land relations has been presented to decipher the differences between *char* and *chaparies* within the same geographical area. Since, Koroyoni *chapari* had the characteristics of *char* for a long time, tracing the evolution and changes in its land relation would help us to understand the difference between *chars* and *chaparies*.

Land Ownership and Control

When Koroyoni was happened to be a *char*, problems of flood and erosion were severe in this area. Due to rapid flood and erosion nature of the land became temporary or semi-permanent. Therefore, instances of people becoming landless were common in the past. Earlier, along with the Muslim people both Mishing and other communities of the nearby villages have possession and control in the land of koroyoni *chapari*. From the respondents the researchers have come to know that land conflict was common in the past. Conflict over possession of newly emerged eroded land required man power and muscle power. As possession and encroachment of land was the sole criteria of claiming ownership, it became a functional necessity of the dwellers to maintain large families to acquire and control more amount of

land. It's observed that those people who have large family size have higher amount of land holdings compared to others. Though different scholars tried to put forward the argument that lack of education and awareness is the main factor of the increasing population of *char-chapari* (Zaman, 1991), it has been found that the need of possession, control and protection of the land from different land conflicts have made persistence of large family size a functional necessity in Koroyoni *chapari*. Earlier, people of the nearby villages had cultivated land in Koroyoni *chapari*. Disintegration of the joint families of these people has created a huge dearth of man-power, which has the further consequences of the loss of land control in Koroyoni *chapari*. Those people, who have knowledge of religious texts and rituals, have gained advantage in case of land conflict, over the newly emerged eroded land. People use to respect them and show reluctance to come into any conflict with them. Therefore, it can be said that religious knowledge and influence have a strong relationship with large land holdings.

When koroyoni *char* became koroyoni *chapari* it's observed that nature of the land got permanent or semi-permanent character. It had made a huge impact on the emerging land relations of Koroyoni *chapari*. The amount of land holding can be presented through table 1

Table 1: Amount of land Holding of the People

Amount of land (in <i>bighas</i>)	No. of respondents	Percentage
0-5	15	26.32%
5-10	20	35.09%
10-15	15	26.31%
15 and above	7	12.28%
	57	100

Now, the majority of the dwellers of this *chapari* have 5-10 *bighas* of land. But a few dwellers (12.28%) possess more than 15 *bighas* of land. Although nearly 10.53% of people belonging to the part A of Koroyoni *chapari* appear to be landless, this status is quite contestable. It must be mentioned that the entire dwellers of Koroyoni *chapari* part A are completely relied on the neighbouring Mishing community for acquiring land on lease at the annual rent of 300 rupees per *bigha*. Whereas, the same Mishing community does not possess legal land revenue documents, which would qualify their ownership. If, the existing literature on land relations qualifies the ownership only for those who can produce legal land revenue documents whereas, the conventional practice of land holding in *char-chaparies* permits the possessors of the land to claim their ownership (Hussain,2008), then it's quite a paradox for us to mention the people of Koroyoni *chapari* part (A), as landless.

In this study the researchers have found that amount of land holding of the people has decreased in the last 30 years. As land erosion was rapid when Koroyoni was happened to be

a *char*, land holding of the people naturally got decreased in the process of the transition from *char* to *chapari*. According to Sultana (2017), land holding has direct relationship with the income of people in case of the agricultural societies like *char-chaparies*. In that context, it has been found that though amount of land holding has decreased in the process of the transition of the land from *char* to *chapari*, income of the people is also increased. When the land of *Koroyoni* has been re-emerged as *char*, Jiya Bhoroli river brings sediments which make the land fertile for cultivation. Even though the land holding has decreased in the process of transition, agricultural productivity has significantly increased.

Revenue Administration

In case of land revenue administration, a significant shift can be observed in the process of the transition of the land from *char* to *chapari*. According to the respondents, earlier, demand for land revenue survey was raised by the dwellers of *char-chapari*. Due to temporary nature of the land, they showed reluctance to raise such demands. On the other hand, they did not make any request to the preceding MLAs or any land revenue officers, regarding the demand for permanent land *pattas*. It's after 2001, when the permanent nature of the land was observed in the form of a *chapari*, demand for land revenue survey was raised by the dwellers. These demands of land revenue survey have brought to light some other aspects. Earlier, the people of the nearby villages and different political parties are not sceptical about the threat of intrusion of the *char* dwellers. As they are living in the *char*, which is geographically isolated to the plain areas, the people of the nearby villages did not feel the threat of intrusion of the *char* dwellers. But after the *char* land got to the plain and the dwellers of the *chapari* have everyday interactions with the people of the nearby villages, it made them flummoxed and furious. Such fear was also visible in the activities of the revenue administration. According to the *mandal* of the area revenue administration foreclose them to collect *bedokholi Jorimona*, a fine to be collected from the encroached land, with the fear that the receipt of the fine would make the *char* dwellers eligible to claim for permanent *pattas*.

Evolution of Land Tenure

A process of evolution in case of land tenure system has been observed in *Koroyoni chapari*. Earlier, when the area had the characteristics of a *char*, land lease was common in both *Koroyoni chapari* part (A) and *Koroyoni chapari* part (B). Newly migrated dwellers have lease- out agreements with both *Mishing* and the people of nearby villages. Up to 1990s, the dwellers had not indulged in lease in activities. Even though they developed lease in activities in the later 90s, these activities are rapidly increasing once this area got emerged as a *chapari*. Now a days, three types of leasing are popular in *Koroyoni chapari*

- 1) *Mukh-chawoni* in which, 80 kg rice per *bigha* must be given.
- 2) *chukti-bandhok*, in which 200-300 rupees per *bigha* should be given in case of lease.
- 3) General lease agreement.

In *Koroyoni chapari* part (A), the People have a *chukti bandhok* with *Mishing* people. This is a lease out agreement for the dwellers of *Koroyoni chapari*. *Mukh-chawani lease* is seen in the part (B) area of *Koroyoni chapari*. The Pattern of land leasing activities are presented in

the table 3

Table 3: Pattern of land leasing activities of the dwellers of Koroyoni *chapari*.

Land leasing	respondents	Percentage
Lease-in	17	56.66%
Lease-out	13	43.33
Total	30	100

In the table3 it's clear that 30 out of 57 respondents are involved in land leasing activities. 17(56.66%) are involved in lease in activities on the other hand 13(43.33%) are involved in lease out activities.

Land Transaction

The Purchase and sale of land is not at all a common phenomenon in case of Koroyoni *chapari*. Availability of required amount of cultivable, cultivated and homestead land make land purchase less important. People outside this *chapari* don't show their interest to buy this land as it's prone to flood and erosion. Due to the lack of cadastral survey, the people of Koroyoni *chapari* have been facing lot of discriminations in terms of land transactions. They have a constant fear of eviction from their land. Also, the lack of proper land records makes them vulnerable to different discriminations; in terms of land transactions. Transformation of the land from *char* to *chapari* has opened up multiple doors of discriminations. One such discrimination is observed in case of the grant of compensation for the construction of national highways and river embankment. Recently, to connect the neighbouring villages with the national highway, an alternative river embankment was constructed. The Majority of the land of that embankment has passed through the land of Koroyoni *chapari*. For this, the dwellers are compelled to surrender a major amount of land. Though they claimed for compensations, the lack of land records and constant threat of eviction by the government pushed them to a disadvantageous position. They are promised to pay only 5000-7000 rupees. According to one respondent, who lost his land in the construction of embankment, they cannot even protest for such discriminations. There's possibility that further protest can pave the way for eviction of them from the land. The Lack of legal claim and ownership over the land makes them vulnerable in two ways. In one way, they cannot claim ownership right over their land and in the other way; they are getting constant pressure and threat of eviction from the government and other actors.

From the crisis of identity to vulnerability of losing the land, lack of permanent nature of land to evolution of semi-permanent nature of land, the emerging land relations of Koroyoni *chapari* is significant. Issues of land revenue administration, new processes of state making, vulnerability in terms of land transactions etc have been emerged as new features of the emerging land relations of Koroyoni *chapari*. These features were not present in the past.

Land Relations and Emerging Power Structure:

According to Oomen (1970), one of the important elements of the power structure is power pool. For him, power pool of a homogenous population is monolithic. But it's interesting to know different aspects of the power pool in context of semi-permanent, non-cadastral land. To know about the existing power structure of Koroyoni *chapari* and its earlier power structure, the researcher has asked different questions to the respondents. To understand the community decision making of Koroyoni *chapari* the researcher has witnessed a conflict settlement meeting of this *chapari*. As agricultural production is the sole source of livelihood in Koroyoni *chapari*, land has a crucial role in the existing power structure. To know the land wise income distribution of the dwellers of Koroyoni *chapari*, 57 respondents have been asked different question. Land wise income distribution can be understood through Table 4

Changing Power Structure of Koroyoni Chapari:

According to the existing dwellers of Koroyoni *chapari*, the role of police was not active in the past when the *chapari* had the characteristics of *char*. Due to the geographical isolation of the area, police hardly came to this place. In that context, *matbars* enjoyed enormous powers. According to the respondents, role of *matbars* were very cruel at that time. They used to grab the land of others. In case of conflict resolution, jury system of community trial was not available in that time. Therefore, the *matbars* got sole authority to decide conflict. Those who had maintained good relationship with the *matbars* could get more benefits. According to the respondents belonging to 5-10 *bigha* land category, earlier, *matbars* were religious leaders. Though they occupied decent amount of land, their religious affiliation made them very powerful. Due to their affiliation to Islamic religious organization, they got sole authorities to resolve different conflicts. These *matbars* misused their powers and tried to confiscate the land of others. If an eroded land newly emerged in the *char*, they used to deprive the real possessors of land. With the help of their brothers, they used to possess the newly emerged land.

Due to the transition of the land from *char* to *chapari*, a few changes can be observed in case of the power structure of Koroyoni *chapari*. Instead of monolithic *matbar* dominated power pool, the recent land relations witness multidimensional power pool. To resolve land related conflicts, a jury is nominated by the people. The jury consist of the village headman, the VDP secretary and a *matbar* or other influential people. The jury system of community trial successfully decreased the powers of *matbars*. Now due to the active role of police, the traditional *matbars* cannot confiscate the land of others. Instances of land erosion are decreasing after 2001. It has further impacted on the land relations of Koroyoni *chapari*. Violent land conflict in terms of the issues of ownership of the eroded land is gradually disappearing. It's interesting to note that Land of the earlier *matbars* have eroded in the flood, this has decreased their power and influence. Emergence of the post of the village headman and the VDP secretary has made further threat to the position of *matbars*. Those who could not become head man or the VDP secretaries have failed to maintain the earlier dominance. It also observed that due to the emergence of 3-member jury system of community decision making, those *matbars* who traditionally got supremacy due to their religious affiliation and

knowledge, have seen their power and influence gradually getting weaker.

It can be argued that transition of the land from *char* to *chapari* has not only made huge impact on land relations but also in the overall power dimensions of social relationship. Like the preceding chapters, it is also observed that the relationship between land relation and power structure is not same in case of *char* and *chapari*. Therefore, it's not appropriate to consider *char* and *chaparies* as homogenized category, at least in case of land relations and its impact on power structure of these societies.

Conclusion

The Land relations of the dwellers of Koroyoni *chapari* have gone through different changes. Though they have homestead and cultivated lands, lack of legal ownership makes their life vulnerable to multiple exploitations and tortures. On the other hand, the demand for permanent ownership of land and land revenue survey makes them suspicious in front of the people of nearby villages. Being devoid of the ownership right over occupied land, mere rights of voting cannot make them secure. Hussain (2008) argues that lands rights are not divinely ordained. To get ownership, possession is equally important. In case of Koroyoni *chapari* possession of the land has duration of more than two decades. Even after the long decades of possession, their identity and land rights are trapped in the quagmire of the suspicion of intrusion, encroachment. On the other hand, the process of state making has further broadened the chances of alienating them from their land. In this context, land relations of the dwellers of Koroyoni *chapari* have raised some further questions of complexity and uncertainty. On the other hand, total exclusion of women from any kind of ownership and land use rights have opened up different questions. All these complexities and uncertainties of the land relations of *char-chapari* make it important in context of identity, land relations and power structure etc.

Notes

Char- Sandbars or alluvial formations surrounded by river water.

Chapari- attached char or sandbars attached to the plain areas. Due to flood or changing direction of the river char land use to get attach to the plain areas. It's called *chapari*

Mandal=*Mandal* refers to a government officer who keeps the record of land measurement.

Bigha=*Bigha* is a unit of land measurement

Patta=*Patta* refers to a legal document issued by the government against the actual owner

VDP= Village defense party

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