

Agriculture: Source Of Livelihood In The Char Areas Of Assam

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Abstract:

Char are the river islands which are flood- and erosion-prone areas. In Assam they are an integral part of the fluvial part of the Brahmaputra River. Here all the people used to engage in agricultural activities. But the livelihood of the area faces a great challenge because the people of the area often stay in a state of poverty and lack the basic amenities for survival. The present study was conducted to find out the livelihood initiatives that are available in the study area, i.e., in the char areas of the Kamrup Rural district. A quantitative study has been done, and data are collected from four char villages of the Kamrup district of Assam, namely Dakshin Barni, Andhupara, Bhelkar no. 2, and Bangalpara. Primary data has been collected from 100 sample households through a structured set of interview schedules. The study revealed that the majority of the people in the area adopt agriculture as their main source of livelihood. Besides agriculture, people also adopt animal husbandry, fishing, boating, etc. as livelihood options.

Keywords: *agriculture, livelihood, char areas, animal husbandry.*

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I. Introduction:

Assam state, which is situated in the northeast of India, has diverse geographical characteristics. Among which the char areas or the sandbars of the Brahmaputra River play a very significant role in the socio-economic life of the state. The char areas are the river islands, which are best understood as low-lying flood- and erosion-prone areas. According to the government of Assam, the definition of char includes “the sandy land area extended from Sadiya to Dhubri of Assam within the river Brahmaputra or surrounded by water of the river Brahmaputra, where people can live and cultivate the land and is included in the first category of char areas. Moreover, both sides of the river Brahmaputra extended up to cultivate the land are second-category chars”.

According to the socio-economic survey 2002-03, nearly 14 per cent of the total population of the state Assam is from char areas. People living in such areas are very poor, and they mostly rely on agriculture. Agriculture is the major source of income for the people living in char areas (Bhagabati, A.K. et al., 2005). Agriculture is the mainstay with very little alternative source of income. People living in the area have traditionally relied on cultivating paddy, sesame seeds and jute for a livelihood. However, for the last few years, people of Chars have been earning their bread employing alternatives such as vegetable cultivation and cattle fattening (Siddique Abu, 2018). Moreover, in most of the char areas, vegetable farming ensures a better turnover for farmers than traditional rice, jute or sesame.

Although agriculture is the main source of people in char areas, the backwardness of the agricultural sector and lack of knowledge of the farmers hinder them from sustaining such activities. Along with such reasons, the natural calamities like floods, soil erosion, instability of the chars, etc., also become major challenges for the farmers (Hoque and Hazarika, 2020). So, the present study aims to find out the activities performed by the people of char areas for their survival.

Char areas of Assam are the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra River. According to the Socio-Economic Survey 2002-2003, it covers about 3.60 lakh hectares of land and approximately 24.90 lakh people. Due to the problem of flooding and soil erosion every year on their upstream and deposition downstream, people in the area tend to migrate frequently downstream, and thus they have to struggle for their survival. Most people in the area usually depend on agriculture, but their source of livelihood cannot be considered a sustainable one, as floods and erosion destroy their yield every year. These vulnerable natural situations hinder the char dwellers from sustaining themselves in a definite source of livelihood, and therefore they have to

engage themselves in several alternate livelihood options. So, it has become necessary to conduct a study to investigate the activities performed by the people of the char area for their survival.

II. Objectives And Methodology:

The objective of the present study is to find out the activities performed by the people of char areas for their survival. Survival in these challenging environments often necessitates a diverse range of economic activities, including fishing, agriculture, and small-scale trading. The study will employ qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus group discussions, to gain insights into these livelihood strategies and the socio-economic factors influencing them.

The present study is empirical in nature and based on both primary and secondary data. A set of structured interview schedules has been developed to collect the primary data from the sample household through personal interviews. The secondary data has been collected from the Directorate of Char Area Development, from different published sources such as reports prepared by the government (the report of the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission), statistical handbooks, various journals, research work, library work, etc.

For selecting the sample households, a multistage random sample technique has been used. Out of fourteen char villages of Assam, Kamrup district has been selected randomly. Among the five development blocks of the district, Hajo block has been selected on the basis of the availability of char villages. The four char villages, namely Dakshin Barni, Andhupara, Bhelkar no. 2 and Bangalpara, have been selected randomly.

The information relating to livelihood practices has been collected through a household survey from the selected sample villages. For the present study, a total of 100 households have been selected. Almost 10% of the total households from each selected village have been taken. The number of sample households from each village has been given in the following table:

Table: 1: Sample Size Selection Of Households.

Sample villages	No. of households in the villages	No. of sample households
DakhinBarni	212	20
Andhupara	180	18
Bhelkar no. 2	469	44
Bangalpara	179	18
total	1040	100

Source: Primary data

For processing and analyzing the collected data tabulation, percentage method and pie diagram have been used.

III. Result And Discussion:

As the Char areas are backward areas, the people of the areas also struggle to maintain their livelihood. The unstable nature of the areas hinders the people from sustaining definite livelihood activities. So, the people of the area depend on the seasonal agriculture, and 95 per cent of the people of the area engaged in the agricultural sector (Goswami, A.C., 2000). Moreover, there is a lack of facilities for generating income from other sources, a lack of developed transport and communication systems, a lack of education facilities and also a lack of health care facilities, so the char dwellers keep themselves involved in the agricultural sector (Chakraborty, G. 2009). The available fertile agricultural land and vast grassy land to rear livestock also lead people to adopt agricultural activities as their main occupation. Besides agriculture, some other activities like animal husbandry, minor business, agricultural day labour, etc., are also adopted by the people of the area as their secondary source of livelihood (Alam and Bhuyan, 2005).

In order to find the different livelihood initiatives of the people of the study, a household survey has been done. The collected data are given below:

Table: 2: Primary Livelihood Initiatives Adopted By The People Of Dakhin Barni Village.

Livelihood initiatives	Number of households	In percent (%)
Agriculture	11	55
Animal husbandry	4	20
Daily wage	2	10
Fishing	2	10
Boating making	1	5
Boatman	0	0
Service	0	0
total	20	100

Source: field survey data.

From the above table, it is seen that out of 20 sample households, 11 households adopt agriculture as their primary occupation, which is 55 per cent of the total sample population. Out of 20, 4 households adopt animal husbandry as their primary source of livelihood, which is 20 per cent. In the case of daily wages and fishing, 2 households for each were selected as their main source of livelihood. Only one household, out of 20 households, adopts boat making as their primary occupation.

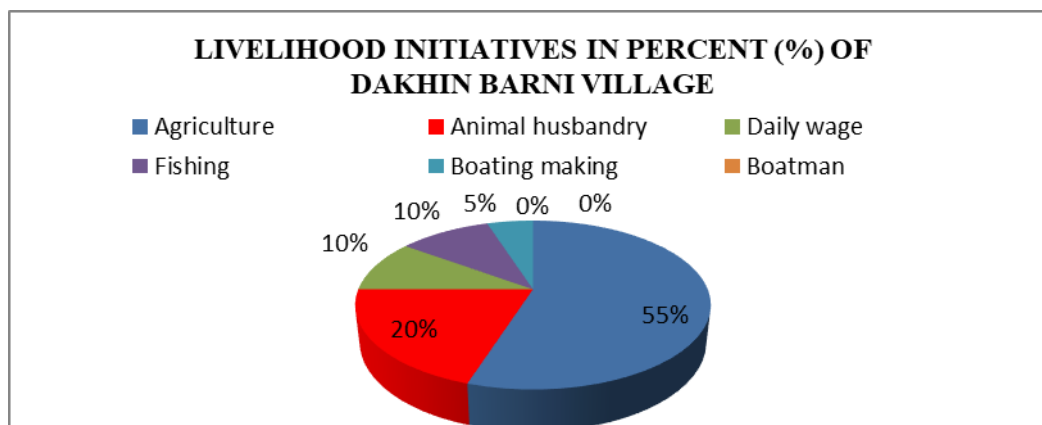


Fig:1

Fig:1 shows that the most of the people of Dskhin Barni village engage themselves in agricultural activities which is 55 percent.

The obtained data from Andhupara village are given below:

Table: 3: Primary Livelihood Initiatives Adopted By The People Of Andhupara Village.

Livelihood initiatives	Number of households	In percent (%)
Agriculture	12	67
Animal husbandry	2	11
Daily wage	0	0
Fishing	2	11
Boating making	0	5.5
Boatman	1	5.5
Service	1	0
total	18	100

Source: field survey data.

In Andhupara village, out of 18 sample households, 12 households, which are 67 per cent, engaged in agricultural activities. Whole 2 households out of 18, i.e., 11 per cent, engaged in animal husbandry. Again, out of 18, 2 households engaged in fishing (11 per cent). One sample household adopts boating as its primary source of livelihood, and there is only one household whose source of living is government service.

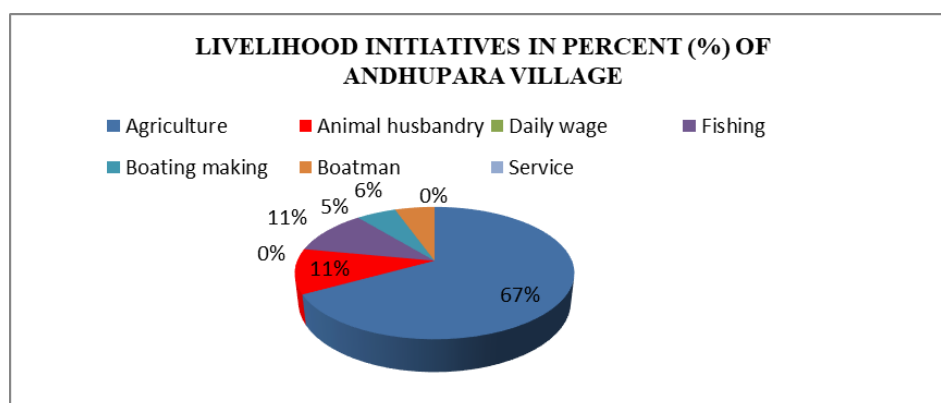


Fig:2

Fig 2 shows the livelihood initiative adopted by the people in the Adhupara village. The figure clearly depicts that majority of the people 67 percent engage in agricultural activities.

The data obtained from Bhelkar no. 2 are given below:

Table: 4: Primary Livelihood Initiatives Adopted By The People Of Bhelkar No. 2 Village.

Livelihood initiatives	Number of households	In percent (%)
Agriculture	36	82
Animal husbandry	4	9
Daily wage	2	4.5
Fishing	2	4.5
Boating making	0	0
Boatman	0	0
Service	0	0
total	44	100

Source: Field survey data.

From the above table, it becomes clear that 36 out of 44 engaged in agriculture (82 per cent). 4 households engaged in animal husbandry (9 per cent). 2 households each engage in daily wage and fishing, respectively.

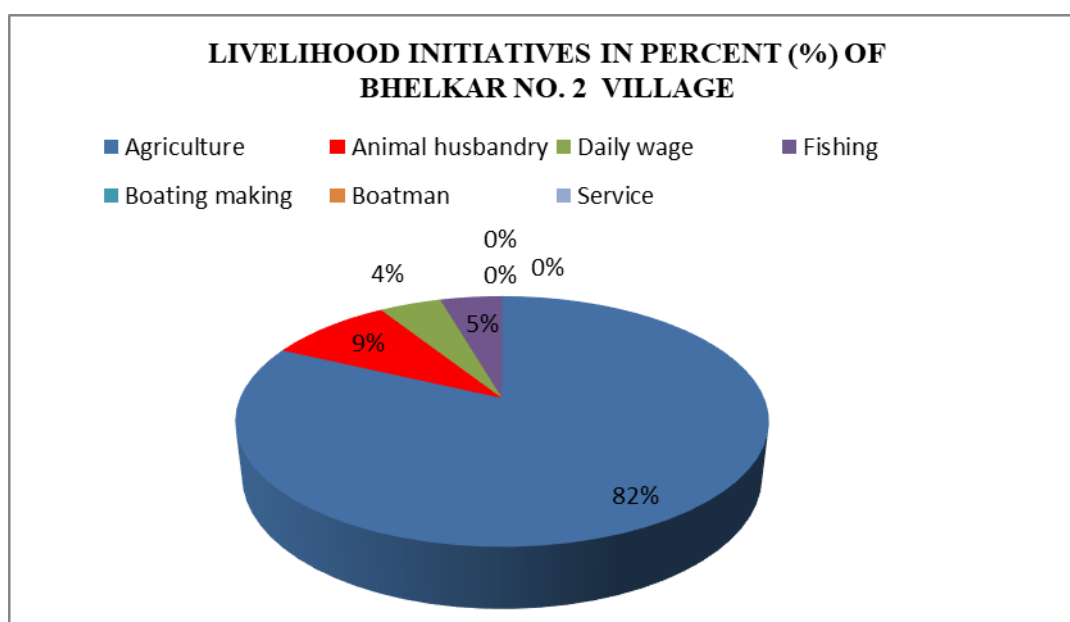


Fig:3

Fig 3 depicts that in Bhelkar No. 2 village also most of the char dwellers select agriculture and farming as their basic livelihood option which is 82 percent.

The data obtained from Bangalpara village are given below:

Table: 5: Primary Livelihood Initiatives Adopted By The People Of Bangalpara Village.

Livelihood initiatives	Number of households	In percent (%)
Agriculture	11	61
Animal husbandry	4	22
Daily wage	2	11
Fishing	0	0
Boating making	0	0
Boatman	0	0
Service	1	6
total	18	100

Source: Field survey data.

In Bangalpara village, out of 18 sample households, 11 households, which is 61 per cent, engaged in agricultural activities. While 4 households out of 18, i.e., 22 per cent, engaged in animal husbandry. Again, out of 18, 2 households engaged as daily wage earners (11 per cent). There is only one household whose source of living is government service.

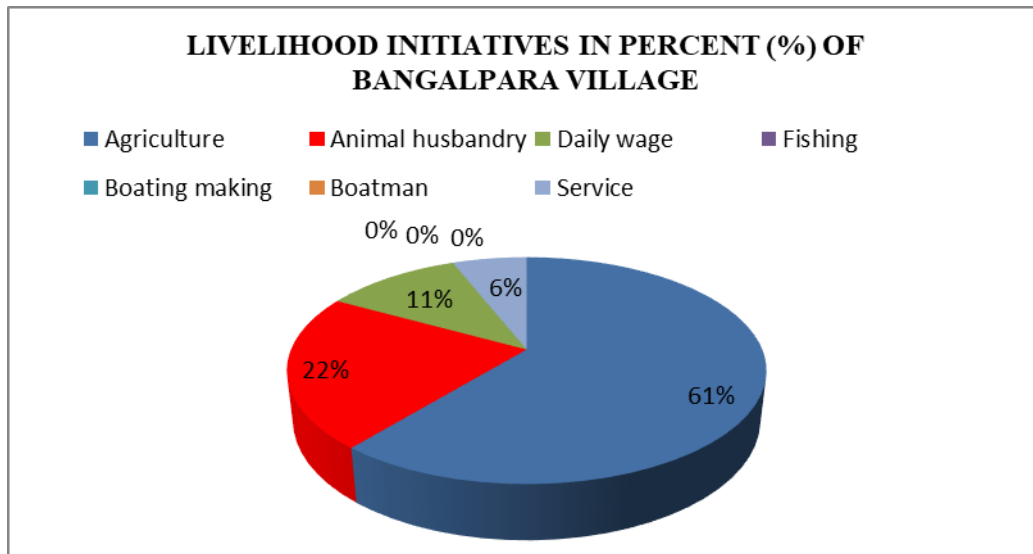


Fig:4

Fig. 4 represents livelihood initiatives adopted by the people in the Bangalpara village. The figure clearly depicts that the majority of the people, 61 per cent, engaged in agricultural activities.

IV. Findings:

- From the analysis of the obtained data from the four sample char villages, it becomes clear that the majority of the sample households engaged in agricultural activities, i.e., 70 households out of 100 sample households (70 per cent).
- 14 out of 100 sample households, i.e., 14 per cent, engaged in animal husbandry. Mostly, people used to rear goats and sheep and sell them in the local markets.
- There are 6 households out of 100 (6 per cent) who used to work in other fields as daily wage earners.
- Again, there are 6 sample households out of 100 who depend on fishing in the Puthimari River, which flows across the selected char villages.
- In Dakshin Barni village, every year, a boat race is organised, so the demand for new and decorated boats is high, and some people engage themselves in making boats. In the off-season they survive by engaging themselves in making wooden furniture, but, according to them, demand for furniture is quite low. Here, one sample household out of 100 engages in boat making, which is from Dakshin Barni village.
- The study area is a flood-prone area. Every year a flood creates widespread destruction, and the communication sinks. Most roads flowed away with the flood, so the only way of transport that remained was by boat. People used to move from one place to another by boat. In the present study, one sample household out of 100 used to row boat in floods, and in the dry season they survive by growing vegetables and selling them in local markets. This household is from Andhupara village.
- From the obtained data, it has also been found that, out of 100 households, only two are engaged in government services, and both are teachers in the nearby government provincialised lower primary schools.

Thus, on the basis of the field study of the present study, it becomes clear that agriculture is the major source of livelihood in the char areas of Assam. But the level of agricultural activities is still backward because of floods, riverbank erosion, lack of knowledge, use of traditional methods of agriculture, etc.

V. Conclusion:

The char areas of Assam play a significant role in the economic development of the state. 95 per cent of people in char areas are cultivators but spend their lives in a distressed condition due to lack of a modern transport system, education, alternative job opportunities, medical facilities and other essential facilities (Mahmud, S. et al. 2005). The people in char areas are deprived of many basic amenities of modern life. Their level of living standard is very low. The flood destroys houses and land of cultivation (Ahmed, M. H. and Latif, A. 2012). Next to agriculture, wage labour, both agricultural and non-agricultural, and trade are the other sources of livelihood. There is less diversification of the economic activities. The other sources of livelihood are fishing, boating, rickshaw pulling, hand cart pulling, horse cart pulling, etc. (Sarma, G. 2013). But there is a lack of commercialisation of these alternative sources of income. Thus, a large number of households in char areas used to migrate to some nearby areas in search of work (Haque, D. and Hazarika, C. 2000).

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