

## Natural Assets and Livelihood Pattern of Char People of Lakshmipur in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

*A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future. Natural assets of livelihood of char people represents the natural resources such as land, water, timber and wider environmental goods that are critical for traders and associated groups, to support production. Many people, in Bangladesh, are found to live in the chars despite harsh physical conditions there. The study examines the sustainability of natural assets of livelihoods of char people and explores the influence of land and river, and the impact of climate change on their natural assets. The study found a scenario of feudalistic society, gender impact of energy insufficiency and a devastating impact of climate change on the livelihoods in the char. The livelihood pattern of the people of char is insecure, vulnerable and unsustainable. They are deprived of land, safe drinking water and energy insufficiency. They survive depending on agriculture, livestock-rearing and fishing. Although the people of char try to help themselves under all kinds of odds, it is recommended that, there is a strong need for institutional support to assist them in tiding over such difficult circumstances.*

**Key Words:** Livelihoods, Land, Rural Elite, Energy Insufficiency, Water

### Introduction

Globally collected poverty data shows that we have roughly 6.8 billion people in the world, out of which 1.2 billion live below poverty line income level which is less than one US dollar a day and another estimates reveals that 842 million regularly smell severe and reckless hunger. 153 million children under 5 in the developing world are under weight. Worse yet, 11 million die every year younger than 5 years of age and more than half of

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those from hunger related causes. Thirty million people die of hunger every year (UNFPA, 2009). The land area of Bangladesh is (sq. km) 147570, population is (million) 144.2, the population residing in rural and urban area is 107.4 and 36.8; population density is 977 (per sq. km) and growth rate is 1.26 (BER, 2009). The total households are (million) 28.67. The proportion of households in rural and urban area is 3.31 and 25.36. The landless households in rural area are 32 lakh 56 thousand- 98.37% of total rural households. The landless households in urban area are 12 lakh 21 thousand- 4.81% of the total urban households. Though in private survey the total landless households are 32%, in the recent years nearly one sixth (15.62%) of the total number of households have been to be landless. The people living in these chars are much more impoverished than those who live in other regions of rural Bangladesh and could be termed as the poorest of the poor. Their deprivation and suffering are well portrayed in different literary works of different writers as well as in different research works done by researchers on Char lands. In worth mentioning novels- NODI O NARY and PADMA MAGHNA JAMUNA, and in the film *Lathiyals* an outstanding general scenario of the lives and livelihoods of char people is reflected. The settlement process in the char lands is almost synonymous with litigation, strife, arson, and bloodshed. A large body of literature on natural hazards in chars is rooted in the studies on human ecology and occupancy tradition developed at the University of Chicago. Gilbert White, forerunner of natural hazards studies, initially investigated the physical factors (White: 1945) and later moved on to examine the social forces affecting the occupancy of floodplains (White: 1958). Natural hazard studies examined the implications of flood, drought, snow, volcanoes, cyclones, and environmental pollution for people in a number of countries. The countries were Mexico, Canada, New Zealand, Tanzania and Bangladesh (Baqee, 1998:6).

The Bangladesh based studies mainly covered hazards like floods and cyclones, but surprisingly river bank erosion was not examined. Islam (1974) as a local member of White's comparative research team, investigated peoples perception of and adjustment to coastal cyclones in Bangladesh. His inference of 'traditional inborn fatalism' was later faulted by Zaman (1989), who advocated an approach seeking to reflect local social dynamics. Zaman suggested that one's response to erosion depended upon one's financial circumstances and social connections. This view rarely received any attention in the earlier literature except on scudder and collision noted the differential response to forced relocation in people's adaptive strategies and suggested further refinement of analysis both along the lines of social differentiation and community socio-cultural systems. Weist (1987) on the other hand, proposed that population dislocation due to river bank erosion

should be examined using a theoretical framework based on historical facts. He also examined domestic group adjustment to displacement, particularly the impact on female headed households and overall households composition and change (Baqee, 1998:6). None of the analyses suffice to explain the settlement process in the char land.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the Study is to examine the livelihood pattern of char people of Lakshmipur. Other specific objectives are to find out whether land and river have any influence on their livelihood, to look into whether climate change has any impact on their livelihoods or coping mechanism and to explore whether they have sufficient natural assets.

### **Methodology of the Study**

This study is basically exploratory in nature. My study area was Bayer Char under Ramgati Upazila of Lakshmipur District. In the study the method was quantitative and to collect data survey technique was followed. An interview schedule was used instead of mail questionnaire and self administrated questionnaire. Both structured and unstructured questions were incorporated in the interview schedule. The quantitative was supplemented by qualitative intending to explore some social meanings. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with Key informants, women (heade of households) and female members of NGOs. Heads of the households were the respondents of the study. From 479 households I selected 160 as sample size using the technique of systematic sampling.

Table-1: Sampling Procedure

<b>Name of Villages</b>	<b>No. of Households</b>	<b>No. of Samples</b>
1.Char Lakshmi	180	60
2. Char Darbesh	152	51
3. South Toomchar	147	49
	N. 479	S. 160

Second time I used systematic sampling because I found the sampling frame to NGOs working there. After the completion of the field work, data were processed and analyzed usingSPSS for Windows (Version 16) and based on the analysis of data, the report was prepared.

### **Results of the Study**

#### ***Demographic Characteristics of Respondents***

Table-2 points out that, out of the total respondents, a significant number of respondents (70.0%) are male where only 30.0% (48) are female

respondents. Here male respondents are more than female respondents because some families are residing here without females and as a traditional society males are the heads of the most households. From age perspective, a substantial number (45.0%) of respondents fall between 20 and 40 age and a narrow figure (5.0%) fall at 80 age or above. 40.0% respondents' age is between 40 and 60 year; and 10.0 respondents' age is between 60 and 80 year. Here most of the respondents are young because the people of the char have to fight for local elites known as *neta* in exchange of land

Table-2 Respondents Based on Sex, Age, Religion and Marital Status

Sex		Age				Religion		Marital Status			
Male	Female	20-40	40-60	60-80	> 80	Muslim	Hindu	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Widower
112 (70.0%)	48 (30.0%)	72 (45.0%)	64 (40.0%)	16 (10.0%)	8 (5.0%)	155 (96.9%)	5 (3.1%)	129 (80.6%)	7 (4.4%)	16 (10.0%)	8 (5.0%)

Out of the total respondents, 155 (96.9%) respondents are Muslim and only 5 (3.1%) respondents are Hindu. There was no any respondent of other religion. From marital status, most of the respondents (80.6%) are married where unmarried is only 4.4%. Here we see that most of the heads of households are married. The totality of widow and widower is 15.0% (respectively 10.0% & 5.0%). Most of them are the victims of man-made disasters of char as fighting, abduction and dacoits. Among the total female headed households 33.4% are widow and among male headed respondents 7.2% are widower. Here widows are more than widower because males are very much related to these man-made disasters.

Table-3 shows that a significant number (101, 63.1%) of respondents are illiterate and 23.8% (38) can sign only. The primary and secondary passed respondents are only respectively 16 (10.0 %,) and 5 (3.1%). There were not found any higher secondary or graduate level respondents. As inhabitants of a char among the total respondents most of the respondents' occupation is agriculture (40.0%).

Table-3 Respondents Based on Education, Occupation and Family Size

Education				Occupation				Family Size		
Primary	SSC	Agriculture	Fishing	Rickshaw Pulling	Business	House Wife	4	5	6	> 6
16 (10.0%)	5 (3.1%)	64 (40.0%)	48 (30.0%)	19 (11.9%)	5 (3.1%)	24 (15.0%)	16 (10.0%)	40 (25.0%)	48 (30.0%)	56 (35.0%)

The second highest number of respondents engaged in fishing (30.0%) as they live on the bank of river. There are 24 respondents who are housewives among the total respondents. All of them are females and they are 50% of all female respondents. Females are playing their gender role as a traditional society. The occupation of rest female respondents are agriculture and fishing. The number of respondents who are related to business are 3.1% (5). They are very few in number because of lack of business facilities. On the

other hand they are poor of the poorest. So, they have no capital to invest in business.

Most of the families have more than six members (35.0%) and six-member- family is the second highest (30.0%) among the total respondents. The causes of big families are poverty, religious superstition, lack of awareness and lack of contraceptive methods. The number of four member families are 16 (15.0%) and the 25.0% (40) families' number of member is 5. There are only 16 respondents whose number of family members are 4 and they are 10% out of total respondents. Most of them are educated and practicing family planning method. Of them some families are small because some members died of cholera and diarrhoea as these diseases are epidemic in this char because of lack of pure drinking water and sanitation.

### ***Land and Occupation***

Table-4 describes that when the respondents were asked about their occupation, a significant number of them informed that their occupation is agriculture; of them, 50.0% are marginal land owner and it is very significant that no landless respondents' occupation is agriculture. It is also significant that out of those respondents (48) whose occupation is fishing, all are landless, who are the 50.0% of total landless respondents. Those who are rickshaw puller (19), business man and house wife all are landless

**Table-4 Ownership of Land and Occupation**

		Occupation of the Respondents					Total
		Agriculture	Fishing	Rickshaw Puller	Business	House wife	
Pattern of land ownership	Landless	0 (.0%)	48 (50.0%)	19 (19.8%)	5 (5.2%)	24 (25.0%)	96 (100.0%)
	Marginal	32 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	32 (100.0%)
	Small	14 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	14 (100.0%)
	Medium	10 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	10 (100.0%)
	Large	8 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	8 (100.0%)
Total		64 (94.0%)	48 (30.0%)	19 (11.9%)	5 (3.1%)	24 (15.0%)	160 (100.0%)

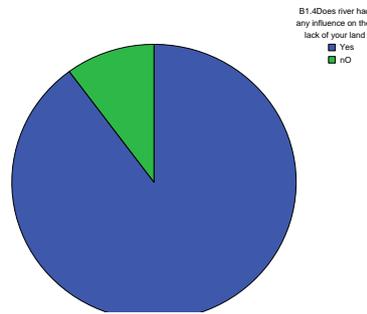
And those who are farmer, all of them are land owners; of them 50.0% are marginal, 21.9% are small 15.6% are medium and 12.5% are large land

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owner. It indicates that because of the scarcity of land, char people do not accept agriculture as their occupation.

### *Land and River*

In response to the question whether river has any influence on their lack of land, Out of the 128 respondents



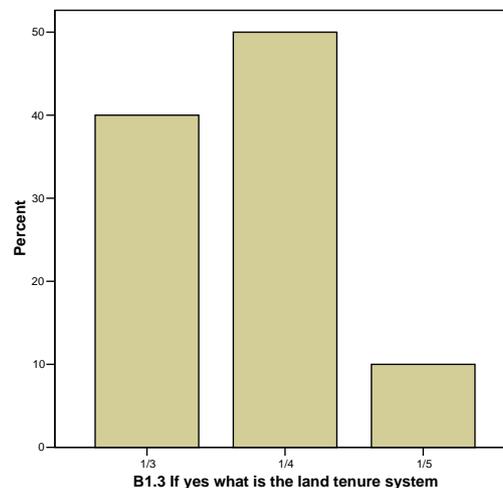
Graph-1 Impact of River on Land

of landless and small land holders, a significant number (89.8%) of them answered positively and only 10.2% (13) answered negatively. It indicates that most of them are the victim of river bank erosion (Graph-1)

### *Land tenure system*

When the landless respondents (96) were asked whether they cultivate other's land, 83.3% (80) of them said yes. Though they cultivate other's land to survive their lives, it does not help them to do so.

It is evident from the graph-2 that of them 50.0% (40) informed that three fourths of their produced crops goes to the land owners of the land and they get only one fourth but the owners do not contribute anything to production



Graph-2 Land Tenure System

40.0% respondents informed that they get one third of the crops and 10.0% said they get only one fifth of the grain and four fifths of the grain goes to the owners of the land. It indicates the land based exploitation.

***Sources and Exchange of Land***

Table-5 shows, when the total respondents were asked how they achieved their homestead land, 136 (85%) respondents stated that they got the land to live by leader and of them 91.7% (88) are landless. Only 5.0% and 10% respondents got by hereditary and other sources respectively. When the respondents were asked whether they have to give anything in exchange of land, 137 (85.6%), out of them, answered positively and of them, 60 (43.8%) asserted

Table-5 Sources of Land Based on Ownership Pattern.

		Sources of land			Total
		By Leader	Hereditary	By other Source	
Pattern of land ownership	Landless	88 (91.7%)	0 (.0%)	8 (8.3%)	96 (100.0%)
	Marginal	27 (84.4%)	5 (15.6%)	0 (.0%)	32 (100.0%)
	Small	13 (92.9%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (.0%)	14 (100.0%)
	Medium	8 (80.0%)	2 (20.0%)	0 (.0%)	10 (100.0%)
	Large	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	8 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)
Total		136 (85.0%)	8 (5.0%)	16 (10.0%)	160 (100.0%)

that they had to give money and they are the 37.5% of the total respondents. 28.8% (46) the total of respondents have to fight for the interest of leader, of them, 28.8% are those respondents who said they have to give labour to the distributors of land. In response to the question whether they are exploited in exchange of land, 129 respondents (94.2%) out of 137 respondents expressed their expression positively and in this category, all of the money (60) and labour (23) payer are included. 5.8% respondents informed that they had to pay grain, even still now they have to continue it. They are the 5.0% of total respondents.

When the respondents were asked whether they think that poverty is the cause of their vulnerability, 82.5% respondents, out of the total said that they think that poverty is the cause of their vulnerability, of them 58.9%

respondents are landless and 17.5% are marginal Only 17.5% respondents think that poverty is not the cause of their vulnerability but other causes as landlessness, near to river etc. Of them, 60.7% respondents are landless and 14.2% are medium and large land owners.

***Landlessness and climate change:***

When the respondents were asked if there is any relation between landlessness and climate change, in spite of their illiteracy, 144 respondents (90%) out of the total stated positively and of them 80 (55.6%) are landless. They said it from their practical experiences (Table-6).

Table-6 Relation of Landlessness with Climate Change

		Relation to climate change		Total
		Yes	no	
Pattern of land ownership	Landless	80 (83.3%)	16 (16.7%)	96 (100.0%)
	Marginal	32 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	32 (100.0%)
	Small	14 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	14 (100.0%)
	Medium	10 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	10 (100.0%)
	Large	8 (100.0%)	0 (.0%)	8 (100.0%)
Total		144	16	160
	% within raw	90.0%	10.0%	100.0%

***Water and Livelihood***

In response to the question about the sources of most used water, the researcher was informed that the highest number 88 (55%) of respondents' source of most used water is pond, of them the highest number are landless 33.3 %. The second highest number (40) of respondents' sources of most used water is river of them all are landless (41.7%). 25.0% of respondents' sources of most used water is canal and all of them are landless The total number of respondents whose sources of most used water are river pond and canal is 152 which is the 95% of total respondents.

The cause of it is they are the inhabitants of new char, poor and are landless. Even source of most used water of the respondents of small, medium and large is pond. Out of the respondents who are marginal (32) in land ownership, 8 respondents' source of water is tube well and they are the only respondents out of the total respondents. They are 5% of total respondents.

When they were asked which water they used in their drinking and cooking, of them 35% (56) informed that they used tube well water and of them 34.7% are illiterate. 65% of the total respondents use river, pond and canal water in their drinking and cooking of them 41.25% are completely illiterate. Of primary passed respondents, 37.5%- the highest number used tube well water in drinking and cooking. Here it is evident that though categorically most of the respondents are illiterate, 34.7%- the highest number of respondents used tube well water in their drinking and cooking. The cause of it is in spite of lack of tube well; they collect tube well water from nearby for drinking and cooking. On the other hand 40% of primary passed respondents used tube well water and 60% of them used river, pond and canal water. The cause of it may be either their lack of consciousness or poverty.

### ***Energy and Livelihood***

In response to which the sources of energy are, the highest respondents (59) answered that the source of their energy is cow dung of them 100.0% said that the collectors of fuel are female. It is also evident from this table that out of total respondents, 72 respondents (45%) said the collectors of fuel are females and 50 respondents said girls. The totality of these two categories is 122 which is the 76.25 of the total respondents. It reflects the real scenario of the gender discrimination.

In response to the question whether the fuel is sufficient or not, 136 (85.0%) out of the total respondents replied negatively of them the highest number of respondents (47.1%) think that the impact of river is the main cause of their energy insufficiency and 23.5% think new char is the cause of their energy insufficiency (Table-7). Of those who said energy is not sufficient, 56 (35.0%) expressed their experience that females and girls are affected class of energy insufficiency and 48 (35.3%) said females and only 8 (5.0%) respondents replied that boys are the affected class of energy insufficiency. Only 24 (15.0%), out of total, replied that they have sufficient fuel.

**Table-7 Causes of Energy Insufficiency and Its Gender Impacts**

		Affected classes by insufficiency					Total
		male	Female	boy	female and girl	All	
Causes of insufficiency	New char	0 (.0%)	7 (21.9%)	0 (.0%)	24 (75.0%)	1 (3.2%)	32 (100.0%)
	Lack of trees	0 (.0%)	16 (84.2%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	3 (15.8%)	19 (100.0%)
	<i>Impact of river</i>	4 (6.3%)	20 (31.3%)	4 (6.3%)	32 (57.1%)	4 (6.3%)	64 (100.0%)

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		Affected classes by insufficiency					Total
		male	Female	boy	female and girl	All	
	Lack of power energy	12 (57.1%)	5 (23.8%)	4 (19.0%)	0 (.0%)	0 (.0%)	21 (100.0%)
Total		16	48	8	56	8	136
	% within raw	11.8%	35.3%	5.9%	41.2%	5.9%	100%

Only 11.8% respondents (16) think that males are affected by energy insufficiency and 5.9% think males, females, boys and girls all are affected. If we scrutinize (adding the second and third category) the tables we can see that 104 respondents (76.5%) think that females class are affected by energy insufficiency and it is the 65.0% of the total respondents.

### Conclusion

The research was carried out to examine the coping mechanism or livelihood pattern of the people of Bayer char. The data show that the prime indicator of sustainable livelihood is land. It has multi-faceted impacts on other assets of livelihood. But most of the people of Bayer Char are landless (60.0%) or near to landless that means marginal land class (20.0%) but the absolute reality is they have neither homestead nor arable land of their own, they live in an area of *khas* land that is not distributed by the government. River has an endemic impact on char people's landlessness and livelihood (89.8%). The people who migrated here from same district (65.0%) and other districts (35.0%) in search of land (45.0%) and better life (40.0%) are landless by river bank erosion. Climate change has a devastating impact on their landlessness (90%). So, there is a close relation between migration and climate change. People got a piece of land by *neta*-local elite, leader- (85.0%) In exchange of it they have to do everything for the interest of leader as fight (5.8%), giving grain (85.7%) labour (16.8%) and money (43.8%). There exists a relation of slave and slave masters between char people and *neta*. River or landlessness has a devastating impact on fuel energy (70.6%). For gender specific activities women are absolutely affected by fuel shortage (95.45%). Women try to cope with it using cow dung (36.9%), straw (25.0%) and other agricultural residues. Most of the inhabitants use pond water (55.0%) and drink river water (25.0%). Though 35.0% of the respondents drink tube well water, they have to collect it spending much time and labour from the remote households which have tube well.

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