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Settling-on-the-Move: Birsing Char-scapes in the Brahmaputra Valley

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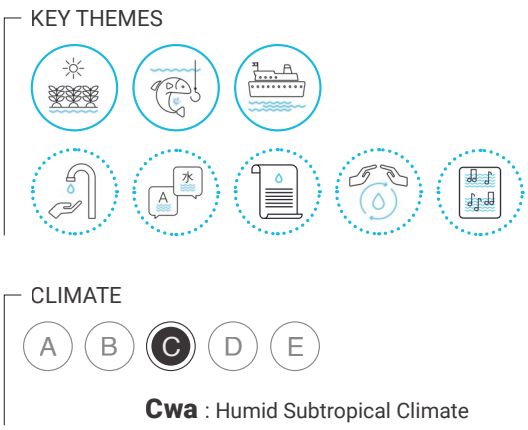
Chars are shifting riverine islands. This article focuses on Birsing Char, part of Birsing Jarua Village Panchayat, in the Brahmaputra River near the Indo-Bangladesh border. Generations of families have migrated across this porous border, settling in the Lower Brahmaputra Valley. This migration has intensified the sociocultural othering of Bengali Muslims amid Assam's identity politics and India's rising authoritarianism. Through fieldwork and interpretative mapping, the article uncovers forms of alternative knowledge, including local spatial practices and intangible heritage like songs and poetry, threatened by infrastructural development, policies of the Indian government and climate change. It explores how such knowledge can be harnessed and inspire alternative development policy and design in the context of global warming in the Brahmaputra Valley and in Assam's sociopolitical climate. The case underscores the urgency of recognizing marginalized chars as vital to the region's water legacy, as they contribute both to local livelihoods and broader ecological systems.

Keywords: *fluid landscapes, porous borders, cultural resilience, worldviews, climate change*



< Fig. 1 The cropping system is naturally adapted to water levels in the monsoon season (Source: Swagata Das, 2021).

Braided Brahmaputra, Shifting *Chars* and Porous Borders

As the Brahmaputra River enters Assam State in India, the sudden flattening of slope and confluence of tributaries give rise to an oscillating braided pattern, creating alluvium deposits in the form of river islands, locally known as *chars*. They are extremely transient, a "uniquely fluid environment where the demarcation between land and water cannot be well defined or made permanent" (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013, 1). While *chars* can appear legally ambiguous, they are crucial for many people: the last state survey conducted in 2002–2003 estimated 2,490,097 inhabitants in 2251 *char* villages of Assam (Directorate of Char Areas Development 2004). The actual number could be much higher as *charuas* (*char* dwellers) move in and out of *chars* before and after the survey is conducted, leading many to be excluded from official records.

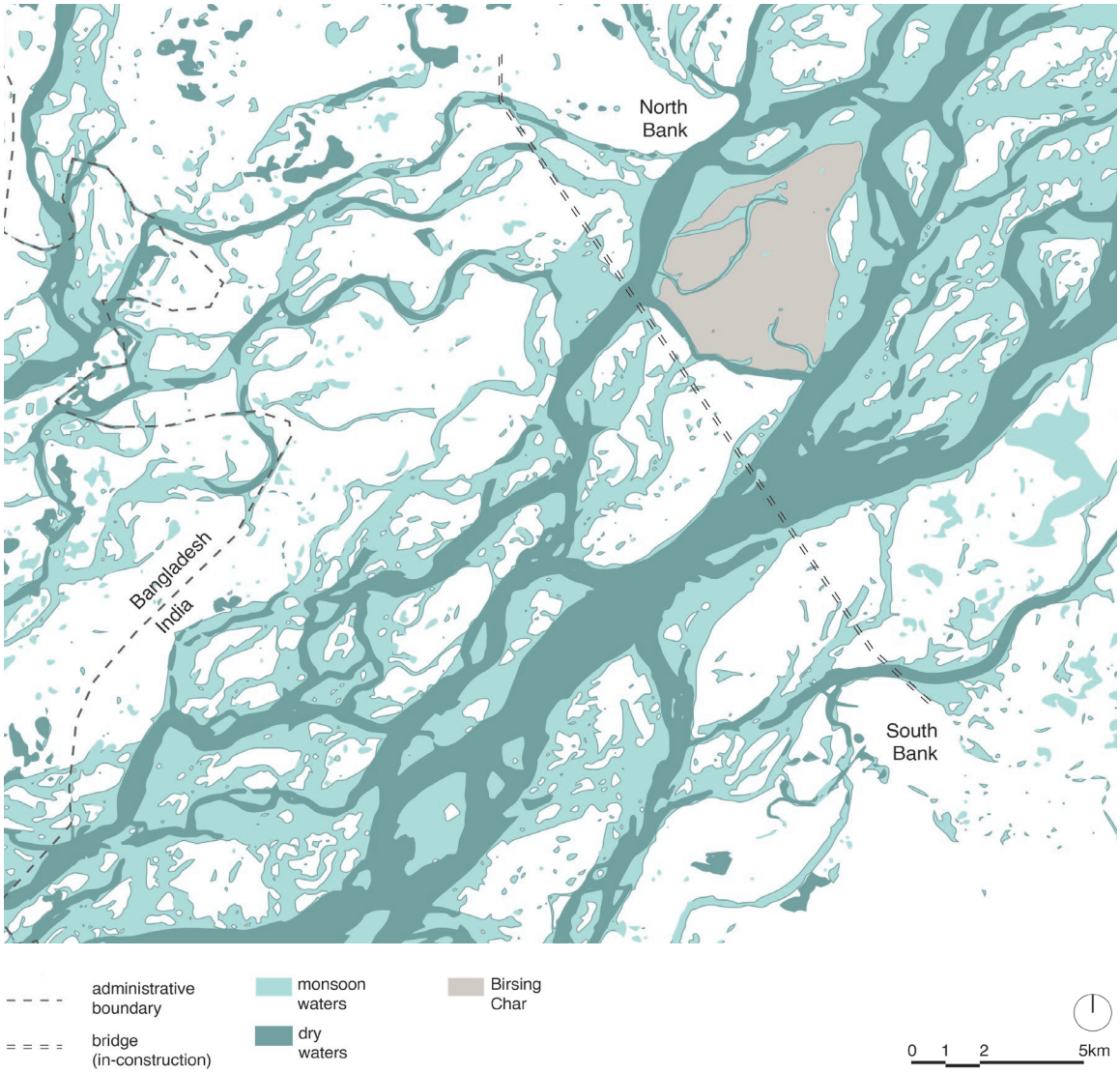
Many people's everyday lives do not adhere to categories of land and water, as they choose to "inhabit an undivided wetness" (Cunha 2018, 292). In the downstream area of Assam, generations of migrants navigate the fluid Indo-Bangladesh border (fig. 2). The shifting nature of these fluid territories renders administrative borders obsolete, creating a gray zone of statehood and non-statehood, along with a corresponding array of freedoms, restrictions and constraints.

Between Seen and Unseen: Sociocultural Othering of Bengali Muslims in Assam

In Assam, the interplay of rivers and land has always been closely linked to citizenship and immigration. In the nineteenth century, the British colonial state encouraged land workers from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to migrate to Assam, transforming the Brahmaputra's floodplains into the "British empire's eastern-most jute frontier" (Saikia 2019, 1405). The colonial "Line System" not only restricted settlement areas and limited immigrants' economic activities (Chakraborty 2009), but it also created terminologies such as "immigrants" and "native" (Das 2023, 18) to categorize the population in Assam. These categorizations persisted through India's 1947 Partition and Bangladesh's 1971 Independence, fueling social tensions and contributing to endemic violence (Iqbal 2010), including the 1983 Nellie Massacre.[1]

Since 2016, with the rise of a right-wing Hindu government throughout India, including in Assam, Bengali residents have faced significant discrimination due to their religion. Bengali Muslims have experienced systemic violence, being perceived as "illegal immigrants," while Bengali Hindu migrants have been viewed as "refugees" (Das 2023, 27). This differential treatment has intensified the scrutiny and political marginalization of Bengali Muslims, particularly in *chars* near the Bangladesh border. Most *chars* in the Lower Brahmaputra are inhabited by descendants of Bengali Muslim migrants, popularly and derogatorily called "Miyah." In Assam, the recent implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), along with the National Registry of Citizens (NRC), exacerbates the stigmatization of cross-border migration from Bangladesh and promotes further ethnic and religious intolerance (Menon 2023). The CAA, passed by the Indian government, controversially grants fast-track citizenship to six religious minorities

1. During the anti-foreigner Assam movement (1979–1985), a mob comprising Tiwa, Koch, Hindu Assamese and other local ethnic groups killed over 2,000 Bengal-origin Muslims in Nellie, Central Assam. Rumors of imminent Muslim attacks on Tiwa villages incited the violence, prompting activists and local villagers to launch a preemptive assault on unsuspecting Muslims.



^ Fig. 2 The braided Brahmaputra River forms an ever-changing mosaic of environments shaped by nutrient-rich silt, sandy sediments and water channels. (Source: Swagata Das, 2024. Based on global-surface-water.appspot.com, Google Earth imagery accessed onJanuary, 6 2022 with excerpts of a Bhatiali song from Rahman, 2021).

Bhaitali song (Bangladeshi folksong)

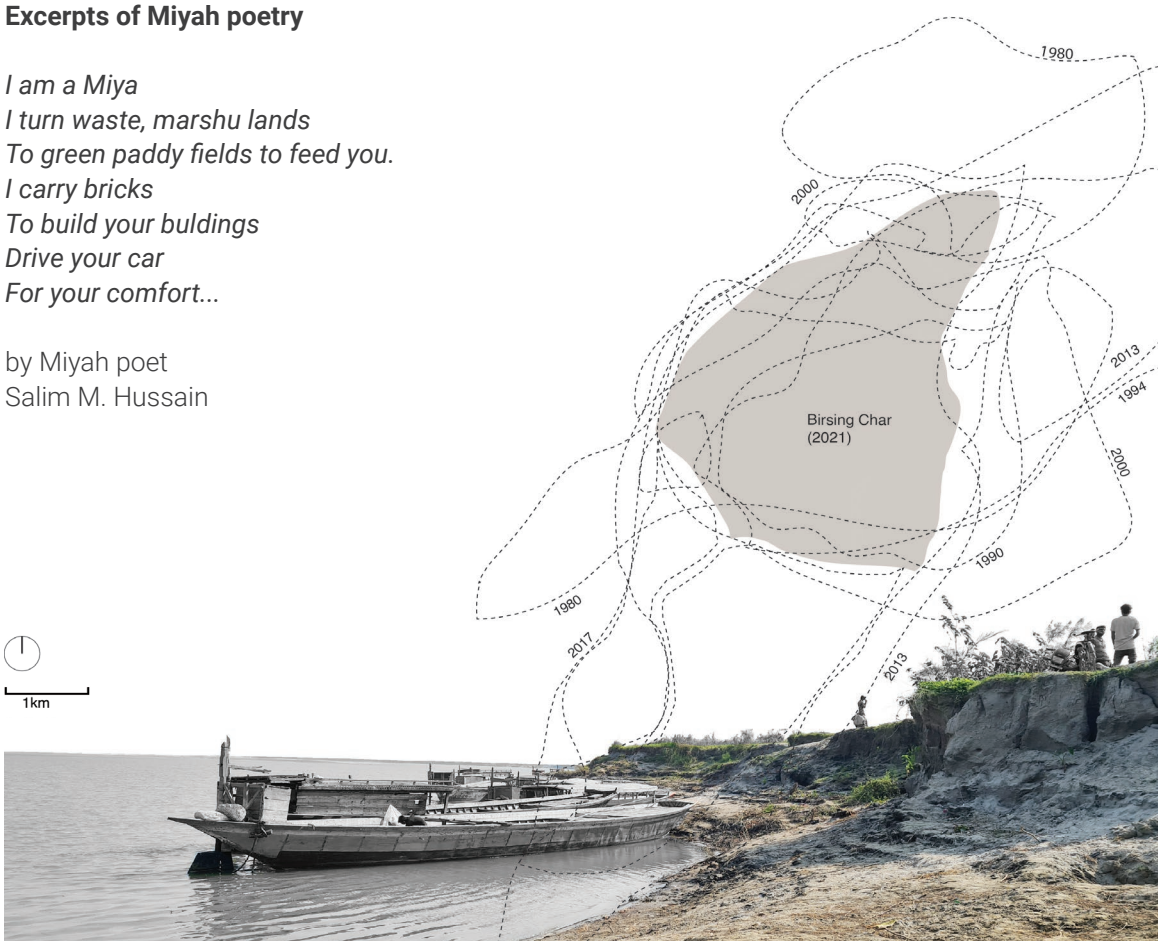
O ki ore,
pagla re nodi
eiglai ki tor riti re bidhi
Boshotbhangiya korlu
re chharachhari...

(Oh mad river
is this your true nature
You have destroyed our homes
and forced us to live apart...)
Source: Rahman 2021

Excerpts of Miyah poetry

I am a Miya
I turn waste, marshu lands
To green paddy fields to feed you.
I carry bricks
To build your buldings
Drive your car
For your comfort...

by Miyah poet
Salim M. Hussain



^ Fig. 3 Inhabitants adapt to the ever-shifting dry-land *chars* by moving, a way of settling that navigates danger and exploits local assets. It strongly contrasts with conventional notions of landownership and revenue mechanisms introduced during British rule. (Source: Swagata Das, 2024. Based on Google Earth imagery, sunflowercollective.blogspot.com and fieldwork carried out in December 2021).

while explicitly excluding Muslims, India's second-largest religious group.

Meanwhile, in 2019, Assam released its updated NRC list, which excluded a sizable portion of the Bengali-Muslim population. Although terms like Miyah are avoided in the wording of policies and the state refutes that the CAA and NRC are linked, their combination in the border territory of Assam threatens to render many stateless (Menon 2023) by introducing new political and economic uncertainties for the already marginalized *charuas*. In response, resistance movements, like the Miyah poetry movement, attempt to reclaim power and local identity. Figure 3 includes an excerpt from a poem that occasioned a police report being filed for "communal disturbance" (Bahn 2019).

Just as the state seeks to define who is Indian and who is not, it is equally obsessed with creating and enforcing more strict land-water sep-

arations, which undermine the fluid landscapes of *chars*. Monofunctional land use planning, a colonial legacy, does not correspond to the fluid *char*-scapes. The distortion caused by sociocultural othering (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013), also deeply rooted in colonial-era policies and exacerbated by contemporary legal measures, has further marginalized movement patterns of the *charuas*. The pejorative discourse has crafted a narrative that views *chars* primarily as territories to be saved against such othering, thereby obstructing a nuanced understanding of the intertwining of water, culture and the heritage of Assam's *char*-scapes, which now face additional challenges from climate change.

Chars as Places of Transition, Exchange and Seasonal Occupation

Chars are sites of rich water heritage with site-specific and dynamic relationships between fluid landscapes, human migration and cultural resilience. Along the Indo-Bangladesh border, *chars* serve as grazing lands and formal and informal cattle markets. The presence of the Indian Border Security Forces complicates the informal cattle trade, but subversive strategies, including bribery, sustain the lucrative business (Sur 2020). The continuously shifting river channels hinder efficient state control, while Bengali-Assamese inhabitants have acquired an intimate knowledge of how to move and reside (bypass and hide) within the idiosyncratic landscape. Such complexities frame an understanding of administrative borders as temporary (and permeable) barriers to exchange. *Chars* are also considered "granaries of the (Indian) state" (Chakraborty 2009, 3), producing significant amounts of paddy, jute and seasonal vegetables.

During the dry season (2021) and the monsoon season (2023), Das conducted fieldwork in a relatively stable *char*, locally known as Birsing Char,[2] revealing the fluid lives of Bengali-Assamese *charuas*, who must navigate an administrative gray zone due to religious discrimination and shifting waterscapes. Das traced the everyday life of a landless migrant family comprising a husband, wife and child who had settled in the relatively unstable part of Birsing Char, which gets seasonally flooded. They occupy a sole dwelling constructed on a mound with a mud plinth, thatched walls and tin sheet roofing (fig. 4). Their migration from various *chars* to relatively stable ecologies reflects generational patterns of relocation and highlights the appeal of Birsing Char for migrants with precarious citizenship status. First, certain villages on the *char* have been included as revenue villages (administrative units with land surveyed and entered into official records), granting them some form of state legitimacy. Second, the *char* population is comprisesd entirely of Bengali Muslims, offering a sense of communal refuge. Nevertheless, uncertainty looms since the land is prone to extensive erosion. People have developed various ways to simultaneously occupy nearby territories for complementary yet diverse livelihoods. The settlement culture developed over generations flexibly exploits a variety of continuously changing locational assets while navigating restrictions and avoiding state control.

Fieldwork revealed three distinct movement patterns of household members. Major floods

2. *Chars* do not have official names. Over the years, members of villages who have been displaced by flooding and erosion settle on *chars*, which then take the names of the original villages. In this case, the former village of Birsing split into three parts (Birsing Pt. I, Pt. II, and Pt. III) and occupies most of the higher stable ground of the *char*.

prompt long boat journeys by the entire family. The male member's seasonal migration with a neighbor occurs during the monsoon (June–September). They live on boats and engage in fishing during the lean agricultural period, while the woman and child sustain the family by cultivating kitchen gardens and bartering. Finally, daily movements between the Birsing Char and Dhubri towns are prompted by seasonal changes in *ghats* (passages leading to a river), as their livelihood includes farming, fishing, trading and livestock rearing. The settlement culture weaves together a multitude of localities, activities and agencies (of different family members and, by extension, the wider networks). Beyond serving as landing places for boats, *ghats* also function as public spaces with marketplaces and bays for loading and unloading. Dhubri town, once a bustling river port during British rule, now has four *ghats* used by local vessels to transport people and goods to and from neighboring *chars*. *Ghat bazaars* (fig. 5) on the north bank operate every Monday and Thursday, transforming the riverbank into a marketplace where *char* inhabitants trade essential commodities and products for survival.

The construction of the Dhubri-Phulbari Bridge (Choubey 2024), part of a spree of state-driven infrastructure development on the Brahmaputra, will soon restrict these movements. The bridge will cross the Birsing and other *chars*, threatening to erase (or severely limit) the local way of life by extending state control over the hinterlands. Official trade routes will replace traditional water heritage elements and practices in *ghat* bazaars. Traditional water routes will disappear, and charua-operated boats will be without freight.

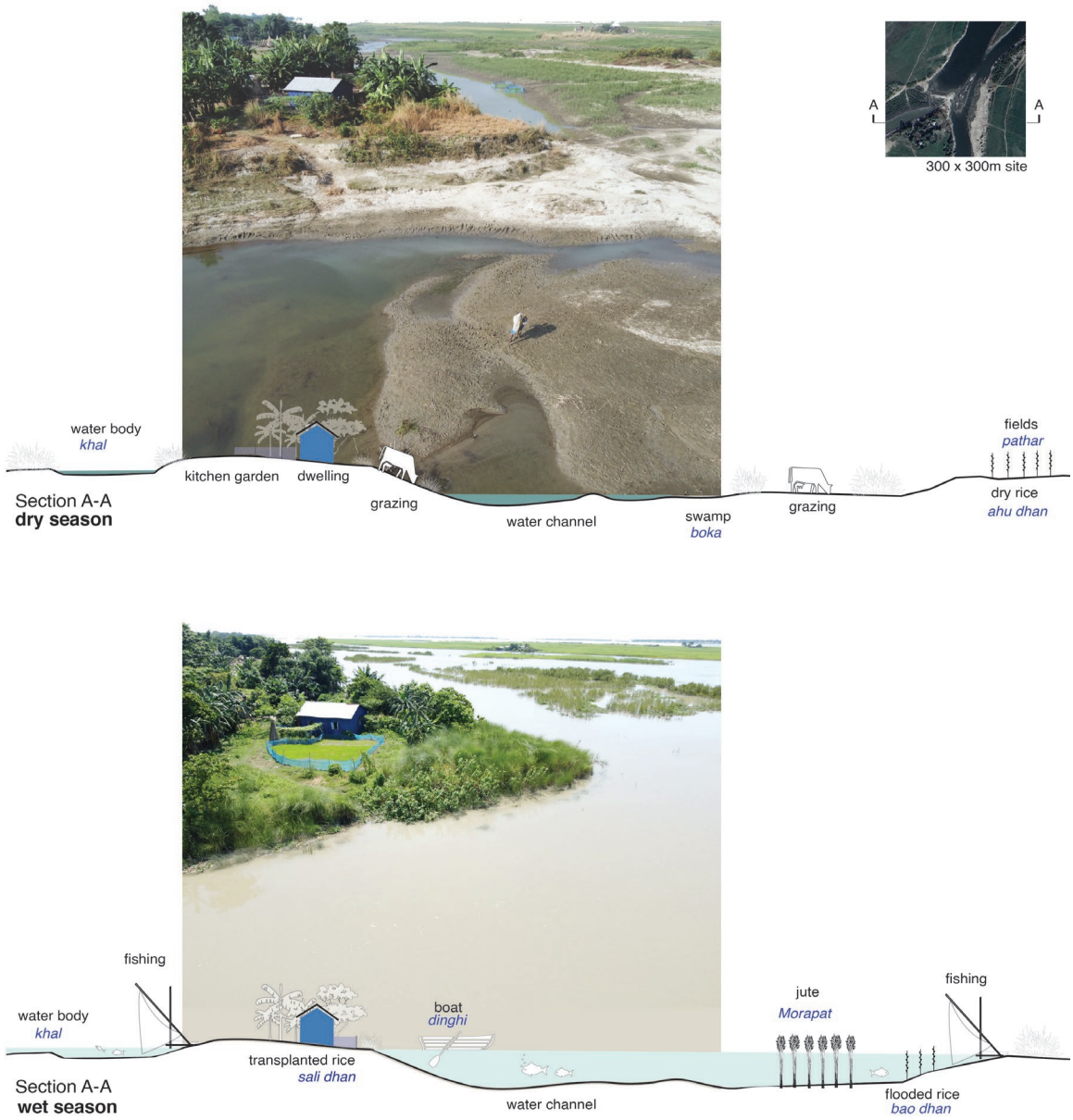
Fieldwork revealed that cultivation, attuned to seasonal cycles and water levels, remained the primary livelihood for the studied *char* family in 2021 and 2023. Drawing on his agricultural expertise, the male member plowed the sandy terrain and fertilized it with cow dung, poultry waste, ash and paddy husk before the arrival of monsoon. These organic fertilizers decompose in the rainy season to form fertile topsoil. The *chars* are typically covered in tall grasses and reeds set ablaze before sowing *ahu* (dry rice) in March/April. Harvest precedes the high water in July, with cultivation resuming after the floods recede. Leveraging the soil's moisture, winter crops like rapeseed, mustard and various pulses are sown post-monsoon to ensure sustenance during lean, dry months. Sali rice saplings thrive in manicured fields adjacent to homes, nurtured by rainwater and flood-borne silt before transplantation to fields. Low-lying areas, submerged during monsoons, are utilized for cultivating *boro* rice along with jute with longer stems (fig. 1). The knowledge of the *char*-scapes and sustenance practices stand as a testament to the resilience of *charuas*, which can support their livelihoods across seasonal transformations and the ever-changing environment.

Char-scapes as Water Heritage Rooted in Culture and Nature

Char-scapes exemplify a multifaceted water-related heritage. *Charuas* have developed an adaptive crop calendar that mixes crops for risk distribution and the efficient use of water levels. Beyond farming, communities harness water-adapted livelihoods, engaging in fishing, boat-making and using boats to transport passengers. In times of need, they shift to non-farming livelihoods like carpentry, daily wage labor and small businesses, often coupled with seasonal out-migration. Religious and spiritual beliefs fortify their sociocultural resilience, while traditional ecological knowledge

^ Fig. 4 One family's inhabitation of a *char* reveals the territorial scale of occupation, different types of dwelling and movement within the landscape (Source: Swagata Das, 2024. Based on fieldwork in December 2021 and July 2023).

anticipates flooding and erosion. In essence, the *chars*' water-related heritage is a dynamic living legacy. It includes the practical knowledge (Scott 1999) that the *charuas* acquired over generations. The settling-on-the-move culture of the *charuas* contains a set of relations



^ Fig. 5 Seasonal waters and shifting geographies prompt inhabitants to adopt their livelihoods and cropping systems (Source: Swagata Das, 2024. Based on fieldwork).

between a multitude of locations (all with continuously evolving locational assets), activities that exploit these assets, and actors (ranging from different extended family members to the networks that link them with the wider world). These sets of relations dance with the natural rhythms of the river as well as with the whims of state politics while regularly being disrupted by catastrophic floods, large-scale infrastructural interventions and eruptions of violence

between communities in this sensitive border area. Clearly, this settling-on-the-move culture embraces as much the opportunities offered by their refuge space, the *chars*, as by avoiding dangers and subverting state politics. The settling-on-the-move culture, until now, has proven sustainable.

Recently, climate change has impacted *chars* with erratic rains, higher temperatures, extended monsoons and an increasing number of extreme weather events (Das and Khanduri 2021). Flawed disaster management and eco-hydrologically insensitive development in Assam increase exposure to "natural" hazards, prompting communities to seek external state support and migrate away from the *chars*. One can wonder, however, whether, rather than relocation and subordination to the state, a new iteration of the settling-on-the-move culture of the *charuas* would be more advantageous. The practical knowledge acquired by the *charuas* has continuously and opportunistically been adapting to changing conditions. Rather than losing such living practical knowledge and shifting to supposedly more rational practices, it might be worthwhile to imagine how to maintain and adapt the practices of the *charuas* to the new conditions generated by global warming. For the *charuas*, their daily lifestyle is integral to such a living heritage (as embodied practical knowledge). It should be leveraged to achieve inclusive, sustainable development, social cohesion, equity and community well-being.

Conclusion

Charuas acknowledge the river's fluctuations, including flooding, which is not considered a risk but simply part of the natural cycle. In a culture of risk assessment, fervor for technological advancement and its attendant "fixes," awareness of flooding, erosion and sedimentation as intrinsic natural processes has been fading. However, in recent years, global warming has brought these processes back into focus. Additionally, the number of climate refugees migrating to India is expected to rise as the climate crisis intensifies (Asian Development Bank 2012). Migration driven by ecological factors is part of state-making processes in Assam.

Throughout history, *chars* have contributed to Assam's agricultural production and economy, and chars have been important places of refuge for Bengali Muslims. Their defiance of categorization, where water and land naturally recede and flow, have hosted undermined communities threatened by the CAA and NRC. Today, they invite contemplation of alternative realities and narratives that envision *char*-scapes as uncharted territories, retaining the freedom that their inherent illegibility offers. Simultaneously, they could function as productive landscapes to generate new economies, combined with specific densities to support them.

Policy Recommendations

- Planning policies need to acknowledge the fluid landscape of *chars* beyond conventional land-use categories and treat them as a distinctive case. The State Action Plan of Climate Change for Assam should include a dedicated chapter addressing the potential and vulnerability of *chars* and outlining new visions of the char environment and economy to build resilience in Assam's floodplains.

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