

Theorising and contextualising land and power structure of char-chapari

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse different theoretical or epistemological dimensions of the relation between land and power in char-chaparies of Assam. Topographical and geographical specificities of both char and chapari compel different researchers to look into its power structure in a different theoretical framework. Fluidity and temporary nature of land create a major hindrance towards application of ideas like class, domination and hegemony in case of the char-chaparies of Assam. Therefore, an attempt is made to examine and revisit existing theories of power in case of the land relation of char-chaparies of Assam. How temporary and fluid nature of land make the dwellers of char-chapari vulnerable to eviction and how these vulnerabilities can be examined in light of the concept of both “civil and political” society are key aspects of this study. An attempt is made to understand the relation between land and power structure in light of the works of Marx, Weber, Gramsci and Partha Chatterjee.

Key words- Land, power, char, chapari, epistemology.

Introduction-

Land can be regarded as one of the most important source of livelihood in agrarian societies. Ownership and control of land determines social prestige and status of the individuals in agrarian societies. Ownership and control of land provide powerful position to the land owner. Therefore, land has direct relationship with the power structure of the agrarian societies (Rawal, 2008). Different scholars like Chakravarty (2009) and Hussain (2001) argues that societies of the *char-chaparies* of Assam can be regarded as agrarian societies as more than 90 percent of the population of these *chars*¹ and *chaparies*² are solely dependent on agricultural production. Therefore, relationship between land and power structure of *char* and *chaparies* merit separate and special analysis. Before analysing the relationship between land and power structure of *char* and *chapari*, it is important to define what power and power structure is. In this paper, both collective and individual definitions of power are used. Max Weber defined power in terms of collective action. For Weber (1970) power is the chance of a person or a group to enforce their own will even against the resistance of others involved, through a communal action by the *gemeinschaft*. Dahl (1961) defines power in terms of individual action. He tries to explain power by giving an example- A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something which B would not do otherwise. It's observed that though there is difference between both the definitions of power, yet these views have one thing in common. They imply power over others. Further, Dahl (1961) has given a definition of power structure, considering both collective definition and his own definition of power. For Dahl (1961), power structure is a systematic arrangement of power distribution within a system.

In this paper I will discuss four dimensions of power- 1) Marxian understanding of power 2) power as domination 3) power as influence 4) power as collective assertion.

¹ Chars are those sandbars which are surrounded by water. It is like river island so it's also known as island sandbars

² Chaparies are those riverine areas which are attached to the plain areas. When a land of char gets submerged in the river, due to the changes of the direction of the river, the eroded land gets re-emerged and attached to the plain areas. This newly emerged permanent land is known as chapari

1) Marxian understanding of power-

As the purpose of the study is to locate the relationship between land and power structure in *char-chapari*, it is important to study the relationship between land ownership and power structure within the Marxian understanding of class. But Marxian understanding of class as a locus of understanding power structure brings to light further complexities in *char-chaparies*. For Marx (1972), forces of production including means of production and labour power and relations of production determines mode of production of any society. Any change in the mode of production, which constitutes the base of society leads to further changes in the social and political structure of the society. Therefore, economic mode of production determines power structure of the society (Marx, 1972). In this context it can be argued that as an agrarian society, land is the most important means of production in *char-chapari*, ownership of which determines power structure of these societies. Ownership of land ensures dominant position of the land owning class over the landless class. But the problem is that if we accept the existing definition of *char* and *chapari*, considering it as a homogenous category, application of the Marxian class framework in terms of ownership of land to understand power structure is difficult. Even though existing literatures consider *char* and *chaparies* as same category, there's subtle difference between these two categories. *Chars* are those sandbars which are surrounded by water, therefore, life of these sand bars are temporary and fluid. Erosion and re-emergence of the already eroded land is the common phenomena in case of the *chars*. When a *char* gets attached to the plain areas due to the changing direction of the river, it becomes *chapari*. It is not as fluid and temporary as the *char* lands. On the other hand, according to the report published by the "National productivity council" those sand bars which have life of more than 15 years can be considered as permanent land. In this context we can argue that the lands of the *chaparies* are more permanent than the lands of the *chars*. It is important to note that Marxian understanding of class as a locus of power structure requires fix nature of commodity. In case of the agrarian societies like *char* and *chaparies* it is observed that land as commodity is fluid in *chars* and relatively permanent in case of the *chaparies*. Therefore, Marxian understanding of ownership of means of production as key determinants of the power structure is applicable to the *chaparies* but not to the *chars*.

2) Power as domination

One of the major differences between Marxian and Weberian understanding of power is that they applied this concept into different situations. Marx (1972) observed power as control over economic resources. For Weber (1970) power is exercised through different axis like class status and party. According to Weber (1970), concept of power is vague as it involves numerous conditions and circumstances to determine the realization of the will. Therefore, He talks about authority or domination as another form of power which is unambiguous. Weber (1970), defined domination as the probability that a command with a given specific context will be obeyed by a given group of persons. For dominance, voluntary compliance is required. Power which is considered as just and right is considered as authority or domination. According to Weber (1970), authority can be described as legitimate power which requires 5 key aspects

1) One or more rulers. 2) One or more ruled. 3) Desire and tendencies among the rulers to influence the actions of the others. 4) In the objective context, the evidence of the obedience of the ruler. 5) Direct or indirect evidence that people obey these orders subjectively.

Weber (1970) tries to trace the authority from legitimate structures and practices. He talks about 3 types of authorities- 1) Traditional authority 2) Charismatic authority 3) Legal rational authority. In the analysis of the traditional authority Weber (1970) talks about 3 kinds of authority namely patriarchal household, patrimonial authority and feudal authority. In case of patriarchal household kind of traditional authority, male head of the household enjoys supreme power over the land the household possessed. The authority of the patriarch is derived from mental and physical dependence of the women and children on him. In case of the patriarchal kind of household property is transferred to the successors in the male line. Female members of the household are deprived of the property line. Same patriarchal kind of households is still observed in *char* and *chaparies*. Physical strength of the male members help them to acquire authority. It is observed that majority of the land of *chars* are

remaining as non cadastral due to its fluidity of land, therefore possession of the land is still considered as sole criteria of claiming ownership. In this context, physical strength of the male heads of the households enjoy supreme property right over the land the household posses (Weber, 1970).

Weber (1970) argues that patrimonial and feudal kinds of authorities are further extension of the patrimonial household kind of authority. When a society is marching towards economic changes a patriarchal household develops the rule of its family members. Patriarchal authorities still enjoys its domination with the help of its family members. Later on these patrimonial system leads to the emergence of feudal estates where head of the patriarchal household works as feudal lord who tries to control its subordinates by different means.

In those *chars* which are relatively more stable and permanent, we can observe both the patrimonial and feudal kinds of authority. Even in some semi permanent *chars* and permanents *chaparies*, we can see how heads of the patriarchal households have developed feudal estates.

For weber (1970) charismatic authority emerges in the time of crisis. When individual attributes of some person acquires significance in the life of the general people, it emerges as charismatic authority. Likewise, in case of *char-chapari*, conflict over the possession of newly emerged eroded land requires authorities which have personal attributes which are adequate enough to influence and dominate the people and to resolve the conflict.

Weber (1970) argues that in case of the charismatic authority, Charismatic community or a group of the people having charisma would lead to the process of the routinization of charisma. In case of the routinization of charisma, charismatic community always try to routinise their charisma and tries to transfer it to its successors. This routinisation takes place in the familial line of the charismatic leaders. In case of *char-chapari* it is observed that charismatic leaders challenge the authority of the traditional leaders. They try to continue their charisma by further participating different village institutions like panchyats or community meetings.

In case of legal rational authority, Weber (1970) argues that formal rule of state or bureaucratic authority can be observed. This kind of authority challenges traditional or charismatic types of authorities. Society is regulated by formal rules and institutions. In case of *chaparies*, due to its geographical proximity with the plain areas and its relatively permanent nature of land then the land of *chars*, we can see a significant pace of state making. Activities of the agencies of the state are much more visible in case of the *chaparies* then the *chars*.

We can easily understand different dimensions and structures of power by applying weberian idea of authority or domination in case examining the power structure of *char* and *chapari*. Now I will try to examine the idea of power structure in two different ways

3) Power as influence

Robert Dahl has extensively worked on different aspects of influence. According to Dahl (1961), power and influence are complementary to each other. Influence is the ability of an actor to bring about desired changes in the behaviour of the actor or actors on persuading them. For exercising power, according to Dahl (1961), three pre-requisites are required

1) Resources 2) intention 3) skill for exploiting the resources. Dahl (1961) has identified 5 different variables of power structure, among them he has given preference to land as essential determinants of power structure. For him, ownership and control of land ensures the dominance of the landowner over the landless. To measure influence, Dahl (1961) identified three major dimensions

a) The weight of influence that means which ideas are influenced

b) Domain of influence, whose ideas are influenced

c) Scope of influence, that suggests the value implicated in the policy.

To have a clear understanding of the power structure of any society, he divided power structure into 1) power seeker at the top 2) apolitical stratum at the bottom 3) political stratum in between these two.

To understand, influence as key aspect of power, Oomen (1973) used the concept of “power pool”. According to him, in village communities power structure can be understood in terms of the examinations of the constituents of power pool. Power pool of rural community consist of

- a) Community leaders
- b) Formal position holders
- c) Influential persons of decision making
- d) Those that have capacities to prevent any decision to be accomplished. Power pool is identified in community meetings, settlements of disputes etc (Oomen.1973).

Problem of Oomen’s (1973) idea of power pool is that it denounces the possibility of the existence of collective or multiple layers of power holders in the power structure of homogenous population. In case of homogenous populations like religious minorities or disadvantageous groups in the property relations, such framework is not applicable. To understand multiple layers of power in case of homogenous populations of religious minorities or other marginal groups, we can shift our attention to the fourth dimension of power

4) Power as collective assertion or power exercised in political societies

Chatterjee (2004) propagated the idea of political society. He differentiated political society from civil society. For him, political society refers to the proliferation of the forms of political mobilisation by unprivileged communities that violate laws and opposed to the norms of citizenship. Governmental practices of the state create distinction between citizens and populations. Most of the world, large, unprivileged sections of the populations are not culturally equipped to enter into the civil society because of their religious minority status and disadvantageous location in the property relation. Mathematical calculation of governmentality considers them as mere subject or population which are vulnerable to surveillance mechanism. States obsession with order and property prevent it accepting these people as citizen. But these vulnerable people organises themselves in the form of kin base formal or informal collective organizations which help them to get moral content (Chatterje, 2004). The entire argument of chaterjee is applicable to the general characteristics of the population of *char* and *chapari*. In case of *char* and *chapari*, temporary nature of land and both disadvantageous position of the people in property relations and their religious minority status compel them to be vulnerable to eviction or forceful displacement. Government refuses to conduct revenue surveys. In response to that they organise kin base collective groups which creates new and collective elements in the existing power structure of *char* and *chapari*.

Conclusion- In case of *char* and *chapari*, it is observed that all four dimensions of understanding power have close relationship with land ownership and control. Different axis like income, class, gender etc can be used to study existing power structure of *char* and *chapari*. But As an agrarian society and fluidity of land, examination of the land relations of *char-chapari* would provide us adequate framework to understand existing power structure of *char* and *chapari*.

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