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Human Security at the Margins: A Thematic Analysis of Bangladeshi-Origin Migrants in Dhubri, Assam

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Abstract

This paper examines the human security challenges confronting migrants of Bangladeshi origin residing in Dhubri district, western Assam. Applying the multidimensional human security framework articulated in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, this study draws from literature, demographic and governmental sources, and ethnographic comparisons. Six intersecting domains are identified as central: economic marginalisation, food insecurity, health vulnerability, personal risk, fragile community cohesion, and acute environmental vulnerability. Dhubri's status as a distinctive riverine border district, characterized by historical settlement on char land prone to flooding and erosion, intensifies these insecurities. The analysis demonstrates that these domains of insecurity are deeply interlinked, creating challenges that conventional welfare and governance responses cannot adequately address. This analysis extends the existing literature on subaltern migration, border communities, and human security in South Asia, ultimately advocating for community-centred policy solutions that address structural vulnerabilities through integrated, multisectoral approaches.

Keywords: Human security; Bangladeshi-origin migrants; Dhubri; char land; livelihood vulnerability; environmental displacement; border communities

1. Introduction

The demographic and cultural landscape of lower Assam has been shaped by successive waves of migration across the Indo-Bangladesh border, spanning more than a century of shared colonial, postcolonial, and post-partition history. The partition of Bengal in 1947 and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 generated significant cross-border population flows that altered the composition of districts such as Dhubri, Goalpara, and Barpeta. These effects remain legible in contemporary settlement patterns, linguistic distribution, and livelihood structures. Scholars of the Bengal borderland have documented the deep historical interpenetration of communities across what became an international frontier, demonstrating that the binary of 'Indian' and 'Bangladeshi' obscures the much more complex genealogies of populations whose migratory histories are much older than the borders through which they are now defined (Van Schendel, 2005). Within Assam, Dhubri district stands out for its demographic prominence: situated at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the international boundary with Bangladesh, it has hosted the largest concentrations of Bengali-speaking Muslim communities in the state, many of whom trace their origins to present-day Bangladesh.

The existing literature on these communities has predominantly addressed issues of immigration legality, demographic change, and the politics of belonging within the Assamese public sphere. Although analytically significant, this emphasis has relegated the examination of the substantive living conditions of Bangladeshi-origin populations to secondary importance, focusing instead on debates regarding their presence and legitimacy (Baruah, 1999; Weiner, 1983). As a result, the human security profile of one of India's most demographically distinct and economically marginalised communities remains insufficiently explored. This study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from juridical debates to the material and social conditions of everyday life, with particular attention to the structural constraints shaping these communities' existence.

The conceptual foundation of this study is the human security framework, which emerged from development scholarship in the 1990s as a deliberate alternative to state-centric security paradigms. The United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report defined human security through the dual pillars of freedom from want and freedom from fear, identifying seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (UNDP, 1994). The Commission on Human Security further developed this framework, emphasising that security should be understood as 'protecting the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment' (Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 4). When applied to migrant and border communities, this framework facilitates the mapping of vulnerabilities across multiple dimensions, thereby capturing the compound nature of disadvantage that aggregate national or state-level indicators often obscure.

The specific focus on Dhubri is necessary for several overlapping reasons. The district records the highest proportion of the Muslim population in Assam according to the 2011 Census, at approximately 79%, with a substantial share of this population composed of Bengali-speaking communities of Bangladeshi origin (Census of India, 2011). A significant proportion of this community resides on char land, the morphologically unstable riverine islands of the Brahmaputra system, whose annual flood cycles and chronic erosion impose distinctive environmental and livelihood vulnerabilities absent from mainland settlements. Dhubri's position at the bottom of Assam's development league table on indicators ranging from literacy to health facility density further amplifies the insecurities experienced by its most marginalised residents. The district thus functions in this paper not merely as a geographical location but as an analytical window through which the structural conditions of Bangladeshi-origin migrant life can be examined with the precision that their complexity demands.

2. Conceptualising Human Security in Migration and Border Contexts

The emergence of human security as a concept in international development discourse represents a significant epistemological shift: from the state as the referent object of security to the individual and community, and from territorial integrity as the measure of security to the material and social conditions that enable people to live with dignity, autonomy, and freedom from chronic threat. Alkire (2003, p. 2) defines human security as protecting 'the vital core of human lives from critical and pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment'. This formulation is productively distinguished from narrower welfare definitions by its attention to vitality and to the distinction between chronic deprivation and acute crisis, both of which are analytically relevant in the Dhubri context.

The UNDP's seven-dimensional typology has become the standard reference point for operationalising human security in empirical research (UNDP, 1994). Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007) provide the most

systematic elaboration of this framework for policy application, arguing that the seven dimensions must be understood as mutually constitutive rather than additive: a deficit in one dimension typically exacerbates conditions in others, producing a dynamic of compounding insecurity that is qualitatively distinct from the simple sum of individual deprivations. This insight is central to the present analysis and shapes the paper's methodological approach.

The human security framework has attracted significant critical scrutiny. Paris (2001, p. 88) argued that the concept's expansiveness makes it 'so vague that it verges on meaninglessness,' encompassing threats as diverse as unemployment, disease, and political repression under a single analytical umbrella. MacFarlane and Khong (2006) extended this critique, suggesting that the breadth of human security as institutionalised in UN discourse inhibited coherent policy priority-setting. These are not trivial concerns. However, the framework's integrative breadth is precisely its methodological strength for the study of compound-vulnerable populations such as the one examined here. Communities in which poverty, environmental hazard, institutional exclusion, and social stigmatisation operate simultaneously cannot be adequately understood through analytical frameworks that disaggregate these conditions into separate, sequentially addressable problems.

Gasper (2005) offers a productive middle ground, distinguishing between human security as a 'wide concept' encompassing all threats to human welfare and a 'narrow concept' focused specifically on severe, pervasive threats to vital human interests. He argues that the narrow formulation retains the framework's political distinctiveness while establishing a threshold that enables meaningful empirical application. This paper adopts the narrow formulation: the insecurities examined are those that are both severe in their consequences for individual and household welfare and pervasive in their structural character, rooted not in individual circumstance but in the systematic conditions of life for Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri. Adger (2006) further extends the framework's utility by linking vulnerability to the exposure and sensitivity of communities to external stressors and to their adaptive capacity, a triad of analytical dimensions that maps productively onto the environmental and economic insecurities documented in later sections.

The connection between human security and Amartya Sen's capabilities approach is theoretically significant and practically productive. Sen (2000) argues that human development must be understood as the expansion of substantive freedoms, the real capabilities of individuals to live lives they have reason to value. Human insecurity, on this reading, is not merely material deprivation but the restriction of capability, the foreclosure of the possibility of dignified and self-determined life. Kabeer (2005) extends this framework to address gender as an axis of capability constraint, demonstrating that women's human security is structured by both material and relational conditions that standard welfare indicators systematically fail to capture. Both dimensions are relevant to the Bangladeshi-origin communities of Dhubri, where economic deprivation interacts with gender hierarchies to produce compounding capability deficits.

In the literature on South Asian border communities and migration, human security approaches have been applied to understand the circumstances of populations whose lives are shaped by the intersection of territorial politics, economic marginalisation and cultural displacement (Samaddar, 2003; Banerjee, 2010). Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013), in their landmark study of char communities across South Asia, demonstrate that the riverine borderland is a distinctive social and ecological formation in which standard development categories break down: chars are neither urban nor rural, neither firmly bounded territories nor open spaces, and their inhabitants occupy a position of structural ambiguity in relation to both state

and market institutions. This study draws on and extends that insight in its application to the specific conditions of Dhubri.

The term 'Bangladeshi-origin migrants' is used throughout this paper to refer to individuals and communities whose family histories involve migration from the territory of present-day Bangladesh, as well as their descendants resident in Dhubri. The formulation acknowledges the transnational genealogy of these communities without prejudging questions of current citizenship or legal status. The paper is not a contribution to debates about immigration or demographic change; it is an analysis of the structural conditions of life for a historically constituted community whose vulnerability demands scholarly and policy attention irrespective of those debates.

3. Dhubri District: Ecology, Demography, and Development Profile

Dhubri district occupies the westernmost extremity of Assam, bounded by West Bengal to the west, Bangladesh to the south and southwest, and the districts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon to the north and east. The Brahmaputra River, which defines the northern reaches of the district, is one of the world's most hydrologically dynamic river systems, carrying a sediment load among the highest globally and generating a distinctive fluvial landscape of shifting channels, char islands, and seasonally inundated plains (Sarma, 2005). This ecological character is not merely a background condition for social life in Dhubri; it is the primary determinant of livelihoods, settlement patterns, infrastructure accessibility, and disaster risk for a substantial proportion of the district's population.

The demographic character of Dhubri is distinctive within the Assamese context. The 2011 Census recorded a population of approximately 1.95 million across an area of some 2,838 square kilometers, yielding a population density substantially above the state average (Census of India, 2011). The Muslim share of the population, at approximately 79%, reflects the historical concentration of Bengali-speaking Muslim communities in the district, many of whom trace their origins to the delta regions of present-day Bangladesh, particularly the Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions. The historiography of this demographic formation extends from the colonial period, when Bengal's agrarian economy generated significant internal migration toward the underpopulated char lands of the Brahmaputra valley, through partition-era displacement and the economic migration of subsequent decades (Weiner, 1983; Hazarika, 2000). Misra (2000) situates this demographic trajectory within the broader pattern of peripheralisation that has characterised Assam's relationship with the Indian state, arguing that the structural underdevelopment of the region created conditions in which migration both from and into the district became an organising feature of economic life.

The char lands of Dhubri constitute the ecological heartland of this analysis. Zaman (1991, p. 673) defines chars as 'temporary islands formed by sediment deposition and subject to continuous morphological change through erosion and accretion.' In Dhubri, an estimated three to four lakh individuals reside on char land, representing one of the highest concentrations of char-dwelling population in Assam. The ecological instability of these formations imposes particular demands on their inhabitants: settlement must be understood not as a fixed spatial relationship between a community and its land but as an ongoing negotiation with a landscape that is continuously and unpredictably modified by fluvial processes. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013) describe char communities as 'amphibious' populations whose social and material practices are shaped by an intimate familiarity with water as both a resource and a threat.

The administrative profile of Dhubri compounds its ecological challenges. Baruah (2005) documents the pattern of institutional marginalisation that characterises Assam's border districts: government offices,

health facilities, schools, and market infrastructure are concentrated on the mainland, leaving char communities dependent on seasonal boat transport and exposed to severe connectivity deficits during flood season. Hussain (2013) extends this analysis to Dhubri specifically, demonstrating that the district's administrative capacity is strained by the combination of high population density, difficult terrain, and limited fiscal resources, leading to chronic underprovision across virtually all welfare categories.

The socioeconomic profile of Dhubri confirms its position among the most disadvantaged districts in Assam. Data from the fifth National Family Health Survey indicate that the district records among the lowest rates of institutional delivery, full childhood immunisation and access to improved sanitation in the state (NFHS, 2021). Bezbaruah (2010) situates Dhubri's developmental deficits within the structural dimensions of Assam's regional underdevelopment, identifying limited industrialisation, dependence on primary sector livelihoods, and inadequate public investment as the principal determinants of persistent poverty. The International Organisation for Migration (2020) further notes that districts characterised by high migration pressure, limited formal employment, and poor infrastructure tend to exhibit compounding vulnerabilities that require integrated rather than sectoral policy responses: a diagnosis that applies with particular force to Dhubri.

4. Thematic Analysis of Human Security Challenges

This analysis examines six primary dimensions of human insecurity as they manifest in the lives of Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri. Although the sections are organised analytically, the conditions described are deeply interconnected rather than discrete. Each domain of insecurity both produces and is produced by conditions in the others.

4.1 Economic Security: Precarious Livelihoods and Structural Exclusion

Economic insecurity constitutes the most immediately experienced dimension of human security deprivation among Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri, and its structural determinants are deeply rooted in the political economy of the char landscape. The community's integration into the formal labour market is negligible; participation is concentrated overwhelmingly in the informal and seasonally variable agricultural economy, with sharecropping, daily wage labour on agricultural plots, river fishing and petty trade constituting the principal income sources for the majority of households. The precariousness of sharecropping arrangements is compounded by the absence of legally enforceable tenure agreements: most char cultivators work the land under informal verbal contracts that provide no protection against arbitrary eviction, rent escalation, or the appropriation of standing crops by landowners (Hussain, 2013).

Seasonal income variability is a defining feature of char-based livelihoods, and its consequences for household welfare are severe. The post-harvest period from November through January represents the peak of economic adequacy for most agricultural households; the lean season that follows, extending through the pre-harvest months, is characterised by income collapse, asset depletion, and dependence on informal credit. Ahmed (2014) documents the rhythm of seasonal debt accumulation among char households in lower Assam, demonstrating that the lean-season deficit is structural rather than contingent, reproduced annually by the mismatch between the seasonality of agricultural income and the continuous demands of household expenditure on food, health, and education.

The contraction of the river economy has eroded livelihoods that historically provided important supplementary income for char communities. Sarma (2005) documents significant changes in the Brahmaputra's hydrological regime, including increased sedimentation, channel migration, and the proliferation of sandbars, which have reduced the navigability of traditional fishing and ferrying routes.

The decline of river fishing as a reliable livelihood reflects both these hydrological changes and the reduction in fish stocks associated with alterations in the river's seasonal flood dynamics. These structural shifts have accelerated a transition toward wage dependence without commensurate access to formal labour market protections or social insurance mechanisms.

Credit exclusion reproduces economic insecurity across generations by preventing households from investing in productive assets, smoothing consumption through economic shocks, or capitalising on agricultural opportunities. The absence of land titles for char cultivators, who lack documentation of ownership over the plots they farm due to the informal and shifting nature of char settlement, disqualifies them from institutional credit products, including government agricultural loan schemes (Das, 2016). Dependence on informal moneylenders, whose interest rates typically exceed institutional alternatives by a substantial margin, traps households in debt cycles that drain the surplus that might otherwise be invested in education, health, or productive equipment. Drèze and Sen (2013) identify credit exclusion as one of the principal mechanisms through which rural poverty in India is reproduced across generations, and the Dhubri case illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity.

Circular and seasonal migration to urban centers, including Guwahati, Kolkata, and other metropolitan areas, constitutes a significant livelihood strategy for char households seeking to supplement agricultural income during the lean season. Piper (2009) argues that migration-development linkages are complex and cannot be reduced to either a driver of household advancement or a symptom of structural failure; in the Dhubri context, seasonal outmigration represents a rational household adaptation to structural income insecurity rather than a marker of opportunity. Migrants occupy low-wage niches in construction, domestic service, and the informal trade economy, remitting a portion of earnings that supplements household income at origin without significantly altering the structural conditions that generate the need to migrate.

4.2 Food Security: Seasonal Deficits and Institutional Exclusion

Food insecurity in the char settlements of Dhubri is structurally determined rather than episodic, shaped by the intersection of agricultural seasonality, ecological hazard, and inadequate social protection coverage. The primary food security challenge in normal agricultural years is not absolute scarcity but severe seasonal fluctuation: a period of relative adequacy in the post-harvest months is followed by a pronounced lean-season deficit that typically worsens with each successive month until the next harvest. This deficit is acute during the pre-monsoon period and catastrophic in years when flooding destroys standing crops or stored grain stocks, eliminating in days the agricultural capital accumulated over an entire growing season (Das, 2016).

The dietary profile of char communities reflects the constraints of poverty and market isolation. Dependence on rice as the overwhelmingly dominant caloric source, supplemented by river fish, lentils, and seasonal vegetables when available, results in low dietary diversity and an elevated risk of micronutrient deficiency. The Food and Agriculture Organization's global analysis of food security identifies dietary diversity as a critical dimension of nutritional security, noting that populations dependent on a narrow dietary base are systematically exposed to micronutrient deficiencies even when caloric intake is technically adequate (FAO, 2022). NFHS-5 data for Assam confirm elevated rates of anemia among women and stunting among children in districts with the socioeconomic profile of Dhubri, consistent with the dietary conditions described here (NFHS, 2021).

The Public Distribution System represents the principal institutional mechanism through which the state addresses food insecurity among low-income rural households, providing subsidised grain entitlements to ration card holders. However, char communities face documented barriers to PDS access that flow directly

from their residential circumstances. Obtaining and maintaining a ration card requires a stable registered address and inclusion in the electoral rolls; char households whose settlement location shifts following erosion or flood displacement frequently find that their documentation no longer corresponds to their actual residence, resulting in practical exclusion from entitlements to which they are legally entitled. Baruah (2005) documents this pattern of administrative exclusion in char-affected districts of Assam, noting that the administrative procedures designed for stable mainland settlements are systematically ill-suited to the fluid residential circumstances of char communities. Drèze and Sen (2013) emphasise more broadly that in India the gap between formal welfare entitlements and effective access is frequently largest for precisely those populations whose need is greatest: a dynamic that the Dhubri case exemplifies.

The Anganwadi network under the Integrated Child Development Services scheme is formally tasked with delivering supplementary nutrition, healthcare, and early childhood education to children and pregnant or lactating women in rural India. In char areas of Dhubri, the network's effective reach is curtailed by the difficulty of establishing and maintaining permanent Anganwadi centers on morphologically unstable land and by transportation barriers that prevent char-dwelling women and children from accessing mainland facilities with the regularity required by the scheme's nutritional impact. The consequence is a systematic deficit in nutritional support for the population segment, young children and pregnant women, whose food security needs are most critical for long-term human development outcomes.

4.3 Health Security: Infrastructure Deficits and Epidemiological Burden

The health security of Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri is compromised by a combination of inadequate infrastructure, physical inaccessibility, elevated disease burden, and the compound effects of poverty and malnutrition on health-seeking capacity. Dhubri's formal health infrastructure includes a network of Primary Health Centers, Community Health Centers, and sub-centers distributed across the district; however, all fixed health facilities are located on the mainland, creating a systematic accessibility deficit for char populations whose transport to the mainland is seasonally constrained, financially costly, and in flood conditions physically dangerous (Hussain, 2013). The National Health Mission's district health planning data for Dhubri acknowledge this infrastructure gap while noting that budgetary and logistical constraints have limited the expansion of mobile and outreach services to char areas (NHM Assam, 2020).

The epidemiological profile of char communities reflects the interaction of waterborne disease risk, vector-borne illness, and chronic nutritional deficiency in a riverine environment with minimal sanitation infrastructure. Diarrhoeal diseases, typhoid, and waterborne infections remain significant causes of childhood morbidity during the monsoon season, when flooding contaminates drinking water sources and sanitation systems collapse. Malaria and other vector-borne diseases associated with the stagnant water accumulations left by receding floods constitute persistent public health threats in the char belt. The World Health Organization's assessment of health conditions in the South-East Asia region identifies similar patterns of compound environmental and infectious disease burden in communities characterised by poor water and sanitation infrastructure, poverty, and inadequate public health coverage (WHO, 2019). Tuberculosis, amplified by household overcrowding, malnutrition, and the interruption of treatment continuity during displacement episodes, appears at elevated rates in comparable riverine communities.

Maternal and child health indicators represent perhaps the most acute dimension of health insecurity in Dhubri's char settlements. The NFHS-5 data confirm that Dhubri district records institutional delivery rates, antenatal care coverage, and child immunisation completion rates well below the Assam state average, which is itself below the national average (NFHS, 2021). Bhattacharyya and Sharma (2018)

identify the transport barrier as the primary proximate determinant of low institutional delivery rates in Assam's char areas: the cost and physical difficulty of reaching mainland health facilities during labour, combined with the unpredictability of the onset of labour in relation to the seasonal availability of boat transport, deters hospital delivery even among women who express a preference for institutional care. The consequences are elevated rates of maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality that represent a severe and preventable health security failure.

Mental health constitutes a dimension of health security that is systematically underrepresented in formal health statistics but is of considerable importance in communities subject to repeated displacement, livelihood crisis, and chronic insecurity. Choudhury and Das (2019) examine the psychosocial dimensions of flood-induced displacement in the Brahmaputra valley, documenting elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptomatology among households that have experienced recurrent flood displacement. Adger (2006) connects psychological dimensions of vulnerability to the broader concept of adaptive capacity, arguing that communities whose psychosocial resources are depleted by chronic stress and repeated crisis are systematically less capable of adapting effectively to new environmental or economic shocks. The mental health burden of char-dwelling communities in Dhubri thus compounds their material vulnerabilities in ways that inhibit individual and household recovery from adverse events.

4.4 Personal Security: Violence, Exploitation, and Protection Gaps

Personal security, understood as freedom from physical violence, coercion, exploitation, and fear, is systematically compromised in the char settlements of Dhubri by the combination of geographic isolation, absent or inaccessible state protection mechanisms, and the social vulnerabilities generated by poverty and gender inequality. The physical remoteness of char settlements from police stations, courts,, and other organs of law enforcement means that access to formal protection and legal remedies is effectively unavailable to the majority of char-dwelling households. Disputes over land, crop shares, water access, and personal conduct are consequently resolved through informal mechanisms, including community arbitration and the authority of local leaders, which may be just but may also reflect the power inequalities of local social structure rather than the rights of the disputing parties (Hussain, 2013).

Women and girls in char communities face compounded personal security deficits produced by the intersection of gender norms that restrict mobility and voice with the physical isolation of char settlements and the minimal presence of institutional support services. Kabeer (2005) argues that gender-based vulnerability to violence and coercion is not reducible to individual incidents but is structured by the relational conditions that determine women's capacity to exercise agency and seek protection. In char communities, these relational conditions include limited independent income, dependence on male household members for transport and social navigation, and the absence of women's support organisations with effective reach into remote island settlements. Choudhury and Das (2019) document the gendered dimensions of displacement-related psychological distress in the Brahmaputra valley, finding that women experience distinctive forms of stress associated with the loss of domestic space, social networks, and the security of known environments.

Human trafficking constitutes a documented and serious personal security threat in the char areas of lower Assam, including Dhubri. The combination of poverty, limited educational attainment, and the absence of legitimate local employment creates structural conditions in which trafficking networks operate with relative impunity, recruiting young women and girls through deceptive employment promises directed at economically desperate households. Bharali and Saharia (2015) identify Dhubri as a district of significant

trafficking vulnerability within the broader Brahmaputra char belt, noting the existence of established networks with linkages to Indian metropolitan areas. The limited presence of law enforcement in char areas, combined with the social stigma that attaches to victims of trafficking in conservative rural communities, results in very low rates of reporting and prosecution that further enable trafficking networks to persist.

Child labour represents a further dimension of personal insecurity, collapsing the boundary between childhood and adult economic responsibility in ways that have long-term consequences for human capital formation. The International Labour Organization's analysis of child labour in South Asian agricultural communities identifies poverty, household income insecurity and the seasonal structure of agricultural work as the principal drivers of child labour, noting that parental aspiration for children's education is consistently subordinated to immediate economic necessity when household income falls below subsistence (ILO, 2015). In Dhubri's char settlements, children contribute to agricultural and domestic labour in ways that reduce school attendance and learning continuity, perpetuating the intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage and economic vulnerability.

4.5 Community Security: Social Cohesion, Stigmatisation and Educational Marginalisation

Community security, in the UNDP framework, refers to the capacity of groups to preserve their cultural identity, social practices, and collective values, thereby providing members with a sense of belonging, mutual support, and shared purpose. For Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri, community life is simultaneously a source of social resilience and a site of tension generated by the complex intersection of origin identity, local belonging, and the stigmatisation that has historically been attached to Bengali-speaking Muslim settlers in the dominant Assamese public discourse. Understanding community security in this context requires attention to both dimensions: the positive social capital generated within the community and the negative external pressures that constrain its flourishing.

Within char settlements, dense kinship networks, neighbourhood solidarities, and community-based institutions function as informal social protection mechanisms that partially compensate for the absence of formal welfare infrastructure. Labour reciprocity during planting and harvest, mutual aid in flood aftermath, and the provision of interest-free loans within extended family and neighbourhood networks represent economically significant dimensions of community-based security. Samaddar (2003) situates these informal solidarities within a broader analysis of how marginalised border communities construct social orders in the absence or inadequacy of state provision, arguing that their vitality is itself evidence of the structural deficits that generate their necessity. Mosque-based community organisations and informal village councils similarly play roles in dispute resolution, information dissemination, and collective resource management that exceed their nominal functions.

Against these internal solidarities must be set the experience of stigmatisation and social othering that flows from the dominant Assamese nationalist narrative, which has framed Bengali-speaking Muslim settlers as demographic and cultural threats to indigenous Assamese identity. Baruah (1999) traces the historical construction of this narrative, demonstrating its roots in the colonial period and its intensification through the anti-immigration mobilisations of the 1980s. Banerjee (2010) extends this analysis to examine the gendered dimensions of border-community stigmatisation, showing how women's bodies and conduct become sites on which anxieties about cultural contamination and demographic change are symbolically inscribed. The psychological and social consequences of sustained stigmatisation for Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri are empirically real: they inhibit civic participation, generate chronic psychosocial stress, and create barriers to accessing government services whose personnel may share or reflect the pre-

vailing social attitudes toward the community.

Educational marginalisation reproduces community insecurity across generations by restricting the acquisition of the skills, credentials and institutional knowledge that enable households to navigate bureaucratic processes, access formal employment and participate effectively in democratic governance. Ludden (2003) argues that access to education is not merely a welfare good but a precondition for the exercise of the democratic rights that are formally available to all citizens: without literacy and the cultural competence to engage with state institutions, formal rights remain inert. In Dhubri's char communities, educational attainment is constrained by poverty, seasonal displacement, the linguistic medium of instruction in Assamese rather than the Bengali, the community's mother tongue, and the limited availability of qualified teachers willing to serve in remote, difficult-to-reach island schools. Das (2016) documents the consequences of this educational deficit for the occupational horizons and institutional navigation capacity of char community members, finding that low educational attainment substantially narrows the range of livelihood strategies available to households and reduces their ability to claim welfare entitlements.

The NFHS-5 data for Assam confirm elevated rates of female illiteracy and low secondary school completion among Muslim populations in districts with the socioeconomic profile of Dhubri (NFHS, 2021). These gender differentials in educational attainment reflect the interaction of poverty with gender norms that prioritise boys' education when household resources are constrained, generating a specific form of capability deprivation among women and girls that compounds their vulnerability across multiple human security dimensions.

4.6 Environmental Security: Fluvial Hazard, Erosion, and Climate Change

Environmental insecurity occupies a foundational position in the human security profile of Bangladeshi-origin communities in Dhubri, not merely as one dimension among several but as the physical and ecological substrate that shapes all other forms of vulnerability. The Brahmaputra is among the world's most dynamic river systems: Sarma (2005) documents the river's characteristically high bank-erosion rates, substantial suspended-sediment load, and frequent channel migration, which together generate a continuously changing fluvial landscape that makes permanent settlement on char land a perpetually provisional undertaking. Annual monsoon flooding affects virtually all char settlements in Dhubri, inundating agricultural land, damaging or destroying housing, contaminating water sources, and severing transport connectivity to the mainland. For char communities, the flood season is not an exceptional disruption but an annual structural feature of life around which all productive and social activity must be organised.

Riverbank erosion represents a qualitatively distinct and more severe form of environmental insecurity than seasonal flooding, as its consequences are permanent and cumulative rather than temporary and reversible. When a char island erodes, the agricultural land and settlement infrastructure built upon it are lost indefinitely, often for decades. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013) emphasise that erosion-induced displacement is particularly destructive of social capital because it disrupts the community networks, kinship geographies, and accumulated local knowledge that give char settlements their resilience: when a community is forced to scatter across multiple relocation sites, the informal social protection mechanisms documented in Section 4.5 are severely weakened. The Central Water Commission's technical assessment of the Brahmaputra valley estimates substantial cumulative land loss to erosion in districts, including Dhubri, over the past five decades (Central Water Commission, 2015), though the precise figures remain contested and difficult to verify given the morphological complexity of the char system.

The mechanisms and consequences of environmental displacement among char communities bear comparison with the broader global literature on climate-related population movement. Black et al. (2011) argue that environmental change rarely acts as the sole cause of migration but rather interacts with existing economic, social and political vulnerabilities to alter migration decision-making; this framework applies directly to Dhubri's char communities, where erosion and flood displacement interact with poverty, land tenure insecurity and institutional exclusion to produce migration outcomes that reflect the compound character of vulnerability rather than environmental determinism alone. Mirza (2011) provides a regional assessment of flood risk in South Asia, demonstrating that the Brahmaputra basin faces among the highest flood hazard levels on the continent, with significant implications for population vulnerability in districts such as Dhubri.

Climate change projections for the Brahmaputra basin introduce an additional layer of environmental insecurity whose long-term trajectory is likely to amplify rather than ameliorate existing conditions. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report identifies the Himalayan-Tibetan river systems as among the most climate-sensitive hydrological systems globally, with projected changes in monsoon precipitation intensity, glacial melt dynamics, and extreme weather frequency that will alter the seasonal and long-term flow regimes of the Brahmaputra in ways that are not yet fully modeled (IPCC, 2022). For char communities already living at the margins of ecological tolerance, even modest increases in flood frequency or peak discharge compound losses of agricultural capital, housing infrastructure, and community cohesion. The adaptive capacity of Bangladeshi-origin char dwellers to accommodate these changes is severely constrained by poverty, institutional exclusion, and the absence of any coordinated climate adaptation policy specifically directed at the char settlement context.

Disaster management responses to the annual flood cycle in Dhubri have documented limitations in their reach to char communities. The temporal and logistical demands of relief distribution to remote, inaccessible islands create systematic delays, so char households frequently receive emergency assistance after the acute crisis has passed. Hussain (2013) documents the pattern of relief distribution in Assam's char districts, finding that the allocation processes favour communities with physical accessibility and institutional advocates, generating a systematic disadvantage for the most remote and politically marginalised char settlements. The longer-term resettlement and rehabilitation programmes administered by the state government in response to erosion displacement have similarly focused primarily on mainland communities, leaving char-dwellers to negotiate relocation informally and without institutional support.

5. Discussion: Intersectionality, Structural Vulnerability, and Policy Implications

The six thematic sections presented above reveal a pattern of compounding insecurity that cannot be adequately understood through any single analytical dimension. Economic insecurity is simultaneously a cause and consequence of food insecurity; the lean season deficit that produces child malnutrition is a direct outcome of the precarious sharecropping arrangements and seasonal income structures that make agricultural livelihoods unreliable, while malnutrition itself reduces adult labour productivity and thereby perpetuates economic vulnerability. Health insecurity is materially connected to environmental insecurity: the waterborne disease burden that elevates child mortality in char settlements during the monsoon season is the proximate consequence of flood-induced contamination of water sources, while the chronic stress of environmental vulnerability compounds the psychological health burden documented by Choudhury and Das (2019). Personal insecurity is linked to community insecurity: the trafficking vulnerability of young women in char communities is a structural outcome of educational marginalisation and livelihood

constraint, and the isolation of communities from state protection mechanisms is itself a product of the administrative exclusions that define char settlement as a space outside the effective reach of formal institutions.

This intersectionality has important methodological implications. Adger (2006) argues that vulnerability assessments that address single dimensions of exposure systematically underestimate the actual burden of disadvantage for communities subject to compound vulnerability, because the adaptive capacity relevant to any one threat is reduced by the simultaneous presence of others. A household facing economic instability, nutritional deficiency, health vulnerability, and flood risk is not simply the sum of four independent deprivations; the interaction of these conditions generates a qualitatively distinct state of extreme vulnerability in which the capacity to absorb or recover from any single adverse event is compromised by the presence of all the others. Alkire (2003) makes a similar methodological argument in the context of human security measurement, insisting that the dimensions of human security must be assessed jointly rather than sequentially if the compound character of insecurity is to be captured accurately.

The policy implications of this intersectional analysis are demanding but clear. Gasper (2005) argues that the political utility of the human security framework lies precisely in its insistence on the integrative character of human welfare: it resists the bureaucratic tendency to decompose complex social problems into departmentally manageable components and demand responses that address structural conditions rather than their symptoms. In the Dhubri context, this means that sector-specific interventions, while necessary, are insufficient: an improved primary health centre on the char will improve health outcomes only if the transport barriers that prevent access are simultaneously addressed; a strengthened PDS will improve food security only if the documentation barriers that exclude char households from ration entitlements are removed; educational improvement will generate returns only if the economic conditions that make schooling attendance costly are ameliorated. Drèze and Sen (2013) make a comparable argument for India more broadly, contending that the country's persistent developmental deficits reflect not the absence of individual welfare programmes but the failure to integrate them into coherent strategies that address the structural determinants of poverty and vulnerability.

The human security framework's insistence on the individual and household as the referent objects of security, rather than the community or state, also draws attention to the significant internal heterogeneity that exists within the Bangladeshi-origin population of Dhubri. Not all members of this community are equally vulnerable: households with mainland land tenure, access to formal employment, or urban-migration income occupy a substantially different position in the security landscape from those with no documented land tenure, no educated members, and no connections to the formal economy. Kabeer (2005) emphasises gender as a particularly significant axis of internal differentiation that aggregate community analyses tend to obscure: women and girls in Bangladeshi-origin char settlements face compounded vulnerabilities generated by the interaction of community poverty with gender hierarchies that restrict mobility, educational access, and decision-making autonomy in ways that make their human security profile distinctively severe. Policy responses that treat the community as undifferentiated will systematically fail to reach the most vulnerable members.

The role of civil society organisations in bridging the gap between formal welfare entitlements and their effective delivery to char communities deserves acknowledgment as a partial but significant response to structural failure. Bharali and Saharia (2015) document the activities of non-governmental organisations in Assam's char belt, including legal literacy programmes designed to assist communities in obtaining

documentation for welfare schemes, community health worker networks, and livelihood diversification initiatives. These interventions represent important forms of adaptive capacity support for communities whose institutional exclusion otherwise leaves them without recourse. Piper (2009) notes that civil society organisations are often the primary institutional presence in migration-affected communities whose labour market and social service integration is incomplete, providing forms of information, advocacy, and support that partially compensate for the gaps in state provision. However, the reach of civil society in Dhubri's most remote char areas is limited, and their interventions cannot substitute for the systemic government action that the scale and structural character of the insecurities documented here require.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Bangladeshi-origin migrants in Dhubri district, Assam, experience a compound and intersecting set of human security deprivations spanning economic, food, health, personal, community, and environmental dimensions. The analysis establishes that these insecurities are not primarily the product of individual circumstance or cultural factors but are structurally generated by a combination of geographic marginality, institutional exclusion, ecological precarity, and historical patterns of settlement that have placed this population at the intersection of multiple, compounding vulnerabilities. The human security framework, applied with precision to the specific conditions of the Dhubri char landscape, proves its analytical utility by capturing this compound character in a way that more targeted, single-dimension approaches cannot.

The UNDP's foundational argument that genuine security for individuals requires sustained attention to the social, economic, and ecological conditions of life, rather than territorial or juridical measures alone, is confirmed and extended by the empirical patterns documented here (UNDP, 1994). Alkire's (2003) methodological insistence on assessing human security dimensions jointly rather than sequentially is vindicated by the finding that virtually every dimension of insecurity analysed in this paper is simultaneously cause and consequence of the others, generating a systemic condition of vulnerability whose structural character demands structural responses.

Several specific policy directions emerge from this analysis. The documentation barriers that exclude char-dwelling households from Public Distribution System entitlements, MGNREGA benefits, and healthcare schemes require administrative reform; mobile and flexible registration systems appropriate to fluid char residential circumstances are technically feasible and operationally necessary. Healthcare delivery in char areas must be redesigned with physical accessibility as the primary design criterion, deploying community health worker models, mobile medical units, and telemedicine platforms as complements to fixed-facility investment. The specific maternal and child health deficits documented by NFHS-5 (2021) and elaborated by Bhattacharyya and Sharma (2018) require targeted investment in outreach-based antenatal, delivery and postnatal care that does not depend on char communities accessing distant mainland facilities. Climate adaptation planning for the Brahmaputra char belt must specifically incorporate the circumstances of char-dwelling communities and be designed with active community participation rather than as a technocratic exercise conducted without reference to local knowledge and experience: this is consistent with the participatory approach to adaptive capacity development advocated in the IPCC's most recent assessment (IPCC, 2022).

In conclusion, achieving genuine security for the population of Dhubri necessitates a transition from reliance on "territorial or juridical measures" to a sustained commitment to improving the social, economic, and ecological "conditions of life". While this study provides a conceptual foundation through

secondary analysis, it highlights the urgent need for future longitudinal research and sustained ethnographic engagement to further amplify the voices and visibility of one of South Asia's most overlooked populations.

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