

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
DYNAMICS OF ADJUSTMENT TO RIVERBANK
EROSION HAZARD AND POPULATION RESETTLEMENT
IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA-JAMUNA FLOODPLAIN

by

MOHAMMAD Q. ZAMAN

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
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ISBN 0-315-47927-2

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ABSTRACT

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF ADJUSTMENT TO RIVERBANK EROSION HAZARD AND POPULATION RESETTLEMENT IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA-JAMUNA FLOODPLAIN

Riverbank slumping or erosion caused by shifting of river channels is an endemic and recurrent natural hazard in Bangladesh that displaces an estimated one million people in the country annually. While erosion removes land and displaces population on such a large scale, new and fertile land reemerges every year from river beds forming *chars* (new islands) in the midst of the stream; this erosion and accretion of land is a characteristic feature of the courses of the active river systems of Bangladesh. The purpose of this study is to describe and explain human responses and adjustment to riverbank erosion displacement in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain in the context of the micro-level social, economic and political environment which largely shapes local adjustment strategies and resettlement options. Utilizing both survey and in-depth anthropological data, the study shows that the behavioral approach commonly used in natural hazard studies is inadequate to understand human responses to hazards.

Human responses to hazard are always conditioned by the structure of social relations of production. The evidence found in this study suggests that people affected by riverbank erosion have differential responses and adjustment strategies, depending upon their economic

position and social class. Since erosion is endemic in the floodplain, most households in the *char* villages have insufficient land for subsistence and survival. The scarcity and unequal distribution of land, together with limited access to new depositional land, force landless and displaced peasant households to develop patron-client ties with the local landed elite in terms of peasant-landlord relations of personal dependence and political services. The patron-tied displacees are used as *lathiyals* (clubmen) by local landlords who are in constant struggle with each other to secure control over new *char* land and expand their agricultural "frontier" for extraction of surplus. In fact, the fierce battles for changing land resources permeates all social and political relationships between the patrons and dependent clients, because ownership or use of land is the prime factor of adjustment to repeated displacement in the floodplain. An understanding of this social context of adjustment to natural disaster requires that human responses be viewed within a broader historical and political-economic context, since options for adjustment are largely products of existing social structure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of several people who were influential in the realization of this research. My advisor, Dr. Raymond E. Wiest, supervised me throughout every stage of the present study with his characteristic enthusiasm and discipline. I have benefitted enormously from his insights both in the field and in the analysis of the data that make up this work. I wish to thank Dr. Wiest for his time, knowledge, and the patience he has shown in discussing the issues raised in this study. I am also thankful to all members of my Supervisory Committee: Dr. Marek Debicki of Political Studies, Dr. John Rogge of Geography, and Dr. Louise E. Sweet of Anthropology for their criticisms and contributions. Dr. Sweet deserves special mention for her critical comments on an earlier draft and her considerable understanding of the social forces at work in the riverine peasant villages of Bangladesh.

The study grew out of a joint research program between the University of Manitoba (Canada) and Jahangirnagar University (Bangladesh), funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada. I am grateful to Drs. John Rogge and K. Moudood Elahi -- the Team Leaders of the Riverbank Erosion Impact Study (REIS) Project -- for their help and assistance to carry out the research.

Two people deserve special words of gratitude. Dr. Ralph W. Nicholas of the University of Chicago introduced me to the historical literature that I used in this study; he also shared his vast knowledge of Bengal peasant culture and society. Dr. Peter J. Bertocci of Oakland

University made useful comments which improved the overall quality of the work. I am deeply grateful to both of them.

Most of all, I must offer my heartfelt thanks to the people of village Char Chashi and of Kazipur who form the subject of this study. No fieldworker could ever hope for a more supportive and hospitable research environment. I would like to thank my research assistant Anwarul Islam Bablu for his help and assistance in the field data collection. I am also thankful to my co-researchers Dr. Chowdhury Haque, Matiur Rahman, Ziarat Hossain and Charles Greenberg for their support. I appreciate the help I received from Norman Klippenstein in data processing, from Mike Kelley in map preparation, and from Ziarat Hossain who prepared the figures used in this thesis.

The preparation, research, and write-up of the present study meant long hours of loneliness for my wife Habiba and my loving four-year-old daughter Kusum. I am especially thankful to them for providing me the necessary time to engage in the kind of work I enjoy most. In appreciation of their cooperation, help, and long endurance, I lovingly dedicate this study to them.

M. Q. Z.

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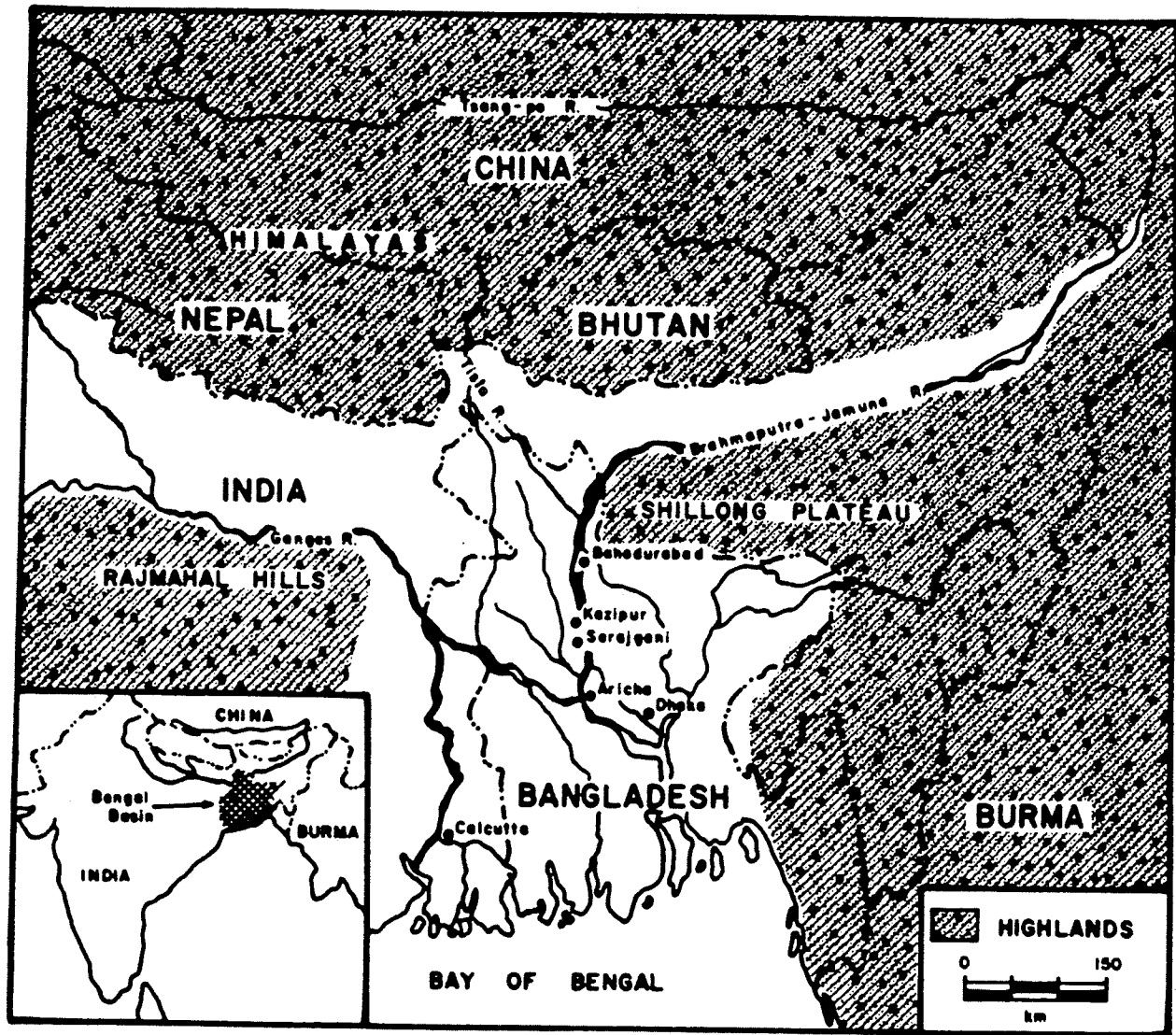
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Figure 1
Geo-political Map of Bangladesh



Source: Haque 1988

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*Nodir ekul bhange, okul ghore,
eito nodir khela.
Shokal belar raja, are bhai
fakir sondha bela.*

Breaking this bank, building that
bank, this is the river's lark.
It makes the rich man of the morn
a destitute by dark.

- A Bangladeshi proverb

The great rivers and their larger distributaries are continually eating up one bank and depositing silt on the other; while islands and *chars* of considerable size rise from their beds and often disappear as quickly as they come up.

Ahmad, Nafis. *An Economic Geography of East Pakistan*.
London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 34.

Riverbank erosion is an endemic and recurrent natural hazard in Bangladesh. The purpose of this study is to describe and explain human adjustment to displacement due to riverbank erosion in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain in the context of micro-level social, economic and political environments which largely shape local adjustment strategies and resettlement options. My primary focus is Char Chashi,¹ a riparian village in the midst of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain in the district of Serajganj, but the analysis extends beyond the village and links it with other villages regionally and, to a limited degree, the floodplain as a whole. I also make some reference to resettlement in the southern delta in order to show that the processes of adjustment in Char Chashi are not unique, but also prevalent in other riparian villages of Bangladesh.

1.1 The Setting of the Problem

Bangladesh, situated on the delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river systems, is occasional victim of various types of natural hazards such as tropical cyclones, droughts, tornadoes, and tidal surges, but it regularly experiences floods that are associated with a distinct type of hazard, namely, riverbank slumping or erosion caused by shifting of the river channels. The changes in the river courses carry away valuable cultivable land, destroy village settlements, markets and towns, displacing an estimated one million people annually (Rogge and Haque 1987). Historically, the land has been made up largely of river deposition, erosion and re-deposition. The annual flooding of the plains of these rivers is a blessing because it makes the land fertile; but the force of flood waters also regularly causes bank slumping or erosion. According to a study conducted by the Institute of Engineers of Bangladesh, the Brahmaputra-Jamuna river has been shifting westward at an annual average rate of 0.8 kilometer per year since 1936; the Ganges eroded about 5.5 km of its west bank near Sujanagar in Pabna district between 1956 and 1975 (Holiday 1986). Even gradual migration or shifting of channels of the major rivers in the country may be anywhere between 200 to 5,500 feet annually (Galay 1980).

There are few riverine areas in the world that have such unstable river courses (Coleman 1969). It is said that river Jamuna has never been in the same place for two successive years since its development in the past 150 years (Ahmad 1968, Kamaluddin 1973). In a typical year, one-tenth of the total 56,000 square miles of land in the country is severely flooded; at least one-half is subject to some inundation; and about 2,400 km of bankline annually experiences major erosion (Islam and

Islam 1985). Currey (1979) identified 66 out of 495 *upazilas* (sub-districts) of the country as affected and/or liable to bank erosion. Thus, in 1984-85 alone, erosion took place at 283 localities, of which 38 were in the Brahmaputra floodplain area; the Ganges caused erosion at 30 places; the Meghna at 6 places; the Teesta at 8 places and other minor rivers in 201 places (Holiday 1986). Another study carried out by the River Research Institute of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (hereafter BWDB) identified 254 erosion-hit areas in the country which it claimed resulted in erosion to the length of 1,439,487 feet (Islam and Islam 1985). As a result, every year in Bangladesh hundreds of thousands of people are affected by riverbank erosion. All of the displaced population becomes virtually destitute and is added to the already large army of landless population in the country, currently estimated to be over 50% of the total rural households of Bangladesh (Jannuzi and Peach 1980).

While erosion removes land, new and fertile lands reemerge every year from river beds in the midst of the stream where they did not exist before. Indeed, this erosion and accretion of land is a characteristic feature of the courses of the active river systems of Bangladesh. These newly formed islands -- locally called *chars* -- are settled upon by people of both banks as new agricultural and settlement "frontiers" and remain sources of perennial dispute among conflicting claimants. Depending on the quality of the top soil, this land can be used immediately after it reemerges. For example, land with silty soils is the most valued; one can grow transplanted rice and other crops with practically no tillage. Land with clay and mud is not easily cultivable and is generally used as pasture during winter. The sandy *chars* are infertile, but nevertheless poor peasants often try to raise millet or

cultivate sweet potato (Rashid 1978). For the first few years, the new *char* land is cultivable only during the winter season until additional depositions above the normal flood level are built up or are wiped out again due to changes in the courses of rivers. Thus, accretional land is also subject to continual change, erosion and reformation.

What is unique about this land is that it is an "unstable" resource. Peasants living in other parts of Bangladesh do not think of or find their agricultural land unstable. In many parts of the world peasant agricultural production or yield is uncertain due to variable natural conditions such as rain or drought. But in the Bangladesh floodplain area it is not only that agricultural production is uncertain due to flooding and other climate related hazards; the land itself is unstable - - a gamble in the shifting river channels. Thus, it is possible that in any single season thousands of acres of land are either gained or lost in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain region (see Ahmad 1968). The fact that village Char Chashi where this research was carried out in 1984-85 was almost completely wiped out by erosion during the monsoon of 1986 further attests to the capricious nature and extent of erosion in effect in the floodplain.

In a country with over 100 million people with 90% dependent on agriculture and living in rural densities of nearly 1,800 per square mile, with 50% already landless, and many more continually displaced by bank erosion, one can well imagine the significance for grasping even these unstable land resources for livelihood by the floodplain users. Access to *char* land, its use, exploitation and control are, therefore, crucial not only for the survival and adjustment of the displaced people but also essential for the continuity and expansion of the land-based

power of the large land owners locally called *jotedars* and *talukdars*.² As a class of landed elites, the *jotedars* and *talukdars* historically were "middlemen" between the *zamindars* (landlords) and the *rai-yats* (cultivating peasants) under the *zamindari* of Bengal (see Roy 1979). Despite the abolition of the system in 1950, the land-based power of the ex-landlords remains very much alive in the countryside (Jannuzi and Peach 1980). As found in Kazipur, the *jotedars* and *talukdars* have control over *char* land which is important for their own economic and political "stability"; they annually extract considerable surplus wealth from the peasant households as "tribute." In exchange for the tribute, the displaced peasants are allowed to use the land. Following local Kazipur tradition, I use the terms *jotedar* and *talukdar* to refer to local power-holders who have a stronghold both on the means of production and coercion; this stronghold strengthens their grip over the local riverine environment and *char* settlements.

In Bangladesh, people consider this specific adjustment to riverine environment as a special category of rural life -- called *char* life -- making up a "*choura*" subculture. A cultural distinction is thus made between people who live on *chars* and those on the mainland. The *char* land is considered uninhabitable by the *bhadraloks* (gentlemen)³ due to the risks of riverine hazard and displacement that requires repeated movements and social adjustment to erosion. The most common characterization of *char* people is that they work as hired thugs of powerful local *jotedars* and *talukdars* in dispute over depositional land. Mainland villagers, therefore, undermine *char* inhabitants socially and culturally.

Shifting river channels in Bangladesh thus cause not only loss of land and human settlement; they also open up "frontiers" of new

agricultural land supported by what may be called a "frontier-type" society -- isolated, marginal, violent, and culturally distinct from the mainland (cf. Lattimore 1951). They are also, to some extent, practically "lawless" because it is often difficult to enforce law and order in *char* villages due to their relative geographic isolation. Even when possible, it is extremely difficult to make laws operative if they conflict with the interests of the local *talukdars* who, like war-lords, have their own "rules of the game." The overall economic and political relationship with the mainland and the larger society is what defines *chars* as "frontiers" (see Lattimore 1951); marginality and endemic violence, typical of *char* villages, are products of this relationship.

Historically the changing river environment has brought up two important forces significant to adjustment processes to riverbank erosion hazard. First, a set of land laws regulating ownership and access to emergent *char* land and dispute arising therefrom; and second, the rise of a violent *lathiyali*⁴ institution -- a peasant-lord system to gain control over accretion land by the powerful *talukdars* and *jotedars* using their patron-tied dependents as *lathiyals*. The twin forces of ownership rights and violence between competing local *talukdars* to control new depositional land played key roles in the resettlement and adjustment process in the past (Mukerjee 1938, Nicholas 1962), and remain to date enduring forces in the social structure of the riparian villages of Bangladesh. Thus, what these processes indicate is that adjustment to dislocation and resettlement in the Bangladesh floodplain has always been a systematic socio-political response to the whole phenomenon of riverbank erosion and displacement.

1.2 Review of Natural Hazard & Disaster Research

1.2.1 A General Overview

There is not a great deal of anthropological literature on disaster responses that is useful to understand this unique problem of population displacement and resettlement in the context of a developing society like Bangladesh. To date, the large body of literature on natural hazard studies has developed mainly in the industrialized West, particularly in the fields of geography and sociology. Major geographic studies rooted in the human ecology and occupancy tradition that developed at Chicago include Gilbert White's (1964) choice of adjustments to floods; farmers' perceptions of flood risk in the United States and the impact on land-use decision (Burton 1962); perception of drought hazard on the Great Plains of the United States (Saarinen 1966); and perception of hazard and choice in floodplain management (Kates 1962). These studies primarily give prominence to individual perception -- attitudes, motivations, beliefs, values and personality -- and response strategies to expand the explanatory framework in the tradition of behavioral and decision-making models. The focus of such paradigms, therefore, has been to understand how particular natural disasters, such as floods (White 1974), are perceived and how individuals and communities adjust to risks, respond to the warning systems and cope with the losses and destruction. While it is often difficult to define and measure satisfactorily behavioral variables such as attitudes and values, greater emphasis on individual response and strategy to cope with "extreme" natural events has in effect consistently underplayed the role of many social and cultural factors and the larger economic and political systems in hazard adjustment (Hewitt 1983, Torry 1979a). This is also true of sociological studies of natural

disasters in the United States which are by and large behaviorally-oriented and deal mainly with reaction of hazard victims to emergency evacuation (Drabek 1969, Drabek and Boggs 1968), coordination of organizational and mass behavior (Form and Nosow 1958, Mileti, Drabek and Haas 1975), and the social and community processes involving human relations between groups under conditions of stress (Barton 1969, Baker and Chapman 1962). This research orientation among both geographers and sociologists from the 1950s through 1970s resulted, according to Hewitt (1983), in the development of a distinctively "technocratic" approach for mitigating hazard losses in the forms of disaster preparedness, evacuation plans, relief and rehabilitation efforts.

However, since the mid-1970s several streams of development in natural hazard studies began to emerge as criticisms of the state of disaster research, but more particularly of the limitations of the American behavioral approach in terms of its applicability to non-western societies (see Baird et al. 1975, Wisner et al. 1976, Waddell 1977). The general criticisms offered include (i) the lack of comparative cross-cultural and multidisciplinary studies (Kreps 1984, Quarantelli and Dynes 1977), (ii) the absence of treatment of "social adjustment" to hazards (Waddell 1977, Gold 1980), (iii) the lack of a holistically and historically grounded perspective in disaster analysis (Wisner et al. 1976, Oliver-Smith 1986) and (iv) the lack of adequate investigation of the impact of post-disaster relief/aid, patterns of local inequality and community social stratification, class structure and social change (O'Keefe 1975, Wisner et al. 1976, Bates et al. 1982, Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982, Oliver-Smith 1986, Watts 1983, Zaman 1986a, Haque 1988). The latter perspective has been raised principally by cultural geographers and anthropologists through their work and insights into the indigenous

social and cultural strategies of adjustment to disasters in pre-capitalist Third World societies.

1.2.2 Anthropology and Disaster Research

Even though anthropology as a discipline has a long-standing intellectual tradition in the study of non-western cultures and societies, few anthropological studies deal specifically with natural hazard phenomena. There are only a handful of early ethnographic studies that deal explicitly with natural hazards and disasters (Belshaw 1951, Keesing 1952, Wallace 1956a, Firth 1959). Several reasons are offered for the paucity of studies in the field. Wallace (1956b:15) claims that anthropology, like other social sciences, is devoted to the study of "normal" patterns of human behavior and that hazards or disasters are "isolated and annoying interruptions of norms" that create "breaks in patterns." Therefore, there is a tendency to treat extreme natural events as ecologically marginal, remote or peripheral issues. Torry (1979b), however, considers that more plausible answers possibly "lie at a deeper, epistemological level." Torry (1979b:521) argues that

there is a long-established penchant in anthropology for conceptualizing a social system interacting with its physical environment in terms of "resilience" -- the ability of a system to resist external perturbations.

Such a homeostatic perspective on environmental hazards, losses or vulnerability typically regards natural events as constraints on traditional community social organization rather than agents or forces that may power social change (Torry 1979b).

The development of the cultural ecological perspective in anthropology and post-disaster relocation and resettlement studies in the Third World provided new impetus to the recent growth of anthropological

literature on natural disasters (Oliver-Smith 1986). Many traditional ethnographic accounts have paid attention to socio-cultural adaptation of pastoral nomads to ecologically harsh drought-prone environments (see Barth 1958, 1973; Sweet 1965a, 1965b; Dyson-Hudson 1966). However, these studies are generally cultural-ecological interpretations of adaptation to "marginal" environments, not to hazard or disaster. Moreover, cultural-ecological studies have dealt mostly with small-scale societies which are relatively undifferentiated internally, or such internal differentiation has not been very significant. Recent works of anthropologists on forced migration and resettlement (Scudder 1982, Fahim 1968, Colson 1971), comparative work on dam relocation (Brokensha 1964, Brokensha and Scudder 1968) and relocation/resettlement due to natural disaster, political upheaval and planned change (Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982, Oliver-Smith 1986) have focused on household and community responses to displacement with emphasis on differential responses to adaptive strategies (Scudder and Colson 1982), suggesting further refinement of analysis both along the lines of social differentiation and community socio-cultural systems.

1.2.3 Toward a Conceptual Framework: The Historical-Structural Approach

Generally speaking, the growing dissatisfaction with the behavioral school of disaster research came from geographers and anthropologists alike. The consensus developed out of the constructive criticisms thus far is two-fold. First, there is clearly a need to move human-environment relationships beyond a natural causation paradigm into a dialectical relationship of man-environment-social forces. The advocates of this perspective (Waddell 1977, O'Keefe, Westgate and Wisner 1976)

suggest that it is the conditions of underdevelopment that force the poor -- the most vulnerable group -- to leave relatively more secured forms of adjustment for high-risk disaster prone areas. Therefore, social forces play a strong role in the process of adjustment to hazards. It is also maintained that the social context of disaster adjustment is dependent on historical conditions for the development of structural domination and dependence that have long been a legacy of the colonial past for many developing countries. Second, Hewitt (1983) and Torry (1986) forcefully argue that natural disaster studies must confront both natural and social causes of disaster at the systemic and local levels. Hewitt (1983) considers that people in many societies view natural disasters as "normal" and "manageable," but disaster impact is compounded by the pattern of resource allocation/distribution, local stratification and inequalities -- factors identified as structural causes of poverty and underdevelopment (Baird et al. 1975, Bates et al. 1982).

The historical-structural approach emphasizes analysis of social classes and relations of production in historical context. In this study, the impact of structural factors is identified by linking household responses to social relations of production and the totality of social life. Advantages to this approach are that it stresses a dynamic view of the overall structural factors and the social and political matrix within which individual responses, adjustment patterns and resettlement options occur. Human responses to hazard are always conditioned by the structure of social relations (Smith and O'Keefe 1980); therefore, understanding the impact of hazard is impossible without taking into consideration the historical development of social relations of production. Just as natural processes such as flood or erosion may affect social structure, so also social and economic

processes such as land ownership rights, tenure systems and regional economic development strategies may affect adjustment to natural hazards.

This approach is useful whether the analysis is focused on the individual, the family or community, or on such issues as access to and control of land resources necessary for adjustment and relocation. Since the household is the primary unit of production and consumption in Bangladesh rural society, it is also the principal unit to respond to any kind of hazards, for example, riverbank erosion. Although it is possible to conceptualize adjustment or responses to hazard as individual "choice" at the household level, such choices are in fact determined by a number of socioeconomic and cultural factors -- for example -- by the size of landholding, by composition of households (whether nuclear, joint or extended), by kin or patron--based interdependencies between landed and displaced persons, or by other social linkages. However, ownership and control of land -- the economic base and major means of production -- is the most significant variable that determines the development of complex network of adjustment strategies practiced by the floodplain users. As will be evident, the colonial legacy of land ownership and redistribution, the evolution of land tenure systems for *char* land administration and the historical role of local landed elites in organized violence for control over newly formed *char* land, and their relationships with the state significantly influence local adjustment strategies of the mass of displaced people. The use of the historical-structural approach will make explicit the mechanism by which social, economic and political forces directly or indirectly shape adjustment patterns and resettlement policies and options.

1.3 The Problems and Objectives of the Study

Despite this scale of the problem, riverbank erosion hazard remains to date a poorly understood phenomenon in geographic as well as social scientific studies on Bangladesh. However, there are a number of studies by geographers and social psychologists that deal with (i) human responses and adjustment pattern to storm and coastal cyclones (Islam 1974, Zaidi and Schuler 1962); and (ii) cropping adjustment strategies to annual flooding in the country (Ralph 1975, Islam 1980, Paul 1984). I shall review the general findings of the studies in terms of adjustment to cyclone and flood hazards.

Islam (1974), a member of White's (1974) comparative research team, investigated perception and adjustment to coastal cyclones in Bangladesh. He found that people view cyclones as an "act of God" which may recur, and that perception of storm hazards does not vary by education or occupation. Islam (1974:23) further characterized the villagers as having "a traditional inborn fatalism" hardly caring to seek employment opportunities outside hazard zones. Even though a "native," Islam seems unaware of, or fails to appreciate the importance of social and cultural factors of adjustment except a passing mention of "kinship and community ties." This may possibly be due to an uncritical acceptance of White's approach and methodology which has been criticized widely (Baird et al. 1975, Wisner et al. 1976, Waddell 1977). Similarly, Zaidi and Schuler (1962:157) reported the reactions of storm cyclone victims in a Comilla village using a questionnaire "drawn upon the patterns of American disaster studies." Ralph (1975) adopted an "ecological paradigm" of natural hazard in her investigation of perception and adjustment to flood among villagers in the Meghna floodplain. She reported use of indigenous

measures of adjustment to flood; the study found no significant relationship between socioeconomic variables (i.e., age, education, occupation, etc.) and attitude toward future flooding or perception about severity of flood. In a study of four villages in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain, Paul (1984) found that the villagers are well aware of flood hazards. Normal flood (*borsha*) is viewed by the villagers as a blessing since it is beneficial to them; high or abnormal flood (*bonna*) is considered hazardous because of widespread crop damages and other losses associated with such flooding. Both Paul (1984) and Islam (1980) report that agricultural practices and cropping patterns in the floodplain are well adapted to the characteristics of annual flood in Bangladesh.

Recent studies by Haque and Hossain (1988) and Haque (1988) have, however, made significant contributions to our understanding of perception and response strategies to riverbank erosion hazards in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain. It is reported that one-third of the villages in the survey area in Kazipur *upazila* were either completely or partially affected, displacing an estimated 30,000 people during 1972-82 (Haque and Hossain 1988). Haque (1988) examined the characteristics and nature of responses to riverbank erosion hazards and found that human responses are significantly related to socio-economic "entitlements" among floodplain users and the available resources and opportunities. In other words, Haque (1988) strongly argues that human responses are intrinsically related to the factors associated with the existing social structure (i.e., household economy, ownership of land, occupation and other socio-economic statuses) along with the nature of geo-physical agents.

The theme of the present study is to examine a wide range of human responses from immediate reactions to long-term socio-cultural and

political factors of adjustment particularly as they pertain to rural social change and development. I shall discuss the impact of riverbank erosion hazard and population dislocation on the economic and social organization of a single village within a regional economic, social and political context. The study generates baseline information on two important and related themes in hazard research. First, the study shows how individual and household adjustments are conditioned by social relations of production, interdependence between landed and displaced persons, kinship and reciprocity ideology and social linkages between people who share certain values as members of traditional corporate organizations. Second, the study shows how micro-level economic and political factors interact with macro-politics to determine the use of accretional and depositional land as they relate to land redistribution and resettlement of the displaced population. An understanding of this set of issues is of primary importance to an assessment of the problem.

Of the two major tasks I have set for myself in this study, the first, to describe the role of kinship and kin-based inter-relationships, *gusthi* (patrilineage) and *samaj* (local corporate group) in adjustment to erosion hazard is relatively straightforward. The second task, an analysis of the micro-macro interplay of economic and political factors for use and control of depositional land, local-level power structure and village factions, and finally, recruitment to organized *lathiyal* groups for violent possession of *char* land, is exceedingly complex. An understanding of these sets of issues requires examination of the nature of local political power, support and protection of the *lathiyals*, the nature of intra-/inter-village political alliance/opposition, and identification of sources of local patrons' linkages with the local and

national administration. Although I recognize the role of kinship and reciprocity ideology in adjustment to erosion and displacement, I argue that historically the rise of the *lathiyali* institution has been the most important structural framework shaping access to and use of depositional land by the displaced population. In fact, the household as a 'production unit' is helpless in riverine environment without such a connection for support and survival. Peasant households in *char* villages are integral parts of the *lathiyali* system to secure their rights to *char* land which appears and disappears every year.

Anthropological studies of this phenomenon in Bangladeshi rural society are rare. Adnan (1976) made a study of the nature of land conflict and violence in *char* villages in Barisal district in the lower Meghna delta. He observed that local patrons recruit and retain followers through a mixture of persuasive and coercive measures with their own private armies of *lathiyals* "to inflict selective extra-legal violence" (Adnan 1976:7). The use of *lathiyals* by local *talukdars* for land grabbing and consequent loss of human lives in violence are almost established practices of *char* life in Bangladesh (Ali 1981, Wahed, Kamal and Hasnat 1983, Zaman and Wiest 1985, Zaman 1987). When a patron succeeds in violent fights over depositional land, resettlement takes place usually with his own trusted followers, kin or dependents, and the patron remains the virtual owner of the entire *char*.

Although this study is not primarily about the *lathiyali* institution as such, an understanding of the social basis of its origins and the political role of *lathiyals* in mobilizing regional dispute will form an important part of my analysis. The *talukdar* as a member of the local political elite and a powerful regional patron, backed by his political linkage with the administration, is a typical "political entrepreneur"

(Attwood 1974) in mobilizing regional dispute. As noted earlier, the *talukdars* in Bengal historically had their own private armies of *lathiyals* for physical violence with impunity and no apparent accountability. They ruled the countryside, maintained local "law and order" and used the *lathiyals* as instruments of coercion for local control and extraction of surplus from the peasants (see Carstairs 1895, Broomfield 1976).

My analysis of the *lathiyali* institution comes close to Blok's (1974) understanding of the mafia in western Sicily. For Blok, *mafiosi* are primarily "political middlemen" or "local power-brokers" who bridge the local-national gap "linking the infrastructure of the village to the superstructure of the larger society" (1974:7). Blok accounts for the rise of the mafia to relative isolation and marginality of Sicily and the nature of weak state systems. However, my own analysis of the origins of the *lathiyali* institution presented in this study reveals that it was not isolation but the integration of the Bengal rural peasantry with the colonial state through a chain of landed intermediaries (i.e., *zamindar*, *talukdar*, *jotedar*, etc.) with monopoly over local-level administrative and political functions that gave rise to this "parapolitical system" (Bailey 1968).⁵ The primary function of landed intermediaries was to extract surpluses from the peasants in the form of land revenue for the colonial state. I attempt to show how *talukdars* as local "power-holders" in contemporary rural Bangladesh take advantage of the unstable riverine situation by maintaining invisible armies of *lathiyals* (i) to extract surplus and/or use of cheap labor of the dependent peasant households to expand new agricultural frontiers, and (ii) to secure further control over new *char* land. In addition, with *lathiyals* behind them, the

talukdars can also significantly influence outcomes in formal political structures. Therefore, my thesis is that the *lathiyali* system has long been a systematic socio-political adaptation to riverbank erosion and displacement in riverine Bangladesh.

1.4 Definitions of Key Concepts

In order to deal with the problems stated earlier, it is necessary to define some key concepts used in this study. I shall review the background of these concepts before stating my own usage of them. "Natural hazard" or "disaster" are used interchangeably throughout this study. There is evidently a lack of consensus among scholars on what constitutes a natural disaster. One major approach regards natural hazards as extreme natural events generated from geo-physical sources (Burton and Kates 1964). Another orientation, popularly known as the Chicago approach, emphasizes the man-nature interaction in defining hazards (Kates 1971, Burton et al. 1978). A third approach argues that hazards, instead of extraordinary events, be viewed as an extreme version of situations in everyday life (Baird et al. 1975, Waddell 1977). This third approach is most appropriate for the present study because it emphasizes the social conditions which aggravate the post-hazard situation in terms of risk vulnerability and differential adjustment ability of individuals in a society. Interaction of both natural and social factors (e.g., population pressure, and lack of access to land resources) accentuates the impact of natural disaster. A natural disaster such as recurrent riverbank erosion in Bangladesh not only destroys land (the economic base), but land also reemerges for productive use; people fight over it as a scarce resource for adjustment as an on-going social process. In hazard literature, the concept of adjustment is

defined as an anticipatory action to reduce or minimize negative impact of an extreme event (White 1974). The focus of the present study is largely on the aftermath or impact of erosion event, i.e., post-hazard situation. Therefore, by adjustment, I refer to all kinds of human action or relationships intended to "compensate" or overcome the losses incurred by natural hazard.

"Patron" is another major concept used in this study. In the literature, a patron is largely viewed as a person of power and wealth who can help or protect a less powerful person or client (Foster 1963). The relationship is reciprocal exchange of goods and services and thus dyadic but, for sure, asymmetrical (Powell 1970). Due to the asymmetry, some scholars tend to regard the patron as a kind of "boss" or "big man" (Paine 1971, Vincent 1978). Wolf (1966a) summarized the relationship as dyadic, vertical, multi-stranded and exploitative for the client.

In an agrarian society like Bangladesh where land remains the basic resource and means of production, the status of the patron is strongly correlated with land ownership and the status of the client with sharecropping, wage or contract labor. Land ownership in Bangladesh is heavily concentrated in the hands of a group of people who are monopolistic wielders of local power. These local landed elites are patrons who provide land to sharecrop, hire or contract landless people to work, and provide credit for production and other kinds of material benefits (e.g., jobs) to clients through their extra-local contacts or brokerage. In the context of the present study, a patron is able to assume his powerful and exploitative position because he possesses resources to provide destitute peasants with land and other material support necessary for survival in an ecologically harsh setting like that

involving riverbank erosion hazard. Furthermore, the patron is often the lone provider of access to previously unsettled and/or new depositional *char* land for resettlement. The clients in turn demonstrate their loyalty as *lathiyals* of the patron when called to do so for control over new *char* land. Thus, patronage as understood in this study refers to all kinds of reciprocal and exploitative relationships between the members of the local landed elites and the subordinate peasant classes; it is a means to maintain their position of dominance.

"Politics" is a very elusive concept, especially when someone wants to undertake research in local-level politics. Daily events in village life hardly provide any scope to study and identify issues that are "formally" called politics by political scientists mostly bent on "structural" studies of politics (e.g., Easton 1959, 1965). The Eastonian approach to defining politics as part of a "formal" structure has limited utility for societies in which anthropologists have traditionally worked; politics cannot be analytically isolated, for example, from kinship, local corporate groups, and other kinds of interpersonal relationships through which power and authority are manifested (Cohen 1970, Mair 1962). Political roles and actions in traditional societies, according to Cohen, "seem to be enmeshed in the entire social life of the people" (1970:485). Cohen and Middleton (1967) further argue that it is useful if we take politics as "events" and not "structure or function." I do not contest the value of structural studies of politics, however. The presence of "government" or any other particular structure should not be considered a requisite definitional attribute of politics (Swartz 1968:2). Therefore, "politics" in the present study refers to events and processes that are related to the struggles for control and use of new depositional land by the powerful landholders.

"Power" is another concept often ambiguously defined and used. Bailey (1960:10) suggests power to be "command over resources and control over men." In the light of the floodplain situation, power may be defined as command over land and control over households that produce surplus from the land. The local *jotedars* and *talukdars*, due to their "control" over new depositional land, claim a right to exact tribute or surplus from the dependent peasants in return for their occupancy and use of the land. The surplus may be delivered in different ways, for example, in the form of labor, kind, or money (see Wolf 1966b). Thus defined, the basis of power is economic; it grows directly out of production relations and, in turn, defines political forms and relationships between the peasants and the landlords in the floodplain villages.

Existing literature on patronage has rarely focused on the role of "force" or "violence" in the formation and maintenance of the patron-client ties. Flynn (1974:151) considers the tendency to have been "the exclusion of coercion from patron-client relationships." The traditional functionalist analysis has viewed the relationship as "voluntary" and "collaborative" (Foster 1963, Powell 1970, Scott 1976). The use or threat of violence as a mode of support or collaboration, I would suggest, is significant in the relationship. Blok (1974), in his accounts of the mafia, demonstrates how coercive manipulation of interpersonal relationships are used to enhance and consolidate the vested interest of the powerholders over the mass of the agricultural population (also, Schneider and Schneider 1976). From my empirical observation, I consider that it is altogether too bland and simple to define the relationship as one of voluntary collaboration. On the contrary, the

relationship is exploitative and the use or threat of violence should be considered an element inherent in the relationship. Adnan (1976) considers persuasive and coercive measures to be factors both in the recruitment and maintenance of the relationship.

The capacity for violent force is an indicator of the power base of the patron. The existence of an individual "private army" of each patron is a constant threat to dependent clients not only for submission and support, but also to turn over a share of the surplus to the patron. The concept of "violence" used in this study refers to any kind of threat, intimidation or use of public or extra-legal force on the part of patrons to control, dominate, and exploit the local peasantry. The extent and nature of violence thus defined may be applied in a variety of situations, ranging from use of physical force to injure or murder, to deprivation of rights to live and work on land. The degree of violence and exploitation of the dependent peasants is tied to several factors such as the size of the potential labor force and control over them by making new *char* land available for productive use.

1.5 Sources and Methods of Data Collection

This dissertation is based on data collected from several sources carried out in a number of different places. First, an anthropological field project was carried out in Kazipur *Upazila* in the district of Serajganj, Bangladesh for a period of fourteen months from June 1984 to July 1985. Second, library research was conducted at the University of Rajshahi Library to find information pertaining to violence and conflict in Bangladesh over depositional land as reported in a vernacular daily newspaper. The research at Rajshahi provided an understanding of the general patterns of violence and land conflict throughout the delta

country. Careful use of "non-ethnographic" data such as press reports can supplement anthropological research in complex societies, particularly when there is a dearth of information. Finally, I engaged in a week of historical and archival research in December, 1987 at the Joseph Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago to investigate the historical dimensions of the problems treated in this study. The historical research in Chicago played a critical role in the development of the perspective presented here.

Anthropological fieldwork always entails direct participation and observation in the field for a prolonged period of time. As mentioned earlier, I spent a total of fourteen months in the field. During much of this period I lived in Kazipur except for occasional brief visits either to Jahangirnagar University for consultation with other members of the research team⁶ or with my family at Rajshahi. Anwarul Islam Bablu, a trained sociologist, assisted me both in the field data collection and in library research at the University of Rajshahi. A full account of the varied and complex experience of fieldwork warrants a separate paper in its own right, consisting of the local ethos, gossip, and stories of how people perceive of and adapt to riverbank erosion hazards; the kind of problems encountered in the field; and the many different ways in which information was collected. Here I shall confine myself to a brief description of the field experience, the general research methodology, and the techniques employed in the field research.

When I arrived in Kazipur with Anwar Bablu in June of 1984, the area was experiencing the first of three waves of high floods in that year associated with massive bank erosion. The 1984 flood was one of the worst in Kazipur and also the most widespread flood in Bangladesh. About

60 of a total of 62 districts of the country were affected by the flood. The entire district of Serajganj was inundated, resulting in loss of human lives, property, and crops; thousands of families were displaced, particularly from *char* villages, who eventually took shelter on the flood protection embankment. Despite our efforts to explain the objectives of our research in Kazipur, many of the displaced families took us to be local officers responsible for relief distribution and rehabilitation. Many narrated their miseries and losses due to such high floods. However, when we told them our identity and affiliation with a university and our interest to know their problems caused by flood and erosion, one young mother of four children said: "You can see our *durobstha* (precarious condition); what else do you want to know? We need relief to survive and save our children." Others took us to be journalists linked with newspapers in Dhaka. Several people complained about corruption in relief distribution and gave us some names of local leaders and officials involved with "*gom churi*" (smuggling of wheat meant for relief), with the hope that it would be published. Still others took us to be disguised military officers checking distribution of relief goods in Kazipur *Upazila*. However, we were finally able to overcome all of these "identities" once flood water receded and life began to return to normal. People then started to appreciate our research interest in bank erosion and population dislocation. One old man, displaced 10 times in the last 15 years, said: "We are happy that you have come to see our distress. You see, we don't have any future; it is gone with the Jamuna. Write about us, and let the government know about our problems."

We stayed in the local Community centre located in village Khudbandi, adjacent to the Kazipur market centre. There were several reasons for this independent accommodation. First, we did not want to

stay with any family because of our long-term research plan. Second, we needed a "base camp" of some sort to conduct a rural survey of the research problems. Finally, independent housing was also important to accommodate other visiting team members from Jahangirnagar and Manitoba universities. We equipped the Community centre so that at least 10 to 12 people could stay for any length of time. The Kazipur *Upazila* Officer was generous enough to install a tubewell for pure drinking water and a semi-sanitary latrine for use by the research team. The villagers were delighted to get these two permanent public services free of cost to them. We hired an unemployed young man, whose family has been displaced three times in the last five years, as our cook. Both he and his father turned out to be good informants and local guides.

Based on our extensive field experience with the problem, it was decided that our sample of the study area population for the rural survey (henceforth Kazipur Survey) should cover the entire *upazila* so that we could understand the problems and responses of people -- both displaced and nondisplaced. Using a complex multi-stage probability sample method,⁷ a total of 619 households were ultimately chosen from eight different *mouza* (local revenue unit) villages.⁸ Char Chashi, incidentally, was one of the sample villages of the Kazipur Survey.

My own selection of Char Chashi for in-depth study was influenced by a number of factors. First, the village should be easily accessible from the "base camp" at Kazipur and also should not be very far from the present *upazila* headquarters. It was considered important because under the new administrative arrangement the interaction of the village systems with the local administration has increased tremendously. Many village-level statistics are now available with the *Upazila* Statistical Officer.

Also, matters relating to local planning, relief and rehabilitation are now performed by the *upazila* administration. The second criterion for village selection was that it should not be very large, and as far as possible nucleated. The settlement of *char* villages is generally dispersed due to local ecological conditions. The size of the village was also considered important because *char* villages around Kazipur-Serajganj area are either too small or too large. A village with about 200 households was considered the ideal. This size would permit daily routine contacts with people in the village, which is essential in anthropological studies. Third, the history of settlement in the *char* village should be fairly recent so that respondents could easily reconstruct their own story of migration and settlement in the village and any other important event or factor related to settlement history. Finally, the presence of some kind of peasant organizations such as village co-operative or landless association was an important factor in the selection. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of agricultural co-operatives in Bangladesh villages under the Integrated Rural Development Program (now renamed to Bangladesh Rural Development Board). Such village level organizations provide opportunity to examine the dynamics of interaction and integration between landed and landless people in the village.

Anwar Bablu and I visited eight different *char* villages across the western channel of Jamuna in Natuarpara and Tekani Union *Parishads* (local self-government units). Prior to our visits we collected some secondary information -- mostly from census, local *upazila* and union *parishad* sources -- on each village to see which one of the villages might fulfill our set of criteria. The number of estimated households in each village during our reconnaissance survey varied from 65 to 1000 households, with

widely scattered settlement in some cases. We found that in Char Chashi alone, the households were clustered in two major neighborhoods. The number of households in the village increased from 85 in 1974 to over 200 in 1984. This dramatic increase was caused by in-migration of people over the last ten years from other neighboring villages affected by riverbank erosion. The in-migration factor turned out to be very attractive to us, for it would provide some insights into the dynamics of resettlement currently in effect in the *char* areas. Furthermore, abundant case material was available to illustrate forces currently at work, particularly with the presence of a landless/wage labor association in the village. Finally, Char Chashi was very conveniently located -- directly linked with Kazipur market centre year-round by regular *kheoa* (country boat) from sunrise to sunset. Char Chashi, therefore, was our choice for an anthropological in-depth study.

In the very early stage of our ethnographic research in Char Chashi, we realized that the study of a single *char* village may not be adequate to understand the problem. We soon found that villagers are not only related by kinship within villages and with people in neighboring villages, but many of them are totally dependent on local large landowners even for their homestead land; many are their sharecroppers, yearly contracted servants, and wage laborers. We also found that village level faction leaders (*matabbars*) maintain alliance with local *talukdars* and recruit *lathiyals* for local and regional conflicts over new depositional land. Many social and political forces tie villagers together both within the village and regionally. Therefore, to understand the structure and processes of village level adjustments to hazards, the nature of land conflict and local political dispute, we must

look beyond the village. The study of a single *char* village will provide the context of our analysis to understand the forces at work in the larger arena.

A complete enumeration of households in Char Chashi was made in April of 1985 as part of the Kazipur Survey using the REIS (Riverbank Erosion Impact Study) project questionnaire. The data derived through the Survey are mostly quantitative, focusing primarily on demographic, economic, and social features of the household; perception of and adjustment to erosion hazards; and displacement history (for more information on the REIS survey instrument, see Rogge 1985). Anwar Bablu and I spent most of our time as "participant observers" in the field collecting "case materials" and interviewing village leaders, locally powerful *talukdars* and local government officials for a better understanding of the different aspects of erosion, dislocation and resettlement, and to provide the breadth and depth of data necessary for its analysis both at micro and macro levels. We also worked in the local *tehsil* (land revenue) office to check certain land record documents related to reallocation of depositional lands, particularly in Char Chashi. The Kazipur *Upazila* Land Revenue and Administration Officer provided *mouza*-based information on land erosion and accretion within the *Upazila*. We also collected cases of major land conflicts in Kazipur involving local *lathiyals*. Such incidents, once they are over, become popular "folk" tales in the locality. The same story is repeated by everyone, especially the number of *lathiyals* involved and the violent outcome of dispute. We still verified them with locally informed people and often with parties involved in disputes. Prolonged interviews with disputing parties revealed their links with local administration and higher levels political systems. These quantitative and qualitative data

collected at the union and *upazila* levels are of significant value to link the local-level phenomena to regional and national levels.

We did not encounter any serious difficulty in the field in terms of human relationships with our respondents, neighbors, friends and the Kazipur community at large. The decision to stay adjacent to the market centre and commute to Char Chashi by *kheoa* proved very useful. The "base camp" in Khudbandi helped us to remain in constant touch with respondents both in the mainland and *char* villages. My previous experience with village level research (see Zaman 1977) facilitated field research plans and acquisition of local administrative and political support to carry out the research. There was no doubt or misconception among the local population about our research. People readily helped us whenever asked. My assistant Anwar Bablu quickly established good rapport with people in Kazipur; he became a very dependable and excellent fieldworker.

Nonetheless, we faced some problems in carrying out the research at the field level. One persistent problem was to establish village "identity" of informants. People who settled in Char Chashi after being displaced from other neighboring villages continued to identify themselves with their "original" village(s) while talking to outsiders. For example, the present population of Char Chashi comes from at least ten different villages. Thus, many household heads of the village initially reported to us as inhabitants of, for example, Char Kazipur or Manikpatal. Both of these villages are now in the river. Likewise, many households that moved from Char Chashi to adjacent Jorgachha or Bilsunder villages informed us that they still belong to Char Chashi, at least socially. So in the wide-open *char* areas, it was difficult to set a village "boundary" for our survey. There were many village "identities"

among people of one single village. For us, the only recourse to avoid confusion was to define the village following the *mouza* boundary. Thus, all residents of *mouza* Char Chashi during the study period were interviewed despite their former village identities. Villages wiped out by erosion still exist as "social entities" although they are no longer "geographic" entities. Another field-level difficulty had to do with interviewing 41 heads of household in Char Chashi who were unavailable during the period of the Survey in April and May of 1985. They were all absent from the village for over two months as seasonal labor migrants to Bogra, Sherpur, Natore, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Dinajpur. The wives of those households were interviewed via other male relatives. As a result, some information was incomplete. These difficulties in the operation of the survey, however, do not constitute any serious limitations of the study. Long-term residence in the field and anthropological insights into local cultural practices supplemented deficiencies of the survey instrument.

1.6 Data Analysis and Presentation

The following five chapters (Chapters Two through Six) contain accounts of the research area and findings, followed by a summary and conclusion of the present study. Chapter Two deals with the ecology of the Bengal delta, focusing mainly on the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain area, contrasting features between *char* and mainland in the delta, and Bengal land reclamation and settlement in historical perspective. Here the aim is to analyze the historical and social processes that shaped the development of social structure in the riparian areas of Bengal in the last few hundred years. In Chapter Three, I discuss the demographic, socio-economic and ecological features of the village in local riverine

context. I have analyzed the socio-political dynamics of land ownership, structure of land holding and production relations in the village. The dynamics of relationship between the state and the rural society is presented briefly in this chapter. Chapter Four deals with the politics of village-level social organization and social adjustment to displacement. The nature of village leadership, factions and patronage systems are outlined to elaborate upon adjustment choices and resettlement options of the displaced population. In Chapter Five, I analyze the everyday nature of violence in *char* villages in Kazipur and elsewhere in Bangladesh, and the role of local *talukdars* as violent "political entrepreneurs." A critical review and a discussion of the existing *char* land survey, records of rights and administration is also presented. Chapter Six focuses on the current resettlement policies of the Government of Bangladesh in the light of recent changes in *char* land policies. The study concludes with a short discussion on the social, cultural and structural factors shaping individual and household adjustment strategies in the context of limited options constrained by natural hazard vis-a-vis increasing landlessness and underdevelopment. Policy suggestions are offered to improve the current tenure arrangements, reallocation of new depositional land, land survey and records, and implementation of *char* land reforms with local-level participation.

CHAPTER TWO
LAND AND SOCIETY IN RIVERINE BENGAL:
AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

A few of Hossain Mian's secret plottings had got bruited about; three families belonging to the [fishermen's] quarter had vanished. Nobody knew at first when Hossain collected a few families, old men and infants and all, and deposited them far away. It came to be known later that he was starting a settlement of his own, somewhere near Noakhali, on a little uninhabited island, densely wooded, wild beasts and numberless birds as the only denizens so far.

To this islet Hossain would take starving, debt-ridden families, clear part of the jungle and make it habitable.

He goaded helpless people with hopes of a new, though precarious, life, gave them a little land which had never felt a furrow since the day of creation, supplied them with implements for farming and wood-cutting, and some kind of accommodation. From what other places he had collected his victims was unknown, but every one in Ketupur knew that three of the fishermen's families had been whisked away by Hossain and turned into primitive peasants. And yet, whether they knew it or not, it was all the same to them. All that they could do was to bow low and accept Hossain's bounty. When asked to help him turn the impossible island into a habitable area, they would refuse as long as they had the strength, and then, one day, when they could no longer hold out, they would silently grip the hands of wives and children and board Hossain Mian's long-distance boat.

Excerpts from the famous Bengali novel *Padma Nodir Majhi* (Boatman of the Padma) by Manik Bandyopadhyay (1936), translated by Hirendranath Mukerjee (New Delhi: National Book Trust, Second Edition, 1977, pp. 21-22).¹

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a framework of the development of a "frontier society" in *char* settlements in the riverine regions of Bangladesh. First, I describe the river systems and the floodplains of the country -- the setting of the environment -- in which the frontier began, its original social formations and the historical processes out of which it developed. My objective is to reconstruct the

nature and style of interaction between the *char* and the mainland and the social relations of production in the frontier land. A comparison of the environmental characteristics, cropping patterns, population distribution and nature of village societies between *char* and mainland is presented to illustrate the contrasts between them, and to analyze different adjustment mechanisms to riverine environment as they develop and function as a distinct culture of *char* life.

2.1 Rivers and the Floodplains of Bangladesh

The rivers of Bangladesh are the most significant features of its landscape. With a network of 250 rivers, Bangladesh occupies most of what is known as the "Bengal Delta," the largest in the world; it also includes the deltaic portion of the Indian state of West Bengal. The delta country is largely made up of alluvial soil deposited by the three main river systems -- the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers. The Ganges originates in the southern slopes of the Himalayas and enters Bangladesh near Rajshahi in the western side of the country. Within Bangladesh, it is called the Padma and flows southeast to its confluence with the Brahmaputra. The Brahmaputra originates on the Chinese side of the Himalayas and flows through Tibet and India to Bangladesh. It is known as the Jamuna after its confluence in north Bengal with the Teesta. The Meghna rises in one of the rainiest hillslopes of the world -- the Shillong Plateau in Assam and joins the Padma south of Dhaka (see Figure 1).

With the exception of the Tertiary hill tracts of Chittagong and two Pleistocene terraces covering less than twenty percent of the land in the country, the dominant physiographic features of Bangladesh consist of the Ganges delta and the floodplains of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna and the Meghna

river systems (Ahmad 1968, Spate 1954, Rashid 1978). Spate (1954) divides the Ganges delta into three regions: the Moribund, Mature and Active delta. The Moribund is the oldest portion of the Ganges delta formed by silt of the Ganges and its distributaries. The land in the delta has generally very slight slope, resulting in quick silt deposition on the river beds. This results in (a) occasional floods due to decreased carrying capacity of the river channels, particularly during monsoon periods, and (b) gradual or sudden shifting of river courses to a more low-lying area, wiping out hundreds of village settlements and valuable cultivable land (Nicholas 1962). The Mature delta, a small stretch of land, lies between the moribund and active deltas and is flooded annually both by the Ganges and Jamuna rivers and their distributaries such as the Madhumati. Spate (1954) includes in his schematization of the mature delta zone the districts of 24-Parganas in West Bengal (India), the northern and southern parts of Khulna and Jessore respectively, and the northwestern portion of Faridpur district in Bangladesh. Today, "this area does not receive extensive silt deposits any more, nor it is subject to much diluvion" (Rashid 1978:43).

The Active delta roughly covers all of the deltaic and coastal plains of Bangladesh. It contains a large deltaic area from north of the Ganges river to the Bay of Bengal. The tidal plain of Barisal, Patuakhali, Khulna and the Sunderbans in the southern part of the country facing the Bay of Bengal characterizes the active delta area. However, because of the action of tides in the coastal plain extending from Noakhali to the south of Cox's Bazar, the entire southern sea face is also considered part of the active delta. Thus, portions of Comilla, Dhaka, Faridpur,

Noakhali districts in the Padma-Meghna floodplain and coastal belts of Chittagong along Karnafuli river system form the larger deltaic region.

The deltaic plain is subject to regular flooding and almost continuous erosion and accretion of land. New land formation, especially in the lower Meghna estuary, is an important feature of the active Meghna-Tetulia-Shahbazpur river systems in the area. There are innumerable *chars* of varying sizes in the active delta region; it is often difficult to ascertain their numbers because new strips of land appear as quickly as some old ones disappear within the river. However, we find some fairly old and large *chars* or island settlements at the mouth of the lower Meghna. For example, the islands of Bhola (827 sq. miles), Ramgati (250 sq. miles), Hatia (220 sq. miles) and Sandwip (187 sq. miles) are old land formations (Rashid 1978:44). The island of Sandwip was recorded in the survey by Major Rennell (1781) conducted during 1764 to 1772. Since then, considerable changes have taken place in Sandwip and other surrounding islands due to the process of erosion and accretion in effect in the area.

The erosion/accretion phenomena in the lower Meghna delta are governed by (a) upland discharge of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river systems, and (b) by the tidal influence of the sea. According to one source (Barua and Koch 1985), an estimated 1.2 billion tons of silt are annually carried through the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river systems into the Bay of Bengal. In order to arrest the silt and to speed up the rate of accretion in the lower Meghna delta, the Government of Bangladesh with assistance from the Dutch government, has recently undertaken a land reclamation project (BWDB 1977). To date, the Project has achieved some encouraging results. A total of 163,092 acres of land have emerged,²

according to Landsat imagery taken in 1979-1980, with much more potential for future accretion.

The Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain covers a large territory, extending from the northeastern tip near the Teesta through the main channel of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna, to the Meghna. The northern Bengal districts of Rangpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Bogra, Sherpur and mid-central districts of Pabna, Serajganj, Jamalpur, Tangail, Mymensingh, Manikganj and Dhaka are part of this floodplain. With its several distributaries such as Bangali, Kazipur-Ichamati river, Phuljur, Hurasagar, Dhanbandi, Karatoya, Jhenai, Kaliganga and the older course of Brahmaputra -- it criss-crosses the entire floodplain. This floodplain is subject to large-scale and complete inundation by deep flood water between three to twelve-feet high for about four months during the monsoon periods from mid-June to mid-October every year (Rashid 1978).

The Brahmaputra-Jamuna is a multi-channel river system. It is more evident from upstream Jagannathganj Ghat in Jamalpur transversing through Bogra, Serajganj, Pabna and Tangail districts up to its confluence with the Ganges near Goalunda Ghat in Rajbari district. Indeed, nowhere within the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain have the courses of the Jamuna river channels changed so suddenly creating additional new channels on the local floodplain (Galaya 1980). As a result, every year there appear numerous *chars* and *diaras* (additions to existing land) in the mid-stream and on both banks of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna river.

Several geographic and historical accounts (see Morgan and McIntire 1959, Ahmad 1968, Bristow 1987, Latif 1969, Rashid 1978, Hunter 1877, O'Malley 1923) recorded dramatic shift of the Old Brahmaputra river in 1787 into its present Jamuna channel and some remarkable instances of fluvial changes that occurred in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain in the

last two hundred years. Hunter (1877:385) describes the Brahmaputra-Jamuna as

a river of many changes. After the survey (1850-56), it swept to the eastward and washed away several villages on the bank of the river; but afterwards retired towards the west forming a new channel, and leaving a number of sandbanks and alluvial accretions on the east of its bed. The banks are abrupt or sloping, according as the current sets from one side of the river or the other; but, in consequence of the numerous alterations in the current, they change their appearance almost yearly.

O'Malley (1923:6-7), in his *Bengal District Gazetteers: Pabna*, made the following remarks:

Alluvion and diluvion are constantly taking place along the courses of the principal rivers of the district, especially the Padma and the Jamuna, the river channels perpetually swinging from side to side of their sandy bars, while the streams themselves sometimes completely change their courses... The surface of the country in the neighbourhood of the great rivers is thus subjected to constant changes, which naturally gives rise to innumerable disputes over land.

Finally, one of the far reaching fluvial changes in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna system over the years has been the emergence of new *chars* and *diaras* in the floodplain. Saha (1924:78-79) reports that a total of 73 *chars* emerged in Pabna (and Serajganj) district. Of them, 9 *chars* in Pabna and 12 in Serajganj are fairly large with somewhere between 1000 and 9000 acres of new depositional land. The large river systems are thus changing the landscape of the country constantly and such changes will also occur in the future. As one observer (Mydans 1987) put it: "There is nothing like an up-to-date map of Bangladesh." The changes in the river systems have influenced human settlements and the way of life of the people in the Bengal delta since time immemorial (Mukerjee 1938, Panandikar 1926, Nicholas 1962). Chowdhury (1982:11) remarks that "the history of this low-lying land can be traced and found in the morphological evolution of the river systems." The following section is,

therefore, devoted to a brief review of the evolution of human settlement and population movement in the Bengal delta.

2.2 Land Reclamation and Settlement in the Delta Frontier

Geographic knowledge about the Bengal deltaic region is relatively recent. Prior to Rennell's survey (1781) of the Bengal river systems, we do not have, unfortunately, any reliable description of the geography of the country for the remote past. However, in some classic texts of ancient India, for example, the *Rig-Veda* (latter half of second millennium B.C.) and the *Mahabharata* (2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D.), the country of *Vanga* (or Bengal) is mentioned, which corresponds roughly to the oldest portions of the present Bengal delta.³ Mukerjee (1938:123-130) notes:

There is no doubt that the first settlement of Bengal was in the old alluvium tracts. The most ancient inhabitants were described as fishermen and uncleaned folks in the ancient literature... Vanga at that time comprised only the modern districts of Murshidabad, Nadia [now in West Bengal], Jessore, Pabna, Faridpur and parts of Rajshahi [in Bangladesh].

It is probable, however, that only the riverine tract or the seaboard was populated; the interior was more or less a region of marshes and wastes devoid of habitations. Barani, writing as late as the 14th century, thus refers to Bengal as a "land of swamps." ⁴

J. C. Jack (1916:16-17), a colonial officer who spent years in Faridpur District of Eastern Bengal, describes the development of settlement in the delta:

It is still in the process of formation and is full of rivers which are broad and deep, heavy in the flood season with constructive silt, yet sufficiently active to work their will upon a land of plastic mud. Here, as is the fashion of the delta, the rivers are washing away mud from one bank and re-forming it on the other with a method so complete and comprehensive that in the entire tract, perhaps 900 square miles in extent, very little of the present land has been in existence a hundred years and not very much for more than fifty years. Probably there has been land and population in all this country for five centuries or more...

In the south-western part of the district the whole land is a vast marsh, yet able to sustain a large and growing population. In the normal course this land would have been raised many centuries ago by silt from the great rivers, but owing to an abrupt and unexplained change in their courses, those rivers abandoned it and went farther eastward, leaving a few smaller distributaries to fill up the vast basin. It is only within the last century that the population has flocked to this basin, but to such purpose that the dismal swamp now contains 800 people to the square mile.

Many historical accounts (Hunter 1875, 1877, Pargiter 1885, Carstairs 1895) report that the new delta areas and also a large part of southern Bengal including the Sunderbans constituted "new frontier" in terms of extension of cultivation, migration and development of new settlements. Mukerjee (1938) identified, among others, population pressure in the decaying moribund floodplain vis-a-vis the availability of extremely fertile alluvial soil and opportunities provided by rivers for transport and commerce as factors for migration into the new delta areas. These observations on population settlement in the delta have been confirmed by Nicholas' (1962) comparative study on the evolution of village organization in the old and new delta area. Nicholas (1962:80) remarks that

Population pressure and competition for land in the older settled portions of the delta forced groups of poor cultivators to search for new land in the south and east, to take their families into the newly opened territory, and to develop new communities there.

The fact that the riverine environment and new land resources attracted settlers from other areas has been further established by Haque (1988:157) in a comparison of population density by bankline and non-bankline districts in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain over a period of about one hundred years from 1891 to 1984. The districts on the bankline have had consistently a much higher density of population than the non-riparian districts. Haque (1988) accounts for this variation between the

two broad regions largely as a product of past population redistribution caused mainly by migration to the new delta area.

It is important to note here the ethnic composition of the early settlers of the floodplain frontier. The large majority of the early inhabitants were "primitive" agricultural tribes and castes who made their livelihood by clearing forests and jungles along the riverine areas (see, O'Donnell 1893, Bourdillon 1883). Using available ethno-historical data, both Mukerjee (1938) and Nicholas (1962) describe the ethnic composition of the early settlers. Mukerjee (1938:279) traced out the movements of at least three major Hindu cultivating castes into the delta area: the *Mahisyas* (also known as *Kaibartta*), *Namasudra* and *Pods* -- all having cultivation, boating and fishing as traditional occupations. The *Mahisyas* and *Namasudras* were scattered all over Bengal with concentration in the eastern and southeastern portions of the delta (Bakarganj, Faridpur, Khulna and Jessore); the *Pods* were distributed in the central (24-Pargana) and south-central (Khulna and Jessore) part of the delta (Nicholas 1962). Cultivation, boating and fishing were of crucial importance to the inhabitants of the delta for livelihood and survival in the frontier.

The early settlers and the frontiersmen thus came from the lower stratum of the caste-based Bengali Hindu society. There was considerable ethnic homogeneity and probably the frontier society was relatively egalitarian. Nicholas (1962) studied two villages in the Bengal delta -- one each in the moribund and active delta -- in West Bengal. Compared with Chandipur in the moribund delta, Nicholas found that Radhanagar village in the active delta was more egalitarian in caste composition, social hierarchy and landholding largely as a product of the frontier settlement. Nicholas (1962) further reports that the large well-to-do

landowners and men of high caste came into the active delta only after it had been cleared and brought under cultivation.⁵ Similar ethnic and religious composition of the population of this low-lying area has also been reported by Das Gupta (1954). In his *Faridpur Revisional Settlement Final Report*, Das Gupta (1954:1-2) writes

the Namasudras form the majority and are found mostly in the marshes which explains why they are more numerous in Gopalganj... Hindus belonging to the higher castes are found more or less in the bigger and prosperous villages... The Namasudra cultivators in the marshes and Muslim cultivators in the *chars* ... both, however, lead simple lives and are content with what the earth yields in her ordinary profusion on the account of natural advantage of the area.

Two different processes of colonization of new land can be identified historically: (1) land reclamation, clearing and cultivation especially in the Sunderbans, and (2) claims over new accretion or depositional land by peasants in the riparian areas of the active river systems. The Sunderbans, an extensive mangrove forest lies "in the southern portion of the Ganges delta, extending from the Hugli on the west to the Meghna on the east, through the present districts of 24-Parganas [West Bengal], Khulna and Bakarganj [in Bangladesh]" (Pargiter 1885:1). It is found in historical records (Hunter 1875, Pargiter 1885) that the Sunderbans had constantly attracted settlers during the last two hundred years who opened up new frontiers of new settlements at its northern edge by reclaiming land through clearing jungle and building embankment (also, see Nicholas 1962). Hunter (1875:318-19) describes the early phase of migration to the Sunderbans:

The bulk of population of the Sunderbans is derived from the Districts immediately on the north. The population is increasing gradually, the increment is almost entirely confined to the western parts of 24-Pargana Sunderbans and the eastern part of Bakarganj Sunderbans...

The Commissioner of Sunderbans states that many years ago, in the early days of Magh immigration, it was the customs of the immigrants

to seek out some little secret creek leading into the heart of the forest, where they would form a location, clear the jungle, and cultivate the land. The reason of their thus secluding themselves is said to have been in order to secure immunity from the payment of revenue. This practice is now abandoned, only, however, because very little jungle now remains in the Bakarganj Sunderbans for them to hide in.

In 1783, Mr. Tilman Henckell, then Judge and Magistrate of Murli (now Jessore) submitted a plan to Mr. Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of British India, for (a) granting out leases of waste land for cultivation in order to raise revenue, and (b) to settle boundaries of their estates with local *zamindars* (Pargiter 1885:1-3). Hunter (1875:329) summarizes Henckell's concerns on Sunderbans reclamation and resettlement:

The *zamindars* of the bordering Districts were making claims to the land which had been granted to the *talukdars* or grantees in the Sunderbans. The *zamindars* would not furnish any specific boundaries to their estates; but whenever any land was brought under cultivation, they claimed it as lying within their limits. They were themselves bringing into cultivation small patches of land here and there in the Sunderbans, in order to prove, by bringing it upon their rent-roll, that it was theirs.

The Sunderban forest was the property of the state and was not included in the Permanent Settlement of 1793 (Pargiter 1885). However, southern boundaries of many permanently settled *zamindari* estates of Bakarganj, Khulna and Jessore which bordered with the Sunderbans had remained undefined in the early period. As a result, settlement in the Sunderbans raised legal difficulties over ownership of reclaimed land, although people who cleared the jungle themselves had clearly established a strong sense of interest and control over the land (Nicholas 1962). Despite this, Hunter (1875) reports that the *zamindars*, in order to extend their untaxed domain, introduced tenants (*abadkari* or reclaiming *rai-yats*) who led the the clearing of forests and reclamation (also, see Gupta 1940). The *zamindars* in the Sunderban regions had two major

objectives in land reclamation: control of additional tax-free land and appropriation of surplus from their tenants who turned the waste land into a productive asset. Thus the reclaiming *raiya*ts were a distinct social category in their relationships to the *zamindars* who controlled the reclaimed land.

Settlement and ownership rights over accretion land in the active river system also raised similar legal problems as in Sunderbans, but it was further complicated by the fact that there was always more than one claimant of the new alluvial island. First, it is often difficult to ascertain ownership of the new land -- whether it belongs to the estate to which it may have annexed, to some other riparian proprietor upstream who lost his land due to erosion, or even to people on the other side of the river. Second, inhabitants of both banks of the river become very quickly involved in dispute, which often ends in battle, and bloodshed for the disputed land. Further, the new *char*, with its extremely fertile land hardly requires any clearance. On its first appearance from river beds it is almost always ready for cultivation. Colebrooke (1807:4-5), in the following passage, explains the entire process with amazing accuracy:

Such islands as are found, on their first appearance, to have any soil, are immediately cultivated; and water melons, cucumbers, and *sursoo* or mustard, become the produce of the first year. It is not uncommon even to see rice growing in those parts where a quantity of mud has been deposited near the water's edge.

Some of the islands, before they have acquired a degree of stability which might enable them to resist the force of the stream, are entirely swept away; but whensoever, by the repeated additions of soil, they appear to be sufficiently firm, the natives then no longer hesitate to take possession of them, and the new land becomes an immediate subject of altercation and dispute. The new settlers bring over their families, cattle, and effects; and having selected the highest spots for the sites of their villages, they erect their dwellings with as much confidence as they would do on the mainland; for, although fixed on a sandy foundation, the stratum of soil which is uppermost, being interwoven with the roots of grass, and of other

plants, and hardened by the sun, becomes at length sufficiently firm to resist the future attacks of the river.

Thus strengthened and matured, these islands will continue a number of years, and may last during the lives of most of the new possessors; as they are, in general, liable to destruction only by the same gradual process of undermining, and encroachment, to which the banks of the river are subject.

As noted earlier, there are enormous difficulties in determining ownership of such alluvial formations. However, in the riparian areas, it has been traditionally viewed that the first step in establishing ownership rights in new *char* land is to get "possession." Bengal landlords, notes Carstairs (1895:274), had always maintained a disciplined "band of retainers" who would fight or use sheer force for possession over new accretion land "especially on the banks of the Ganges... or in its delta, Backergunj [Bakerganj, now known as Barisal] or Fureedpore [Faridpur], -- not without loss of life, but by the weapon of the country -- the iron-bound club, the spear, or the gun." He further narrates how getting possession involved battles between rival parties which is more or less true for the active river regions of Bangladesh even today. Carstairs (1895:242-43) said:

Men would go with boats or carts to cut whatever produce there was -- trees, grass, or anything -- to stick up sheds, to dry fishing-nets, or perform any other act of ownership they could think of; grazing cattle, ploughing etc... A rival party would arrive from the other side with similar intention, and pitched battles often ensued. For a newly formed islands, though next season might see it swept away again, might also become a rich estate, of good land.

Carstairs (1895) also mentions that such fighting was often aided by hired bravos or goons (also, see Mukerjee 1938, Broomfield 1976).⁶ Apart from tribal Sonthals, Kols, Bhuyas and Paharis, the manly Rajpoots, Ahirs and puritan Muslims of Bihar (India), the *candals* (low-caste Hindus) of Faridpur and also some fierce Muslims from Bakarganj, Noakhali, and Comilla were renowned wielders of clubs (Carstairs 1895). According to

Dey (1970), Pabna district was well-known throughout Bengal for its sturdy *lathiyals* who were hired even by the landlords and the indigo planters of other districts. There is, even today, "rivalry between localities as to which produces the best *lathials* [sic]" (Broomfield 1976:46).

2.3 The Landlord and Village Societies

The process of colonization of the delta country associated with violence and the use of power by the landed elites cannot be understood in isolation from the agrarian developments in British India, particularly following the Permanent Settlement of 1793. A complex set of land tenure relations evolved through the operation of the system (see Islam 1979, Sen 1979, Guha 1963) which resulted in the creation of many rent-collecting "intermediaries" between the cultivating peasants and the state. In this section I discuss the nature of land tenure systems in ancient India and the evolution of a rich peasant class in British India as "power-brokers" between the villagers and the colonial state (see Abdullah 1980).

Before the advent of the British in India, the land system appear to have been one of community-owned property. However, eminent authorities like Baden-Powell (1882) and Mookerjee (1926) maintained that private property and peasant proprietorship existed in India even during the *Vedic* period (latter half of the 2nd millennium B.C.). There is also a third view that "land was the property of the king, i.e., of the state" (Sen 1962:37). This may indicate that state ownership was not totally absent, but possibly limited by or combined with common ownership of the village. However, the state as a taxing power over communal villages meant that they all were part of one unified system. This Indian

tradition is labeled by Karl Marx as the "asiatic mode of production" which typically represented a "self-sufficient" village system in pre-British India. This "self-sufficient" village-based communal mode of production ensured villagers equal access to land and other resources for centuries in India. Desai (1959:7-8) said:

The village population was mainly composed of peasants. The village committee ... which was the *de facto* owner of the village land, distributed the land among the peasant families in the form of holdings. Each holding was cultivated by the peasant family by means of collective labour of its members and with the aid of primitive plough and bullocks. The peasant family enjoyed a traditional hereditary right to possess and cultivate its holdings from generation to generation.

Some scholars (see Habib 1963, Hasan 1973) tend to suggest that there was already some degree of incipient differentiation within the peasantry even in ancient Indian villages in the form of leadership positions like village "headmanship." This was further developed during the late period of Mughal rule in India with the introduction of *zamindars* (landlords) as local revenue collectors in behalf of the Mughal administration. The East India Company went further and introduced a peculiar kind of feudal system by replacing tenants' occupancy rights with individual proprietorship of land held by *zamindars* under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. Instead of being revenue collectors, the *zamindars* under the new system exercised control over land in return of payment of a "fixed" revenue to the state (see Sen 1979). They were given rights to fix their own terms of tenancy with the hope that such fixed assessment would induce them to reclaim waste and forest land under cultivation (see Hollingbery 1879). Since the government was primarily concerned with the security of land revenue, the *zamindars* "were given power to evict their tenants, distrain and sell their property, and even seize their persons without recourse to the courts of law" (Sen 1979:2).

The new system thus superseded the traditional rights of the village community over the village land and resulted in the emergence of a powerful and rich landed class in the countryside as rent collecting intermediaries between the colonial state and the peasants. There were, apart from the state, four classes of people connected with and having different kinds of rights and interests in the land (Abdullah 1976, Jannuzi and Peach 1980). Figure 2 represents in simplified form the hierarchy of interests in land in Bengal: (i) the *zamindars*, (ii) the tenure holders (dependent *talukdars*) (iii) *rai-yats* (independent *jotedars*), and (iv) the under-*rai-yats*. Outside the four classes were the share-croppers and landless agricultural laborers.

The new "rent-receivers" (*zamindars, talukdars and jotedars*) gradually evolved as a class with considerable political power and became "mediators" in rural Bengal. For example, Glazier (1873:34) reported that *mundals* and *pramanik* (village leaders) in Rangpur villages are "the principal men in any locality who are looked up to by the inferior *rai-yots* [sic] to advise in and settle matters of local interest." Nelson (1923:24) mentions that in Rajshahi villages the *pramaniks* and *mundals*, who are a class of rich farmers, serve as "intermediaries" between the villagers and the landlords or government functionaries.

Many historical accounts (Jack 1915, Sinha 1968) narrate the nature of the relationships of this rural landed elite with its subordinate *rai-yats*. Sinha (1968:132) writes

They [the great *mundals*] have made themselves pretended guardians of the lower *ryots* [sic]. They could incite the *ryots* to commotion at their pleasure and compel the *zamindars* to bend on them. But they were equally ready to plunder the poorer *ryots* who were too much terrorised to complain. The *mundals* of this district were in the habit of usurping great quantity of land for which they paid little or nothing.

Figure 2

The Hierarchy of Interests in Land, 1885-1950

The State

The *Zamindar*

(legally, a proprietor of land, acting as an intermediary between the state and the tenants in rent collection)

The *Talukdar*

(the *zamindars* farmed out portions of their estates to independent or dependent *talukdars*; they paid fixed amount to the *zamindars* and pocketed the difference between their rent collection and fixed dues)

Raiyats (or independent *Jotedars*)

(the *talukdars* created further chain of intermediaries; subordinate tenures called *raiya*s (also called *patni talukdars*) acquired right to hold land for purposes of collecting rent or bringing the land under cultivation by establishing tenants on it)

The Under-*raiya*s

(a rent-paying landholder having temporary possession of a holding under a *raiya*t)

Outside this hierarchy of interests were *bargadars* (sharecroppers) and wage laborers whose rights in land were either tenuous or nonexistence.

Sources: Abdullah (1976) and Jannuzi and Peach (1980)

There are also references in historical reports (see Bell 1942:16) that in some localities the *jotedars* as independent cultivators developed as an "uncontested dominant class" in their capacity to make violence endemic for land-grabbing (also, see Jack 1916). Hollingbery (1879:IX) remarked that "the worst of landlords are the middlemen." The following account by Jack (1915:83) further illustrates the nature of oppression by the powerful class of *zamindars* on their dependent tenants:

Abwab [illegal exactions] are realized by a system of overt and covert intimidation... It is exercised in two ways, by clubmen and through the courts. All powerful landlords retain a body of *mridhas* or village headmen and peons, who are paid by a share of the exactions which they help to obtain; but in addition the worst estates keep a regular force of *latials* or clubmen in their pay, who are employed in cases of local opposition to arrest, confine and punish the rebellious and in more serious combinations to engage or overawe the disaffected... it appears that small estates hire men from the larger when occasion requires.

Further, it was not uncommon for a violent landlord to send professional *lathiyals* or men armed with heavy sticks (many of whom were notorious thieves and dacoits) to harass and annoy the *raiya*s. The following report of July 1, 1873 by Peter Nolan, Sub-divisional Officer of Serajganj sent to the Collector of Pabna District further illustrates the nature of oppression by landlords:

I need scarcely remind you of the character borne by the Sanyal family and constantly sustained by them for thirty years. I have had to punish one of the family (D.N. Sanyal) under Section 154 of the Indian Penal Code for encouraging by his presence in the village the plundering of the house of a headman of considerable wealth, because he refused to consent to an enhancement [of revenue]... Sanyal is known to have maintained a body of dacoits and thieves to harass the *ryots* [sic] of a rival sharer (cited in Sen Gupta 1974:27).

It is thus evident that the new land tenure system introduced by the British gave an "unfair advantage" (Calkins 1976:11) to the *zamindars* over the cultivating peasants in maintaining the rights and interests of the landed elite. The British soon had to intervene to stop repressive

activities of the *zamindars* and took new measures in 1885 by enacting the Bengal Tenancy Act which gave *de jure* recognition of rights by others besides the *zamindars* in the agrarian hierarchy (see Sen 1979). The extent of subinfeudation, however, remained a predominant feature of land relations in Bengal. According to one source (Huq 1957), the chain of subinfeudation in Bakerganj district increased from four in 1871 to 20 in 1911, and by 1950 it went up even further; "if one proceeds to record a particular plot during the settlement operation the recorder should not be surprised if he has to open more than 50 *khatians* [record of rights] before he can approach the man behind the plough" (Huq 1957:53).

This hierarchy of interest in land was dismantled in 1950, following the recommendation of the Flood Commission, by the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (EBSATA). All intermediate rent receiving classes were abolished and a relatively high ceiling of individual holding was instituted. The EBSATA of 1950 and the subsequent land tenure reform measures in post-independent Bangladesh avoided any substantial change in the traditional agrarian structure of the country. Jannuzi and Peach (1980) observe that even though the Act of 1950 eliminated the rights of the *zamindars* to act as intermediaries of the state in the collection of land revenue, these erstwhile *zamindars* were converted in status to *maliks* (landholding tenants of the state), enabling them to maintain their position as the landholding elite of Bangladesh. The following tables clearly point to the current uneven distribution and unequal control over land resources by a small group of landed elite.

TABLE 2.1

Distribution of Total Land Owned in Bangladesh, 1977-1978.

Area (in acres)	1977		1978	
	% of households	% of area	% of households	% of area
Landless	11.07	0.00	14.69	0.00
0.01- 3.00	72.78	36.91	68.58	33.39
3.01- 6.00	10.65	27.03	10.35	16.30
6.01-10.00	3.56	16.40	3.71	16.30
10.01-15.00	1.14	8.37	1.51	10.42
15.01 +	0.80	11.29	1.16	15.07
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Based on Jannuzi and Peach (1977, 1978).

TABLE 2.2

Trend in Ownership Pattern by Farm Size, 1974-1979.

Landownership by Farm Size	Percentage of Total Land Owned		
	1974	1977	1979
Bottom 50%	8.9	6.9	4.8
Top 10%	41.5	49.9	53.9
Top 2%	16.1	20.0	25.1

Source: Haque (1988)

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 illustrate the same trend of increasing control of land by a few farm households. In Table 2.1 we find three broad patterns: (i) there is a rise in landlessness from 1977 to 1978, (ii) the control over land by the marginal (0.01 to 3.00 acres) and small (3.01 to 6.00 acres) peasants declines, and (iii) there is a steady and consistent rise in the control of land by a small group of farm families,

a fact also supported by Table 2.2. I shall discuss further details of land distribution and landlessness in the next chapter. What is important to note here is that (i) the rich peasants as a class control a large share of the total land and (ii) that they are economically most influential and politically very active in the countryside.

2.4 Evolution of Alluvion and Diluvion Land Policies: 1825-1975

All alluvial accretions and islands formed either by gradual or sudden shifts of river courses in the country were excluded from the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 (Gupta 1940), possibly due to (a) the uncertain nature of the land formation in the riparian areas, (b) difficulties in determining rights over the newly accreted land, and perhaps (c) lack of a clear idea of the liability of assessed or fixed revenue for land lost in the process of diluvion or erosion. However, as noted earlier, it proved advantageous to the local *zamindars* who took all possible steps and brought additional land into their untaxed domain using reclaiming *raiya*s. The first legislative enactment by the state for regulation of disputes concerning alluvion and diluvion land was the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation XI of 1825. The Regulation itself and subsequent amendments to 1950 (EBSATA) are a complex set of rules which provoked more conflicting claims than they may have actually settled (Gupta 1940, Raskhit 1979). In this section I shall present an overview of the regulations for *char* land administration and definitions of ownership that have changed over the last one hundred fifty years.

Traditionally, ownership and dispute over alluvion and diluvion land was decided following standard local usage of *lapta payosti* (addition to existing land) and *sikosti* (reformation *in situ* or on original site)

titles. The intents of the enactment of 1825 were to provide legal basis to these generally known rules and "as well as for the guidance of the Courts of Justice determining claims to lands gained by alluvion" (Kabir 1961:59). Section 4 (including subsections 1 & 3) of the Regulation of 1825 provides three different interpretations of ownership based on the nature of alluvial formations: (1) Land gained by gradual accretion and deposition was allowed to be owned by persons to whose riparian estates the accretion land had annexed (i.e., *lapta payosti*); (2) Sudden erosion of land which afterwards reappeared on the old site or very close to it (i.e., *sikosti*) and properly "identified," should be the property of the original owner and not be considered an increment to the estate to which it may have annexed; (3) *Char* land or an island that arose in the midst of a river where the channel between it and the river is not fordable shall be under "direct management" of the government and that the government may settle it with any person it considers proper (Gupta 1940, Kabir 1961).

The modes of proof or identification made the task more complex and apparently difficult. Raskhit (1979:476) lists four different modes of identification: (i) it is necessary to ascertain whether any old marks are found in the alluvial accretion; (ii) to prove the situation, boundaries or land marks must be supported by competent extrinsic evidence; (iii) comparison between the old and new survey maps must be marked; and (iv) it is necessary to refer to comparisons of map reports and local investigations by civil court commissioners or other surveyors. The above modes of proof, however, were unnecessary for accretion land when it was gained by adjacent riparian owners as a contiguous accretion. These new regulations for *char* land administration did not improve the endemic nature of land dispute in the riverine areas. Gupta (1940) and

Raskhit (1979) reported many legal and practical difficulties in settling disputes and enforcing law. As new islands surfaced above the water level, new struggles also arose to occupy them, and legal battles have been known to go on for decades or even generations.⁷ Local riots and violence over accretion land were common, and typically local *zamindars* were involved directly with such rioting (Gupta 1940). The alluvial land thus remained subject to perennial dispute, recurring riot and protracted litigation due to difficulties in identifying whether the land is an accretion or a reformation *in situ*. A Government of Bengal report on settlement and survey operations in Pabna-Bogra notes the litigious nature of local *jotedars*: "a *jotedar* with the holding of any size who has not at least one case under trial is a man of very small consequence. During the operations disputes were, therefore, very numerous and frequently about pieces of land too small to be shown on the maps" (Government of Bengal 1924:6). It was largely in consequence of local turbulence and rioting in connection with accretion land that prompted the government to pass the Bengal Alluvial Lands Act in 1920 which allowed the Collector of the District to take control of disputed land until the claims were legally settled (Gupta 1940, Khan 1977).

The principle of the Regulation of 1825 was retained by the EBSATA of 1950 with only two limitations (Sections 86 & 87) on the restoration of land lost by diluvion to the previous owners (Ali 1980, Siddiqui 1980). First, the period during which such restoration can take place has to be within 20 years. Second, such restoration was, however, subject to the provisions laid down in the EBSATA (1950), Section 20 (i.e., land to remain in the possession of the rent receiver, and the cultivating *raiyyat*) and Section 90 (limitation of transfer of holding up

to a maximum of 125 acres). After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the rights of tenants on accretion land has significantly changed. I shall elaborate on the nature of those changes and their implications for resettlement of the displaced population in Chapter Six.

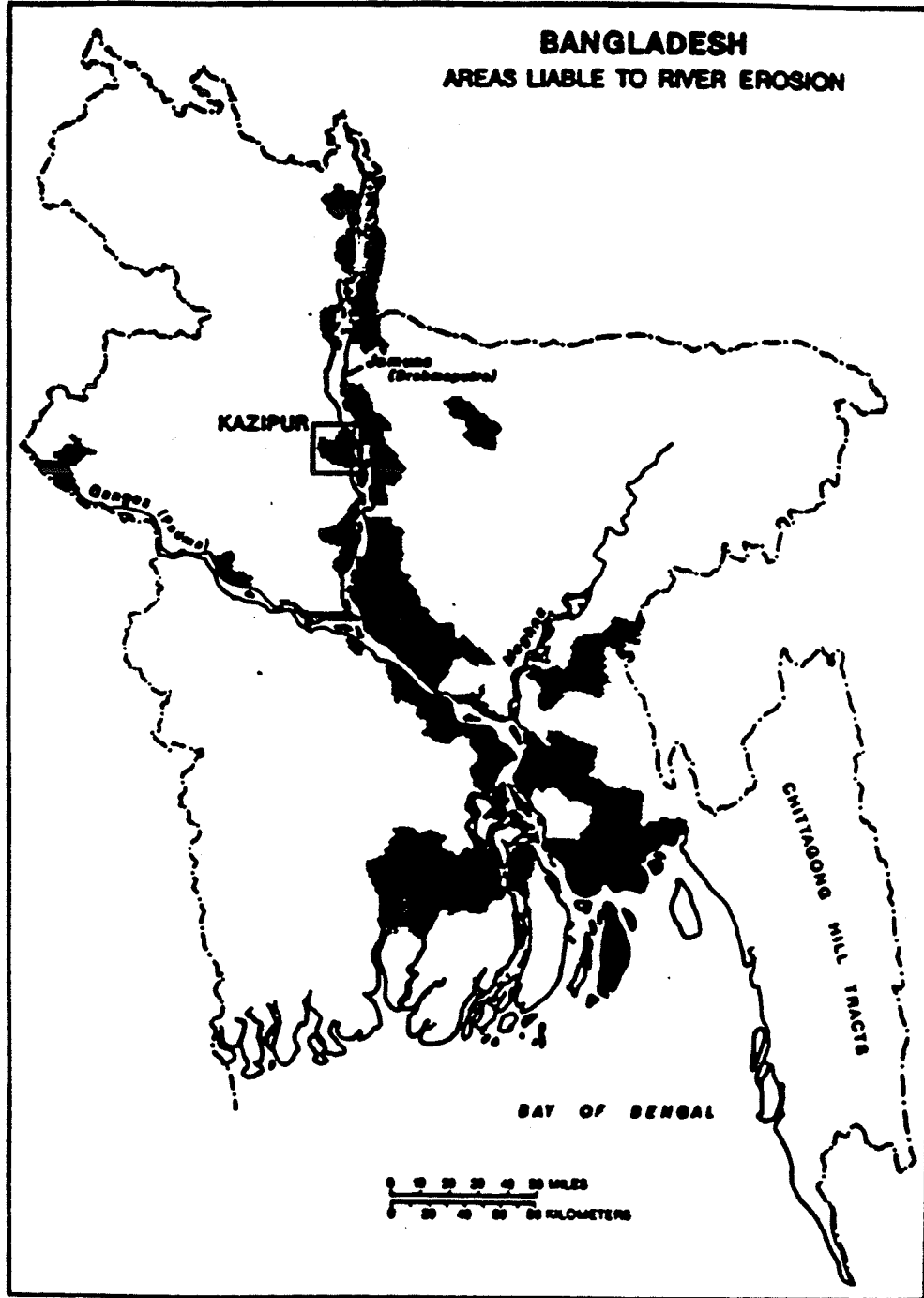
2.5 Contrasting Features of *Char* and Mainland

The physiographic features as well as the social structure of the early frontier settlements in the floodplain and the delta described in section 2.2 provide evidence of significant variation between *char* and mainland. The *char*, despite being a "part" of the whole, has a distinct culture characteristic of frontier societies. In this section, I illustrate further the differences between *char* and mainland in the floodplains in terms of environmental and other socio-economic variables.

There are no systematic statistics on the total acreage of *char* land in the country and population proportions living on *char* village settlements. However, it is possible to develop an estimate indirectly using some secondary sources and findings of the Kazipur survey data. As noted in Chapter One, out of a total of 495 *upazilas* of the country, 66 (14%) of them located along the banklines of the Ganges, Brahmaputra-Jamuna and Meghna rivers are affected and/or liable to annual bank erosion (see Figure 3). Since the banklines include much of the most densely populated land in the country, it is suggested that somewhere between 15 to 20 percent of the population of Bangladesh (i.e., 15 to 20 million) live in areas liable to erosion (Rogge and Haque 1987). The proportion of *char* land in each of these 66 *upazilas* may vary from about one-third to two-thirds of the total area of the *upazila* land. I use Kazipur *Upazila* as an example to illustrate the differences between *char* and mainland in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain.

Figure 3

Bangladesh: Areas Liable to Riverbank Erosion



Source: Currey 1979

The active floodplain of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna has mixed sand and silt -- the combination of loams on the swales and clays in the basins, while the *chars* are composed of calcareous loams (Rashid 1978:126-127). As a result, *char* land is more susceptible to changing courses of the river than the mainland. Moreover, the relief of *char* is also relatively lower than the mainland areas. These variations in the physiography between the mainland and *char* land are reflected in the three-fold classification of land made by the local villagers: (1) *khlar*, meaning the land located in the interior region (i.e., inside the BWDB embankment), relatively protected from flood and elevated vis-a-vis the *chars*, (2) *bir* land, implying the stretch of land located between the river and the mainland (i.e., bankline), and (3) *char* land, meaning mid-channel islands (Haque 1988:194). Dispute over ownership of *char* land is nearly a rule; people who own land may not have control over its use, whereas ownership of land and its use is rarely disputed in the mainland.

The physiographic differences also influence the local cropping patterns, vegetation, and settlement. *Doas jomi* or the silt-deposited land in the *chars* and on the banklines are fertile, easy to plough with minimum cost, and can produce a variety of crops that include three varieties of rice (*aus*, *aman*, and *boro*), jute and sugarcane. The *char* land is further well suited to winter vegetables such as water melons, mustard and varieties of pulses (Ahmad 1968:69). Crop diversification is common practice in *char* as an adjustment strategy to annual flooding (see Rasid and Paul 1987, Paul 1984). It is the abnormal or high flood that is considered a hazard which can cause widespread damage to standing crops and property and sometimes to livestock and human lives (Islam 1980). However, since the land is unstable, it is less valued in terms of market price compared to the mainland. The cropping pattern in the

mainland flood-free zone (inside the embankment) is biased to *aman* and *boro* rice, with some jute and winter vegetables. *Aman* and *boro* are cultivated with modern inputs (e.g., fertilizer, improved seeds, irrigation, pesticide) at a much higher cost than on *char* land. The yield is, however, much more dependable and the output or return is two times higher than from *char* land.

The cropping patterns of three varieties of rice (*aus*, *aman*, *boro*) in *char* and mainland villages vary significantly. According to Kazipur survey data, 93% of *char* households (n=247) grow *aus* rice while 68% of households (n=227) in *bir* or bankline and 35% of households (N=73) inside the embankment (*khlar*) cultivate it. Over 90% of the households in *khlar* zones practice *aman* cultivation, followed by households in *char* (77%) and bankline (65%) zones. Finally, cultivation of *boro* rice is largely confined to *khlar* (81%) zones, followed by *bir* (43%) and *char* (15%) village households (Haque 1988:254).

The riverine environment also influences and shapes the formation of village settlement, population density and village social organization in Bangladesh (cf., Bertocci 1976). Although nearly two-thirds of the Kazipur *upazila* is riverine, the distribution of settlements on the *char* land is low and scattered compared with the dense and nucleated settlement pattern in the mainland. Villages are few and far between in the *char* areas; in some instances, a *char* settlement consists of a small number of related households. Thus, the population size of *char* villages also varies widely. Of the total 11 union *parishads* (local government units) in Kazipur, five belong to *char* areas which are accessible only by country boats. Due to their relative isolation and lack of speedy transport, it often takes days to reach a *char* village; as a result, *char*

villages are rarely visited by any government officials or "law and order" enforcing people. According to 1981 census figures, about 29% of the total population of Kazipur *upazila* are *char* land inhabitants; population densities in *char* and mainland regions are 825 and 2,538 persons per square mile respectively (cited in Haque 1988:193).

Above all, the *char* village settlements differ from mainland villages in terms of integration and degree of social solidarity among the villagers. In the *char*, the village consists of in-migrants from neighboring villages displaced by erosion. In this sense, unlike mainland villages, the *char* village is merely a function of the local ecology and environment with ever present intense competition and violence for control of land. The power hierarchy, based on economically dominant lineages, is generally similar in both cases, but in *char* areas the land-based vertical divisions are more pronounced and clear. Therefore, the *char* land is economically, demographically, and culturally different from the mainland, and characterized by its *choura* way of life.

This should not be taken to mean that the *choura* people are isolated from the political control of the larger society. In fact, the power-base and political leadership of mainland *talukdars* are derived largely from their control over new *char* land and a large class of tenants and landless whose economic and social need for local adjustment to erosion makes their labor docile as well as cheap. However, local *talukdars* and *jotedars* use their political power differently in mainland and *char* villages. The use of force by them is common in *char* land villages, because it is considered essential to maintaining their control over the frontier land. Therefore, there exists a symbiotic relationship between the *talukdar* and his *char* land frontier. This argument is developed further

in Chapters Three and Four by analyzing the socio-cultural complexity of responses to displacement in terms of land tenure, kinship, *samaj* and patronage systems in village Char Chashi.

CHAPTER THREE

CHAR CHASHI IN LOCAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

*Not even this would exist after a few days
The Meghna has taken away my childhood
Taken away the fields of corn, the forest patches
Put at disarray my home, my sweet ancestral home.
Now it is the turn for my homestead,
None of this will remain
Not a shred of evidence will remain...*

*The distant river was like a stream of affection
Barely noticed yet reassuring
But now look,
Boats laden with merchandise for distant ports
Are pulled along by the aerials
Going right through the front-yard...*

*I have no past, nor any present
Nor do I know where the uncertain future will take me.
Only this much is certain,
After a few days no one will know or tell
That there was habitation here,
Hearth and home, happy folks.
No trace of any such encampment here,
No one will ever know.
All devouring Meghna writes down my name in water.*

Original: Abdur Rashid Khan (1984)

Translated by Ali Anwar

Char Chashi, the village chosen for anthropological in-depth study of the impact of erosion and dislocation on village economy and social organization, is one of the many *char* village settlements of Kazipur *Upazila* in Serajganj District in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain of Bangladesh. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Char Chashi in its local and the larger riverine context. The first section gives a description of the village in its ecological setting. I discuss the

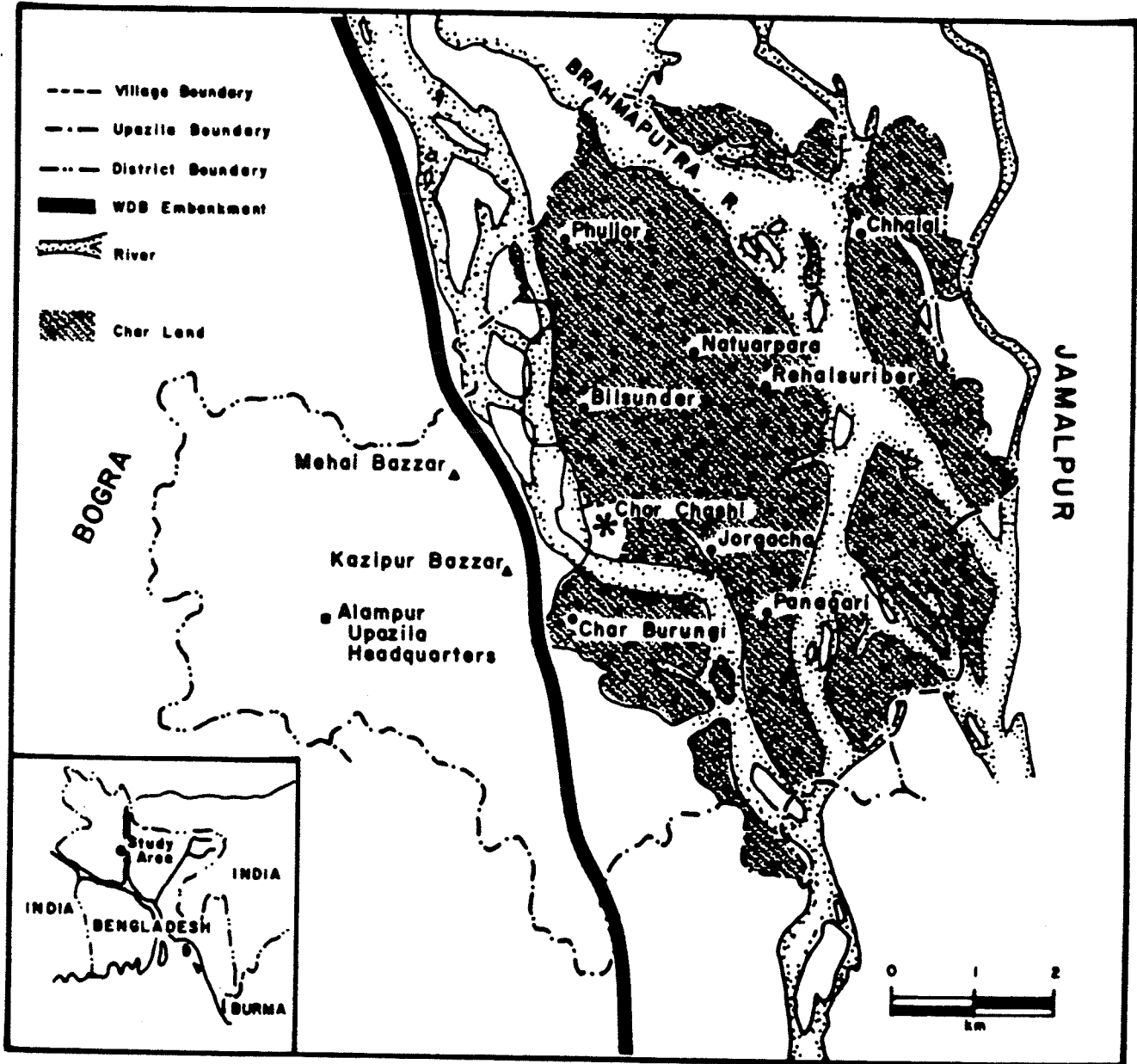
extent of erosion and displacement within the local riverine environment which sets the context for struggle for depositional land. In the second section a physical description of Char Chashi in relation to other neighboring *char* villages and the mainland is presented. The third section deals with socio-demographic features of the village. The fourth deals with education, literacy and labor. The fifth section examines the agrarian structure of the village in larger national context. The sixth and final section focuses on the nature of relationship of the rural agrarian society with the state. In this chapter, I emphasize that the local riverine environment in association with a particular type of social and productive force influences settlement pattern and other social relations of production in Char Chashi.

3.1 The Village in Its Ecological Setting

Village Char Chashi lies across the extreme west channel of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna in the midst of the river along with many other *char* villages and is surrounded by at least three or more major channels of the Jamuna (see Figure 4). Administratively speaking, Char Chashi is one of the ten *mouza* villages of Natuarpara Union *Parishad* (local self-government unit) under Kazipur *Upazila*. It used to be a very large *mouza* with three maps (Jurisdictional Land - JL#38, Sheets 1, 2, & 3) prepared during the Cadastral Survey of Bengal in 1920. According to village sources, population settlement in this *char* began around 1940. In 1951, massive erosion devoured nearly half the *mouza* land. Another one-third of the remaining land was lost to the Jamuna in 1983. As a result, the village site had to be changed several times in the past thirty years. During the monsoon of 1986, exactly one year after the field research for this study was completed, the bulk of the 205 village households were

Figure 4

Village Char Chashi in Local/National Context



displaced once again due to a sudden eastward shift of the river course; only 20 village households remained by 1987: our research site had virtually disappeared -- but that is "charland."

Erosion and population displacement in the floodplain is an on-going phenomenon. The floodplain is constantly changing. In the absence of any up-to-date survey or map of the region, it is difficult to ascertain accurately the amount of erosion and accretion land in Kazipur *Upazila*. There are no year to year statistics on the amount of erosion and accretion activity. However, the *Upazila* Land Revenue Office provided some *mouza*-wide information recorded for 1977-78, 1983-84, and 1984-85. The Revenue Officer told me that official information on erosion and accretion land is primarily dependent on local surveys carried out only periodically. Table 3.1 presents data on the extent of erosion and accretion in Kazipur.

TABLE 3.1

Erosion and Accretion Activities in Kazipur *Upazila*.

Year	No. of mouzas wiped out	Land Lost (acres)	No. of mouzas partially affected	Land Lost (acres)	Accretion Land/acres	No. of mouzas
1977-78	20	9,841.09	22	no figures	9,153.03	16
1983-84	8	4,022.69	27	no figures	8,528.65	8
1984-85	12	4,773.89	3	no figures	4,373.06	5
Total	40	18,637.67	52		22,054.74	29

Source: *Upazila* Revenue Office, 1985.

According to the Revenue Office, there are 117 *mouzas* in Kazipur *Upazila* with a total area of 32,662 acres including the existing water bodies.

However, the total amount of land within the *upazila* changes almost every

year with new erosion and accretion of land. As in Table 3.1, in 1977-78 alone, Kazipur completely lost 20 *mouzas* to the river Jamuna with a total area of 9,841 acres, amounting to 30% of the total area. In addition, 22 *mouzas* were partially affected. The amount of accretion land recorded for the same year is 9,153 acres. This means that 93% of the land lost in 1977-78 was regained through accretion of new land from previous diluvion land. If we consider the three years together, the amount of accretion registers even higher by 3,381 acres over erosion land. Using Landsat imagery data, Haque (1987) estimates that out of its total land Kazipur lost 5,776 acres (18%) and regained 3,744 acres (12%) between 1968 and 1981.

We must, however, consider these statistics with some caution; the process of erosion and accretion is a very complex phenomenon that has social, economic and political implications beyond the physical dimension of the problem. Even though the perpetuated myth is that what is washed away by the river will eventually show up again (*nodir ekul bhange okul ghore eito nodir khela*), it often takes three to five years or more for fully restoring accretion to take place. Moreover, the loss of silt in the flow of the river reduces the total size and fertility of the emergent land.

Other than the physical dimension, there are, as noted earlier, numerous socio-economic and legal consequences of erosion and accretion of land on such a massive scale. First, the extent and frequency of displacement at the individual and household level is phenomenal. According to the Kazipur survey of eight *mouza* villages, a total of 394 (64%) of the 619 sample households reported having been displaced by erosion at least once; out of them, over 80% reported multiple

displacement. In Char Chashi, the extent of displacement is even higher. Table 3.2 shows the frequency of household displacement in the village.

TABLE 3.2

Frequency of Household Displacement in Char Chashi.

Displacement Frequency	Number of Households	%
Never displaced	5	2.43
Once	8	3.90
Twice	9	4.40
Three times	21	10.24
Four times	20	9.76
Five to ten times	106	51.70
Over ten times	35	17.08
Not known	1	0.49
Totals	205	100.00

All of the households except five in Char Chashi experienced displacement at least once; over 50% of the households in the village were displaced between five to ten times; another 17% over ten times. Among those displaced, the range of displacement frequency is from one to twenty-four times. My village informants told me that repeated displacement provides the local *jotedars*, unlike others, opportunity for greater control over newly accreted land. The displacement figures alone indicate the capricious socio-economic conditions of the displacees in the floodplain. Yet the irony of *char* life is that, after being displaced, it reproduces its own society in every new resettlement. As one displacee put it, "We have to keep rolling like silt." He further said, "For us, it is normal; we expect it to happen, and happen any time. You see, I have been displaced twelve times in the past twenty years; God knows how many more times I have to move before I die!"

One possible reason for this high frequency of displacement is the fact that people tend to move very short distances after displacement. According to my village level data, twelve percent of the households moved up to half a mile from their last place of dislocation; another 54% between half a mile to one mile; 8% from one to two miles; and 25% over two miles within the rural areas. This means that the displacees have a general tendency to remain close to the river despite further possibilities of displacement in the immediate future. The economic and social factors responsible for this short-distance migration by the floodplain inhabitants will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter Four.

3.2 Settlement and Geography of the Village

In the floodplain zones, village settlements are generally scattered evenly due to local ecological conditions. First, the field has to be raised above the normal flood level before houses can be built. Second, even though peasant families have a tendency to live in clusters with their kinfolk as far as possible, the availability of homestead land to the already existing village settlement eventually determines whether the village settlement is dispersed or nucleated. The settlement pattern of Char Chashi is relatively nucleated unlike many other neighboring villages. This may have resulted from repeated erosion and shifting of village sites in the past few years. The village settlement runs north-south with wide-open fields and a few scattered households in between. However, one can still easily identify two major clusters of houses in the village, each forming a *para* or neighborhood: *Uttarpara* (northern) and *Dakshinpara* (southern) neighborhoods. The two *paras* contain most of the households in the village.

Char Chashi is by and large a typical *char* village. Its physical setup is also like other surrounding *char* villages with less vegetation around the settlements than is found in the mainland villages. Perhaps the most startling physical feature of the village in general is the presence of large numbers of dilapidated houses. About 47% of the houses have straw and bamboo roof materials compared to 37% in the mainland; houses with corrugated tin roofs are 53% and 66% for Char Chashi and Kazipur mainland study villages respectively. This picture is largely true of *char* village settlement in the Kazipur-Serajganj area. People of Char Chashi told me that such house types help them reduce their potential losses during displacement because they can quickly dismantle their houses and take them along to their new destination. Another possible reason is that many households in the village cannot afford any better housing structure.

Another physical aspect of village life in *char* areas is the lack of any permanent rural roads for inter-village communication or any other infrastructural facilities commonly found in the mainland. Roads are easily washed away during rain and floods due to the sandy nature of the soil. An officer of Kazipur *Upazila* administration told me that they avoid by policy any major government investment in terms of permanent construction or development of rural infrastructure in the *char* areas.

The village has one primary school, four mosques and two small grocery shops. The nearest market centre is Natuarpara Bazaar which meets twice a week. The two most important market centres -- Meghai and Kazipur Bazaars -- are across the river in the mainland. Every day and particularly on market days in the mainland, hundreds of people from surrounding *char* villages commute by *kheoa* (country boats) which are available from sunrise to early evening after sunset. However, inter-

village communication within *char* villages and contact with the mainland become difficult during the monsoon period (mid-June to mid-October) when the breadth of the Jamuna river in Kazipur widens to between three and ten miles at certain points, flooding the entire *char* areas.

The Brahmaputra-Jamuna river system is extremely braided in this reach. It has many distributaries like the Daokopa, Kazipur and Ichamati rivers which run through Kazipur *Upazila*; the networks of these minor river courses make Kazipur and all of the district of Serajganj accessible by water almost throughout the year. The annual flooding by these rivers covers the land quickly with fertile silt; but excessive floods also often totally destroy crops. The high fertility of the soil, however, means that peasants are amply rewarded if they can get one bumper crop in every two years or so. The villagers also take advantage of the rivers by fishing either as a form of livelihood or for daily home consumption. The rivers abound with fish of all kinds -- *Hilsha*, *Rohit*, *Mrigal*, *Boal* and many more -- which, together with rice, constitute the staple for most ordinary Bengali villagers.

The Kazipur *Upazila* covers an area of 143 square miles and has a total population of 212,810 with a density of 1,488 persons per square mile (BBS 1983). The original headquarters of this administrative unit and the principal market town, located in Kazipur on the right bank of the west channel of Jamuna, were literally washed away -- along with four other villages -- by severe erosion that hit mainland Kazipur in 1978.¹ Since then, *upazila* government offices were temporarily housed in the local "flood shelter" until recently when a new *upazila* complex was opened in 1985 at Alampur, a site about three miles interior from the bankline. Today, only one third of the Kazipur *Upazila* is on the

mainland; the remaining two-thirds lies across the west channel within the river in *char* village settlements (see Figure 4).

A flood protection embankment, namely, the Brahmaputra Right Bank Flood Embankment, was built in 1962 (IEC 1960) by the BWDB (formerly Water and Power Development Authority) to protect the mainland from regular flooding and to raise agricultural productivity. The embankment stretches 152 miles north-south from Rangpur to Serajganj via Kazipur along the right or west banks of the Teesta and Brahmaputra rivers (Figure 4). Since the completion of the embankment in 1967 there have been a number of breaches, resulting in severe floods in areas inside the embankment. The most devastating flood in the recent history of Kazipur-Serajganj occurred in 1984 while this research was being carried out. The water levels in the Jamuna reached a record high level -- 15.87 meters (above the Mean Sea Level of 15.24 which is considered the danger level) in three successive waves of floods from July 11 to September 30, 1984 (source: Kazipur Upazila Engineer's Office). Most of the area in the entire district of Serajganj was inundated, resulting in tremendous loss of property and crops officially estimated at Taka 500 million (US\$20 million). The District Administration sources (Hossain 1985) reported that a total of 127 people died, and about 30,000 families were displaced, of which 7,000 were permanently dislocated by the 1984 massive flooding and erosion. A report published in a daily newspaper (The *Ittefaq*, Dhaka, August 19, 1984) claimed that 14,000 families had lost their homes during the flood and erosion and took shelter on the embankment between Kazipur and Serajganj. The majority of these displaced families are from surrounding *char* villages and are likely to become virtually permanent residents as squatters on the embankment for lack of any other alternatives (Zaman 1986b).

3.3 Demographic Characteristics and the Division of Labor

According to the village census that we carried out in March 1984, Char Chashi has 205 households with a total population of 1,174. Only those people who live within the *mouza* boundaries of Char Chashi are counted, thus in-migrant households from other villages that may maintain their ties with their former villages but depend primarily on Char Chashi land or labor and other economic and social support, are included in this figure. All inhabitants of the village are Muslims. The village had a Hindu fishing community of about 20 households that moved to the embankment after being displaced in 1983.

Village population has gone up and down over the past ten years (1974-84). Village level population statistics as shown in the following table (Table 3.3) reveal that there has been both dramatic increase (over three times from 1974 to 1981) and decline in village population.

TABLE 3.3

Population of Char Chashi (1974-1984)

Census	Number of HHs	Total Population
Village Census 1974	85	537
Village Census 1981	255	1,346
Agriculture Census 1984	227	---
Field Survey 1984	205	1,174

Sources: Bangladesh Census, 1974 & 1981; and Kazipur Agricultural Census, 1984.

The increase was due primarily to in-migration of population from villages nearby, particularly from Char Kazipur, Simultala, Masuakandi and Char Burungi which were badly affected by the 1978 erosion in

mainland Kazipur. During the field survey we found that Char Chashi village population consisted of people from as many as ten different villages from both banks of the river.

Similarly, many people moved out from Char Chashi to the neighboring villages of Bilsunder, Rehai Suriber, Panagari, Jorgachha, Dakshin Tekani; some took shelter as squatters on the flood control embankment in the mainland. Therefore, there is a general pattern of in- and out-migration of people within a cluster of *char* villages in the floodplain area. All *char* villages are thus an always changing mix of in-migrants from other neighboring villages.

The average household size, according to our survey, is 5.7, as it is for the entire *upazila*, but lower than the Bangladesh national average of 6.14 per household (BBS 1984a). Variation from the national average may have several reasons. First, it is possible that economic distress due to repeated dislocation and landlessness may be a factor in fragmenting larger domestic units (i.e., traditional joint families) into nuclear types (Wiest 1988). Second, out-migration of part of the family to other safer areas or urban centres may reduce average household size. Finally, erosion and flooding hazard may impact on mortality, especially infant mortality, although it is difficult to ascertain from our survey data. Cain's (1978) work in Char Gopalpur in the Old Brahmaputra floodplain did not establish any direct relationship of the impact of erosion hazard on infant mortality due to small population size of the village; nonetheless, citing other sources, Cain suggests that in rural Bangladesh landless families experience a death rate among children aged 1 to 4 more than four times greater than among children of large landowning families. This finding suggests a link between mortality rates, standard of living and hardship, reflected in household size.

Table 3.4 shows a distribution of the population of Char Chashi by age and sex groups.

TABLE 3.4

Population in Char Chashi by Age and Sex

Age Group	No. of Males	% Males	No. of Females	% Females	Totals	%
<11 Yrs	206	17.55	189	16.01	395	33.65
11 - 15	81	6.90	67	5.71	148	12.61
16 - 25	108	9.02	136	11.59	244	20.79
26 - 35	91	7.76	60	5.11	149	12.86
36 - 45	43	3.67	54	4.60	97	8.27
46 - 55	37	3.15	31	2.64	68	5.59
56 - 65	31	2.64	19	1.62	50	4.26
66 & over	8	0.69	13	1.12	21	1.74
TOTAL	605	51.53	569	48.47	1,174	100.00

The village population is 1,174. Of this total population, 605 (52%) are male, and 569 (48%) are female. According to the 1981 Census, at the *upazila* level the population sex ratio is almost even (49.89% male and 50.11% female). The national ratio is 106 males for every 100 females in the country, or 51.5% males and 48.5% females (BBS 1984a).

The household unit referred to in the statistical material is called *khana* (production and consumption unit) or *chula* (hearth group) in local Bangla terms. It is also known as *paribar* in some areas of the country (see Zaman 1977). As a domestic unit it is based on kinship-relations, and develops around a single nucleus. It typically functions as a corporate unit under the authority of a male household head, and in the context of a patrilineal ideology. As we shall see later in Chapter Four, the composition of village households varies greatly, depending on economic well-being, patriarchal control and inheritance of land

resources. The age/sex composition and household size, therefore, have many implications for production and reproduction potential, use of gender-based division of labor, economic mobility and social class (see Wiest 1988, Cain 1977, 1978, 1983; Cain, Khanam and Nahar 1979, Islam 1974). The population statistics in Table 3.4 thus deserve further consideration in terms of consumer/worker ratio in the household and household headship.

It has already been mentioned that the mean household size in Char Chashi (5.17) is lower than the national average of 6.14 per household. Nearly half (46.26%) of the village population is under 16 years of old; about 80% fall below 36 years of age, and 34% below 10 years of age. The age composition of the population suggests that the consumer/worker ratio may be relatively high in many household units. For example, the working population of the village (both males and females between 16 and 65 years of age) constitutes 52% of the total population; women of this age group form nearly half of the adult working population. However, due to rigid gender segregation and a powerful ideology linking family honor (*izzat*) to female seclusion (*pardah*) and subordination, the domain of female economic activity in rural Bangladesh is largely confined to household work (see Chowdhury and Ahmed 1980, Arens and van Buerden 1977, Kabeer 1988). Thus, there is a clear division of work between sexes in the culture of rural Bangladesh; women remain inside the house and are responsible for cooking, taking care of children, and raising poultry; occasionally they take part in the post-harvest agricultural activities (see Sattar 1975, Chowdhury and Ahmed 1980). But in *char* villages in the Kazipur-Serajganj area, women of landless and poor peasant families are in many cases forced by economic necessity to work in the field; it was found in the *char* that women are even occasionally used as draft labor in

place of oxen to turn the mustard press. Therefore, poor women assist their families in cultivation, harvest and post-harvest operations and other productive activities. Such cooperation is critical for their survival and adjustment to erosion and displacement as an on-going process. Still, men are culturally considered the ones responsible for earning a living for the household and sustaining its income.

Households having no earning adult male member face the greatest hardship in adjusting to repeated dislocation and survival in the *char*. According to the village census, 52 heads of household (25%) in the village are female-headed; 21% of these women are single-parents (widow or divorced) with children, the rest (79%) have husbands; they were absent as seasonal migrants for work in places like Bogra, Sherpur, Rajshahi and other distant rural locations. In all such cases, the "wife" in the family assumes "temporary" headship of the household. According to the Kazipur survey, the incidence of both types of female heads is higher in *char* villages (24%) and among embankment squatters (30%) than in the mainland (17%) (Wiest 1988). Long absence of the males for work away from the family and divorce/separation put the female heads under economic and social-psychological stress in managing the domestic group organization. Also, in the case of early death of the husband/father, the eldest son becomes the head and primary supporter of the family, even though he may be very young; this is due to property inheritance laws in Bangladesh.² Therefore, female-headed households and those households newly headed by very young sons are more vulnerable to hazard impact and dislocation (Wiest 1988; see also Cain 1981). The social and economic impact of riverbank erosion dislocation on such households is intense, especially under conditions of distress and shortage of access to resources.

The Kazipur *upazila* administration has a special food aid program -- the VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) -- to support such "distress" families. But the poor people have least access to this food-aid because the decisions to "entitlement" are made by the local leaders, and the distribution is also made through them. As a result, the food-aid program in Kazipur *Upazila* is essentially controlled by the local leaders which largely benefit them. During my stay in Kazipur, at least three different cases involving members of various union *parishads* were instituted by the *upazila* administration for black-marketing wheat meant for post-flood relief in the area.

3.4 Education, Literacy, and Labor

People of Char Chashi appear to have a much lower literacy rate than the national average. The Census of Bangladesh (BBS 1984a) defines literacy as educational attainment of Grade V and over. In our survey, five categories of educational attainment are recognized (Table 3.5). If literacy is associated with any amount of schooling, the village has a literacy rate of 32%, higher than the national average of 24% in 1981 (BBS 1984a). However, if we use the census definition, the literacy rate drops to 17% for the village.

There are several reasons for this low literacy rate. My informants in Char Chashi told me that education has rarely been a prime objective of *char* people. "We need our children for farming and raising our cattle," said an informant. Abdul Ghani, a teacher in the local primary school said, "Most of the children who start school drop out after two or three years." As a result, a sizeable portion of school-age children

TABLE 3.5

Educational Levels of Char Chashi Villagers
Five Years and Older.

Educational Levels	No. of		%		Totals	%
	Males	Males	Females	Females		
Illiterate	296	30.64	364	37.68	660	68.32
Primary (I-V Gr.)	132	13.66	79	8.18	211	21.84
Secondary (VI-XII)	71	7.35	20	2.07	91	9.42
Post-Secondary	2	0.21	--	--	2	0.21
Madrasha	--	--	2	0.21	2	0.21
Total	501	51.86	465	48.14	966	100.00

remain out of school to assist family-farm activities. In rural Bangladesh, it is common to find children of poor families working as child laborers when they are 10 years old to supplement family income (see Khuda 1982). There is also significant gender-bias in the educational background of villagers. Males have a higher literacy rate than females in the village. The percentage of female literacy decreases as educational levels among villagers increase. This noticeable gender difference may have economic reasons, but it is always expressed in cultural terms. For instance, given the limited economic resources, a family in rural Bangladesh prefers a son over a daughter for schooling because the son is expected to take responsibility for the family as he grows up (Jahan 1975); daughters are expected to move out after marriage. The institution of *purdah* also places restriction on their movement at early puberty and thus many girls are deprived of education in the rural areas. Kabeer (1988) observes that the patrilineal descent rule, together with an intensely hierarchical system of gender relations and the ideology surrounding the *purdah* system, are key mechanisms through which social controls over women are maintained and reproduced.

3.5 Land and the Economic Structure of the Village

Having provided an overview of village Char Chashi, I shall now focus on the economic structure of the village which directly or indirectly relates to the social and political power relations within the village and beyond. "Economic structure" shall refer to the modes of production characteristic of rural riverine Bangladesh -- the forces of production, and most importantly, the social relations of production. These features of the economic structure are essential to explain the emergence of certain social roles and the nature of the political economy at the village and supra-village levels. First I describe different categories of *char* lands and cropping practices in village Char Chashi. This will then be followed by an analysis of the nature of ownership of land and relations of production in the village.

3.5.1 Land Types, Technology, and Cropping Pattern

The agricultural economy of the village is obviously influenced by the river systems and the nature of flooding and erosion from year to year. The land itself is formed by the alluvial action of the rivers. Although *char* land is generally considered low land, the villagers classify their *char* land into three different types: (a) *balu jomi* -- sandy soils consisting of a sandy loam according to age, (b) *doash jomi* -- the name given to fertile and relatively high land with silty soils, and (c) *kada jomi* -- new depositional land with clay and mud. The *doash jomi* is the most valued. Most of the land around Char Chashi is of this type. *Balu jomi* is mostly infertile due to the recent origin of the soil. About 25% of the land in Char Chashi is of this type. *Kada jomi* is generally very low land that consists of new accretion to the existing

land. This type of land makes up less than 10% of land in Char Chashi. All the different types of land are, however, subject to annual flood to between 3 and 12 feet in normal years (Ahmad 1968, Rashid 1978). The land in Char Chashi is suitable for a large variety of crops: rice of three different varieties (*aus*, *aman* and *boro*), wheat, pulses of several kinds (*mug*, *musuri*, *kalai*, *khesari*), oil seeds (mustard and *til*), spices (chile, turmeric, onion), sweet potato, many different types of winter vegetables, sugarcane, jute, tobacco and some fodder crops. The traditional pattern has been to cultivate *aus* or jute in the spring (mid-April to mid-August), *aman* in the summer and autumn (mid-March to mid-November), and winter crops (pulses and vegetables) from January to March. Some villagers cultivate a combined broadcast of *aus* and *aman*; in such cases it is sown early in March, so that the *aus* can be harvested before the river rises; the *aman* is then left in the field until December when it is ready for harvest. *Boro* rice is cultivated in the very low land; it is sown in nurseries and transplanted to the soft mud left by the flood when the water recedes. The cropping intensity of land in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain, according to estimates made by Rashid (1978), is 170 percent, i.e., 1.7 crops per year. The villagers, through years of experience with flood, have developed traditional wisdom in adjusting their crops and farming practices to regular annual flooding and the overall riparian ecology (see Paul 1984).

The land is easy to cultivate. The agricultural implements used by the villagers are by and large traditional in the sense that the same locally-produced simple tools have been used from time immemorial. The wooden plough (*nangal*) for furrowing and turning up the soil, a pair of oxen (*balad*), a yoke (*joal*), and a leveler (*moi*) form the core of village

agricultural technology. A shallow tubewell, owned by the local *jotedar*, is the only modern technology in village agriculture. It is used for irrigation to raise winter crops in the village. The villagers rarely use modern chemical fertilizer because the land is fertilized annually by the silt-laden floods. The technological and economic self-sufficiency of the peasant households in the village is dependent primarily on ownership size and local control of depositional land. This theme is pursued in the next section.

3.5.2 Peasant Classes and Modes of Production

Land is the resource base of village Char Chashi. It is true of any other village of Bangladesh as well. Therefore, ownership and control of land -- even the right to use or work on the land -- are crucial factors for survival and adjustment to erosion and dislocation. As a productive asset land also "bestows status, power, and above all security" (Arthur and McNicoll 1978:35). It will be evident from my description and analysis of the peasant classes of Char Chashi that the authority pattern, local organization, and power relations in the village are all tied to the ownership and local control of depositional land.

The agriculture of Bangladesh is characterized by small-holdings, with an average farm-size of under two acres. This smallness in farm-size has led some scholars to believe that it is a "land of small farmers" and that the land tenure structure is relatively egalitarian (Abdullah et al. 1974, Bose 1973). This notion is associated with another related assumption that peasant differentiation is not significant in Bangladesh. As a result, peasant differentiation is glossed into peasant stratification of sociological types -- "rich peasant," "middle peasant," "poor peasant" -- based merely on "ownership"

of land. This scheme is still the framework of Bangladesh agrarian analysis used by many rural social scientists (see Jannuzi and Peach 1980, de Vylder 1982, Chowdhury 1978, Arthur and McNicoll 1978, Jansen 1987). However, there are many inadequacies of classifying peasants merely in terms of ownership of land; the class structure of rural Bangladesh is more complicated, based as it is on a variety of tenures and socio-political institutions. Considering the land-man ratio and differential productivity of land in Bangladesh, small variations in landholding can lead to marked differences in social classes.

I adhere to the land-based classification with the following two objectives in mind: (a) to illustrate the limitations of such classification, particularly with reference to the complex land-based social relations in Char Chashi, and (b) to develop a more fruitful framework for analyzing peasant classes. In Table 3.6 peasant households of Char Chashi are compared with land ownership patterns in Kazipur and other rural areas of Bangladesh in terms of landholding size.

This table illustrates a number of aspects of *char* land ownership that are distinct from mainland villages. First, about 45% of the households in Char Chashi have absolutely no agricultural land. The percentage of landlessness in Char Chashi is almost double the Kazipur figures and over three times the average of other rural areas of Bangladesh. This high percentage of landlessness is linked not only to the natural forces of erosion; it is also a product of the social forces at work in the riparian villages. Second, over half of the households (52%) in Char Chashi are small peasants who own between one to three acres of land. Despite the fact that some *char* lands are fertile and productive, others may be sandy and thus largely unsuitable for

TABLE 3.6

Size of Household Landholdings for Char Chashi,
Kazipur and Rural Bangladesh (%).

Acres	Char Chashi N=205	Kazipur N=547	Rural Bangladesh N=12,031,272
Landless Peasants (zero acres)	44.9	24.1	14.7
Small Peasants (0.01 - 3 acres)	51.8	66.0	68.6
Middle Peasants (3.1 to 7 acres)	1.9	7.9	11.8
Large Peasants (over 7 acres)	1.4	2.0	4.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Sources: Field Survey 1985, Haque (1988) for Kazipur, and Jannuzi and Peach (1980, Table E.1) for rural Bangladesh.

cultivation for years. Therefore, ownership of one to three acres in *char* villages vis-a-vis ownership of the same parcel of land inside the embankment in Kazipur or elsewhere (e.g., Comilla) means a great difference in productivity and income to peasant farm families (see Wood 1981). A small peasant household whose cultivable land remains sandy is virtually landless in Char Chashi. According to estimates made by the villagers, a family of six members should require at least three acres of *char* land for subsistence while one acre and a half inside the embankment in the mainland can provide subsistence to such a family. Table 3.6 also confirms significant differences in landlessness and ownership patterns of land in Char Chashi vis-a-vis Kazipur and the rest of Bangladesh; there is more inequality in land distribution in Char Chashi village.

As noted in Chapter Two, continuous shifting of the river channels in the floodplain means that ownership rights and land titles are confused or even rendered obsolete. The consequence is perpetual litigation and rioting among local *talukdars*, *jotedars* and cultivating peasants that is associated with land grabbing. Mere possession of title may not be sufficient to control or use the land; political connections are often more critical. In fact, political alliance and relationships with local *jotedars* and *talukdars* can open access to new land with no legal or jural rights. Given this situation of ownership and control over land, the classification based upon landholding size among peasant households is misleading, particularly in the case of Char Chashi.

The social realities of *char* life are obscured rather than illuminated by this classification for several reasons. People who control new depositional land, mostly without legal sanction, commonly fail to report their use of depositional land. We also found that villagers use local *khas* land (any unused government land including newly emerged *char* land) without paying rent officially. Therefore, the land statistics of Char Chashi in Table 3.6 do not represent actual possession or control of land accurately, especially by those who are allegedly involved in local land conflict. The case of Rahim Chakladar illustrates this point clearly. A *jotedar* I shall refer to as Chakladar, who is one of the most powerful players in local and regional violence for land grabbing, gave me different figures on different occasions on the amount of land he owns. On one occasion he told me, "You may hear many different stories about me; I do not own very much land, maybe about 30 acres. But, you see, you cannot guarantee your ownership in *char* land. It changes almost every year. You may lose all your land tomorrow! You even may not have control over your land if you don't have enough power."

Many local informants told me that Chakladar may officially own 33 acres, but he controls unofficially another 150 to 200 acres of agricultural land in several *chars* around Char Chashi and in mainland Kazipur. As a violent and effective political "boss," Chakladar maintains his own *lathiyali* troops to enforce and also to extend his domain over new depositional land. I was frequently told that nearly half of Chakladar's landed property is illegally owned and controlled by his family.

According to the survey data, the total amount of land owned by the villagers is only 158 acres. The 205 households in the village cannot live practically on 158 acres of land for their subsistence. In fact, there is far more land available to work. My informants told me that people who control large amounts of land in the village would never talk about it, because most of their possessions are unlawful. Furthermore, the land on which many displaced families live and work are owned by people who do not live in *chars*, meaning that ownership and/or control of land in *char* villages may lie outside the village itself. Thus, in analyzing ownership of land in *char* villages, it is important to distinguish between actual "control" of the means of production from "legal" ownership. It is almost always possible for the amount and forms of legal ownership not to coincide with actual control of land. In this case, it is the latter which is determinant in defining class position, i.e., the place of the dominant and exploiting class in the relations of production. Given the unstable nature of *char* land, the domination and exploitation may take many different forms of production and labor relations. Therefore, any classification of peasant households based on the size of ownership of land alone fails to reflect the nature of control and the complex web of economic and social relationships which

binds people of Char Chashi to large landowners beyond the village boundaries.

The Marxist concept of "class" proves to be a better analytical tool for classifying peasants of Char Chashi. We find a growing interest among some scholars in social class analysis of the Bangladesh peasantry (see Wood 1976, 1981; Adnan et al. 1977, Bertocci 1979, Jahangir 1979, Alamgir 1978, Westergaard 1985). However, there are two distinct approaches in the application of the concept. First, Adnan et al. (1977), Alamgir (1978), and Jahangir (1979) utilize the conceptualization of class based upon differential land ownership, sharecropping and use of labor to identify elements of capitalist development in Bangladesh agriculture. Bertocci (1979) criticizes the class concept for failing to capture the "structural fragmentation" of the rural peasantry in terms of interplay of economic factors with non-economic but culturally significant markers of relative prestige and social rank. Bertocci (1972) links classes to differences in status and power suggesting that those of low status lineages (*nichu-bangsho*), by attaining new economic strength and political power over time, may acquire high status (*ucho-bangsho*) -- a mobility process he defines as "cyclical *kulakism*." To support his thesis, Bertocci (1972) maintains that in a monsoon climate like that of Bangladesh with high demographic pressure on land, it is unlikely that a family can maintain a good amount of land and superior wealth without some difficulty unless land is consistently accumulated. Bertocci (1972:47-48) writes

Hence, over time, unless accumulation of land is kept up, a lineage's collective wealth stands to be dissipated. At the same time, other families with subsistence holdings or a little more may be rising, especially if they are able to engage successfully in lending activities, in particular the taking of land in mortgage, over a given period of time. Thus, there appears to occur a regular

rise and fall of families, the decline of wealth (and hence a key basis of power) for some and the increase of these for others, in a process which probably evinces a three to four generation periodicity.

Bertocci's views have been discussed and criticized at length by Wood (1981), forming what may be called the "Bertocci-Wood controversy." Wood (1981) criticizes Bertocci's understanding of structural fragmentation and considers that it is a status framework involving use of Weberian concepts of class and status. Other political analysts of peasant societies (see Alavi 1965, 1973; Schryer 1975, Stavenhagen 1975) have also strongly criticized the use of social status and ranking in analysis of class.

Bertocci's thesis of cyclical *kulakism* -- the rise and fall of families -- does not fit the floodplain context. The case of Rahim Chakladar discussed earlier in this Chapter indicates that the *jotedars* and *talukdars* as a class are less vulnerable to riverbank erosion hazard due to their large landholdings compared to small and poor peasants; the economic and political power of the landed elite not only remains "stable" over generations; it even expands at the expense of the poor peasants in the floodplain. Wood (1976, 1981) makes the same argument against "cyclical *kulakism*"; the "*kulaks*" or the peasants who produce surplus are able to reproduce the conditions of their own class and expand their class interests.

Social relations of production are central to a Marxist definition of class. Classes have a particular relation to the means of production; this relation defines the positions people occupy in the organization of production in terms of the ownership of the means and in terms of the labor process (Poulantzas 1973, 1975). Consciousness of class in terms

of organized opposition or class struggle is not a necessary criterion of class existence (see Messaros 1972). Marx (1964) never insisted that consciousness or collective action was a necessary part of the definition of class except that such collective consciousness of common exploitation was a distinguishing feature of the proletariat under conditions of advanced capitalism. In a semi-feudal, pre-capitalist society like Bangladesh, the development of class relations may be seen in terms of bondage of the dependent classes as workers to those who control the means of production and thus extort surplus from them in various forms. The dynamics surrounding collective action or consciousness is, however, dependent upon other social entities (e.g., kinship, *samaj*, "generosity" based on patronage) that co-exist with class and can operate in the system to impede the development of class consciousness. Wood (1981:4) argues that "Once consciousness is accepted as a contingent rather than necessary expression of class... then it becomes a concept for explaining structural fragmentation instead of being regarded as an alternative social form."

My use of the concept of class is thus more in line with that of Wood (1981), which refers to land-based social relations of dependence and domination instead of existence of class consciousness as a prerequisite for existence of a class. It is the relations of dependence and domination that large landowners use to exploit the landless and dependent poor peasants as cheap and bonded laborers. These relationships are determined by the ownership and control and corresponding distribution of the means of production.

A careful look at Table 3.7 identifies the pattern of relationships of many peasant households with local large landowners and their "patrons." Out of 205 households in Char Chashi, 108 (53%) do not even

own their homestead land. They live on land provided by their patrons and relatives in the form of *kot* (rent) or "free-use" with permission. Of these, 56 (52%) pay rent for the use of land for their homesteads, the rest 52 (48%) have free-use status.

TABLE 3.7

Tenure Status of Homestead Land by Ownership Size of Cultivable Land in Char Chashi.

Cultivable Land in Acres	Homestead Tenure Status			Totals
	Owned Land	<i>Kot</i> Land	Free Use with Permission	
No Cultivable Land	15 (16%) (7%)	34 (38%) (17%)	43 (46%) (21%)	92 (100) (45%)
0.01 - 3 acres	76 (72%) (37%)	21 (20%) (10%)	9 (8%) (4%)	106 (100) (51%)
3.1 - 7 acres	4 (100%) (2%)	----	----	4 (100) (2%)
Over 7 acres	2 (67%) (1%)	1 (33%) (0.5%)	----	3 (100) (2%)
Totals	97 (47%)	56 (28%)	52 (25%)	205 (100%)

Note: Figures within parentheses are rounded column and row percentages.

The "free-users" are locally called *uthuli*, meaning helpless and destitute people. The free-use status itself is a mechanism of exploitation and a bondage based on "generosity"; members of those households are a cheap "labor pool" for the patron. Except for one case, all of these 108 households are landless and poor peasants. The social and economic dependence of these destitute and those of small peasant households on local landed elites is almost absolute. Their adaptation

to dislocation and survival in the *char* environment is made possible through (i) provision for "free-use" of land for homestead, (ii) regular and often yearly contracted employment as cheap agricultural wage laborers, and (iii) sharecropping. The incidence of sharecropping reported by the respondents in the village is not as high as one would expect; there are only four cases of formal contract of share-cropping that recognizes various rights of tenants, including the use of the land for a period of five years under the existing tenorial laws (see Government of Bangladesh 1983:39-43). However, in practice, the incidence of "informal" sharecropping is much higher, especially in new depositional land controlled by the *jotedars* and *talukdars*. Under such arrangements, the peasants have no rights in the land except moral ones like traditional equal sharing of the production. My informants told me that it is more typical in *char* villages than in the mainland. A local *jotedar* put it this way: "Why should I give my land to sharecropping? The displacees who live on my land are there to work for me; they are paid in cash and kind to work on my land. I don't need to share the harvest. I always have to keep an eye on their needs all the time." The local patrons thus develop "paternalistic" ties with landless and displaced households based on granting free-use rights and various other relations of production such as sharecropping and use of permanent and cheap labor power for production.

Other than the displaced poor of the village, I found during my fieldwork a number of temporary small shelters (locally called *goal batan*) in Char Chashi. These shelters are manned by contracted laborers by the landlords from the mainland. The laborers employed in the *goal batan* are paid both cash and kind for their year-round labor. They are

used by the landlords to start cultivation and/or settlement of new *char* land; this type of labor relation is strongly tied to serve the landlord as clubmen for opening new frontier of agricultural land. The *goal batan* is a typical system in Kazipur *char* villages where the large landowners from the mainland employ two or three adult males per shelter, with or without their other family members. They are also responsible for grazing animal herds. Full rationing for survival of the members of the shelter is provided by the owner of the land. The *goal batan* thus is not only a temporary shelter, it typifies a particular relation of production in *char* land where the laborers and the animals move back and forth from the *char* to mainland. Annual contract labor (*kamla*) is another kind of year-round labor system with personalized services to the landlord; it requires work both at home and in the field with no fixed hours. There is a substantial demand for yearly contracted labor (*kamla*) in mainland Kazipur.

From the standpoint of landownership in Char Chashi, approximately half of the households in the village have little access to the most essential means of production. Over 53% of the households in the village do not even own their homestead land. The data on the ownership of cultivable and homestead land by households (Tables 3.6 & 3.7) suggest an important feature of riparian villages; there are two classes -- those who control land and those who do not. Land held by over 50% of the households (up to 3 acres, see Table 3.6) is inadequate for subsistence and survival in *char* villages. As a production unit, they are neither independent nor self-sufficient. One-third of them do not even own homestead land. The smallness in farm size makes them as dependent as the landless and as vulnerable to erosion hazard. The "family farm" in the Chayanovian sense is a myth in *char* villages (also, see Rahman 1986).

The peasant households are dependent on large landowners for employment as agricultural wage labor; some combine peasant farming with commerce, hand-sawing, and riverine transport business. A few are also engaged in subsistence farming on a contract basis (*bargadari*) or yearly mortgage (*chukani*). Large landowners from the mainland are found to mortgage (for cash) some of their *char* lands to small peasants for cultivation. The *chukani* system is one way of acquiring land by the poor peasants in a situation of endemic erosion and scarcity of land.

The agrarian relations in Char Chashi discussed thus far form a complex structure. Figure 5 represents diversity of contract relations between peasant households and local landlords in Char Chashi. The contract relations in Figure 5 also illustrate the structure of labor from most to least dependent on and bonded to an individual *jotedar* or *talukdar*. The degree of dependence may vary between the *char* and the mainland. It is probable that a mainland *talukdar* may have more sharecroppers than "free-users," followed by annual contracted laborers. The relationship of dependence and bondage is greater in the *char* land than in the mainland. These relations show features of adaptation to *char* conditions, establishing the fact that a large and complex society lives off the peculiarities of erosion and accretion. This complexity in the relationship is due both to the natural forces of erosion and to the development of social forces around ownership and/or control of new depositional land historically. A large majority of households in *char* villages are not only economically and socially dependent upon the local *jotedars* and *talukdars*, they are consequently patron-tied laborers expected to support their patrons in local political struggles as *lathiyals*. The dependent peasants join such struggles with hopes of

Figure 5. Diversity of Agrarian Relations in Char Chashi

Contract Category	Structure of Labor Relationship with <i>Jotedars</i> / <i>Talukdars</i>		
	Labor	Remuneration	Services
<i>Uthuli</i> (Free-users of land for homestead)	Always available to work on landlord's land at low wage.	Cash and kind.	Obligated to serve the landlord as clubmen.
<i>Kamla</i> (Annual Contract Labor)	Work year-round at home and in the field; no fixed hour.	Monthly cash; food and residence at landlord house; dress for the whole year.	Most dependable clubmen; responsible for landlord's security.
<i>Bargadari</i> (Sharecropping)	All labor inputs by the sharecropper; costs for seeds are occasionally shared.	No remuneration for labor inputs; the harvest is shared 50 / 50; the harvest is delivered to landlord's house.	Sharecroppers are potential clubmen; join fights for control of new land; also work as unpaid household worker occasionally.
<i>Goal Batan</i> (Temporary shelter, but a labor relation)	Permanent labor for <i>char</i> land cultivation; full time employed; herding animals.	Cash and kind; paid monthly; food and shelter provided by the landlord.	Permanent clubmen.
<i>Khet Majur</i> (Agricultural Wage Labor)	Provide cheap labor; employment / work is normally guaranteed.	Mostly cash, but may be paid in kind (e.g., rice / wheat).	No obligation to work as clubmen; normally available for unpaid work at landlord's house.
<i>Chukani</i> (Tenant Farmer)	All labor inputs by the tenant; normally year-round or seasonal contract to use land.	No remuneration; mortgage paid to the landlord in cash.	Not obligated to serve the landlord.

having more land for future cultivation. The *jotedars* and *talukdars* are thus able to reproduce the conditions of their own class situation and even expand their power base by having new agricultural frontiers at the expense of the dependent peasant classes.

The contemporary agrarian relations in Char Chashi and other riparian villages in the floodplain may better be characterized as semi-feudal in that they have more in common with classic feudalism in terms of peasant-lord relationships than with capitalism (cf. Jahangir 1979, Wood 1981).³ In Char Chashi, and indeed, in the entire floodplain, the dependent peasants are tied to the local landlords by relations of personal dependence and by their lack of any "choice" or freedom. In other words, they are unfree bonded labor with extra-economic compulsion where fusion of economic and political power is at the point of production -- a necessary condition of coercive extraction of surpluses (see Alavi 1981:477). The market for free wage labor is non-existent or very limited. In Bangladesh, capitalist relations do not yet dominate agrarian labor relations (for more, see Westergaard 1985); all labor is not wage labor -- much is still, as evident from Char Chashi, by 'contracts' of great diversity. The amount of political services by the dependent households as *lathiyals* is an example. Another study (Adnan 1976) of a *char* village in Barisal reported similar feudal-like relations among the peasants and the large landowners in the delta area. Arens and van Buerden (1977) also consider that the mode of production is essentially semi-feudal even though there are elements of capitalist developments in Bangladesh agriculture.

3.5.3 Pauperization in the Floodplain

There are no inter-temporal comprehensive data on the extent of land lost by different classes of peasants in the floodplain. However, our Kazipur survey data suggest that it is the poor classes who have been hard hit and pauperized by the combined effects of natural processes of land erosion and the social processes of dispossession of land.

Households with small holdings (0.01 - 2.50 acres) lost 61% of their cultivable and 82% of their homestead land. The loss of land in terms of acreage is higher (7.5 acres) among the large landowners than among small holders who lost between 1 to 2.5 acres. But the net effect of land loss is much more severe among the small and poor peasants than for the landlords due to the following factors. First, about three-quarters of the currently landless households in *char* villages lost their last parcel of land to the Jamuna. Repossession of newly accreted land by small holders or landless is difficult due to the nature of the local power structure and violence by the *talukdars* for new depositional land. Second, the loss of land by the small holders makes them dependent upon their equally poor relatives and kin for support and survival. The large landowners, on the contrary, can maintain their large ownership status and, in fact, can increase it significantly by their control of new depositional land. The large landowners thus can stabilize their economic and social positions at the expense of the small holders, who ultimately become their dependents. Therefore, the process of pauperization continues in the floodplain through a combination of ecological and socio-economic forces.

3.7 The State and the Rural Society in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country of villages. About 91% of the population live in the countryside in an estimated 68,000 villages. Many recent studies have empirically demonstrated the association of land ownership with political power at the village and nation state levels (see Rahman 1981, Alam 1976, Jahan 1976, de Vylder 1982, Blair 1978). Chowdhury (1985:96) remarks that such relationship "occurs in ways which are reminiscent of the feudal social relations." For example, Rahman (1981) found that a class of rich farmers and *jotedars* dominate the local union *parishads* in Bangladesh. Based on interviews of 132 members of sixty union *parishads* spread over in ten different districts, the study reports that about 60% of the members of the union *parishads* own more than 7.5 acres of land; about 47% of the members have their lands under sharecropping arrangements and the proportion of the sharecropped land is about 31% of the total land owned by all members (Rahman 1981:26-37, Tables I & IV). Another study conducted in Comilla district found that 58% of the members of union *parishads* own between 5.01 to 10 acres of land (Alam 1976). In the two national elections to the *Jatiyo Sangshad* (Parliament of Bangladesh) held between 1972 and 1975, more than a quarter of the members elected (27% in 1970, 30% in 1973) owned more than 8.3 acres and 10% owned over 40 acres of land (Jahan 1976). Jahan (1976) further reports that over 50% of the MPs have two or more occupation of rural and urban character, the important occupation being law, business and farming.

Therefore, the fact is that political elites at both levels -- the rural and national -- are structurally aligned and fuse rural and urban interests in their economic and political activities. The agricultural

elites share the benefits of the national policies with the urban bourgeoisie (consisting of the indigenous mercantile capitalist class, administrators, private and public corporate elite, bureaucrats, and professionals) and the military (Islam 1987). They further strengthen their links by exchange of mutual support and services (Jones 1979). Thus, at the village level, the rich farmers and *jotedars* provide a network of support for their urban counterparts out of dependent sharecroppers, clients and army of retainers. In return, government policies are tailored to support and protect the interests of the large landowners, for example, by providing subsidized inputs (e.g., fertilizer, pesticide, seeds, pumps, tubewell, etc.), redistribution of government *khas* land or even modification and/or postponement of land reform measures (see Rahman 1986).⁴ Chowdhury (1985) observes that the dominating political power of the landed classes continues due to the prevailing semi-feudal mode of production in Bangladesh.

Since 1971, the successive civil and military regimes in Bangladesh derived their support from the rich peasant class in the countryside. Blair (1978:70) observes that "the regime in Dacca has been absolutely dependent on the '*kulak* class' of farmers for its survival to hold unrest... and to master votes in election time." They dominated the rural cadre of the "petty bourgeois socialist" regime of Sheikh Mujib during the period 1972-75 (Islam 1987); it is again the same landed class which has aligned with the civil-military-bureaucratic complex from 1976 to the present (see Zaman 1984, Franda 1981). It is important to note that there has not been any strong and effective opposition against this "ruling class" that probably constitutes less than one percent of the population. Several reasons may be advanced to explain it. The major political parties (The Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party)

have failed to develop a unified movement against the military. The cadre and leadership of these parties come mostly from the petty bourgeois class; in fact, the petty bourgeois character of the state partly owes its origin to the Awami League government during 1972-75 period (see Bertocci 1984, Islam 1987). The Bangladesh Nationalist Party was created in 1976 by General Ziaur Rahman to legitimize his military government. The legacy of the present military regime of General Ershad is derived from Ziaur Rahman; many key political figures of the present regime come from both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The left political parties are equally weak in their opposition to the present government. Many known radicals in the country have served military governments since 1975. Indeed, initial support to the military regime of Ziaur Rahman came from the left political parties in Bangladesh, hoping that the military would bring reform measures in the country.

Two complementary approaches -- derived from the works of Alavi (1973) and Kalecki (1972) -- have been used in the analysis of the nature and role of the state in Bangladesh (see Bertocci 1982, Jahan 1980, Sobhan and Ahmed 1980, Islam 1987). Alavi (1973) examines the nature of the state in post-colonial Pakistan and Bangladesh and identifies a number of features common to post-colonial states: (i) the state in post-colonial society is overdeveloped in relation to the economic base because of the colonial legacy; (ii) it is not the instrument of a single class, but the interests of the three propertied classes -- the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the indigenous bourgeoisie, and the landed classes; (iii) the relations among the classes are no longer antagonistic but mutually supportive, for the feudal landowning class complements the

political objectives of the urban bourgeoisie by providing links between the state at the national level and local level power structure in the rural areas; and (iv) the state is dominated by the bureaucratic-military oligarchy.

Islam (1987) argues that even though Alavi considers the petty bourgeois class base of the Bangladesh independence movement of 1971, the analysis of the relationship between the petty bourgeoisies and the state is not clear. A useful insight concerning the relationship between them can be gained by applying Kalecki's concept of "intermediate regime" (Kalecki 1972). Kalecki used the concept to describe societies in which the urban professional middle class, in the absence of a well developed industrial capitalist establishment, makes alliance with the rich peasantry to perform the role of the ruling class. In the context of Bangladesh, the intermediate regime consists of (a) the civil bureaucracy, (b) the military, (c) the civilian politicians, and (d) the rich peasant elites who dominate the countryside. This "intermediate regime" tends to exercise state power to its advantage and thus maintains its own class interests. Their mutual alliance and interdependence have resulted in the development of a particular type of social formation in which they gain about equal weight in the ruling class of the state.

CHAPTER FOUR

VILLAGE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ASPECTS OF ADJUSTMENT

Bhadraloks (gentlemen) as a class would rather be huddled up within a small space on the mainland than settle in the *chars*. If a *bhadralok* ever went to a *char* it was to realize *bhag* (share) from his *bargait* (sharecropper) or for a recovery of loans advanced to the cultivators.

Khan, Nurul Islam. *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Noakhali*. Dacca: Bangladesh Government Press, 1977, p. 63.

In this chapter, I focus on the village social structure which determines to a large extent adjustment choices of the floodplain displacees. I have already examined in the previous chapter the nature of land ownership and agrarian relations which influence all other relationships among the villagers and define the distribution of power and authority in the village. The social organization and cultural factors which I describe here constitute an important framework within which adjustments to displacement occur. First, I describe various domestic units in the village, particularly focusing on the *paribar* (family) which is the basic unit of production, consumption and decision-making in the village. I then focus on various local social groupings such as *para* (neighborhood), *dals* (factions) and *samaj* (local corporate group) to explain their role and function in the development of adjustment strategies by the displacees.

4.1 The Domestic Units

Traditionally, the primary domestic unit (*paribar*) or household in rural Bangladesh is composed of a man and his wife, their children and perhaps wives and children of one or more married sons (Cain 1978). They all live in the same compound of the *bari* (cluster of households), but each married couple in such a joint family system (multiple conjugal unions) may share or sleep in a separate dwelling (*ghor*). However, the family is viewed by its members as a corporate unit in terms of production, consumption and decision-making. It provides its members a better sense of social, economic and psychological security. In instances where married sons may have established their own nuclear units independent of their parents, major family decisions are always taken collectively, after consultation with the patriarch or other elders (*murubbi*) and close relatives.

Even though the nuclear type is the modal household structure in Bangladesh villages (Cain 1978, Zaman 1982a), such family units enjoy, in practice, little autonomy except as separate consumption units. The patriarchal authority in collective decision-making symbolizes the unity among members of the family and the lineage. This sense of unity thus expresses a cultural preference for a joint family system as the ideal domestic group. The father, as long as he is alive, is the ultimate source of all authority in the family; this stems from (i) his position as the head of household (*malik*), (ii) control over landed property, and (iii) his role in decision-making that involves relationship with others within and outside the village. However, this ideal domestic organization may vary due to, for instance, economic factors such as (a) control of land resources, (b) degree of economic interdependence, (c)

conditions of distress, and (d) shortage of access to resources caused by riverbank erosion hazards (Cain 1978, Wiest 1988). It is, therefore, likely that both household size and composition may vary between *char* and mainland villages.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the average household size is 5.7 for Kazipur *Upazila* as a whole. But a significant variation in household size exists between displacees and non-displacees in Kazipur villages. Table 4.1 lists the distribution of household size by displacement status.

TABLE 4.1

Distribution of Household Size by Displacement Status (%)

Displacement Status	Household Size (Number of Person)			
	(1 - 3)	(4 - 6)	(7 - 9)	(10 or more)
Displacees n=322	14.9	50.6	23.6	10.9
Non-Displacees n=225	23.5	42.3	27.6	6.6
All of Bangladesh	22.8	31.0	24.4	9.8

Sources: Haque (1988:283) for Kazipur; and BBS (1984b:103) for Bangladesh.

As shown in Table 4.1, the displacees in Kazipur villages have a tendency for a larger family size than in the mainland villages; it is also true if we compare size of displacee households with distribution of households by number of persons for all of Bangladesh. The relatively large household size may be a possible response strategy to hardship and disaster; the displacees share -- in the absence of control over land resources -- limited shelter, and pool multiple income sources derived

from several working members (see Wiest 1988). Therefore, the presence of larger family households in the *char* villages is an adaptive strategy to dislocation. In Table 4.2, an attempt is made to examine household types in terms of kinship composition in Char Chashi in relation to landholding size.

TABLE 4.2
Household Types by Landholding Size in Char Chashi

Household Types	Landholding Size (in acres)				Total
	Landless	0.01--3.0	3.1--7.0	Over 7	
Nuclear	58 (46%) (28%)	67 (53%) (33%)	1 (1%) (0.5%)	--	126 (100) (61%)
Extended	14 (39%) (7%)	19 (52%) (9%)	2 (6%) (1%)	1 (3%) (0.5%)	36 (100) (18%)
Joint	17 (43%) (8%)	20 (50%) (10%)	1 (2%) (0.5%)	2 (5%) (1%)	40 (100) (20%)
Other	3 (100%) (1%)	--	--	--	3 (100) (1%)
Totals	92 (45%)	106 (52%)	4 (2%)	3 (1%)	205 (100%)

The households are classified into four broad categories (e.g., nuclear, extended, joint households and other). Of the four types in Table 4.2 the nuclear type is the most common domestic group with 61% of the total number of the households. In this classification a family is defined as nuclear when a married couple and their unmarried children live together. Within this nuclear type, about 5% of the households are "fragmented nuclear" with widowed/divorced heads of household and their unmarried children. Another 18% of the households in the village are

"extended." An extended household consists of a married couple plus one or more married sons and their children and other lineal dependents. Twenty percent of the households in the village are "joint" consisting of two or more married brothers and their children plus unmarried sisters, if any. They are found to be laterally oriented (e.g., male head, wife, brother, brother's wife). Only three households are made up of a single person and are categorized as "other."

As found in Table 4.2, there is no clear evidence of a direct relationship between landholding size and family types. We find that all three types -- nuclear, extended and joint families -- are concentrated within landless and small peasant categories. With so few households (only 7 out of 205) having three or more acres of land, it is of course difficult to comment precisely on landholding size and family types. However, two possible generalizations can be made: (a) the proportion of nuclear households among the landless and small peasants is higher than households with more control over land; and (b) the extended and joint households in Char Chashi are dependent both on land resources and kinship support for repeated adjustments to dislocation caused by riverbank erosion hazard (also, see Wiest 1988).

Closely linked with the household as a domestic unit is the *bari* -- another distinct domestic unit. It is a cluster of closely related lineal members; a *bari* is the minimal social grouping commonly found throughout rural Bangladesh (Islam 1974, Bertocci 1976, Jahangir 1979). A *bari* is thus a residential unit of several closely related lineal households; as in the case of Char Chashi, it may consist of only one household. Beyond the household, an individual in rural Bangladeshi society immediately identifies himself with his *bari*. As a social unit, it is "a corporate entity with land held in the name of its head, who

exercises patriarchal control over members" (Arthur and McNicoll 1978:38). Taken in this sense, a *bari* often symbolizes unity among member families. Each *bari* is known by family title such as Chakladar *bari* in Char Chashi; it is also often known by status and occupation. For example, master (meaning school teacher) *bari* or *mondol* (village level leader) *bari*. Since Char Chashi has experienced much in- and out-migration of people over the last few years, the concept of *bari* as a social entity is less important. It is partly due to the fact that people who are immediately agnatically related to each other are scattered all over the village and in other villages due to repeated dislocation, a feature which is again typical of *char* villages but not typical in the mainland. In fact, there are only a few small clusters of households in the village known by family titles (i.e., Chakladar Bari, Mondol Bari), in part due to their traditional economic and social status in the village.

Households that are agnatically related in the village form a *gusthi*. It is an important domestic group in the village, because *gusthi* membership can immediately integrate a large number of people within and also beyond the village. It refers to "a group of households or families all of whom are agnatically related with the exception of in-marrying wives and out-marrying daughters" (Aziz 1979:24).¹ The local villagers have both close (*ghanisto atmiya*) and distant (*dur shomporkar atmiya*) kinsmen in and outside the village. A recognized kin relationship implies certain mutual obligations among members of the kin group; people of the same *gusthi* offer mutual help to each other when needs arise. The rich households of a *gusthi* are culturally expected to help their poor and

needy relatives. The role of *gusthi* in adjustment to displacement is discussed in section 4.2.

The importance of *gusthi* in rural politics and leadership has been well documented (Bertocci 1980, Islam 1974, Zaman 1982b). It is a semi-political unit in the village. In fact, the structure of village factionalism (*doladoli*) is built largely around the nucleus of *gusthi* which is looked upon as the most important set of social bonds both for political and ritual relations among the villagers.

4.2 The Politics of Social Groups at the Village Level

Other than the kin-based domestic units described above, there are other non-kin social groups and institutions important for understanding socioeconomic dynamics of adjustment at the village level. In this section I describe the nature and functions of the *para* (neighborhood), *samaj* and the village as social units. The nature of leadership in these social units is briefly touched upon; more detailed discussion on leadership and patronage system is presented in section 4.5.

The *para* is a geo-social entity within the village unit. It is a cluster of adjacent *baris*; in most cases members are still likely to be related through patrilineal kinship. Therefore, people who live within a *para* often form a cohesive group for mutual self-help and local decision-making. Char Chashi has two major clusters of households, namely *Uttarpara* and *Dakshinpara*, which contain people from several *gusthis* and *samajes* in the village. The struggles for leadership, local politicking and factional affiliations are rooted largely at the *para* level. The *para* as a social unit displays a considerable degree of social solidarity in situations of disaster and displacement.

The *samaj* is an important social organization of mutual reliance in the village. It is also the largest intra- and inter-village social organization that cross-cuts many other social groupings in the village. Based on the notion of "Islamic Brotherhood" and the concept of social equality, it brings together people who share common religious belief and practices and organizes their social life in accordance with certain Islamic values interpreted by the *samaj* leadership. Although the *samaj* is an informal organization -- not recognized by the state -- it has its own organizational structure. In Char Chashi the leaders of the *samaj* are called *matabbars*, and they are empowered to mediate disputes and pass judgement on village conflict. The *matabbars* in the village have relatively large landholdings; they are also considered to have knowledge, skills and power to mediate and settle disputes (also, see Jansen 1987, Thorp 1978).

Local villagers define *samaj* boundaries in terms of two criteria: those who come to the same mosque for prayers, and those who share and exchange meat (of sacrificed animals on *I'dul Azha*) among themselves. This reciprocity and exchange indicates mutuality and solidarity among the members. Bertocci (1980) considers the *samaj* a "religious corporate group" rooted in the Muslim notions of "moral order" which performs functions of social control and dispute settlement. Thorp's work (1978) on the ideology of farmers of Pabna district reports that in public affairs of the 'local brotherhood' (*samaj*) the landed 'bigmen' are considered to possess the skill necessary to direct the *samaj* because it is believed that *Allah* (God) destined them to be powerful in community affairs. The *samaj*, therefore, is a local power domain of the rich peasants who take mediating roles between the villagers and the outside world (Zaman 1982b).

In village Char Chashi, the *samaj* plays an important role in adjustment to erosion and displacement beyond its religious, ritual, ceremonial and adjudicative functions. As shown in Table 4.3, there are eight *samajes* in the village (also, see Figure 6). Except for 4, 5 & 7, each *samaj* has two or more *matabbars* who share political power and influence within the *samaj* and at the same time extend their power base beyond *samaj* boundaries.

TABLE 4.3

Distribution of Households on the Basis of *Samaj*

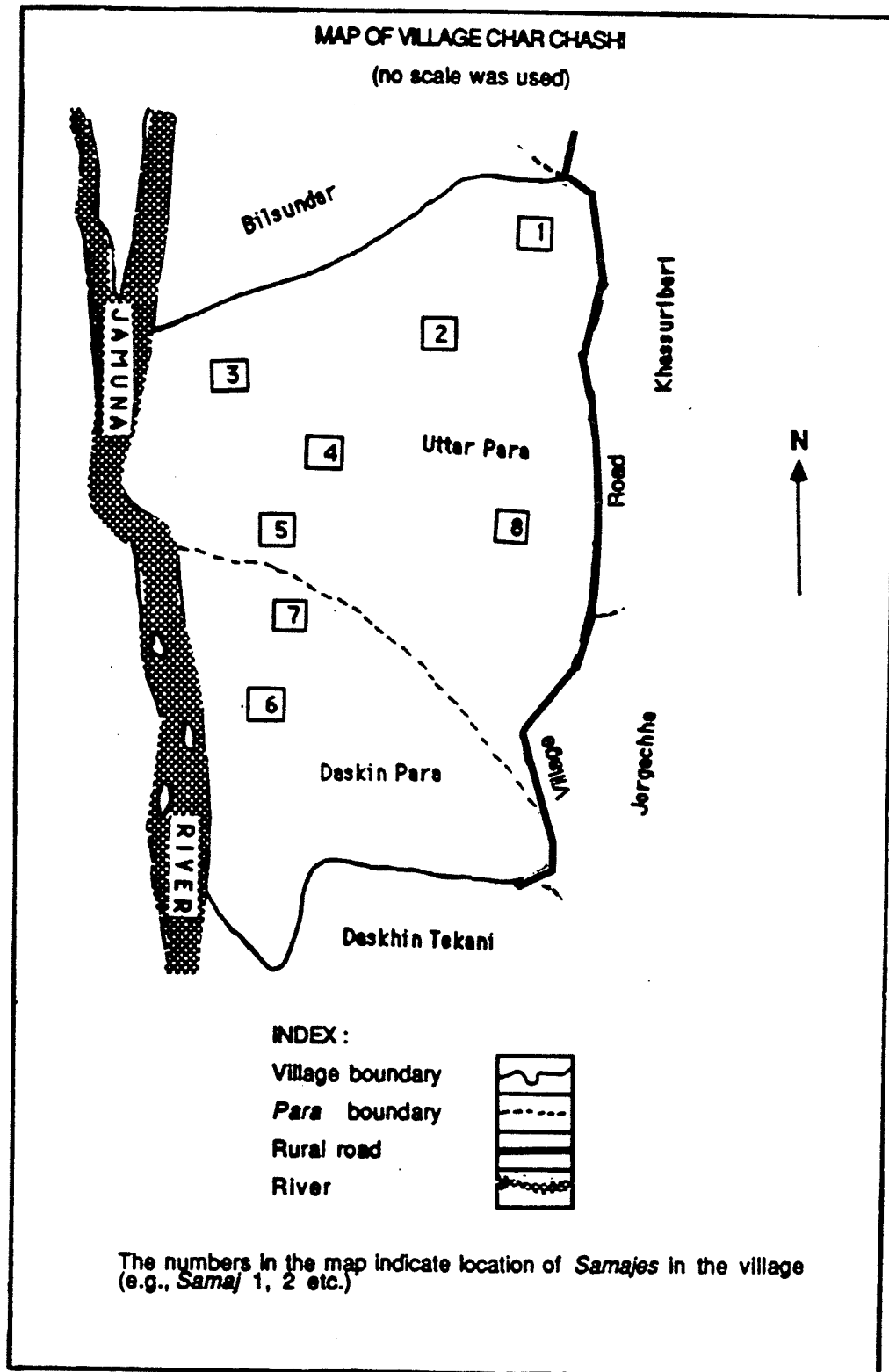
<i>Samaj</i> Number	Names of <i>Matabbars</i> *	Number of HHs	%
<i>Samaj</i> #1	Eunus Ali	25	12.20
	Ismail Contractor		
<i>Samaj</i> #2	Hossain Ali Master	43	20.98
	Abul Kalam Azad		
<i>Samaj</i> #3	Sharfaraz Ali Mondol	20	9.76
	Syedul Haque		
<i>Samaj</i> #4	Imran Ali Mondol	14	6.82
<i>Samaj</i> #6	Rahim Chakladar	41	20.00
	Abdul Karim		
	Hakim Master		
<i>Samaj</i> #7	Taher Ali Sarkar	30	14.63
<i>Samaj</i> #8	Mahtab Ali Sarkar	20	9.76
	Amir Hossain		
Total		205	100.00

* Fictitious names are assigned to the village leaders.

During the first few months of the fieldwork, it was difficult to ascertain the size (number of members) of individual *samajes*, for they transcend village boundaries. An estimated 55 households that migrated to nearby villages continue to maintain their memberships in their original

Figure 6

Spatial Distribution of *Samajes* in Char Chashi



samaj in Char Chashi. For example, the two large *samajes* (#2 & 4) have another 20 and 35 households respectively as members of their *samaj* who live outside Char Chashi in the neighboring villages of Dakshin Tekani, Jorgachha, Rehai Suriber, Panagari and Natuarpara. But cases of fragmentation of the traditional *samaj* organization due to displacement are not uncommon; such fragmentation or loss of membership and support has critical impact on adjustment. For instance, people who moved to the embankment across the river have lost touch with their original *samajes*, making them particularly vulnerable in the squattments (Zaman and Wiest 1985).

Despite the fact that the *samaj* is ideologically based on the concept of equality, "a structure of dominance gradually emerges within it from the unevenly developed bases of other social structures: from the economic and political structures" (Jahangir 1979:2). The *samaj* leadership is thus dominated by a class of large landowners; as a result, a relationship of dependence and patronage develops between the *samaj* leaders and their poor clients who desperately need support and protection by the patrons for their survival (see Zaman 1982c). In the village context, one of the fundamental conditions that shapes the relationship between local patrons and the displaced peasants in the floodplain is the "insecurity" of village life. This insecurity is a product of scarcity of land and limited resources to cope with repeated dislocation.

The politics of *samaj* in fact help the village *matabbars* to control the dependent labor power to their own advantage. In Char Chashi each *samaj* is identified or named after its most powerful *matabbar* (e.g., Rahim Chakladar's *samaj*) which signifies control of the patron-leader over

the *samaj*. As an indigenous system of social control, the *matabbars* within the same *samaj* or between *samajes* may either have conflict or cooperation among themselves, depending on their mutuality of interest or the nature of dispute at hand or even the parties involved in the dispute. If two *matabbars* become involved in any dispute, especially land, a decision to resolve the dispute by the *samaj* leadership is difficult; the possibility is that it will end up in some kind of violent fight because everyone involved in land dispute wants a "zero-sum" outcome. But when a rich peasant fights against a poor one, or when parties involved are both poor or small peasants, a decision may easily be arrived by *salish* (informal conciliation bench consisting of village *matabbars*).² Further, if the dispute is between *matabbars* of the same *samaj*, it is likely that a new *samaj* will be formed by the defeated *matabbar* with his own followers. For example, *samajes* 4 & 5 were united as one *samaj* until 1983 when a land conflict between the two Mondols eventually produced a cleavage leading to the formation of *samaj* #5 by Imran Ali Mondol. Thus, the formation and dissolution of *samaj* is largely dependent on the personal advantage or gains of individual *matabbar*; however, it is also possible that a *samaj* can sustain itself over a longer period of time or generations of a patron family.

The village (locally called *gram*) as the basis of rural settlement is an "elusive" concept (Bertocci 1970), because it is often difficult to determine village boundaries.³ In the floodplain where the land is subjected to extensive seasonal flooding, small groups of hamlets are clustered on raised ground; as a result, settlement patterns are dispersed or linear, unlike in the mainland that are mostly nucleated. The development of the village settlement of Char Chashi has been more a function of the riverine environment with in-migrants from many different

villages. There are, as mentioned earlier, many "village identities" among the villagers of Char Chashi. Therefore, the village as a unit tends to have no corporate features and very little cohesive identity. "A man's duties are, in order, to his own family... then to his *gusthi* and then to his village," observes Islam (1974:75). Arthur and McNicoll (1978:39) has succinctly described this relative lack of village "identity":

A man may reside in one village, attend a mosque in another, patronize a market in a third, and cultivate plots of land in any or all of them. For adjudication of minor disputes he may call on the head of his *gusthi* or on the leader of the *shamaj* [sic] to which he belongs; for assistance in ploughing or harvesting he may turn to other members of his *paribar* [meaning lineage] or to wage labor from distant villages.

As a result, the village as a social unit remains weak and segmented. However, kinship and patronage ties are important organizing forces that together characterize the village system (Arthur and McNicoll 1978). A schematic description of the village social organization is presented in Figure 7.

4.3. Local Perception of Hazard and Measures of Adjustment

Kazipur floodplain inhabitants typically view both flood and erosion as "*Allahar Gajab*" (disaster)-- an act of punishment by God for sinful or anti-religious activities with which people are seemingly involved. Thus, reports of religious meetings, mass prayers and dropping *tabiz* (talisman) into rivers to check bank erosion are not uncommon in erosion hazard areas in Bangladesh (Anwarul Islam 1987). Such religious attitudes to erosion hazards coincide with relatively limited physical adjustment strategies to control bank erosion. Char Chashi villagers told me that they simply abandon their lands without taking any active measures to

Figure 7. Schematic Presentation of Social Organization Units of Char Chashi

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Descriptive/Basis of Affiliation</u>	<u>Approximate Size</u>	<u>Major Functions</u>	<u>Degree of Cohesion</u>
<i>Paribar, Khana</i> (household)	nuclear, extended, joint	6 persons +	main productive and reproductive (biological, social) unit	strong
<i>Bari</i> (homestead)	cluster of patrilineally related households sharing a common compound	6 - 8 households	may often work as economic/political unit	strong corporate group
<i>Gusthi</i> (patrilineal kin group)	kin-based alignment, often extends beyond the village; often may be limited due to fragmentation caused by displacement and migration	varying sizes	political unit, basis of factional/patronage alliance	strong cohesive group, can organize households across village boundaries
<i>Para</i> (neighborhood)	cluster of few adjacent <i>baris</i> , member households are patrilineally related, but not always so	20 - 30 households	local politicing, basis of faction, mutually helpful to members in disaster	considerable degree of solidarity
<i>Samaj</i> (patronage group)	defined by patron-client bonds around one or more leaders, often extends beyond <i>para</i> / village; named after most powerful patron	wide range of sizes	ritual, ceremonial, patronage distribution, political mobilization, dispute resolution, mutual self-help	strong
<i>Gram</i> (village)	based on local <i>mouza</i> unit, but may be socially recognized local village, often difficult to define the social boundary; more a function of local riverine ecology	200 households (average)	social entity, no corporate feature due to almost regular in and out-migration caused by displacement	generally weak, but kinship and patronage ties are important organizing forces that characterize village system

Note: This schematic social organization is almost universal in Bangladesh villages with some local variation (see Bertocci, 1976; Islam, 1974; Zaman, 1977; Arthur and McNicoll, 1978; Chowdhury, 1982; Aziz, 1979.)

protect them from erosion. "It is foolish to try and fight the mighty Jamuna" said one villager. He continued: "When the river begins to approach our homestead, we pack up and move. We live here like *jajabor* (nomads). We have to move frequently."

When threatened by erosion, the villagers can only take a number of divesting measures to reduce their potential loss in the erosion process. For example, they dismantle their houses and take them along to their new destination. They may also sell their livestock, valuable personal belongings (e.g., ornaments) and the remaining agricultural and/or homestead land. Those who migrate out of the area for a distant location try to sell even their land records for whatever price they can get. The small holders do not want to take up the risk involved in buying such paper "assets"; it is again the established large landowners who take the risk and advantage of paying very little cash for such land records. When asked about such incidents, one *jotedar* said: "How can you pay more? We just buy water with the hope that the land will show up one day. It may take five years, ten years, who knows! Even then I may not get possession. You know, papers don't matter very much. It is power that matters."

Apart from these measures, physical moves to either the WDB embankment for shelter or to other non-affected *char* areas constitute a significant adjustment strategy. But the sudden displacement of people from their land, together with physical limitations of embankment squatting and future insecurity has separated many people from their traditional organizations of mutual reliance. About 54% of the displaced households in the village reported that repeated displacement has separated them from their *gusthi* people who have settled in other

neighboring villages. In situations of *gusthi* fragmentation, the villagers largely rely on patronage support and factional alliances.

4.4 Kinship, Friendship and *Samaj* in Local Adjustments

According to my survey data, the displacees in Char Chashi received little assistance or support from the local *upazila* administration or any other relief or government agencies in coping with erosion hazard and displacement. Only four out of 205 households reported to have received some assistance from government sources, typically either in the form of relief goods or wheat under the Vulnerable Groups Feeding (VGF) program. However, the displacees received significant help and assistance from their friends, relatives and local *samaj* organization. The assistance received from friends and relatives is wide ranging, from moral support and advice on destination to cash loans, free use of land for homestead, and food and free labor at the time of move. Thus, friends and relatives provide both moral and material support to cope with dislocation and adjustment.

It is, therefore, particularly important to realize that adjustment to displacement in the floodplain of Bangladesh has been conditioned historically more by social, cultural and political factors than by individual choices alone. For this reason displacees generally move short distances even after experiencing multiple displacements. The adjustment choice is eventually the product of a complex set of factors including: (i) availability of land for resettlement, (ii) support from friends and *gusthi* people, (iii) possibility of maintaining close ties with the *samaj*, and (iv) whether or not displacees have committed themselves to such patronage as sharecropping or free-use of land for

homesteads from relatives and/or locally powerful village leaders who head *samaj* organizations.

TABLE 4.4

Reasons Given for Resettlement in Char Chashi After Previous Displacement

Reason	Frequency of Responses*	% of HHs Stating Reason
Had own land in new location	37	18.50
Availability of <i>khas</i> /rented land	24	12.00
Support and/or presence of <i>gusthi</i> people and friends	91	45.50
Free-use of land	21	10.50
Returned to accreted land	33	16.50
Closer ties with <i>samaj</i>	31	15.50
Hoped land would reemerge	8	4.00
Other	21	10.50

* Respondents could indicate and rank more than one response.

Table 4.4 lists the reasons given for moving to village Char Chashi by the 200 displaced families after previous displacement. The single most important factor for choosing Char Chashi as destination after previous displacement is the presence of friends and patrilineal relatives (45%). Therefore, kinship remains an important factor in the migration decision. "How can you live without your kinsmen? You need them always," said one settler. Existence of owned land in the new location (18%), availability of *khas* or rented land (12%), free-use of land (10%), and return to newly accreted land (16%) are some of the

important factors for moving to their present place of residence. But most of all this indicates that population movement or migration after displacement is not erratic; it is governed by reliable socio-cultural rules and relations typical of pre-capitalist societies.

About twelve percent of all respondents considered it important to remain within and/or to maintain close ties with their traditional *samaj* organization prior to moving to Char Chashi for resettlement. Out of the total 200 displaced households, 63 (31%) reported separation from their respective *samaj* due to dislocation. To the extent possible under this hazard situation, the general tendency found among the displacees in the Brahmaputra floodplain is to cluster together with their kin and *samaj* groups in their new place of residence.

4.5 Village Leadership, Factions, and the Patronage System

The discussion in the previous section underscores the dependence of displacees upon their kin and local corporate groups for assistance and support. In this section, I argue that individual responses or adjustment patterns are in fact rooted in a wider network of social, economic and political relationships such as village factions and the patronage system.

All fourteen *matabbars* of the eight different *samajes* in the village have *dals* (factions), however big or small, to support them in political conflicts and decision-making within the *samaj*. The *samaj* consists of segmented structures of patrons and their clientele cross-cutting class divisions in the village. In fact, the patrons in the *char* villages in the floodplain are in competition and conflict with each other more than they are "a class" functioning in opposition to the landless and small

holders, although both dynamics are present simultaneously. The patron-leaders recruit members to their factions on the basis of diverse principles, e.g., kinship, economic dependence in the forms of employment, free-use of land for homestead, share-cropping and neighborhood. Such relationships are sometimes extended beyond the *samaj* to the village and outside. This means that factional leaders develop a network of supporters and dependents in many villages. However, the ability to develop extra-village networks is dependent on several factors: (a) the nature of resources a particular leader possesses or can deliver, (b) power and ability to mobilize or intimidate people to ensure loyalty, and (c) the role of the faction leader in the regional political system.

The sphere of influence of the leaders of Char Chashi is variable; the power and authority of many of the leaders is limited within their own *samajes*, mostly confined to their kinsmen. Other leaders can assert some influence in village level *salish* meetings. These leaders are classified by the villagers as *parar matabbar* (leader of the neighborhood) and *boro matabbar* (powerful leader of the *samaj* or the village) respectively. Ruhul Amin Master (*Samaj* #2) and Hakim Master (*Samaj* #6) have some influence beyond the village. They participate occasionally in inter-village *salish* meetings. Abdul Karim (*Samaj* #6) has supporters both within and outside the village. Because of his political contact and access to the local administration, he is widely looked upon by the villagers as an effective "middleman" between the villagers and the local administration. But as far as the leadership of village Char Chashi and many other local *char* villages is concerned, by universal opinion, Rahim Chakladar is what the villagers call the only

harta-karta (powerful and authoritarian person) in the locality. He literally rules over other *matabbars* in the village. Chakladar is one of the richest, most powerful, and most fearsome persons in the *char* areas of Kazipur Upazila. "*Charer raja Chakladar*" (Chakladar is the king of *char* villages) -- so goes a saying in the locality. But again, as I found in Kazipur, powerful local patrons, for example, Rahim Chakladar, are clients of more powerful regional patrons. Therefore, there exists a hierarchical network of leadership in the patronage system of the floodplain villages. This network of localized and regional patronage can be explain better by using a patron-based, "non-kin" segmentary model of alliance and opposition commonly found in *char* villages (see Figure 8). As shown in the model, faction leader A fights B for control over new land resources; A & B unite under the leadership of *boro matabbar* X against C & D led by *boro matabbar* Y. A, B, C & D cease hostilities and unite under *Jotedar* K to fight an equally powerful *Jotedar* Z. Finally, at the regional level, the entire network of Ahmed Talukdar unites to fight against Siraj Talukdar to gain or regain control over new depositional land. The following four profiles of leadership in Char Chashi are helpful to understand the dynamics of this coalition-building, the basis of power of the individual leaders and their relationships with their followers, the extent of their involvements in land conflict and their links with the local administration and national-level politicians.

Figure 8. Patron-based, Non-kin Segmentary Model of Alliance and Opposition *

Talukdars

(the *jotedars* loyal to Ahmed Talukdar unite to fight Siraj Talukdar)



Jotedars

(A, B, C & D unite under *jotedar* K to fight an equally powerful *jotedar* Z)



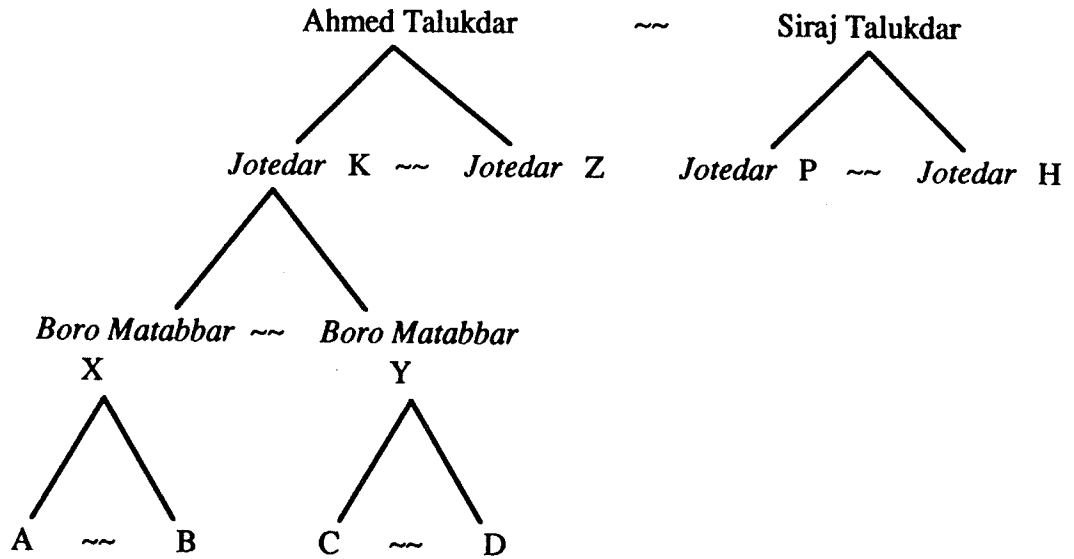
Boro Matabbar

(*Samaj* / village level; A & B unite under X to fight C & D led by Y)



Matabbars

(factions within *para* /*samaj* ; A fights B)



* A, B, C & D are segmented structures of patrons and their clients at *samaj para* levels.

KEY ~ Conflict

Leadership Profile 1: Rahim Chakladar

Rahim Chakladar is a typical character one would possibly encounter in many *char* regions in Bangladesh. He is 72 years of age and has a large joint family with three wives and a total of 17 children (12 sons and 5 daughters). He lives in Char Chashi with his second wife and her children. Other than his house in Char Chashi, Chakladar owns three more -- two in mainland Kazipur and one in Serajganj town. According to his own statement, Chakladar was displaced 22 times and lost a total of 50 acres of homestead and agricultural land in the process of dislocation. It is difficult to ascertain the amount of land he owns now; he told me that he has about 30 acres which he cultivates with the help of family and hired laborers; local informants, however, repeatedly said that Chakladar has between 150 and 200 acres. His third son told me that Chakladar gave in writing 20 acres of land to each of his 12 sons back in 1972 to avoid loss of any land under the new land ceiling act (i.e., the Presidential Order of 1972).

In his young adulthood, Chakladar served the British Army as a soldier, but left the army around 1945 after having a scuffle over Indian independence with the commanding officer. He later joined the revolutionary red army of Comrade Subash Bose and was in Burma until the partition of India in 1947. Chakladar then returned home and got married the same year. He organized local peasant groups between 1947 and 1964, and since then has been involved locally with all kinds of political parties in the country from the Muslim League to National Awami Party (Bhasani) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh. Chakladar claimed that he had close association with Moulana Bhasani and firmly supports his political ideology. In 1964 Chakladar was elected chairman of the local union council, but was later forced to resign in 1966 due to his alleged indirect involvement and support to a local gang of country robbers and cow-lifters, who shared their dividend with Chakladar. His local influence grew partly due to his political relationship with Imam Talukdar who was member of the Pakistan National Assembly during 1964-69. Chakladar was his close associate and local political "agent." In 1979 Chakladar ran for membership of the *Jatiya Sangshad* (Parliament of Bangladesh) on a Muslim League ticket. He also lost in the 1983 local election of union council chairmanship.

Chakladar always considers himself "friend" of the poor peasants. He reminded me occasionally of his involvement with the poor and their "dependence" upon him. Chakladar and his sons have significant control over the village economy and petty commerce. He owns the only rice mill of the village. The family also owns the only shallow tube-well available for use by the villagers on a rental basis for irrigation during winter season. One of his sons is the only government food dealer for the village. Another one has been one of the top *upazila* government contractors for the past few years. Apart from his own large family, Chakladar told me that he is related to over 200 households in and outside the village. "They all will jump to my help if I need," said Chakladar.

Chakladar is seen by almost everyone in Kazipur as a violent and fierce person. He maintains a *lathiyal* troop and controls an estimated 200 acres of illegal or unauthorized land in many *char* villages. For

example, he recently leased (under section 86 of P. O. 1972 as amended in 1975) from the local land revenue office about 20 acres of new depositional land in five *mouzas* (Char Girish, Panagari, Natuarpara and Dakshin Tekani) which belonged to some other people prior to erosion. Those lands are now used by the local villagers either on a sharecropping or rental (*chukani*) basis. According to local sources, Rahim Chakladar, Korban Ali and Hossain Master jointly recorded 50 acres of accretion land during the 1962 Settlement Operation. Now they are fighting each other for their due share of the land. In 1982, he got control over 30 acres of new land in Chalal *mouza* through fictitious records.

Chakladar spends about three days a week in Serajganj town and the Kazipur *Upazila* office to fight court battles and also to manipulate local officials in his favor. He has good contact with officials in the local land revenue department. My local informants told me that Chakladar has up-to-date information on new accretion and *khas* lands in the area and knows when and where to look for new pieces of land that belong to others. He is currently involved in ten different land litigation cases. Many people characterize Chakladar as a "man of litigation" ("*mamla kora Chakladarer choritra*"). During my fieldwork, he even approached my research assistant to influence the *upazila munsif* (civil judge) to win the legal battle against Nizam Sarkar, a former chairman of the local union council and one of his main rivals. When I asked him how he deals with his opponents, he laughed and said: "I do nothing. But if things get worse and I feel it necessary to go into action, I just take my people to his land and harvest his crops. That's how you should treat your foes if you want to live in *char* land."

Leadership Profile 2: Abdul Karim

Abdul Karim is a young, educated and very popular leader of Char Chashi. He is widely known as Karim *Neta* (leader) in Kazipur *Upazila*. Abdul Karim is 35 years old and married to two wives. He owns 15 acres of agricultural land and lost another seven acres due to erosion. He conducts business part-time and also works as BWDB contractor. Karim has four brothers who live with him in Char Chashi. He is a nephew of Chakladar and a very strong rival. Apart from his own political ideas and connections, he gained a leadership position in the village by opposing his uncle's illegal and unjust activities since the 1960s. He made two out-of-court settlements with his uncle over landed property in the last eight years.

Abdul Karim earned his B.A. from Bogra Azizul Haque College in 1969. He became politically involved early in his student life. He actively participated in the war in 1971 and led a guerrilla group. After independence, Karim joined the Communist Party of Bangladesh in 1973. He worked with a group of workers in Serajganj town and later in 1974 became general secretary of the Pabna-Serajganj Krisak Samitee (Peasant Association). Karim led a very popular movement in Kazipur in 1973 against the 1962 Land Survey operation in the area. He told me that people like Rahim Chakladar of Char Chashi, Imam Talukdar of Shubhagachha, Korban Ali and Jamal Pandit of Dakshin Tekani, and Rafiq Talukdar of Char Natipara took advantage during the land survey and got huge amounts of depositional land recorded in their names by bribing the

Survey party and local revenue officials. Abdul Karim even moved a resolution in 1974 in a national peasants' rally held in Dhaka demanding a fresh land survey in Kazipur. Captain Mansur Ali, a cabinet minister in Mujib's Government, had promised to take steps to remedy the problem, but the fall of the Mujib government in 1975 meant an end to that promise.

In 1981 Karim organized the local agricultural wage laborers under *Khet-Mujur Samitee* (Agricultural Wage Labor Association). It is an inter-village association of wage laborers federated at the Upazila level. In December of 1984, Karim mounted a huge demonstration against the local Upazila Officer. It was attended by about 500 *khet-majurs* who demanded adequate relief measures for the displaced and the poor and provisions for work. Karim made a fiery speech. He was arrested the following day, but was later released on bail. A few days later Karim received an earth-works contract from the *Upazila* Office. He confessed that as a contractor he also had underpaid his own people and to some extent cheated them by making false master-rolls of payment. He was candid about it and said that it has been a difficult task to work with the administration and at the same time organize the poor. "But you have to do something for a living," he said.

When asked about political violence and the *lathiyali* system in Kazipur, Karim pointed out that people take the risk and join such violent fights on the promise of more land. He further said, "People who do not have land listen more to Chakladars and Talukdars because they have land to help them." Karim does not think that he can offer an effective alternative leadership against big *lathiyals* like Ahmed Talukdar, Rahim Chakladar or Rafiq Talukdar who have both power and resources to control the local population. But he said, "I will keep fighting with them as far as I can."

Leadership Profile 3: Mahtab Ali Sarkar

Mahtab Ali Sarkar is known as a notorious litigant in the village. The villagers call him "*mamlabaz*" (litigant) Sarkar. He is 75, married and has 9 children (6 sons and 3 daughters). He has about 20 acres under cultivation; part of the land is used by sharecroppers. His eldest son lives separately in Kumarbari *mouza* under Char Girish Union Council to take care of their land under dispute there. According to Mahtab Sarkar, he lost control over 15 acres of his own land during the 1983 survey of depositional land in Kazipur *Upazila*. Hasan Bhuiyan of Kumarbari dispossessed Sarkar from his land by tampering with land records with the active help and assistance of local officials of the land revenue department. He has been fighting seven law suits in Kazipur and Serajganj courts since 1970. Sarkar spends three to four thousands taka every year in legal fees.

Mahtab Sarkar was displaced five times by erosion; the family moved three times within Char Chashi in the last five years. He claims to have lost about 150 acres of land to the river Jamuna in five different *mouzas* -- Char Kazipur, Kumarbari, Maznabari, Dadboira, and Bilsunder. Sarkar currently has, according to his own statement, an additional 15 acres of *khas* land in his possession without proper lease. He said that he is

using those *khas* lands after having some "unofficial contract" with the local land revenue officer. He said: "If you want your own share of the depositional land, you have to bribe the officials. The practice both in Kazipur and Serajganj settlement offices is "pay first, and seek any help later."

Mahtab Sarkar has good relationships with some *para* level *matabbars*, but has little influence in the village beyond his *gusthi* people. When it comes to *lathiyali*, he lends support to Rafique Talukdar. Sarkar said, "These days, if you want to keep *char* land in your control, you have to bribe officials and maintain *lathiyali* forces to establish your rights."

Leadership Profile 4: Hossain Ali Master

Hossain Ali Master is a local primary school teacher. He has a large joint family of 10 members. He also has a large following of *gusthi* people in Char Chashi and other neighboring villages. He exercises considerable power in the village.

According to his own statement he owns ten acres of land which he cultivates with family and hired labor. However, local villagers told me that he has another 12 acres of unauthorized *khas* land under his control. Hossain Master has a bad reputation as "*daanga baaz*" (a man of violent personality) in the locality. He used to have a good relationship with Chakladar until very recently, but now they have law suits against each other in Serajganj court.

Hossain Ali Master is known more as a land grabber among small peasants. Kutti Sheikh, a landless peasant of the village told me the following story. Kutti Sheikh settled in Char Chashi in 1979 after displacement from Char Kazipur. He sold to Hossain Master only two acres of a total of five acres of land that he lost in the erosion. Hossain Master, however, demanded the entire set of land documents from Kutti Sheikh for verification before payment and never returned them. Hossain eventually grabbed all of Kutti Sheikh's five acres in his name in the 1983 Land Survey operation.

During my research in 1984-85, there was hardly any sign of accretion land in what was formerly Char Kazipur *mouza*. It was still an active part of the west channel of the Jamuna during the monsoon. However, Hossain Master of Char Chashi, Yakub Sarkar of Char Burungi and Salamat Haji of Panagari, in collusion with the Survey party, prepared a newly accreted *mouza* map of Char Kazipur depriving many small peasants of their future access to depositional land. It is a very common practice by which the local land grabbers deprive the small owners of their due share in accretion land.

The four case studies of leadership illustrate the role of village leaders who make violence endemic in the area in the process of land grabbing. The case studies also exemplify the network of relationships

of village faction leaders with many different villages and other local leaders in a system of alliance and opposition. For example, Rahim Chakladar, himself a *jotedar*, has been a traditional ally of Imam Talukdar of Shubhagachha. Until the death of Imam in 1971 (described later), Chakladar considered Imam Talukdar his "*guru*" (venerable instructor) and was his "right hand" in local politics and conflict management. Likewise, Mahtab Sarkar maintains political links with Rafique Talukdar of Char Girish to secure his control over disputed land with Hasan Bhuiyan in Kumarbari *mouza*. Such alliances are based purely on landed interests and continue as long as they are mutually beneficial. The leaders in *char* villages also have effective linkages with all levels of government -- local and national -- to maintain their common economic and political interests and to strengthen their stronghold as powerful organizing forces in the countryside.

4.6 Power and *Char* Land Subculture

People of Char Chashi said repeatedly that in *char* life violence is the name of the game, and the ultimate arbitrator of all disputes over land ("*Jore jar jomi tar*"). The local *talukdars* are so powerful that the poor and their dependents would not dare to disoblige them. One informant said that, "the *talukdar* can make a day night and can pick up any one from the *char* at his will, and he may not return to the *char* for the rest of his life." People view the brutalities in the process of land grabbing as natural as the natural process of land erosion (Wahed, Kamal and Hasnat 1983). Thus the *chars* form a "frontier society," differing significantly from the mainland. The nature of village leadership provides a picture of the village social structure

highlighting ownership of land and endemic land conflict that underlies much of the power relations of *char* village society. The acquisition and exercise of power by an individual leader, therefore, emanate from (a) possession or control, directly or indirectly, of depositional land for cultivation, and (b) having a strong *lathiyal bahini* to intimidate through threat or use of violence against property and person. In fact, the power and authority of a local patron largely depends on the number of *lathiyals* he maintains or can mobilize during a confrontation (Zaman and Wiest 1985). A subtle but equally important sources of power are the links with the local administration. These links are critical both for manipulating the local administration and for continued dominance over the peasantry.

The *charland*-mainland distinction, as I experienced it during my fieldwork, it is a pervasive theme which determines to a large extent social interaction between mainland and *char* villages. All inhabitants of *char* land are seen by the mainlanders as people with low or no status and *izzat* (honor) irrespective of their economic standing and traditional status titles.⁴ For example, Rahim Chakladar has a high status title (Chakladar means 'owner of large estate') and is the richest man in Char Chashi, but his social status is run down by the mainland people. Chakladar told me that people in the mainland equate his status with an ordinary rice husker ("*Amagore barani aar charer Chakladar soman*"). Likewise, Rafique Talukdar of Char Girish, despite his economic position, traditional high status and political power in the region, is considered merely one of the *boro* (big) *lathiyals* and *dangabaaz* (a man of violent personality) in the region. This is further accentuated by the fact that in Bengal people who were professional *lathiyals* of *zamindars* came from the lower stratum of the caste-based Hindu society.

The social significance of these distinctions goes beyond individual honor and position in a status system to the determination of social relationships between *char* and mainland villagers. For example, marital relationships between *char* and mainland villagers are rare; mainland villagers would not ordinarily give their daughters in marriage to persons who live in *chars*, nor would they bring in wives from *char* areas (also, see Rashid 1981). Aminur Rahman of mainland Kazipur said, "I would not go to the *char* as long as I have other options; I have not even crossed the Jamuna in the last five years." However, mainland villagers who own land in the *char* occasionally visit either to let out their land through the *borga* system (sharecropping) or to cultivate with the help of *kamla* (servant) or hired laborers. Khan (1977:63) reports, "when a cultivator's homestead in the mainland was attacked by the river and he had also lost most of his lands there, [it is only then] that he thought of transferring his residence to the *char*."

The loss of social status both by the landed and displaced poor in *char* villages is due primarily to loss of land. In *chars* and mainland villages alike, social status is tied to economic well being and ownership of land. The fact that even people like Rahim Chakladar and Rafique Talukdar, who are virtually "kings" in their own locality, have little social status has to do with the "disreputable" ways both have employed to acquire and control depositional lands that belong to others. Further, their involvement in local violence and conflict reduces their honor and social status. There are many local stories about Rahim Chakladar and Rafique Talukdar. My mainland informants told me that Chakladar has been the ring-leader of a group of *goru chore* (cattle thieves) for many years which eventually cost him chairmanship of the

local union council. Rafique Talukdar is still considered the *sardar* (chief) of a gang of robbers who are involved in different kinds of crime and anti-social activities. However, the images of Chakladar or Talukdar do not seriously place them in contempt; they still enjoy ungrudging support and loyalty of their clientele and wield tremendous amounts of power in local and regional political decision-making. Thus, it appears that the natural processes of erosion and dislocation, together with the political and social processes of organized violence and riots by the *jotedars* and *talukdars*, contribute to the perpetuation and social reproduction of the "*choura*" subculture.

To sum up, the analysis in this chapter has shown the social and political context of human adjustment to erosion hazard and dislocation. It appears that kinship and patronage ties stand out as important forces which characterize the local system and vertically bind together people of various social levels. Since patronage provides some security to the clientele, it has achieved relative stability as a system in situations of land erosion, scarcity, and landlessness, providing the socio-political environment for the reproduction of the system itself. In the following chapter, I examine the political processes of local groupings and how local patrons mobilize support for action in particular cases.

CHAPTER FIVE

LAND AND EVERYDAY VIOLENCE IN CHAR VILLAGES

If the appetite of the river appears insatiable it however must be conceded that she also returns back a lot of what she takes. But man's appetite for land is far greater and he will stoop to any length, commit any act, and kill as many as necessary to grab a few more acres belonging to somebody else.

Wahed, Ali. et al. Land of Hope or Despair? Images of Erosion and Emergence. *Bangladesh Today*, Vol. 1(1):17, 1983.

In the preceding chapter I have discussed the patterns of social adjustment to erosion and dislocation in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain within the setting of village leadership, factions and the patronage system. In this chapter I first describe the role of *talukdars* as political entrepreneurs in local and regional violence for control of new depositional land, using case study examples from Kazipur and other riparian areas of Bangladesh. I then review some legal and policy factors pertaining to depositional land administration in order to identify shortcomings and weaknesses of the existing *char* land policies. The last section focuses on the problems of peasant mobilization and the prospect for a class-based solidarity among the poor peasant classes. This discussion will be carried further in the final chapter to develop policy measures which might improve chances for an organized attempt by the poor to control redistribution of new depositional land through active involvement of peasant organizations in the implementation of reform policies at the village level.

5.1 The *Talukdar* as a Violent Political Entrepreneur

The concept of "political entrepreneur" is used here after Attwood (1974) to refer to members of the local political elite who act as key organizers and leaders in mobilizing regional disputes. An understanding of the dynamics of the village level patronage system described earlier requires that the village political processes be viewed as integral parts of mobilization by political entrepreneurs in a regional context. The *talukdar* as a powerful regional patron, backed by his political links and contact with the local administration and the state, is a typical "mobilizer"; he reaches out to the local political field, as mentioned earlier, through a patron-based segmentary system of political alliances with a network of village-level patrons for support of his political actions in the locality.

Any observer of contemporary Bangladesh would come across plentiful cases of illegal land grabbing and violence for control of new *char* land in the country.¹ It is difficult to describe the everyday violence and social life in *char* villages unless someone has lived and experienced it. The laws of Bangladesh applied all over the mainland country do not, in most cases, work in *char* areas. Due to the physical isolation of the *char* land and the absence of any "law and order" enforcing agency, the local *jotedars* and *talukdars* have almost "total" grip over *char* villages with the help of their political "agents" and their invisible *lathiyal bahini*. Since the private army of *lathiyals* is illegal in the country, the *talukdars* have to take extra care to maintain them. They, I am told, invest huge money to protect the *lathiyals* from arrest and conviction by the state.

The nature and scale of *char* land conflicts in Kazipur-Serajganj area can be classified into three broad categories for analytical purposes: (i) conflict between small peasants, mostly over the division of inherited land; (ii) between small/middle peasants and local *jotedars* who grab depositional land that belongs to others either by force or false registration and land records; and (iii) between *talukdars* over gaining possession of an entire *char*. Other than this, there are also those who have a little land, then lose it in the process of erosion or land grabbing, and become clients of the powerful patrons, because they themselves cannot fight or "grab"; they may only get land again in the chance of a redistribution of land in the future.

Disputes among small peasants over division of inherited land are largely resolved by local *salish* and in compromises between parties because the amount of land involved is very little. For example, Ainul Huq and his brother Shamsul Huq of Uttarpara in Char Chashi lived in an extended family with their father Fakir Ali. When Fakir Ali died in 1981, he left behind his widow and three acres of cultivable land for his two sons. The cultivable land was in five plots and with variable quality of land. Ainul Huq, the eldest of the two brothers, formed a separate household in 1982 with his wife and four children. The mother remained with Shamsul Haque and his newly wed wife. Since Ainul had a large family of six, he claimed and eventually took control of the two larger and best plots of land, the bigger family house (*ghor*) with two rooms, and a greater portion of their ten decimal homestead land. Shamsul Huq got the second house with only one room and 3 plots of land which were partly sandy and thus less productive. In 1984 Shamsul called a village *salish* for his proper share of the parental property from his elder

brother who cheated him in the initial distribution of land in 1983. Shamsul also claimed his mother's share of the land for him. This led to a tense relationship between the brothers. It took two sittings of the *salish* bench consisting of five *matabbars* to strike a compromise deal acceptable to both parties involved in sharing their inherited property.

The incidence of land grabbing from small or middle peasants by the *jotedars* either through the use of force or by false records is high. There are many examples of such land grabbing in the village. Abul Hossain had a total of five acres of cultivable land. Three acres of his land was in Char Burungi which Abul lost to the Jamuna in 1978. He further lost another one acre and his homestead land in 1983. Abul told me that during the 1982 Serajganj District Land Survey his three acres of erosion land still in the Jamuna was recorded by Nizam Sarker of Dakshin Tekani in his name. Abul has all the necessary papers related to record of right, but he said, "I don't have money or power to establish my rights on my accretion land. People like Nizam Sarker, Rahim Chakladar, Hakim Master are always there to grab land." He further said, "It is their profession. They can do anything to have a few more acres of land in their control. They screw up everybody's land in the *char*" ("*Tara charer jomir putki marey*").²

During the survey of 1982, large landowners from both banks of the Jamuna made fictitious maps of *mouzas* lost in the 1978 erosion. There were no signs of emergence of that land in 1982, and not even in 1984/85 when I conducted my fieldwork. Displaced peasants who lost their land in 1978 are aware of it. Abul Hossain said, "How can you resist Nizam Sarkar or Chakladar? Many people who lost their land even do not know their *dag* (plot) numbers. Some are now living on homestead land provided by the same *jotedar* who grabbed their land through false records. The

rich always take advantage of the poor. *Char* lands are for the rich people." Cases of the use of force by *jotedars* are also numerous. The case study of *Char Natipara* in Kazipur discussed later in this chapter illustrates the extent of violence by the *jotedars* in grabbing *char* land.

Finally, there is endemic conflict and competition among local *talukdars* to grab land from one another. A specific case of Kazipur is used to explain the dynamics of mobilization for regional political conflict. In 1982, the largest known *kamok* (local name for violent fight for *char* land) ever held in the history of the region was over a 500 acre *char* long disputed by two rival *talukdars* of the adjoining districts of Serajganj and Jamalpur. The *kamok* was organized by Ahmed Talukdar of Kazipur (Serajganj) and Siraj Talukdar of Jamalpur. Imam Talukdar, father of Ahmed, had lost control of the *char* during the war of independence in 1971. Imam spent a year as a fugitive for his political role and alleged anti-social activities in the area during his link with the Ayub regime (1959-1969) as a member of the Pakistan National Assembly. It is widely believed that Imam misused his power and authority during the period and gained control over many *chars* in the region by sheer manipulation of power and violence. Rahim Chakladar, a long time friend and ally of Imam Talukdar, told me that Imam planned and executed a number of murders in several *chars* through his trusted agents. The administration was unable to make him accountable for those killings.

Taking advantage of the political situation in 1971, Siraj Talukdar took control of the *char*. Imam was eventually caught and brutally killed by the *Mukti Bahini* (Freedom Fighters of the 1971 War). Ahmed Talukdar and his family spent the following five years during the Awami League's regime in virtual confinement in their Kazipur mainland house. His

political allies also had difficulties because of their alliances with Imam Talukdar. The political change following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 opened up new opportunities for Ahmed Talukdar for a political comeback in the local political scene dominated by his deceased father for almost one decade. Talukdar told me that he ran for office and was elected chairman of the local union council in 1976 and finally joined the newly created political party of President Ziaur Rahman only to regain and maintain his property and to reestablish the prestige of the family. The 1982 *kamok* was a step in the direction to regain what the family lost in 1971.

Talukdar consulted his allies in secret meetings as to how to best organize the *kamok* and regain control of the *char*. Ali Hossain, a close relative and ally, and himself chairman of Tekani union council, told me that they decided strategies in those meetings attended by over 30 *matabbars* from different *char* villages of Kazipur and Serajganj *upazilas*. Those who attended the meetings took responsibility to provide as many *lathiyals* as possible for the *kamok*. It was further decided to hire some professional clubmen from Serajganj and Tangail. Ahmed Talukdar eventually mobilized some 5,000 *lathiyals* for the fight. The first group of *lathiyals* armed with iron-bound clubs, spears and *fala* (bamboo sticks with sharp edges) were taken over by boats for an early morning raid. They were very quickly resisted by the people of Siraj Talukdar. However, reinforcement continued and the two groups of *lathiyals* sporadically fought for about a week from their respective "base-camps." Ahmed Talukdar's party finally succeeded in capturing three of Siraj Talukdar's people, including a close relative of Siraj. The captives were killed and their bodies were thrown into the river. It was a "declared war" of the *talukdars* against one another. The local police

administration was aware of it, but did not go into action until they received complaints lodged by the victims' families.³ According to records available with the local police office, three murder cases were eventually instituted against Ahmed Talukdar and his party. The cases were under trial for two years in the District Court. Talukdar told me that he spent about Taka 300,000 (US\$12,000) to have the cases dropped in 1984 on grounds of lack of proper evidence.⁴

Ahmed Talukdar is described by many as the "number one terror" in Kazipur *Upazila*. Indeed, his family has a long legacy of terrorism and violence since the time of his grandfather Hafiz Talukdar, but more particularly has been involved in *char* violence and murders during Imam Talukdar's lifetime. In his early political career as chairman of Shubhagachha union council, Imam Talukdar, through his agents, murdered three of his opponents in Char Kinirber in broad daylight, resulting in a reign of terror in the area. Using his political influence, Imam Talukdar forcibly recorded over 100 acres of new *char* land during the 1962 Land Records Survey in Pabna and Serajganj districts. Imam had always maintained some paid agents throughout Kazipur *upazila*; it is also locally thought that he had contacts and effective control over local *chore-dakats* (gangs of robbers). Imam reportedly used the gangs of robbers to intimidate his political opponents by carrying out planned robberies of their houses. My local informants told me that it was Talukdar's "character" to harass his political opponents by implicating them in false cases and litigation.

When Imam Talukdar was killed in 1971, the family did not even publicly acknowledge the death on the fear that their opponents might take advantage of the situation, and the family thus might lose control

over their landed property, especially in *char* areas. The family made "cover-up" stories about Imam being in hiding in Dhaka. Even now, their mainland house is guarded day and night by at least 20 permanent *lathiyals*. Ahmed Talukdar is always accompanied by armed people; he said to me that wherever he goes, Talukdar makes it a point to be home before sunset. Despite the fact that Talukdar regained much of his lost power and control by 1976, the family lives under constant fear of reprisal. To make his footing even stronger, Ahmed Talukdar fought, unsuccessfully, on a *Jana Dal* ⁵ ticket in 1985 for chairmanship of Kazipur *Upazila Parishad*. He is currently president of the Kazipur unit of the *Jana Dal*.

A generalized model of *char* land conflict and resolution is presented in Figure 9. The three different types (A, B & C) of conflict may appear to be independent of each other, but if we recognize the bases of alliance of the disputing parties as outlined in Figure 8 (Patron-based, Non-kin Segmentary Model of Alliance), it is possible to see them linked together in a hierarchical continuum. There may be variation in this simplified model of *char* land conflict resolution, but such a model helps analyze and distinguish various types of land conflict, mobilization patterns and outcomes of dispute. Resolution of dispute by courts is difficult to enforce in *char* regions; often legal battles continue for generations due to appeals for revisions and review by higher courts until the opponents wear out.

5.2 *Char* Violence in the Floodplain and the Delta: A Comparative Perspective

The case study of Ahmed Talukdar provides a general sense of the pervasive violence that surrounds control of *char* land in the riparian areas of Bangladesh. In 1983 and 1984, according to Kazipur *Upazila*

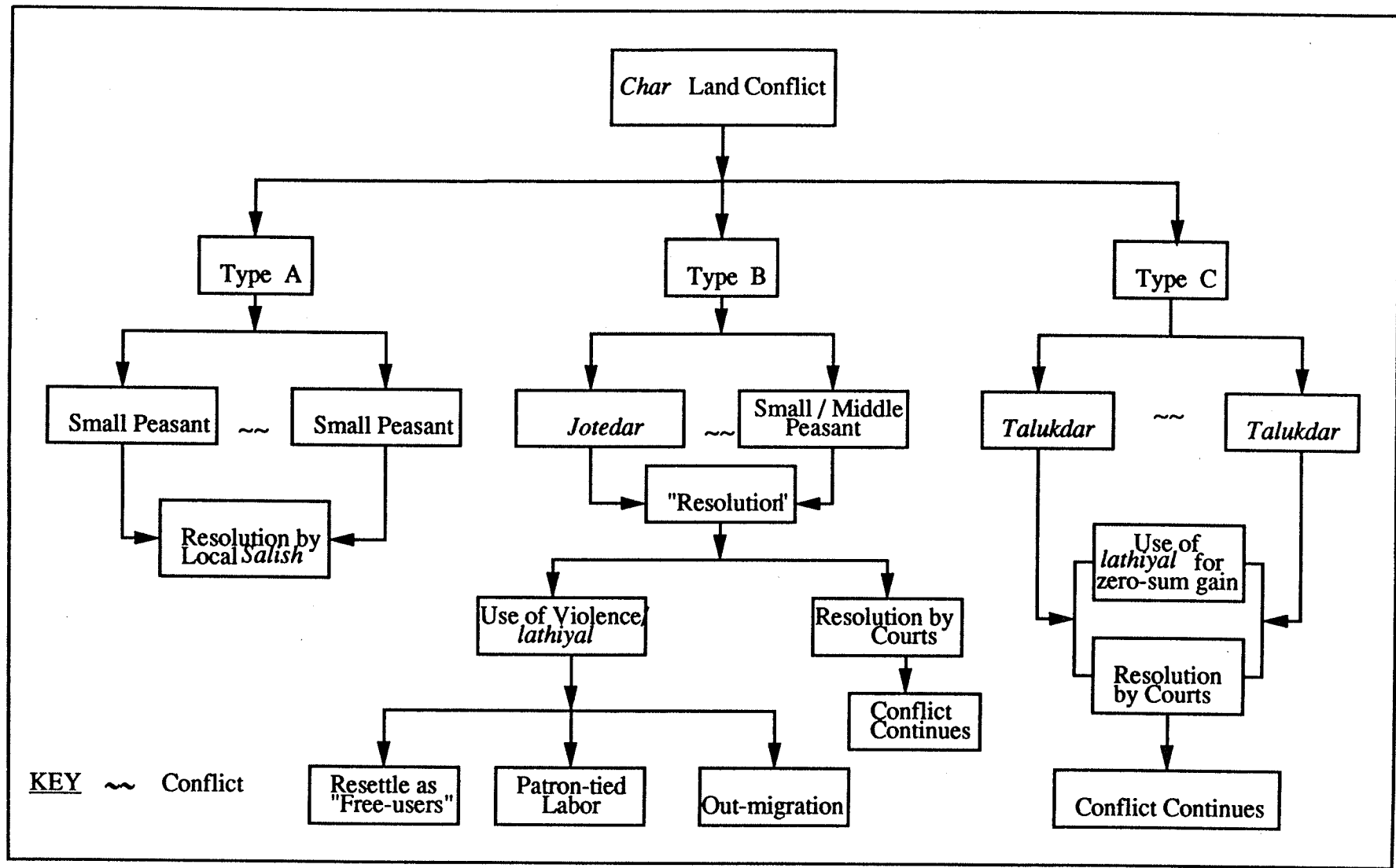


Figure 9: A Generalized Model of Land Conflict and Resolution
(after Hossain 1988; modified)

Police sources, there were seven murder cases and six riots over *char* land in Kazipur. A police officer told me that the figures were below average because of heavy floods causing substantial damages to crops in those years. The officer further said, "Most criminal activities in *chars* centre around land and crops, particularly during the harvest season."

In this section, I shall first focus on the nature and extent of land conflict and organized violence in *char* villages from a comparative perspective utilizing some 40 cases published in the daily newspaper *Ittefaq* over a period of five years from 1978 to 1982.⁶ Four case studies -- one from the floodplain and three from the southern delta -- will be used to illustrate the complexity of the problem and to identify some key issues to evaluate the current *char* land policies as they relate to the relocation program.

Between 1978 and 1982, *Ittefaq* published a total of 40 cases of the use of violence for control of *char* land in the country. Of them, eleven cases took place in 1981 alone. Table 5.1 provides a distribution of the cases by district.

TABLE 5.1

Distribution of Reported Cases of Violence by District.

District	Number of Cases	%
Barisal	11	28
Bogra	3	7
Chittagong	2	5
Comilla	4	10
Dhaka	4	10
Faridpur	1	2
Khulna	2	5
Noakhali	11	28
Patuakhali	2	5
Total	40	100

Twenty two (56%) of the 40 cases have been reported from Barisal and Noakhali districts. One possible reason for such a high incidence of cases is the fact that this area (including Barisal, Noakhali and Patuakhali) is the most active part of the delta in terms of new land formation.

Barisal and Noakhali are also prominent in terms of brutal use of force and loss of human lives over possession/dispossession of new *char* land. Table 5.2 gives us a picture of the extent of human loss in violent land conflicts by district. A total of 733 people were reported to have died in violent clashes over the five year period. The numbers of injured and "missing" are 96 and 123 respectively. In the case of other districts, reports were often incomplete or vague (i.e., "many people were injured and missing"; "the number of people could not be ascertained"). Most of the cases of Barisal were reported from the Bhola area. In case of Noakhali, the reported incidents are more from Luxmipur and the southern part of the district.

TABLE 5.2
Loss of Human Lives by District

District	Reported Death	Injured	Missing
Barisal	32	--	--
Bogra	--	24	3
Chittagong	--	--	--
Comilla	5	47	3
Dhaka	7	25	--
Faridpur	--	--	52
Khulna	--	--	--
Noakhali	694	--	65
Patuakhali	--	--	--
Totals	733	96	123

In Table 5.3 the number of *lathiyals* used by the local *jotedars/talukdars* in violent land conflict and the consequent damage and destruction of property is shown.

TABLE 5.3
Number of *Lathiyals* Used by the *Jotedars*.

District	Number of incidents	Number of <i>lathiyals</i> used	Number of houses burnt
Barisal	1	1,000	400
Bogra	1	--	38
Chittagong	--	--	--
Comilla	2	300	5
Dhaka	--	--	--
Faridpur	1	--	400
Khulna	--	--	--
Noakhali	3	4,300	1,308
Patuakhali	--	--	--
Totals	8	5,600	2,151

In Noakhali alone, a total of 4,300 *lathiyals* were used in three separate incidents in which 1,308 houses were burnt to ashes. Out of the total 40 reported cases, mention of the number of *lathiyals* was made in only eight cases. In others, statements like "many *lathiyals* were used" were mentioned. A total of 2,151 houses were burnt by the *lathiyals* in eight different raids listed above. It is impossible to describe accurately the extent of brutality and terror. What has appeared in the daily *Ittefaq* offers only a glimpse of the horror of daily life in *char* villages all over Bangladesh.

The changes in ownership and control of *chars* do not normally affect the ordinary poor peasants as long as they (a) accept and submit to the new owners; (b) share their crops with the new *jotedars*; (c) come to help as *lathiyals* when called upon; and (d) contribute to the costs of endless

court battles that run simultaneously with *lathiyali* fights. The local *matabbars* who act as agents or middlemen of one or another *jotedars* are in real danger if they fail to quickly change sides and express unquestioned loyalty. This is how the dynamics of segmentary opposition works. The *matabbars* who tend to defy are the ones who become targets of murder or eviction from the *char* by new owners.

5.3 Case Studies in *Char* Violence

The following case studies from Kazipur and the southern delta (summarized from reports published in *Ittefaq*) provide insights into the problematics of *char* land policies in the country. I describe the case studies in as much detail as possible to show how land records, survey and titles of the state are corrupted by the officials of the land revenue and survey department to local advantages of the *jotedars* and *talukdars*.

CASE 1: Char Natipara, Kazipur.

The Char Natipara is a very famous case in Kazipur *Upazila*. It is a very complex and long-standing case where the ownership and control of the *char* have changed hands several times in the last thirty years. It all began in the 1950s following the abolition of the *zamindari* system. The original owner Rani Dinamoni of Tangail made settlement of the *char mahal* (estate) with some of her local agents who later began fighting each other for larger shares of the estate. Bahar Haji of Rehai Suriber took advantage of the situation and recorded a large chunk of the estate in his and his followers' names during the 1962 Land Records Survey. Rafique Talukdar of Char Girish made attempts to regain the land on behalf of the previous owners which ultimately cost five murders in Char Natipara. The *char*, however, remained under the control of Bahar Haji and his supporters.

In 1974 Hashem Sikdar, a *jotedar* and a veteran Awami Leaguer of Bhetua Jagannathpur attacked Char Natipara with 500 *lathiyals*; three of Bahar Haji's agents in the *char* were slaughtered to terrorize others and control the *char*. All their crops were looted. Bahar Haji took Hashem Sikdar to Court. Sikdar was arrested, but after a couple of hearings he was released for "lack of evidence." Hashem Sikdar used his political links with the ruling party to get away with the murders. However, he

maintained his grip over the *char* and became the virtual owner of Char Natipara. Within few years Sikdar started intimidating the peasants to extract more surplus from them; he built up pressure to the extent that the peasants soon found him unbearable.

When the Serajganj District Survey operations began in Kazipur in 1982, Rafique Talukdar, in collusion with settlement surveyors, recorded almost one-half of the total 961 acres of land in Char Natipara and eventually established his control over a large area through renewed violence. According to local sources, Talukdar murdered in 1984 through his people the young pregnant wife of Barkat Ali -- his own dependent in the *char* -- and then filed a murder case against Hashem Sikdar in a bid to take over the rest of the *char* land. This incident, however, did not frighten Sikdar and his supporters. Sikdar was in police custody for three weeks. The case is still undecided in Serajganj Court.

CASE 2: Char Jubilee, Noakhali.

A group of about 2,000 *lathiyals* from Char Clark, Luxmipur attacked Char Jubilee and Tarapur on June 20, 1978. They set 500 houses on fire and took away valuables worth Taka 400,000. They also took away 400 cattle. Three people were killed during the raid. Several hundred remained "missing." The *lathiyals* also attacked Char Bhati on the same day. Eleven people were abducted; police later recovered three of them. Another report published on July 3, 1978 said, "Char Jubilee is almost depopulated after the barbarous and brutal incident of June 20, 1978. The new *char* was settled by retired members of the defense forces and those displaced by erosion in the locality. The resettlement took place following a government plan to relocate the poor in the new depositional land. However, the local *jotedars* in collusion with the corrupt officials of the Land Revenue Department had prepared earlier fictitious records in a bid to take over the *char*." The report pointed out that false documentation and improper survey are major reasons for endemic land conflict over new *char* land. According to the report, a demand was made for fresh survey of Char Jubilee.

In an editorial published on July 3, 1978, *Ittefaq* reported that about 500 dead bodies were recovered from the river -- victims of the Char Jubilee attack. Police later arrested nine people including members and the chairman of the local union council. The editorial criticized the role of local police and administration, and finally recommended opening more police stations in *char* areas to control the *lathiyals* and their atrocities.

The Char Jubilee murders stirred the minds of many people in the country. The case was later tried by the Comilla Military Court. The Court took hearings from 65 people. The judgement was passed on February 7, 1979. Fourteen people received life imprisonment. Four were jailed for one year and one for six months. Among those who received life imprisonment, four were members of the local union council. According to the assessment made by the Court, 200 people were murdered and 300 houses were burnt.

The loss of so many lives and conviction of 20 people in the trial did not improve the situation in Char Jubilee. According to a report published on April 24, 1979, a fresh attack took place on April 9 in which about 300 *lathiyals* took part in the looting and plundering of Char Tarapur, Siddi, Balua, Chiringaa and Char Jubilee. These *mouzas* were washed away by the rivers several decades ago. The total area is roughly about 15,000 acres. These *mouzas*, therefore, were dropped from the Revisional Settlement of 1935, Diara Settlement of 1965 and District Settlement of 1966 because the new land mass did not emerge during the administration of those surveys. However, in 1971 they all emerged together. Attempts by local "influentials" to grab the land through false documentation followed.

In the meantime, the government leased the land to three different groups of people: (i) displaced people affected by riverbank erosion, (ii) landless people of the locality, and (iii) retired army personnel. This relocation was followed by a triangular fight among the following: (a) the *jotedars* who wanted to grab the land, (b) people who owned the land prior to erosion, and (c) the new settlers. The situation was reported to be tense and even may continue to get worse. It was recommended that a high-powered committee be formed to resolve the conflicting claims of the different groups.

CASE 3: Char Fashion, Barisal.

According to a report published on March 3, 1980, local *lathiyals* created terror in Char Fashion. They set many houses on fire and violated many women. The *lathiyals* also attacked Char Megbhasan. Fourteen women who were violated by the *lathiyals* filed cases with the Sub-Divisional Officer, Bhola. A magistrate was sent to make "on the spot" inquiry. People who live in Char Fashion were earlier resettled here following government initiatives and relocation plans. The original owner of this *char* land left for India. In the meanwhile, a local *jotedar* is attempting to take over the land by *benami* (false) documentation.

CASE 4: Char Gazaria, Faridpur.

On February 1, 1981, heavy firing was reported from Char Gazaria. The *lathiyals* set 400 houses on fire. Fifty-two landless settlers were reportedly missing. According to one source, police from Char Tamizuddin (Barisal) opened fire in Char Gazaria and arrested about 80 *lathiyals*. The Sub-Divisional Officer visited Char Gazaria on the following day. About 3,000 new settlers met the Officer who promised to take stern actions against the *lathiyals* and also announced that a full scale inquiry about the incident would be made. The Sub-Divisional Officer was informed that 1,800 cattle were missing following the raid.

A report published on February 10, 1981, said that no fruitful action was taken on the Char Gazaria incident by the local administration. Landless organizer Ali Hossain called a press conference at the Dhaka Press Club to draw attention of the public and the government. Five peasant workers addressed the conference and demanded a

judicial inquiry. It was reported that many fake co-operatives have been formed by the local *jotedars* to grab *char* land. The Deputy Commissioners of Noakhali and Barisal later met in Dhaka to review and discuss the matter.

The case studies of *char* violence reveal a number of facts about *char* land use and administration: (i) the use of violence by *jotedars* to grab depositional land; (ii) the low profile of the police in maintaining law and order; (iii) corrupt practices of the officials of the revenue department; and (iv) fictitious, and faulty revenue survey. The latter is considered the most important contributing factor responsible for much of the violence in *char* areas (Ali 1981). Delayed, incomplete and fictitious records have turned up as sources of as many as 10,000 litigations annually in Bangladesh (Alam 1984).⁷

5.4 Survey, Records and *Char* Land Administration

As I experienced in Kazipur, one of the main problems of *char* land administration is unnecessary delay in survey and settlement of new depositional land. This delay is due to the present centralized settlement operations by the Directorate of Land Records and Survey. Under the present system, periodic settlement operations are carried out every 10 to 20 years (Ali 1981). Such a long gap in the revision of records of rights, especially in the context of annual erosion and accretion in the floodplain and delta areas, make them quickly out-of-date. The Kazipur *Upazila* Land Revenue Officer reported that over 200 *chars*, both large and small, have emerged within the riverine areas of Pabna-Serajganj districts in recent years. Surveys and records of much of this depositional land still remain to be done for any future resettlement.

Delayed settlement operations again work to the benefit of the local *jotedars* and *talukdars* as land grabbers, because possession remains a crucial factor in the eventual determination of ownership. A new *char*, once it has stabilized, becomes a target of encroachment. Typically, groups of landless families are moved onto the *char* apparently supported by powerful *jotedars* who make violence endemic in *char* areas. By the time the Directorate of Land Records and Survey sends out a team for local survey operations, fictitious records pertaining to the ownership of such *chars* are often completed by the *jotedars* in collusion with corrupt officials of the Land Revenue Department itself. The Government of Bangladesh has reportedly lost control over many *chars* due to this delay in survey and settlement operations (Ali 1981). Lack of timely and accurate survey operations, therefore, is a contributing factor to the endemic land conflict in *char* villages.

Many people in Kazipur expressed their concern about irregularities in the 1982 Serajganj District Survey operations. My village level research supports their assertion that the recent survey have made their record of rights almost useless; it is alleged that the survey and settlement officials signed out new depositional land to persons who bribed them handsomely with almost total disrespect for earlier records of rights. Hakim Master of Char Chashi told me that there would be more violence over *char* land in the locality once the results of the survey are published.

The Serajganj District Survey Operation of 1982 as carried out in the *char* areas of Kazipur was, by all opinion, "a game played by money" ("*takar khela*"). There are endless grievances against the survey operations. The survey party camped for three months in chairman Ali Hossain's house in Manikdar. It is alleged that the chairman was the

principal "broker" in all transactions and benefitted immensely from the survey. According to knowledgeable village sources, about eighty percent of the attestations in the new records of rights are faulty, because ownership based on previous records is largely unimportant. Therefore, people who already have records of rights and those who prepare fictitious records pay the surveyors alike at a fixed rate of Taka 1,000 per acre of land. In many instances, field-level workers (*amin*) and officials took money from all disputing parties and promised "fair" records. Ali Hossain chairman said that the survey party literally plundered the villagers ("*Deshe ashle jarip, proja hoy garib*"). He further said that he himself paid Taka 3,500 to keep his records of rights straight. Abul Sheikh of Jumar Khuksha paid Taka 5,000 to ensure new records of rights over five acres of depositional land. Altaf Hossain of Manikdar spent Taka 2,000 to protect his own land in the new records. Nizam Sarkar of Dakshin Tekani paid Taka 3,000 to hold three and half acres of new land. There are many more similar stories in Kazipur villages.

It is the same story of corruption and nepotism in the case of resettlement of *char* land in Kazipur *Upazila*. For example, according to the Kazipur Land Revenue Office, Char Chashi has a total of 71.21 acres of *khas* land of which 44.05 acres have been leased for resettlement. The official records show that between 1976 and 1983, 32 families received *khas* land under the Presidential Order of 1972 (see Table 5.4).

In Table 5.4 we see that the landless and small peasants are purportedly the major recipients of *khas* land in Char Chashi. Two households with over eight acres were also reported to have received *khas* land under the 1975 amendments to the original law (i.e., Presidential

TABLE 5.4

Distribution of Households Purported to Receive
Khas Land in Char Chashi.

Size of Holding	Number of Households	%
Landless	8	25
Up to 3 acres	20	63
3.1 to 8 acres	2	6
Over 8 acres	2	6
Total	32	100

Order of 1972). My own research and interviews cast doubt on these records provided by the local revenue office. For example, ten of the 32 families listed do not even "exist" in the village. The eight landless families who received land according to the land records office said that they had neither applied for nor received any *khas* land. It is possible that the lease records in the names of landless and those ten families in the village are *benami* (i.e., fictitious), used to subvert the intent of the land ceiling legislation. *Benami* records, or transfer of land, is a well known fact to the local revenue officers who make little or no effort to enforce the law. In fact, as noted earlier, local officers benefit from such illegal land transactions (also, see Abdullah 1976, Jannuzi and Peach 1980). Further, in a situation of scarcity of land in the village, it is strange that 27.16 acres (38%) of *khas* land was not leased out over the period of seven years (1976-83). However, it is highly probable that the land is being used anyway by locally powerful people under some "private arrangement" with the revenue officials.

Two important sources -- (i) the present multi-stage and complex survey procedures, and (ii) the bureaucracy in the resettlement of new depositional land -- are breeding grounds for such corruption in survey

and resettlement. The existing survey procedure entails seven different stages over a period of three to five years from the field-survey before a final record of rights is prepared. The first stage begins in the field-site with drawing a "traverse" line delimiting new *mouza* boundaries. The surveyors then divide the *mouza* land into several major blocks (*morobba kata*). In the third stage, plots of land within the *mouza* are marked to scale. The fourth stage is called *kanapuri* -- identification of ownership of land in the newly accreted *mouza*. At this stage, the previous owners of land in the *mouza* are required to submit their records of rights to the surveyors. This is where the distortion begins. Many poor peasants who lost their documents in the process of multiple displacements are eliminated forthwith from any rights on the new depositional land. Moreover, illiterate poor peasants do not even know the *dag* (numbers) of the plots of land lost. "Even with proper documents it is not easy to establish rights on your own land," said a poor peasant of Char Burungi. The officers always perform tricks, often demanding papers that the poor peasants are unable to submit (Zaman and Wiest 1985). Bribery and illegal transactions then become effective means to influence and win the survey people. Competitions for bribing officials are often so intense among large landholders that parcels of land are given to the "highest bidder." As a result, a series of undue changes and amendments in the records of rights are incorporated into the new *mouza* map. This stage, called *bujarat*, is crucial because seeds for future land conflicts are laid here due to intentional changes made by the surveyors. The field-level operation of the survey is also completed at this stage.

The sixth and seventh stages are for objections and the review process at the *upazila* and district levels respectively. As I found in Kazipur, it is again the large landowners who take the opportunity to make the most by legal manipulations. For example, Rahim Chakladar of Char Chashi had fifty different objections against new records of rights by Nizam Sarkar followed by ten review objections at the Serajganj District Revenue Office. Chakladar eventually succeeded in five of these at the district level. Mafiz Master of Dakshin Tekani told me that he fought ten objections of "unlawful" attestations against him. Mafiz not only won in all those cases, but also made more additions in the new records of rights. He said, "You have to bribe twice -- once in the field to put your name on the record, and then bribe people in the office to ensure that your name appears in the final printed document."

It is clear that much of the problem in *char* land administration stems from delayed and fictitious land survey records. According to Ali (1981), there is a gap of twenty years in case of revision of record of rights. Mazharul Islam, Director, Bangladesh Land Records and Survey, told me that most of the *mouza* maps available in the country were done following the Cadastral Survey of Bengal in the 1920s. In 1960, some changes were made through Revisional Settlement. Since then, there has not been any updating of records of rights in *mouza* maps in the country. Therefore, updating records of rights is an important aspect of the problem of *char* land administration. The present system of centralized, periodical and complex systems of survey and settlement operations has to be thoroughly reorganized for more regular survey based on local needs related to erosion and accretion. This may also require a significant change in the existing *char* land administration based on the principle of "administrative devolution" and "local participation."

5.5 Violence and Mobilization of Poor Peasants

Given the extent of landlessness and pauperization in *char* villages together with intimidation, violence and land grabbing by the *jotedars*, the obvious question to ask is why the poor peasant classes of *char* villages do not organize themselves as a class to fight against all kinds of exploitation and injustices. In other words, what are the factors that hinder the development of class consciousness among the rural poor. How can the poor be mobilized and their discontent against the *jotedars* and *talukdars* be articulated? Are the displacees aware and conscious of the exploitative relationships with local landlords? In Chapter Four I have described the basis of patron-client vertical integration across classes and the patron-based segmentary alliance system that ties village level patrons to the regional patron. The existence of this interdependence between landed and displaced persons as a coping strategy itself prevents the development of any effective class-based solidarity among the poor peasant classes. With limited resources to survive in the *char*, the dependent clients do not dare to go against their patrons in fear of, for example, losing the piece of land provided by the patron for homestead or employment opportunities. The patron-client alliance functions as a form of adaptation to the dislocation. There are thus pragmatic reasons why the paternalistic patron-client relationship is viewed with some favor by the poor peasants. Afzal Hossain, a poor peasant of Char Chashi, said the following, "*Chakladar amagore maa-baap*" (Chakladar is our protector).

The endemic nature of erosion sometimes makes it harder for the peasants to define their own class position, since the ownership of land is never fixed. It changes continuously with the process of erosion and

accretion of land in the floodplain ("*shokal belar raja, are bhai fakir sondha bela*"/the rich man of the morn a destitute by dark). I discuss elsewhere (Zaman 1986a) that many people in Kazipur would not admit that they are landless even though their entire farms may have been swallowed by the Jamuna. "Look, my land is there! Yes, far inside the river. I will get it back when it reemerges," said one displacee on the embankment.

Displacees blame primarily river Jamuna for much of their miseries, even though they are aware of the social causes for their impoverishment. "It is our *takdir* (fate)," said Moslem Ali. He continued, "We have to accept *Allahar ichha* (the will of God)." As I found in Kazipur, many poor peasants tend to accept their condition as predestined ("*ai abostha amagore kopalay lekha chhilo*"). This ideology is further reinforced by kinship and the village *samaj* organization. In fact, the dynamics of kin-based interrelationships and interdependence, village *samaj* and factions largely work to "mask class relations" (Zaman and Wiest 1985:8) instead of focusing class interests (also, see Jansen 1987). The kinship system and the rural social structure of Bangladesh prevents extreme polarization of the peasantry and also function as a deterrent to very wide ranging social and geographical mobility (see Abdullah et al. 1976, Bertocci 1979, Wood 1981) while it supports local mobility in the face of erosion and displacement. As the villagers say it: "one's kin are never far away!"

During the period of my fieldwork in Kazipur, the only occasion when landless peasants mobilized together was the *gherao* (besieged) incident led by Abdul Karim Neta. As mentioned in Chapter Four (Leadership Profile 2), Karim Neta mounted a huge demonstration with about 500 *khet-*

majurs against the local *upazila* administration. The *gherao* literally held up the *nirbahi* (executive) officer for three hours in his office room. The demonstrators demanded adequate food relief following the devastating flood and urged the *upazila* administrator to take immediate steps to provide work for the landless people. Karim Neta later told me that prolonged military rule and restriction of political activities are real hindrances to organizing the rural poor as a class. He further considers that lack of effective rural development planning and specialized programs for improving landlessness and poverty indirectly perpetuate the dependence of the poor on the landed elite for exploitation. Patron-client or vertical integration of peasants in a feudal-like structure is thus the form of class relations that is socially reproduced under these conditions of agrarian underdevelopment and regular upheaval associated with riverbank erosion.

This is not necessarily to suggest absence of discontentment against the *jotedars* and *talukdars*. In fact, one of the early cases of uprising of *raiya*s against the permanently settled landlords in Bengal took place in Pabna-Serajganj region (see Sen Gupta 1974, Sen 1954, Kabiraj 1957, Roy 1966). Known as the historic "Pabna disturbances" of 1873, this widespread and popular agrarian unrest covered almost all of Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh) in the late 19th century. According to Sen Gupta (1974:148), the unrest "was caused not so much by the enhancement of rents by the *zamindars* of Eastern Bengal as by the persistent attempts of the latter to do away with the rights of occupancy of a new class of *ryots* [i.e., *jotedars*]." The movement was organized by the Agrarian League to defend and consolidate the occupancy status of the *jotedars*; others such as non-occupancy *raiya*s sharecroppers and agricultural workers also joined, since the *zamindar* was considered the common enemy

of all (see Sen 1954, Chowdhury 1973).⁸ This class of *jotedars* itself eventually became the exploiter of sharecroppers and *bargadars* in Bengal. In 1942, a peasant movement of significant scale known as the Tebhaga movement in Bengal was organized by the Communist Party of India against the *jotedars* (see Alavi 1973). It started against illegal extraction by the *jotedars* in Dinajpur district, but later developed into a movement for reduction of *jotedar's* share of the crop from one-half to one-third (hence *tebhaga*). According to Alavi (1973), the movement did not begin as a movement of sharecroppers; the leadership came from the "middle peasants" and the sharecroppers later joined the movement. However, the Tebhaga movement could not sustain its force following the partition of India in 1947 into two separate states of India and Pakistan (for more, see Alavi 1973). Since 1947, there have been attempts to organize the peasants by some radical groups and left-wing political parties with very little success. Siddiqui (1980) mentions some abortive localized attempts to organize the peasantry for armed rebellion in the countryside following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Siddiqui (1980:144) further observes that weak leadership, internal factional fights and self-defeating strategies are responsible for failures of localized peasant movements.

In the light of the limited success of the previous peasant movements reviewed above and the empirical events and processes found in the floodplain villages in Kazipur, it is unlikely that an organized peasant resistance against exploitation and surplus appropriation by the local *jotedars* and *talukdars* will develop in the near future. It is again especially difficult for the poor to organize themselves against the landlords upon whom they are so absolutely dependent in the *char* land

villages. Local people, however, generally view the use of *lathiyals* by the *talukdars* for land grabbing with contempt. This contempt seems widespread and is culturally expressed in local slang (described in Chapter Four) when people talk about the role and status of *talukdars* in the locality. The dependent clientele are a weak and subordinate group that cannot express this contempt publicly for fear of sanctions, nor challenge the actions of their powerful patrons. As a result, the displaced and the poor peasants cannot assert themselves at times of land survey, recording, or even redistribution of *khas* land in the riverine areas. However, if local economic development strategies, land reallocation and settlement policies are changed to actually benefit the rural poor, it is likely that the poor and the landless would be able to organize themselves horizontally. In a comparative study of the problems of mobilizing the poor and dependent peasant classes, Bujra (1973) argues that (a) the relative strength of different socio-economic strata, and (b) the existence of external political support for leaders of lower or subordinate groups are important variables. Bujra (1973:140-141) observes,

In many cases, a subordinate group can only challenge a powerful minority when it has the advantage of external support.... From being political dependents, they may become political actors in their own right. This is likely to occur when external political or economic developments weaken their dependence on members of the higher stratum, or where they are given support by external forces.

CHAPTER SIX
THE STATE AND
THE FUTURE RESETTLEMENT OF THE DISPLACED POOR

"Throw us into the Jamuna. We have no place to go."
-- Rahima Khatun (55), Kazipur embankment, August, 1984.

"Where shall we go? The Jamuna has doomed us all."
-- Afsar Ali (62), Kazipur embankment, October, 1984.

In this study, I have thus far described and analyzed the impact of riverbank erosion and population dislocation on the economic and social organization of Char Chashi with particular attention to socioeconomic and cultural factors of adjustment to dislocation. I have also examined the political structure of the village in terms of village leadership and the patron-based segmentary system, which is instrumental in organized violence for local control of depositional land. The illegal and violent seizure of land from the weaker by the stronger and hence the concentration of the control of surplus in the hands of the *jotedars* and *talukdars* -- the "rich *kulaks*" -- are all made possible by the marginal and frontier nature of *char* land and a state apparatus that is not strong enough to control these margins or is not interested because they are a tool of the class of large landowners that controls and has established interests over the delta country. Thus, Bangladesh may have an "eternal frontier" as long as the rivers flood and create new *chars* until these marginal territories are controlled in all respects by the state.

In this final chapter, I summarize my argument by examining the political economy of *char* land policies and their implementation for resettlement of the displaced poor in Bangladesh. It is appropriate now to place the developments of *char* land policies in the country since 1971 within the framework of my previous discussion. Particular attention is given to the Presidential Order of 1972 which initially opened up new hopes for resettlement of the displaced poor and subsequent changes in the land redistribution policies of the state. I use some case studies to illustrate local responses to the current *char* land redistribution policies. Finally, a review of past performance and problems of *char* land administration is made for developing some immediate and long-term policies for improved *char* land administration.

6.1 The Displaced Poor and Resettlement Policies in Bangladesh

To assess the impact of the current resettlement policies for the displaced poor, I turn first to my Kazipur ethnographic example to measure effectiveness of government policies against it. One of the concerns expressed to us by the displacees regards their future resettlement prospects. Displacees who live in squattments on the embankment in Kazipur are in constant fear of eviction by the Water Development Board. During the initial few weeks of our fieldwork, some occupants mistook us for WDB officials listing their names to evict them. An older woman said: "Throw us into the Jamuna. We have no place to go." Another person in his sixties appeared to be perplexed while talking to us: "Where shall we go?", he said; "The Jamuna has doomed us all." Some narrated their life stories and displacement experiences so vividly that my research assistant and myself were both severely shaken by the human and socio-economic costs of displacement.

Ever since the completion of the embankment in 1967 by the WDB, thousands of families displaced by flood and erosion have moved onto the embankment for shelter. There are no up-to-date figures on the number of such unauthorized families on the entire embankment. However, a 1982 survey reported a total of 6,723 families as permanent residents of the embankment from Kaunia, Gaibandha to Bera, Serajganj (Rahman 1984). By now, this number must have doubled due to the severe flooding and erosion of 1984-85. Their numbers will increase in the future too.

In 1982, the WDB wanted to evict these illegal occupants under Martial Law Regulation 15 (i.e., unauthorized, unlawful occupancy), but later it abandoned the plan on "humanitarian" grounds (Rahman 1984). Serajganj WDB officials consider that proper maintenance of the embankment requires eviction; they claim that construction of houses and shops on the embankment make it structurally unsafe by creating problems of seepage and formation of numerous rat holes which lead to breaches of the embankment. Therefore, the embankment cannot be permanently used by the displacees.

What policy option can the Government of Bangladesh consider for resettlement of the erosion displacees in the country? Thus far, Bangladesh government policies on resettlement of displaced people is limited to two specific programs: (1) inter-district relocation or redistribution of population, and (2) resettlement of the displaced population on newly emerged *chars* in the southern delta. Inter-district relocation may appear to help ease population pressure in one area by moving excess population to more sparsely populated areas. But in practice it may turn out to be extremely difficult, and often may lead to serious violence between the original and new settlers.

Inter-district relocation of population in Bangladesh has taken two different forms: (a) relocation of the landless and displaced population, particularly from Noakhali, Dhaka and Comilla districts to selected zones in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) as part of a government plan to diffuse the current tribal political conflict in the CHT;¹ and (b) relocation of *bastee* (squatters) population from Dhaka city to new *chars* in Faridpur, Noakhali and Barisal districts for resettlement. During the Zia regime (1975-81), many groups of displaced families from Demra *bastee* in Dhaka city were taken to new *chars* in the southern part of the country. It was heavily publicized by the Zia government as a step toward settling the problems of the landless and displaced population. Ali (1981) considers that inter-district relocation and land resettlement on a large scale may eventually prove difficult to carry out because of strong "local feelings" that characterize Bangladeshi rural society. Citing examples of violence between "locals" and "non-locals" in Dinajpur and Dhaka districts, Ali (1981) further observes that "rehabilitation of landless population of one district in another district is sure to unleash bitter feelings based on narrow regionalism which no bureaucratic machinery will be able to control." We thus find reports of constant struggles between former owners and new settlers in the relocated areas in the southern delta. As a result, the settlers from Dhaka *bastee* were unable to stay on those *chars* for a sustained period; local *jotedars* and *lathiyals* terrorized them with repeated attacks. Ultimately, a large number of the settlers in the southern delta returned to Dhaka (*Ittefaq*, November 29, 1982).

In our survey of Kazipur sample villages (including Char Chashi), we asked a total of 394 heads of displaced households their preferences for relocation if land and relocation assistance are made available to them.

A distribution of preferences for relocation is shown in Table 6.1.

TABLE 6.1

Distribution of Household Preferences for
Future Relocation (n=394)

Preferred Destination	No. of HHs Citing Preference*	% of HHs Citing Preference
<i>Khas</i> land within the <i>upazila</i>	341	87
Nearby <i>char</i>	250	63
Distant <i>char</i>	100	25
<i>Khas</i> land in another district	105	27
Coastal <i>char</i> (reclamation area)	38	10
Chittagong Hill Tracts	38	10
Nearby town or distant cities	96	24

* Respondents could indicate and rank more than one preference.

There is a high preference for relocation on *khas* land within the *upazila* (87%) and on nearby *char* land (63%). Preferences for relocation to *khas* land in other districts (27%) is followed by choice of relocation to urban centres (24%). People showed least interest in moving to coastal *chars* in the southern delta or to Chittagong Hill Tracts. Over all, the preferences shown indicate that the displacees want to remain in their own locality in particular and in rural areas generally. Furthermore, the desire for relocation to nearby *chars* or within the *upazila* suggests that the displacees want as far possible to remain close to their kin and local *samaj* groups.

Therefore, the most viable policy option is local resettlement of the displacees using available *khas* land and newly emerged *char* land, but this appears to be a relatively difficult and complex task because many socio-political and administrative factors play vital roles in the resettlement decision and processes. For poor peasants who lose their

land due to erosion, the process is likely to be irreversible. Few people in Bangladesh have heard of cases of poor peasants getting their due share in *char* land. On the contrary, as illustrated in Chapter Five, the use of violence, dispossession, murder, rape and confiscation of crops and animals by the more powerful *jotedars* and *talukdars* have become an almost established practice of *char* life in Bangladesh (see Adnan 1976, Ali 1981, Wahed, Kamal and Hasnat 1983, Zaman 1987).

6.2 Analysis of the Presidential Order of 1972

Immediately after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Awami League (AL) government led by Sheikh Mujib made some popular land reform measures promised during the election campaign. First, all land revenue arrears, including interest to December 16, 1971, were waived. Second, peasant households with 8.3 acres or less were exempted from payment of any land revenue. Third, the ceiling of agricultural land per "family" was brought down to 33.3 acres; families with land in excess of 33.3 acres were asked to surrender the excess land within 60 days after August 15, 1972. Finally, *salami* (a fixed, one time payment for use of *khas* land) for redistribution of government land was also exempted (Siddiqui 1980).

However, the most significant and drastic changes in ownership of accretion or depositional land were brought about by the Presidential Order (P.O.) of 1972 (Numbers 72, 135 & 137). The Order extinguished all rights of *maliks* (tenants) on new accretion land traditionally enjoyed for nearly 150 years since the first enactment in 1825. The P.O. of 1972 provided that all newly emerged *char* land previously lost by diluvion would now be vested absolutely in the Government of Bangladesh. The

primary objectives were: (i) to recover all such land from the clutches of the locally powerful land grabbers; and (ii) to make available more land for redistribution among the landless and poor peasants (Siddiqui 1980, Ali 1980). The 1972 Order also clearly mentioned that in settling new accretion land, preference should be given to landless families and those displaced by river erosion provided that the total ownership together with the new land held by a family not exceed 8.3 acres. It further said that

the government would preferably settle large blocks of such land through farmers' co-operatives formed with the agricultural families eligible for settlement under this system... Blocks of government land between 50 and 500 acres would be settled on the above principle... Blocks of 500 acres and above, generally in the coastal area, would be settled under the 'Cluster Village Scheme' for co-operative farming... under an approved plan for which the government would provide loans and construction materials (Siddiqui 1981: 69-70).

The Mujib government did not make much headway with the implementation of the new *char* land legislation. In 1973, the government took initiative for settlement of government land in two coastal villages under the "Cluster Village Scheme" (Siddiqui 1980). However, lack of administrative and political support for the program meant that very little progress was made in the resettlement to 1976. The new legislation was not well received by the large landowners with adequate political clout in Mujib's petty bourgeois government. Land reform was an integral part of the Awami League's rhetoric in the early days of the regime; however, as the regime settled down, the radical reforms announced on the eve of independence received very low policy priority (Blair 1978).

The 1972 legislation also came as a sudden attack on the traditional rural power base of the large landowners on two grounds: (i) they legally lost control over any future accretion land; and (ii) the possible

mobilization of the landless and displaced people to form co-operative groups to control and utilize new depositional land was a threat to their local power and control. In order to appease the large landholders after the political change in 1975, the new military government made two major amendments (Ordinance LXI of 1975) to the original law. First, the amendment stated that the owner of the land lost by diluvion is eligible first to settlement of *khas* land (Section 86). Second, the qualifying ceiling for eligibility was raised from 8.3 acres to 33.3 acres. Since addition to pre-existing bars is the most important form of deposition in the floodplain,² the two amendments strengthened the hands of the landed elite with opportunities for further legal manipulation and ultimate deprivation of the landless and displaced peasants from having access to depositional land. Siddiqui (1980:132) remarks that

Even as the law stood in 1972, implementing officials were provided with ample scope to favour the large landowners in preference to the landless, but now following this amendment, absolutely no room was left for settling these lands with the land poor.

6.3 Local Responses to Current *Char* Land Policies

During my research in Kazipur, I found wide variation in responses to the current *char* land policies. When asked to comment on the P.O. of 1972, Rahim Chakladar said very quickly, "It is utter injustice." He then said that there should be two different sets of revenue and ownership policies for *char* and mainland, because *char* land is more prone to flood and erosion. Chakladar further said that the current land ceiling of 33.3 acres should not be applied equally to *char* and mainland; in case of *chars* the ceiling should be raised at least by another 33 acres. "In the *char*, we live entirely on the vagaries of nature; the government, instead of helping us, takes away our land that

we need for survival," said Chakladar. He perceives loss of ownership of erosion land as a kind of *gorimana* (penalty) for *char* inhabitants.

Chakladar and four others of Kazipur *Upazila* (Jamal Sarkar of Rehai Suriber, Moazzem Haque of Natuarpara, Shah Azizul Haque of Manikpatal, Ahmed Talukdar of Shubhagachha) surrendered excess land over the 1972 ceiling of 33.3 acres. The local revenue officer informed me that in all five cases, the excess land officially surrendered was already inundated.³

Mukhles Sardar (52) of Char Girish, a long time "deputy" of Rafique Talukdar, and better known in Kazipur as *dakat sardar* (leader of robbers) for his notoriety, had lost over 20 acres of land by erosion since 1970. But he said candidly that he already regained more than he lost. When asked how he did that, Sardar smiled and said, "In all different ways. I have recorded some during the 1982 Survey; the rest are in my possession." He remarked that the P.O. of 1972 has not really affected the large landowners. In fact, the Order has benefitted them more than the poor. The large landowners can now take lease or make unofficial arrangements with local land revenue officials and use land that originally belonged to others.

Aziz Mian (45) of Char Kazipur lost ten acres of land in 1978. Made destitute, he spent six years on the embankment. In 1984 he moved to Sigrabari on government *khas* land adjacent to the newly built local *tehsil* (revenue) office. Aziz did not lease any of the *khas* land. The officials allowed him to stay on government land on the understanding that the family would cook for the officials and help in other household chores. Aziz told several bribe stories for settlement of new *char* land under Section 86 (LXI of 1975) by people other than the original owners.

Khosal Khan of Khudbandi leased 3.1 acres of land in Char Douglas where he never had any land before. Yasin Sarkar of Dakshin Burungi, Mohammad Dillar of Char Kazipur, Barek Talukdar of Panagari, Abdur Rashid of Juktigachha and many more like them leased land in the same way in collusion with the land revenue officers. Aziz said, "It has become a money making business for the *tehsildars* (revenue officials)."

Responses of small and poor peasants who lost their land are a mix of frustration and anger. Many are not even aware of the complexity of the new *char* land policies. Dhiren Malo (55) of Char Kazipur has been living on the embankment since 1979. He lost his homestead and two acres of agricultural land in 1978. His land had been unlawfully recorded by Salamat Haji of Panagari during the 1982 Survey. Dhiren Malo said that he does not have the money and power to fight Salamat Haji. The only thing he knows about the P.O. of 1972 is that poor and displaced people are supposed to have free land for resettlement. When I asked him whether he knows anyone who got free land, Dhiren paused for a while and said, "I don't know. If they did, you would not find hundreds of displaced families like mine living here for years. I don't think that I will ever have any access to my own land. I even may not have a home of my own in the rest of my life!" Shamsher Ali (35) of Char Chashi lost 2.2 acres of land in Char Kazipur *mouza*. He now lives on land provided by Hakim Master, his relative and a *samaj* leader. Shamsher Ali sold only one acre to Hakim Master in 1980 while the land was still in the river. Hakim Master recorded in 1982 the rest of Shamsher's land and never paid for it. The erosion land did not emerge as of 1985; but when it does, Shamsher said, "I don't know what to do with it! Hakim Master knows more about laws; he knows people and he has access to them. It is pointless to fight him. Laws are not for the poor."

There are innumerable instances where the main objective of the P.O. of 1972 to recover land from the control of the large landholders for redistribution among the poor has not been realized in any form. On the contrary, the land rich took advantage of Section 86 (LXI of 1975) and grabbed new *char* land to an extreme. The resettlement of *khas* land in Char Chashi discussed earlier in Chapter Five further illustrates the point. In many cases, the local *jotedars* used violence to grab *char* land from each other as well as from poor peasants. The 1983 Land Reform Commission Report (Government of Bangladesh 1983) took cognizance of these facts, but the Report misrepresented these issues as "law and order" problems. Further analysis of the Land Reform Commission Report on the use of *char* land will be made in the following section.

6.4 Past Performances and Problems of Policy Implementation

In this section I review the consequences of land reform policy implementation in Bangladesh. Since 1947 two major legislative measures -- the EBSATA of 1950 and the P. O. of 1972 -- were applied for redistribution of agricultural land and modification of tenancy terms. It is now widely recognized that the two reform measures failed to improve the conditions of landlessness or reduce the poverty of the poor peasants in Bangladesh due in part to lack of adequate implementing machinery for such a challenging task (see Abdullah 1976, Ali 1981, Jannuzi and Peach 1980). An attempt is made here to identify the problems in implementing land reform policies in Bangladesh. The problems encountered in *char* land policy implementation are the central focus of my discussion.

There were many legal and administrative difficulties in the implementation of the reform measures envisaged in the EBSATA of 1950. A series of legal battles ensued challenging the validity of the acquisition on grounds of inadequate compensation (see Government of East Pakistan 1959). The Directorate of Survey and Settlement, entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the reform measures, was inadequately staffed by experienced and trained personnel for implementation of the provisions of the Act -- acquisition of rent-receiving interest as well as taking over possession of the excess lands (Ali 1981). Finally, since reform measures were from "above" and were being implemented through the bureaucratic apparatus of the state, the intended beneficiaries -- the poor and small peasants -- had no organized role and thus no opportunity to safeguard their interests in the implementation process of the Act at the village level.

The administration of *khas* land under Section 76 of the 1950 Act made it extremely difficult for landless families to use government *khas* land that was acquired from various sources (i.e., reformed or accreted *char* land, excess land acquired under the Act, etc.). A successful applicant for *khas* land was supposed to be a bona fide cultivator with less than three acres of land who would have to pay a fixed *salami* -- five to ten times the annual rent (see Abdullah 1976). In 1957, the Revenue Department, Government of East Pakistan laid down the following order of priority for lease of *khas* land: (1) tenants of diluviated land; (2) ex-military men; (3) any tenant not employing any hired labor; (4) refugees; and (5) ex-rent receivers with no retainable *khas* land (Government of East Pakistan 1969:45). Despite the defined and limited intent of the 1950 Act to lease *khas* land to landless and poor peasants, even those qualified for government *khas* land had great difficulty

securing such land without bribing the local revenue officials. In 1963 the Land Revenue Administration Enquiry Committee documented in the following passage the corrupt practices of the local revenue officers.

It was said that the *tehsildars* are generally corrupt and rude to the ordinary classes of tenants, that no rent can be paid in reasonable time without illegal gratification... It was further alleged that the *tehsildars* treated the Government *khas* lands as their personal property and let those out in *barga* surreptitiously for their personal gain. We were told in many places by ordinary people that the *tehsildars* are really *zamindars* in a new garb with all their oppressions and that they are all the more powerful and dangerous as they have the authority of Government behind them (Government of East Pakistan 1963:7).

The P.O. of 1972 was a definite improvement upon the Act of 1950 in terms of access to all kinds of *khas* land by the landless and displaced poor of the country. In place of the earlier tradition of *khas* land allocation by the local revenue officials, the Mujib government set up in 1974 land allotment committees at the former *thana* (now *upazila*) level to supervise distribution of *khas* land under the 1972 Order. The land allotment committees consisted of the revenue officer, chairmen of the respective union councils, and local representatives of the three major parties -- the Awami League, the National Awami Party (Muzaffar Group) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Moni Singh) who formed an informal alliance following the independence in 1971. The involvement of political elements in implementing government *khas* land policies, according to one source, "ensured plunder of government land by themselves and their touts and rural rich relatives and followers" (Siddiqui 1980:133). Therefore, the composition of land allotment committees was immediately changed following the military takeover in August 1975. The political elements of the local land committees were dropped out; since then the structure of the local implementing machinery has also changed with increasing

power placed in the hands of the revenue officials. Despite some mix and changes in the structure of implementing machinery for *khas* land allocation and administration, it can be said safely that nothing has changed significantly for the better in the recent years. My own field data on *khas* land allocation, delayed and faulty survey and records of depositional land, and rampant corruption among the revenue officials in Kazipur amply testify that implementation of the land reform measures proposed by the P. O. of 1972 has gone nowhere. The situation in *char* villages has deteriorated further, given the scale of violence discussed earlier. There is obvious need for re-thinking and perhaps a "total" review of the existing *char* land policies and administration in Bangladesh.

6.5 Proposal for Improved *Char* Land Policy and Administration

There has been no real improvement in the *char* land situation since the first enactment in 1825 for regulating ownership of alluvion and diluvion land in Bengal. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the "state" has sought to control this "frontier" of changing land resources for a long time by putting up new land laws and enactments for a variety of reasons including enhancement of government land revenue. This study has made it clear beyond any doubt that the state has no effective control over the ownership and exploitation of the *char* land; instead, the local landlords manipulate state laws or apparatus to their advantage. Analysis of various aspects of *char* land policy implementation made earlier suggests that the existing legal framework is inadequate to ensure the benefit of accreted land to those who need it most -- the displaced and landless poor in the country. But the future

of the poor and the riverbank erosion displacees lies mostly with proper utilization of the new land and relocation of the displacees in the newly emerged *chars*. This is particularly important given the vast potential for new depositional land in the southern Meghna delta, which some estimate to be as high as 10% of the total land area of Bangladesh (see Malik 1983).

In the context of a fast growing population, increasing landlessness and high pressure of population on land, the Government of Bangladesh should give top national priority for reformulation of a comprehensive *char* land policy for control of the *char* land in the country. The urgency of such a policy lies not only in the proper use of accreted land but also in organizing the landless and displaced poor to improve effectively their economic and political interest in the village. Clearly such a decision is political and is dependent on the class basis of the regime in power. Given the relationship between land control and class structure underlying Bangladesh's "intermediate regime" vis-a-vis a weak peasantry, a comprehensive land reform policy by the state seems less likely.

However, if one takes a closer look at the dynamics of political development in Bangladesh since 1971, it is possible to identify some reform measures undertaken both by populist and military regimes as "political" moves for grass-root support. For example, Sheikh Mujib's populist regime (1972-1975) attempted a popular land reform measure; the civil-military coalition of General Ziaur Rahman (1976-81) made attempts for a decentralized self-help village government (*swanirvar gram sarker*) to win civilian support. The present military regime of General Ershad appointed in 1982 a Land Reform Committee (Government of Bangladesh 1983) to recommend possible land reform measures and improvement in tenancy

relations. The Committee focused largely upon occupancy reforms to provide some security to tenants and sharecroppers with more equitable distribution of the produce. The *char* land problems received very little attention of the Committee except for a brief mention for immediate survey and settlement of new depositional land to local landless and displaced people. Thus, it is evident that Bangladesh's intermediate regime has shown over time some interest in minor land reform and tenancy relations without changing the class character of the state. I therefore consider that some policy changes with regard to *char* land are possible even within the existing political framework.

Based on my field-level experience and analysis of the problem thus far, I set forth the following recommendations for improvement upon the existing policies of *char* land administration. These measures will not radically alter the situation of the landless and the displaced poor. But, if properly administered, they may make a difference on two grounds: (i) it is likely that the new accreted land will benefit the landless/co-operative groups; and (ii) in the process, the landless have a better chance to organize themselves at the village level.

1. The 1975 Amendment (Ordinance LXI of 1975) of the P.O. of 1972 should be repealed forthwith. The spirit of the amendment has made the P.O. of 1972 virtually useless. The two major changes -- i.e., (a) preference to former owners of diluvion land for resettlement, and (b) qualifying ceiling raised from 8.3 to 33 acres -- opened up both legal access and other avenues of manipulation by the large landholders to grab depositional land.

2. The records of rights should be updated (also, see Ali 1981). This requires: (a) changes in the complex survey procedures; and (b) re-

organization of the presently centralized Directorate of Land Records and Survey. My ethnographic accounts of the nature of erosion and accretion in Kazipur exemplify why centralized and periodic survey and settlement operation has to be reorganized to suit the changing local situations and needs. The 1983 Land Reform Committee recommended that the District administration should take all necessary steps to ensure completion of survey of all new depositional land within three months of accretion (Government of Bangladesh 1983:48). I consider that the survey should be based on the principle of "administrative devolution" (Montgomery 1972), a system of "on-the-spot" survey and settlement operation by replacing the present bureaucratically encumbered complex system. The whole process should be initiated and completed on the spot by local committees constituted by the *upazila* government with absolute and final power of settlement with accompanying records-of-rights of the settlers at that time.

3. It is possible to stop manipulation by the powerful people to a considerable extent if local peasant organizations are involved in the survey and settlement processes. The "on-the-spot" survey and settlement operations may appear a drastic measure to settle *char* land. Not unlikely, the locally powerful people may use the opportunity to gain land in alliance with revenue officials, yet this "will surely be better than following up of a formal and legal procedure in detail and ending up with lands in the hands of vested groups instead of the actual claimants" (Malik 1983:28). The participation by the landless groups will constitute an effective check -- a kind of "watch dog" against fictitious records and rampant corruption. The success of any reform measures require that its intended beneficiaries should be actively involved in the process of implementation (see Dumont 1973). This may in the long

run also favor the actual landless groups to break "the power of the powerful" (Dumont 1973:31) and organize themselves in terms of their class interests.

4. This will mean reorganization of the Directorate of Land Records and Survey with considerable decentralization of power and administrative authority to the *upazila* government. The *upazila* revenue office should be staffed with trained and experienced supervisory personnel to perform effectively its task. In cases of conflicting claims, new survey of accretion land should be undertaken. Delayed, incomplete and fictitious land records are major causes for land conflict and violence in *char* areas. The involvement of local peasant organizations and participation of the displacees in the land survey may help reduce the extent of corruption. Further, if the landless and displacees can establish their effective control over *char* land and its utilization, local landlords can possibly no longer use them as their dependent *lathiyals* for violence.

5. The problem of violence should be effectively controlled by the state. The 1983 Land Reform Committee recommended that peaceful resettlement of *char* land with landless and displacees should be performed, if necessary, with the presence of a magistrate and police force (Government of Bangladesh 1983:49). The responsibility of the state should not be confined to land legislation alone; the administration should participate effectively in the implementation of the land laws and safeguard the interests of those for whom they are meant. Therefore, some kind of political and administrative support in favor of the poor is absolutely necessary. Dumont (1973:35) observes that the local officials should play "the game of the poor" and should be

always on their side. Continued administrative and political support may result in weakening the dependence of the poor on the local landlords and at the same time improve their strength to organize themselves on a class basis. Further, the state should take stern measures and shut down all private armies of *lathiyals* by opening new police stations and policing the *char* areas. It is important that the state get control of these marginal territories in all respects, and that bureaucratic and regulatory measures be strictly enforced.

6. The government should also seriously think of creating a separate ministry to deal with newly emerged land and relocation of the displaced population in the country. Until now, newly accreted land is being surveyed and resettled by the Ministry of Land Administration and Land Reforms. Programs for inter-district relocation of displaced population have been carried out to date by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation with assistance from local district administrations. The displacees of Kazipur have clearly shown their preference for local relocation and settlement, usually within the same *upazila*. The lack of any clear-cut policy for relocation and resettlement has clouded the future of thousands of displaced people in uncertainty. Given the regularity and inevitable continuity of widespread riverbank erosion in Bangladesh, a new ministry charged with resettlement of displaced and landless people may prove useful both in the formulation and implementation of policies regarding newly emerged land and relocation of the displaced people.

I also suggest the immediate formation of a high-powered National Commission consisting of senior government officials from survey, revenue, relief and rehabilitation departments, politicians, academics and representatives of the displaced people to take stock of the

situation prevailing in the riparian areas in the country. The objectives should be to reformulate a comprehensive *char* land and relocation policy for Bangladesh. It is unfortunate that we do not yet have any national level information with local focus on problems of riverbank erosion, dislocation and relocation of the displaced population in the country. The Commission, in addition to the above recommendations, should look critically into issues such as (i) ownership and tenurial status, (ii) differential ceiling and land tax for *char* and mainland, (iii) participation by the displacees in the relocation decision, and (iv) the role of local *upazila* government in planning and execution of resettlement programs. Since riverbank erosion and consequent loss and emergence of land and human habitation will continue in future, further improvements in resettlement policies, in legal frameworks, in implementation, and in economic development policies will remain imperative.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I have made an attempt to explore the socio-economic and political dynamics of adjustment to riverbank erosion displacement and resettlement in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain. My ethnographic description and analysis of coping strategies of the displacees support the thesis that individual and household adjustments are largely conditioned by kinship and economic interdependence between landed and displaced persons. My point of departure for unraveling the system of dependence is local control of depositional land by *jotedars* and *talukdars* through violence, using their patron-tied dependents as private armies of *lathiyals*. Since erosion is endemic in the floodplain, most households in *char* villages have insufficient land for subsistence and survival. The scarcity and unequal distribution of land together with limited access to depositional land force peasant households to develop asymmetrical patron-client ties with local landed elites. Of the "multi-stranded" relationships that bind the peasants with patrons, the most important one is their use as *lathiyals* by local landlords who are in constant struggles with each other to secure control over new *char* land and expand their agricultural "frontiers" for extraction of surplus. In fact, the fierce battles for changing land resources permeates all social and political relationships between the patron and his dependent clients, because ownership or use of land is the prime factor of adjustment to repeated displacement in the floodplain. An understanding of this social context of adjustment to natural disaster is itself useful as a matter of

general theoretical importance and deserves further emphasis. My ethnographic account suggests that the sources and origins of social factors of adjustment are largely beyond the control of individual's and household units, which calls for adoption of an historical-structural approach in disaster research as opposed to approaches focusing on individual perceptual and behavioral responses.

In Chapter One, I reviewed a variety of approaches dealing with human responses and adjustment to natural hazards. Much of the existing work in the geography of natural hazards is rooted in behavioral-ecological approaches (Kates 1962, White 1964, Saarinen 1966, Burton et al. 1968) that give prominence to unique personal attributes as explanations for responses to natural hazards. Some critical geographers (Baird et al. 1975, Waddell 1977, Westgate and O'Keefe 1976, Hewitt 1983, Haque 1988) and anthropologists (Torry 1979a, 1979b; Oliver-Smith 1986, Scudder and Colson 1982) argue that any paradigm in disaster research must consider both the natural and social structural causes of disaster and underdevelopment. I have made an attempt in this study to integrate and analyze behavioral variables within a socio-historical context that directly or indirectly affect an individual's relationship to local resources to cope with recurrent riverbank erosion and displacement. The case study of Char Chashi in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain illustrates the usefulness of adopting such an "historical-structural" approach to understand the problems of adjustment from an individual, household, community and local/regional perspective.

Char Chashi and other *char* villages in the floodplain are not only frontiers of new agricultural land, they also represent a "frontier society" in contrast to the mainland village societies. Geographically isolated from the mainland, these island villages are peripheral,

violent, and culturally distinct from the mainland, forming what is locally called "*choura*" subculture. They are, however, at the same time tied to the larger society by economic and political relationships. As shown in Chapter Three, the economic and political "stability" of *jotedars* and *talukdars* is largely dependent on the control of *char* land, its exploitation -- mainly in labor relations, employment and sharecropping and appropriation of surplus. A diversity of contract relations exists between the peasant households and local landlords which shows features of semi-feudal relationships in terms of peasant-landlord relations of personal dependence and political services. These relations of production are features of adaptation to *char* life which further establishes the fact that a very large and complex society lives off the peculiarities of erosion land. In the context of local ecology and economy of village Char Chashi, it has been found that individual response or "choice-making" to erosion hazard and adjustment to displacement among the villagers varies widely, depending on an individual's access to land, the extent of ownership of land by each household, and to a great extent, the political relationship of households with local patrons. Further to this, my discussion on village social organization in Chapter Four has shown that there are other types of traditional decision-making units than the household *per se*. These units -- *bari*, *gusthi*, *para* and *samaj* -- have relative corporate characters and play a significant role in individual and group-decisions in social-ceremonial matters; they provide considerable assistance to the displacees during displacement and resettlement. Therefore, in the context of erosion and displacement, the decision taken by a household unit in Char Chashi cannot be understood without reference to the socio-

economic position of the household and its strategy of political alignment with village patrons. The evidence found in this study suggests that people affected by riverbank erosion in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain have differential responses and adjustment strategies, depending on their economic position and social class (also, see Haque 1988).

The patron-client relationship is a dominant feature of social organization in the riparian villages. It functions as a form of adaptation to displacement. Other ethnographic studies of Bangladesh villages (see Bertocci 1980, Wood 1981, Zaman 1982c, Jansen 1987) also suggest that it is the dominant organizational feature of rural Bangladesh. The evolution of this land-based patronage system has been described in Chapter Two. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 by the East India Company resulted in the emergence of a powerful and uncontested dominant class (i.e., *zamindar*, *talukdar*, *jotedar*) in the countryside with monopoly over use of physical force or violence by their own private armies of *lathiyals* with impunity and no apparent accountability. The patron-based segmentary model of political alliance by village-level patrons with more powerful regional patrons, and the analysis of comparative case studies from the floodplain and the southern delta in Chapter Five, provide strong evidence that *jotedars* and *talukdars* in contemporary rural Bangladesh use their *lathiyals* to take advantage of the unstable riverine environment in grabbing newly emerged *chars* as new agriculture and settlement frontiers. Historical accounts for the rise of *lathiyal bahini* presented in this study thus support my thesis that the *lathiyali* system has long been a systematic socio-political adaptation to riverbank erosion and displacement in the riparian villages of Bangladesh.

The following three types of land conflicts are generally found in *char* villages: (a) conflict between small peasants; (b) conflict between small/middle peasants and *jotedars*; and (c) conflict between *talukdars*. The nature and scale of land conflicts, the use of violence and its outcome have been analyzed using a generalized model of *char* land conflict resolution. The local *salish* is effective only in cases of conflict between small peasants; the use of force by the *jotedars* and *talukdars* for a zero-sum outcome is the most important feature of *char* land conflict resolution. Delayed, fictitious, and incomplete records and survey are considered major sources of conflicts over *char* land. The leadership profiles in Chapter Four and the case study materials on land conflict in Chapter Five provide sufficient evidence that local *jotedars* and large landowners maintain political linkages with all levels of government to reinforce their power in the locality. Indeed, political links with local administration and other state-level institutions are important sources of power for continued dominance over the peasantry.

The displacees of Kazipur have expressed a clear preference for resettlement in nearby *chars* and *khas* land within the *upazila*. In other words, they want to remain in their own locality in particular and in rural areas generally. The desire for relocation in nearby *chars* or within the *upazila* suggests that the displacees desire to remain as close as possible to their kin and local *samaj* groups -- a sentiment expressed time and again by the floodplain inhabitants. This finding of the study is corroborated by a large body of cross-cultural and comparative literature on involuntary migration (see Wallace 1957, Oliver-Smith 1982, Merryman 1982, Scudder and Colson 1982, Palacio 1982). The preference to remain close to origins is itself an adaptive strategy to reduce further

social and cultural stress in the new relocated environment. It also helps to maintain contact with kinfolk and obligation relationships, and to maintain cultural "identity." The riverine displacees are dependent upon their relatives, friends, and local corporate groups for assistance in adjusting to displacement. Therefore, in making future decisions regarding relocation of displacees, attention should be given to social organization of displacees and retention of their social and cultural institutions.

The foregoing account of displacement, landlessness and pauperization in *char* villages, together with illegal and violent seizure of land and surplus from the peasants, may lead one to ask why the poor peasant classes do not organize themselves as a class to fight against the oppressive landlords. The inter-dependence between landed and displaced persons as a coping strategy itself prevents the development of any effective class-based solidarity among the poor peasant classes; instead, the patron-client relationship is viewed with some favor by the poor peasants. In Char Chashi it is often difficult for the displaced peasant households to define their own class position since ownership of land is never fixed. Furthermore, the ideology of kinship and *samaj* functions largely as a deterrent to extreme polarization of the peasantry by supporting local mobility in the face of erosion and displacement. Lack of effective rural development planning and specialized programs for improving landlessness and poverty indirectly perpetuate the dependence of the poor on the landed elite for exploitation. As a weak and subordinate group, the dependent peasants cannot organize effectively to challenge action of their powerful patrons. However, given external political and economic support through new economic development strategies, land reallocation, and settlement policies to actually

benefit the poor, they are likely to have a better chance to become political actors in their own right through class-based organizations.

The delta country of Bangladesh will remain an "eternal frontier" until these marginal territories are controlled in all respects by the state. The responsibility of the state should not be confined to land legislation alone; the state should participate effectively in the implementation of *char* land policies to safeguard the interests of the displaced and landless poor in the country. Analysis of various aspects of *char* land policy implementation suggests that the state has no effective control over ownership and exploitation of *char* land; instead, the local landlords manipulate state laws and apparatus to their advantage. In the context of growing landlessness and a fast growing population, the Government of Bangladesh should give top national priority to reformulation of a comprehensive *char* land policy to improve the economic and political interests of the landless and displaced people in the country. But given the relationship between land control and class structure underlying Bangladesh's "intermediate regime" vis-a-vis a weak peasantry, a comprehensive land reform policy in the near future is unlikely. However, the intermediate regime has shown some interest in minor land reform and tenancy relations without altering the class character of the state. Some policy measures have been suggested that require changes in the existing laws, improvement in survey and settlement procedures and updating records of rights, and involvement of the peasantry in the implementation of *char* land policies. If such changes are implemented, the land poor will benefit, and in the process will have a better chance to organize themselves at the village level.

The research findings presented in this ethnography of social adjustment to disaster contribute to our understanding of human responses

and adjustment to natural hazards in a Third World context. In comparative perspective, the contributions of this study form part of a growing body of literature in the field of natural hazard focusing primarily on non-Western, pre-capitalist societies (see Torry 1978; Oliver-Smith 1982, 1986; Wisner, O'Keefe and Westgate 1977; Wisner, Westgate and O'Keefe 1976; Hewitt 1983). Instead of emphasizing perceptual and behavioral variables in adjustment, this study has analyzed the role of social relations of production in the development of adjustment strategies to riverbank erosion hazard in Bangladesh. The case study clearly demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural factors such as kinship and patronage, and other historical and structural factors in shaping individual and household adjustment strategies in a situation of underdevelopment and limited access to land -- the primary means of production in an agrarian society. A number of issues related to multiple displacement and adjustment have been identified for further systematic research. For example, mapping of local migration by households that experienced multiple displacement can provide further insights into the dynamics of adjustment strategies. Longitudinal data of some selected households on ownership of land prior to displacement, loss of household assets in the process of multiple displacement, and estimates of household income and expenditure in the pre- and post-hazard situation will further enhance our understanding of hazard impacts and the process of pauperization in effect in the floodplain. The socio-economic and structural dimensions of adjustment strategies presented in this study strongly support the need for shifting the common behavioral focus toward social aspects of adjustment to explain problems of disaster responses holistically.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

- 1 Following anthropological tradition I have used a fictitious name for the village in order to protect my informants. All other names used in the text are also fictitious.
- 2 *Talukdars* (independent proprietors) and *jotedars* (superior tenure holders) were generic names used to refer to a class of large landholders under the *zamindari* of Bengal. As agents of the colonial rulers, the *zamindars* were socially and politically powerful in Bengal politics and rural administration. For further useful reference to the evolution of the *zamindari* system, see Roy (1979).
- 3 *Bhadraloks* literally means "respectable" and "gentlemen." This term was conceptualized by Broomfield (1968) to refer to a class of rural (and town) people of twentieth century Bengal who claimed and were accorded recognition as superior in social status to the mass of people. The *bhadraloks* "were distinguished by many aspects of their behavior -- their deportment, their speech, their dress, their style of housing, their eating habits, their occupation, and their associations and quite as fundamentally by their cultural values and their sense of social propriety" (Broomfield 1968:5-6).
- 4 The word "*lathiyal*" comes from *lathi*, i.e., a bamboo staff which is the classic peasant (and police) weapon in Bengal and Bangladesh. *Lathiyals* is used here as plural of *lathiyal*. The *lathiyals* have been historically a kind of "private army" of the *zamindars* and *talukdars* in Bengal (see Carstairs 1895, Mukerjee 1938, Broomfield 1976). In contemporary usage, the *lathiyal* is an "armed retainer" or "hired thug" of the *talukdar* and his *dal* (faction) responsible for organizing violent confrontation as needed for gaining control over depositional land (see Ali 1981, Zaman and Wiest 1985, Zaman 1987).
- 5 Bailey (1968:13) defines "parapolitical system" as "those [activities] which are partly regulated by, and partly independent of, larger encapsulating structures; and which, so to speak, fight battles with these larger structures in a way which for them seldom ends in victory, rarely in dramatic defeat, but usually a long drawn stalemate and defeat by attrition."
- 6 The research was carried out under the auspices of a joint University of Manitoba (Canada) and Jahangirnagar University (Bangladesh) project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada. Three localities -- Kazipur in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain, Chilmari at the mouth of the Teesta, and Bhola in the Meghna floodplain were selected as research sites. This dissertation utilizes only a segment of the Kazipur data focusing mainly on Char Chashi.

- 7 In all 619, sample households (Mainland and Bankline = 300; *Char* land = 247; and Embankment Squatters = 72) were interviewed for the Kazipur survey. For a detailed discussion of the methodology and procedure of the sample survey, see Haque, et al. (1985). My co-researcher Chowdhury Haque has used most of the sample data in his dissertation work (Haque 1988). I have used them either to substantiate or generalize my village level findings in a regional context.
- 8 The use of *mouza* as revenue and socio-demographic unit of analysis in Bangladesh rural studies has long been debated and discussed (see Bertocci 1975, Nicholas 1962). A *mouza* is essentially a revenue unit with demarcated geographic boundaries that may often contain more than one village settlement with socially accepted "boundaries" between the villages. *Mouza* as a unit of analysis was approved in the case of this research project mainly for determining certain geographic elements in the process of erosion, dislocation and population migration. Char Chashi is the lone village within the same *mouza* unit.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

- 1 Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956), one of Bengal's finest prose writers, narrates the story of a group of poor Hindu fishermen of a small village on the bank of river Padma and how they were used by an enigmatic Muslim named Hossain in colonizing an island called Maynar Char off the coast of Noakhali District. This novel was included in UNESCO's collection of India's best representative works. It has been translated for a second time into English by Barbara Painter and Yaan Lovelock under the title *Padma River Boatman* (St. Lucia and New York: University of Queensland Press, 1977).
- 2 The following is the district-wide distribution of accretion land in the lower Meghna delta: Noakhali 35,213 acres; Chittagong 22,861 acres; Patuakhali 38,304 acres; and Barisal 66,714 acres (Total 163,092 acres); the targeted area of emergent land is 12,300,000 acres (see Malik 1983:27).
- 3 The province of Bengal in India was not known by this name until Muslim conquest of India around 1100 A.D. In the pre-Muslim period, this large territory was often called *Gauda*. *Vanga* was originally the name of the south-eastern part of the country with undefined boundary. Other geographical names such as *Samatata*, *Harikela*, *Vangala* were also used in ancient literature to refer to Bengal (for more, see Majumdar 1971).

- 4 It is believed that the eastern part of Bengal was possibly the last limit of the wanderings of the Aryans. There is an anecdote in the *Mahabharata* about colonizing this part of Bengal by the Aryans. Khan (1977:5) writes: "The story runs that when in their wanderings the Pandavas reached its [Meghna] banks, Bhim, the most adventurous of those heroes, was sent across to explore the country on the other side and on his return addressed his elder brother, Yudhishthira, in such intemperate language that the latter turned his back forever on a land which could so pervert a man of gentle breeding. The country east of Meghna has therefore been called by the orthodox Hindus *Pandava barjita desh*, a land of utter barbarism."
- 5 Historical accounts (Phear 1880, Hunter 1860) of the origin and number of Muslim population in the active delta region of the former East Bengal suggest that the bulk of the Bengali Muslims are converts from low-caste Hindu cultivators. However, the first census of Bengal taken in 1872 revealed that in Bengal proper, hitherto considered principally the domain of the Hindus, nearly half (48%) of the total population were Muslims, the majority of whom lived in the marshy, low-lying tracts of the present state of Bangladesh (for further details, see Ahmed 1981).
- 6 The hired goons were distinguished by their blind and most devoted courage and their recklessness in exposing themselves to danger. Carstairs writes: "A story is told of a landlord in Eastern Bengal who was out with a solitary attendant, and saw advancing on him a large band of enemy's clubmen. 'Run, sahib,' said the henchman, 'and I will meet them.' 'But they will kill you,' said the master. 'Very likely,' said the man, 'but never mind. What a splendid case you will have in court!' This is the stuff of which professional clubmen are made" (1895:244).
- 7 Carstairs (1895:276-77) describes how forceful possession of land by the locally powerful people even helps fight a court battle and eventually win it: "In the law court, as outside, the long purse gives its owners an immense advantage. It can pay good lawyers; bribe the confidential servants of the other side to give useful information or papers; cool the zeal, and get them to make mistakes. It can buy and bring forward witnesses on his own side, and frighten or corrupt those on the other; it can forward his business in the court by timely gifts to various officials about it. When the case has been decided, if he loses he can afford to renew the battle again and again with applications of appeal, for revision and review, and so wear down his opponents... The struggle, before it ends, is often one over the costs, which have probably mounted up far above the intrinsic value of the property fought over ... In Eastern Bengal, indeed, litigation seems to be a popular sport."

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- 1 Four villages, namely Simultala, Sagatipara, Char Kazipur and Kazipur were washed away between 1978 and 1981, displacing 914 households and an estimated population of 5,296 (Zaman and Wiest 1985). Other villages (e.g., Saudtala, Manikpatal, Char Burungi, Pirejerpara, Betgari, Bildaria and Masuakandi) were partially affected by erosion which continues to threaten their future existence.
- 2 Inheritance among Muslims in Bangladesh is based on Islamic law. Upon the death of the father (head of the household), the property is inherited by the sons and daughters with the surviving spouse having a fixed share. According to Islamic practices, a daughter receives a share half the size of a son. But customarily the daughters do not claim their shares and allow their brothers to enjoy. This contributes to a good relationship between them; it further provides some security for a woman, for she can take a refuge in her brother's house if her husband dies or in cases of divorce or separation.
- 3 Jahangir (1979) and Wood (1976, 1981) suggest that it would be inaccurate to characterize the mode of production as semi-feudal because there are important elements of capitalist relations in agriculture as well (e.g., increase in wage labor, a substantial increase in productivity and commercialization of production, increasing class-based polarization, etc.). There is, however, regional variation; the nature of regional agricultural modernization has also affected the development of agrarian relations (see Wood 1981).
- 4 Jahan (1976) reports that members of *Jatiyo Sangshad* lobby for procurement of fertilizers, pesticide, pumps and tubewells to serve the interests of the surplus producing farmers in their constituencies.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- 1 Ellickson defines *gusthi* as a "locality group" whose members are descended through males from a remembered male ancestor. A Muslim woman, upon her marriage, acquires "dual" *gusthi* membership (Ellickson 1972).
- 2 *Salish* is an informal and traditional dispute resolution mechanism widely used by the villagers. It emphasizes mutual interests of the disputing parties and involves resolution of the dispute through acceptable compromise. Depending on the nature of the dispute, a *salish* bench may consist of *matabbars* from more than one village (see Zaman 1981).

- 3 Bertocci (1976:161) observes that there are several important referents for the term *gram* -- the mouza (revenue unit) village, the "census" village, and socially defined "natural villages" -- leading to difficulties in defining village "boundaries." The form and variation in the settlement patterns in the country is largely influenced by population density and the delta environment. The floodplain generally has a dispersed settlement pattern; nucleated villages are found more in the moribund delta. For a region-by-region description of the settlement patterns, see Ahmad (1956) and Bertocci (1976).
- 4 Based on the ideology of status, earlier studies ranked the East Bengali Muslim population into *ashraf* (high born) and *ajlaf* (low born, synonym in Bengal *atraf*) categories or some variant of this system (see Karim 1956). There are other kinds of stratification; for example, *ucho-bangsho* (high status lineage), *madhya-bangsho* (middle status lineage) and *nicho-bangsho* (low status lineage) (see Bertocci 1972, Jahangir 1979). People with high status titles such as Talukdar, Chowdhury, Majumdar, etc., were traditionally landed aristocrats who had substantial control over the dependent peasantry.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

- 1 In addition to reports published periodically in daily newspapers, two popular weeklies (*Bichitra* #19, #41, 1983; Bangladesh Today, Vol. 1(1), 1983) have recently published cover stories on the nature and extent of violence in *char* villages in the country. The reports contain penetrating analysis of the problem in the southern delta where the river systems are more active in terms of accretion of new land.
- 2 In this study I have not differentiated standard Bangla words and local Kazipur dialectical expressions.
- 3 My informants told me that the *talukdars* always bribe the local police officials to ignore such "law and order" incidents and thus avoid confrontation.
- 4 Ahmed Talukdar privately made deals with the three families and paid them a large compensation for the loss of lives (based on local customs known as *janer badaley maal*, very close to "blood price" customs). In return, they made incoherent statements in the Court resulting in the dismissal of the suits.
- 5 In 1985, almost four years after coming to power by a military coup in 1981, General Ershad took steps to develop grass-roots support for his regime through the *upazila* election -- a newly created decentralized administrative unit by the regime itself (see Khan 1986). Ahmed Talukdar immediately joined General Ershad's *Jana Dal* party to derive political and administrative support for his local

actions. It is typical of the local *jotedars* and large landowners to maintain political linkages with all levels of government to reinforce their power in the locality (also, see Ahmad and Jenkins 1988).

- 6 The choice of *Ittefaq* was prompted by the fact that it has a good network of *mafassul* (rural) reporters, and that more news and views from rural areas are published in this daily than others. The reports on land conflict and violence were all filed by staff reporters on the basis of confirmation by field visits or sources confirmed by the local administration. Some reports were, however, found incomplete. Under reporting seems possible because some violent incidents may be repressed or fail to appear in the newspaper for other unknown reasons. For example, some areas of Faridpur district are notorious for violent land conflict. Only one case was reported in *Ittefaq* over the five-year period. Therefore, the extent of violence may have been much higher than reported.
- 7 Ali (1981:footnote 91, page 190) reports that during the period 1968-69, about 50% of all criminal cases in Gopalganj were related to forcible harvesting of rice by well-organized gangs maintained by surplus-generating farmers.
- 8 Das Gupta (1974:149) observes: "The struggles between the *zamindars* and the richer tenants marked the beginning of a long struggle in rural Bengal which culminated through the enactment of various tenancy legislations [e.g., Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885] in the consolidation of the socio-economic position of the substantial tenants."

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

- 1 The relocation of the displaced population to Chittagong Hill Tracts has been under fire for quite some time. Tribal people, aware of the long-term political goal of the government, have fought back. Reports of intermittent conflicts between the tribal gorillas (*Shanti Bahini*) and the new settlers in the CHT are frequently reported in the national newspapers of Bangladesh. In the past few years, several hundred tribal people and new settlers have been killed in violent fights in the CHT (see Zaman 1982d, Paul 1982, Mey 1984, Chakma 1986). This particular type of relocation of non-tribal population to tribal areas, aimed at "detrribalization," has been tried repeatedly as a policy measure in many countries, resulting only in failures and appalling tragedies (see Oberai 1986).
- 2 According to Bristow (1987:69), addition to pre-existing bars accounts for 53% of the area of deposition in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain, whereas lateral accretion to the bank, new mid-channel bars, and channel abandonment account for 9, 13 and 15% respectively.

- 3 The excess land acquired elsewhere through the ceiling provision is also of poor quality. Siddiqui (1981:78) reports, "The quality of land surrendered was extremely poor -- ditches, marshes, wasteland, etc. -- and when good land was surrendered, it was generally scattered in bits, since, under the law, the landlord decides which land to retain."

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