

# The economic rise of river islands

Northern chars evolved from temporary settlements into thriving agricultural hubs, boosting crops, livestock, and incomes

**A 2022 study jointly conducted by Bangladesh Agricultural University and Taif University found that char farmers in northern Bangladesh have rapidly expanded maize, mustard, groundnut, and chilli cultivation, often adopting high-yield varieties because of better market linkages and rising demand**

S DILIP ROY

At first glance, the northern chars seem like strokes of accidental geography – as if the sandy patches were never meant to be there. A river slows, sand settles, and a strip of land rises like an afterthought, in shapes no mapmaker could have predicted. One season a thin sandbar; the next, a stretch where grass dares to grow.

For generations, these islands of silt were treated as temporary ground – shifting, unreliable, and potentially gone with the next flash flood. Until two decades ago, families built homes with the hesitation as they knew their walls might float away during the monsoon.

Step into these chars today, however, and a different picture emerges. Long rows of maize and chilli colour the pale, sandy landscape. Cattle graze on tall, glossy grasses rooted in rich alluvial soil. Small bazaars buzz with traders who cross the channels not for relief work, but for business.

Families that once stashed dry rations now confidently talk about yields, livestock prices, and savings. Instead of seeking loans to survive, they now seek investment advice.

Across some dozen districts, including Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Sirajganj, Bogura, Jamalpur, Tangail, Manikganj, Faridpur, and Rajbari, stories of barren land transforming into fertile farmland are no longer just tales.

“After the monsoon, the chars

grow around 130 crops on char lands. Lentils, chilli, sesame, wheat, groundnut, foxtail millet, maize, garlic, and sweet potato dominate the fields. Crops like maize, chilli, and groundnut have become valuable enough that major consumer brands buy directly from char farmers.

“While there is no exact survey of total production, ongoing assessments show that food grains grown on char lands contribute significantly to the national food reserve,” Mamun said.

Research confirms these observations. A 2022 study jointly conducted by Bangladesh Agricultural University and Taif University found that char farmers in northern Bangladesh have rapidly expanded maize, mustard, groundnut, and chilli cultivation, often adopting high-yield varieties because of better market linkages and rising demand.

A 2025 study by Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University and Sylhet Agricultural University found that many char farmers now cultivate between 2.5 and 4 acres on average, thanks to improved soil nutrition and shifting river morphology.

## LIVESTOCK AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Agriculture alone does not explain the economic surge. Livestock farming, powered by alluvial grasses, has become one of the char economy's strongest pillars. Milk and other dairy products are now regularly supplied to upazila markets.



Daikhowa in Kurigram.

Women now manage most farm and livestock tasks and have embraced crops like maize in the last five to six years, often earning strong profits. Buyers frequently travel to the char to purchase cows, goats, sheep, buffaloes, and poultry.

Almost every char household functions as a small farm, typically keeping 8-20 cows, 6-10 goats, and 8-10 sheep.

“There are around 19 lakh livestock in Kurigram, about 65 percent of which are reared on chars,” said Habibur Rahman, Kurigram district livestock officer. “Each char family now earns between Tk 3 lakh and 15 lakh annually from livestock sales. Livestock has made char dwellers self-reliant.”

This aligns with findings from the 2022 MDPI study, which observed that mixed farming – crops combined with livestock – significantly increases income stability in char households, especially for women.

## IMPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE AND LIVELIHOODS

Motorised vans, horse carts, and bullock carts now move almost constantly between settlements, where boats were once the only means to cross rivers. A few chars even have semi-paved roads, and many are lit by electricity delivered through submarine cables. These changes are not cosmetic; they cut labour hours, reduce crop loss, and improve household comfort.

“I have 15 bighas of arable land. Seven or eight years ago, most of it was barren. Now I grow crops two or three times a year,” said Ansar Ali, a farmer from Char Shakhahati in Chilmari.

With 15 cows, three buffaloes, 10 goats, and eight sheep, he earns around Tk 10 lakh annually from livestock alone, spending only Tk 2-Tk 3 lakh.

Rahmat Ullah, a 68-year-old farmer, recalled a time when they cultivated only paddy, aus, and vegetables using

traditional methods that produced little profit.

Training from NGOs and the Department of Agricultural Extension encouraged adoption of improved techniques. “Now we cultivate all kinds of modern crops on our own and are getting expected yields,” he said.

But farmers still grapple with high transport costs cutting into their income. “The wholesalers who come here pay 5-7 percent less than the mainland price, citing higher transportation costs,” Rahmat said.

Despite these challenges, economic progress is visible. The potential has attracted mainlanders to buy land and settle on the char.

In Ghughumari Char, Ulipur of Kurigram, 60-year-old Badiar Rahman said families can now afford brick houses, though many avoid them due to erosion risk. “Most people are better off thanks to crops and livestock... Some families have even bought land on the mainland.”

His neighbour, Akhtar Hossain, captured the reversal of fortune. “Earlier, we went to the mainland to work as labourers. Now, labourers from the mainland come here. Work is available year-round.”

Local markets have grown accordingly. “Markets for crops and livestock from the Brahmaputra chars are thriving. We often pay farmers in advance,” said trader Sohrab Ali.

“Char-bred livestock is always in high demand... People in the chars are now financially stronger than many on the mainland,” he added.

NGO veteran Ahsanul Kabir Bulu, who has witnessed the transformation firsthand over the last 20 years, noted, “Seven or eight years ago, poverty was widespread. Now people don't ask for loans, they ask for investment advice.”

**GROWTH AMID FRAGILE GROUND** Prosperity in the chars comes with a warning. The same silt that creates new land can erase it overnight. With rivers depositing massive amounts of sediment each year, chars expand

while river channels narrow.

Lack of dredging, upstream hill silt, and blockages in channels are causing new land to emerge – a worrying trend for riverine Bangladesh.

The Water Development Board reports that most major rivers, including the Brahmaputra, Padma, Jamuna, and Meghna, deposit heavy silt annually, pushing new land above the surface.

Char land now makes up about 2.8 percent of Bangladesh's territory, around 2,500 sq km, Prof Shafiqul Islam Bebu of the Kurigram Char Development Committee said, citing studies.

“Studies estimate that 17 to 18 lakh people live on these chars, with around 600,000 in Kurigram and Lalmonirhat alone,” he said.

“About 400 sq km are in the Brahmaputra and Teesta basins, 1,000 sq km in the Jamuna basin, 700 sq km in the Padma and Ganges basins, and 400 sq km in the Meghna basin. From Kurigram to Sirajganj and Pabna, the Brahmaputra has over 700 char spots,” he added.

Opportunity, however, comes with peril. Char Montola in Kurigram, once home to 350 families, vanished in just two years, swallowed by the Brahmaputra.

“Newly formed char lands bring economic opportunities but also threaten river navigation and ecology... The chars are a lifeline for millions, but they are not permanent. Just as they appear during floods, they can vanish overnight,” cautioned Rakibul Hasan, executive engineer of the Kurigram Water Development Board.

Tuhin Wadud, director of Riverine People and professor at Begum Rokeya University, notes that mainstream development policies overlook the distinct challenges of char regions.

“Separate policies are needed for education, healthcare, and communication systems.” Improved transport suited to char terrain – horse carts, boats, and low-cost routes – must be ensured,” he added.

Dr Abdul Majid Pramanik of the Rural Development Academy emphasised solar powered irrigation as a way to strengthen agricultural output. “If a separate policy for char development is formulated based on our recommendations, the chars will become a beacon of economic progress.”

While most northern chars are under cultivation, only around 30 percent of southern chars are used, leaving vast potential untapped.

Researchers have long described chars as both fertile and fragile – an agricultural gift shaped by erosion and rebirth. While char farmers benefit from fertile silt, they also face persistent threats. Yet none of this deters char residents. They build, rebuild, sow, reap, and start again. Their economy has grown not because the land is stable but because the people are.

As Rakibul Hasan put it, “Rivers erode, chars emerge, but life never stops.”



PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

turn into a sea of green. Farmers now grow almost every type of crop here. The soil is so fertile that it needs very little fertiliser or pesticide, yet the yields are excellent,” said Abdullah Al Mamun, deputy director of Kurigram Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

He noted that many farmers produce two to three crops a year on land that was entirely barren a decade ago.

## FROM ZERO TO 130 CROPS

According to the DAE, farmers now

Small dairy farms line the sandbars, and nearly every household keeps cattle, goats, or sheep. Many families also rear buffaloes, boosting income and living standards.

Women, who traditionally stayed confined to household chores, now play central roles in feeding, tending, and managing livestock income.

“About 10-11 years ago, women were restricted due to superstition. Now women work in the fields from morning till evening,” said 55-year-old Nurunahar Begum from Char

