

Assam Women: Bearing the Brunt of Insurgency

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The impact of armed conflict on women is usually different from men. This is because such conflicts compel women to take on different functions, play different roles, and shoulder different responsibilities, depending on the situation. Violence and its consequences can have severe impact on the lives of women and subsequently on their children. Combined with emotional and psychological stress, women become overwhelmed with the magnitude of tasks and responsibilities when circumstances force them to head a household and be the bread winner of the family. If this is unusual enough, many such women often meet with disapproval from sections within the society since her role as the breadwinner demands her to come out beyond the social and cultural boundaries, within which she is normally confined to. As noted in paragraph 135 of the Beijing Platform for Action, "while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex."¹

The United Nations in its study titled 'Women, Peace and Security' in 2002² states that understanding the impact of armed conflict on women requires attention to specific themes. (1) Women tend to experience conflict differently than men. Women often see their needs and interests as interwoven with the needs and interests of their male partners and other family members. (2) Just like men, women are both actors and victims in armed conflicts. Women participate in armed forces as combatants and by playing supporting roles. They may assume these roles willingly or be forced to play them. Women are also peace activists, working to heal communities in trouble and bring about sustainable peace. (3) Although many trends and observations regarding women are common to conflict across countries, regions and continents, each situation must be understood on its own terms. Women are not a homogenous group and may have contradictory interests and priorities. The economic, social and political conditions also vary from country to country and it is crucial to ground programmatic responses in concrete realities.

Assam, Northeast India's largest state, has been experiencing insurgency and conflict for more than three decades now, and the 'little wars' or 'low intensity conflicts'³ have been persistently disturbing the people of the State. Spread over an area of about 78,438 square kilometre and home to a population of 31 million⁴, the State is one of the hotbeds in South Asia's insurgency theatre. Conflict, however, is not a surprise element here as the State is an ethnic minefield-being home to diverse ethnic groups and communities.

A large number of militant cadres belonging to the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and other insurgent groups have been killed by security forces during anti-insurgency operations. Similarly, militants have killed many security personnel and ordinary civilians. These incidents have left many women widows; many women lost their children, fathers, brothers and other family members. And, because of these incidents, the responsibility to run the household fell in the hands of these women. This present study analyses the socio-economic and psychological condition of these women and how they faced the situation after they lost their bread-earning family member.

Women's Status in Assam :

The population of Assam stands at 31,160,272 as per the 2011 Census, of which 15,954,927 are males and 15,214,345 are females-the sex ratio (females per 1000 males) being 954 and the female literacy ratio being 67.27 per cent. Preference of the male child over the female due to traditional beliefs, deliberate neglect of the girl child and malnutrition has caused this imbalance in the male-female ratio.⁵ Though Assam is not one of the worst-hit states of India in terms of human development and gender equality, its ranking is quite low. The State ranks 11 (out of 19) at Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index Rank according to 2011 Census.⁶ The female work participation rate in Assam is 20.8 per cent against the national rate of 35.6 per cent.⁷ The status of women is decided to a large extent by indices such as income, poverty, education and skills that open up opportunities of development.

Participation of women in the decision making process at home, in society and in the public sphere, and accessing the rights and opportunities provided by the state and the society at large carries much significance as far as the status of women is concerned. In this regard, the position of women in Assam is quite unsatisfactory. Number of women candidates in 2011 Assam Legislative Assembly elections was just 85 (9 per cent) out of 981 candidates.⁸ And out of these, only 14 women candidates managed to win in total of 126 seats, which means there are only 11 per cent women in the Assam Legislative Assembly at present. Even in the recent Lok Sabha election in 2014, there were only 16 women candidates (10 per cent) out of total 162 candidates for the 14 Lok Sabha seats from Assam, out of which only 2 women managed to get elected.⁹ The scenario is much worse in the tribal autonomous

councils in Assam, with only 1 women member (4 per cent) in the 28 member Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council, 3 women member (11 per cent) in the 26 member Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council and no women member in the 40 member Bodoland Territorial Council.¹⁰

It is generally perceived that women from Assam enjoy more freedom of movement and visibility than many other communities in the country. Barring several cases that have come to light in the recent years, normally, practices of bride burning for dowry are not in vogue in the region. This often-cited argument to portray a picture of equity between men and women in the region has brought forward the presumption that violence against women is not really a major concern in the State. But, over the years, the idea has been proved wrong by statistics of registered cases of violence against women in different police stations in the State. According to the 'Crimes in India 2013' report of National Crime Records Bureau, Assam recorded the highest number of incidents of crime against women among the eight northeastern states in 2013 with 17,449 such instances.¹¹ At all-India level, the state stood seventh in 2013.

The prolonged insurgency and armed conflict situation in the State has intensified the woes of violence faced by women in the form of sexual, mental or physical abuse, torture and bloodshed, the manifold social and economic burden and the psychological trauma related to violence. No doubt, the society as a whole, with all its members, may be affected by insurgency violence. Yet, the impact has been worse on women due to their gender and status in society. The culture of violence had brought with it new restrictions on the movement of women, the dress they wear and obviously physical violence such as rape, which is systematically used as a tactic against a particular community.

Households Headed by Women

The National Family Health Survey (phase-2) states that the percentage of women-headed households in Assam was 12.1 per cent, that was above the total all-India average of 10.3 per cent.¹² The State's urban population has 12.1 per cent women-headed households against the all-India average of 11.1 per cent. Only the rural percentage (8.4) is below the all-India average (10.0).¹³ It is observed that the number of women-headed households in the urban areas of Assam is on the higher side.

Socio-economic Dimensions :

The loss due to insurgency violence that the women had to bear is not simply physical and emotional, caused by the loss of their near and dear ones. It always transfers to their social and economic spheres of life. In most cases, women experience a decline in social importance or legitimacy. The economic impact of insurgency violence or anti-insurgency operations and killings in Assam is visible by the increase in female-headed households-a sudden change both in the social and economic status of a family that was earlier supported

by a man (a husband, a father or a brother)-and now bound to be headed by a women who may or may not have the capacity to work and run the family as it was run earlier. It is just an after-shock to the affected women-the first shock being the death of her husband or son or father, the magnitude of which can only be felt by those affected women.

According to a report on "Violence against women in Northeast India: an enquiry" by National Commission for Women (NCW), women have been forced to depend on their neighbours or relatives for work and for help to access the formal economic sector. Women in relief camps are deprived of their livelihood and are unable to take up alternative income generating activities. The NCW study states :

Although all the members of communities are affected by the armed conflict, the impact on women and girls is far greater because of their status in society and their sex. The region, under the shadow of conflict, has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal values and norms, which have brought with them new restrictions on the movement of women, the dress they wear and more overtly physical violence such as rape, which is systematically used as a tactic against a particular community. All this is compounded by the long social, economic and psychological trauma of armed conflict.¹⁴

The economic effects of insurgency may be varied in different countries, and in different contexts. In Nigeria, the militants, mainly the Boko Haram (Boko Haram is a shadowy Islamist insurgency group which operates in northern Nigeria), alone by their nature are used to crippling the economic activities of any place they spread their tentacles. This has also led to migration of people from the affected place due to restiveness. Here insurgency has reduced investment and growth of business in the affected places. Even government executed projects do not get implemented in such areas. No wonder, the 2011 World Investment Report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development reported that lull in business activities caused by insecurity in Kano State alone has cost the Nigerian economy N 1.3 trillion (\$6 billion) as a result of attacks by the Boko Haram group.¹⁵

In Nepal, as impact of insurgency on the economy of the country, it is observed that the rich are becoming richer, while the poor becoming poorer. Big industries have been closed, multinational companies are withdrawing. This draws a bleak economic future for Nepal for the coming years.¹⁶

The socio-economic impact of insurgency also varies from lives of women at relief camps and outside the camps. Reports state that decades of violent insurgency in Assam have forced many women, including homemakers, to even take to prostitution after their husbands or close family members were killed or maimed in terror attacks. "Women hit by terror attacks are exploited very cruelly with some of them forced into nasty things like prostitution," said Manumati Barman, the Coordinator of a women's shelter home run by the

Global Organization for Life Development (GOLD), an NGO in Guwahati.¹⁷ Insurgency is the root cause behind thousands of shattered families, orphaned children, widowed women, some of them forced to beg for making ends meet.

In Kokrajhar and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam, survivors of violence have been living for years together in relief camps. The adverse conditions in such camps deprive the women even of their reproductive rights since she cannot prevent an unwanted pregnancy. This results in delivery of a child in extremely unpleasant circumstances. The difficulties are doubled due to poverty and bad health—a common phenomenon at the relief camps. Again, during conflict times, militants too, try to exercise control over the sexuality as well as reproductive rights of women. They keep close watch over women to see who they are socializing with and dictate the women not to do family planning in order to multiply the race.¹⁸

There are hundreds of widows of insurgency in Assam who have not got the promised ex-gratia payments or jobs promised by the government. "I have not received any money from the government. I have four children and without any financial support from the government, life is simply like hell," said middle-aged Khudija Khatun who lost her husband, Mohammad Arab Ali, to militants' bullets in 1998.¹⁹ In Assam, whenever there is an insurgency violence causing casualties, it has been a government exercise to announce an ex-gratia (since 2008 the amount has been raised to Rs.300,000 from Rs.100,000) and sometimes to promise jobs to the next-of-kin of those who died in such attacks. While some of the women were 'lucky' to receive the ex-gratia amount, jobs have been actually provided to only a few.

Women had to travel many times to the Deputy Commissioner's office of the concerned districts to get their due ex-gratia spending time, energy and money. "I had to make around 40 visits to the DC's office for two years after my husband's death before I received Rs 70,000 as ex-gratia", said Tillottama Basumatary, wife of Romel Chandra Basumatary who was shot dead, along with five others, by rebels of the outlawed NDFB on November 19, 1996.²⁰ If it took two years for Tillottama to get the ex-gratia amount, it was after four years that she started receiving her family pension. The manner in which the officials at the Kokrajhar DC and the DIS offices made Tillottama run around to get her dues without considering the fact that she had just lost her husband who was also the sole breadwinner of her family clearly explains the sense of detachment of the authorities. After three decades since insurgency took roots in Assam, the State Government is yet to form a mechanism or a special cell for the survivors of insurgency to get their dues without difficulty or their grievances heard.²¹

The accounts of Anita Mashahary and Janaki Brahma—the two Bodo women who were married to the then top leaders of the powerful All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU)—deny the general belief that society cushions and protects the survivors of terror, especially if they are women who have lost their husbands or sons to violence.²² As such, women like

them had no way but to strengthen their resolve to meet the challenges of life on their own, and move on. They both lost their husbands in the hands of militants - Anita's husband was abducted and killed on October 13, 2000 and Janaki's husband was kidnapped by militants in 2001, to be never heard of again. And the way society responded to Anita and her two little children after the tragedy, was surprising. Her husband, Bagrangsu Masahary, was member of a political party called People's Democratic Front (PDF), formed in 1996 in the Bodo heartland. The party was supposed to be close to the NDFB. According to Anita, "For a long time after my husband's death, hardly anybody visited us, perhaps out of fear of being linked to the PDF. Some people may have sympathized with us, but they kept away. Perhaps they thought that they would be targeted by those who killed my husband," said Anita. While Anita received her ex-gratia after more than 30 visits to the Kokrajhar DC's office, Janaki-the mother of an infant girl at the time of death of her husband-was deprived of her due. "I did not receive help from the people around me on any front. I never even got any ex-gratia payment as I did not know how to go about claiming it", Janaki said.²³

Many of these women have no fixed income, and those who have some land depend on half the paddy that they get from those who till their land. Many have lost their faith in civil society for its indifferent attitude towards their misfortune and for not contributing anything to help them deal with their trauma. In most of the cases, the only people who backed these women were their parents.

Widows of men related to militants seem to receive a negative approach from the administration and the society at large. While these women may be deprived of their due ex-gratia and job, the people around them may avoid visiting them for the fear of security forces or being tagged as sympathizers of insurgents. When Dimba Rajkonwar, brother of the then ULFA chief Arabinda Rajkhowa²⁴, was gunned down from behind by two motorbike riders on 11 August 1998 at Dibrugarh town, his wife Bharati Rajkonwari was deprived of the ex-gratia payment of Rs 100,000. Shattered after the shocking death of her husband, she became a single parent, saddled with the responsibility of looking after the three young children. Bharati believes that the authorities decided to deprive her of her ex-gratia payment just because she belongs to a family, one of whose members is a militant leader. "My only resolve after the tragedy was to bring up my children well and make them independent in life", she said. In spite of all the odds, Bharati was keen to form an organization to help those women widowed as a result of violence in Assam.²⁵

Impact on Education and Health :

In conflict situations, the girl child is often asked to sacrifice her education on grounds that it is unsafe to venture out of the camps to attend schools. Personal security is cited as an example. Relief camps do not have facilities for education. Economic reasons also compel families to stop the education of their children, particularly daughters. But it is also true that

many schools in the vicinity of the conflict are taken over by security forces for their temporary shelter. This further reduces the opportunities for education of girls. Assam is a good example of such type of adverse impact of violence on education.²⁶

Children from households headed by women often have to drop out of school to supplement the family income. This creates a psychological and mental block that affects them throughout their lives. No school or state institution has emerged to help deal with the hidden trauma that such children suffer.²⁷

During anti-insurgency operations, there have been increased mobilizations of army and paramilitary forces leading to increased sexual harassment and loss of privacy even within the four walls of the house, often considered as so called safety zone. Women face psychological trauma, physical violence, casualties and even death. Women have special medical needs in conflict situations such as extra nutritional requirements and food during pregnancy and breast feeding. Moreover, as victims of sexual violence, the affected women are prone to sexually transmitted diseases as well as unwanted pregnancies.²⁸

Psychological Impact (Mental Health) :

Insurgency results in violence that has both tangible and intangible effect. Violence could be either threatened or actual use of force which may be physical, emotional, sexual or social, against oneself, another person or against a community. While in general, violence always ends in loss of personal dignity, liberty and the right to self-determination, in the case of women it has been oppressively directed against them in order to regulate their lives and behaviour. The United Nations General Assembly offered the following definition of violence against women in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.²⁹

In 2006 the UN Secretary General stated that "women experience all forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated by both State and non-State actors" during times of armed conflict.³⁰

In general, the State responds by formulating strategies to address the visible impact of insurgency violence by paying compensation to the victims or their next of kin in case of death. But such compensations do not take into account the social and psychological needs of the affected people. The plight of women victims at conflict times and after is something that is mostly ignored and unattended. Very often, when peace returns in an area of conflict, even if it is temporary, the general tendency is to forget the subtle effects that violence brought about to the lives of the women. People believe that life goes back to normal. But does it really?

The psycho-social vulnerability of women makes them worst-affected victims of violence. Women suffer as wives, mothers and daughters. Stress, strain, anxiety, hysteria, depression, high blood pressure and other psychiatric illnesses increase manifold. Women have to shoulder the responsibility of supporting their families after the death of a husband, a father, a son or a brother. Their injuries are deeper than physical injuries and unlike men, they do not share their tragedy with anybody and that makes them all the more ill. On top of it all, they also face the added problems of abuse and harassment at home or locality. According to a study³¹ conducted by the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research (CNES) among women in conflict-ridden areas of Nagaland and Assam, the women survivors of violence in Assam were found suffering maximum trauma from Bodo insurgency, the anti-foreigner movement and ULFA insurgency. "In Dhemaji, many villages were attacked and burnt during the 1983 anti-foreigner riots because they had settlements of a sizeable population of the Bengali-speaking migrant community. In Kokrajhar, women from the Bodo community had suffered in the vicious cycle of insurgency and political violence, which disrupted entire families... While many women victims seemed deeply traumatized, their children, too, appeared to be similarly affected. Families had fallen apart in instances where the sole bread-earner had been killed; the associated stigma of the killing had compounded societal problems," the report said.

Trauma, Social Stigma: Impact on Women Victims of Conflict :

Sujata is unable to sleep. She wakes up in a cold sweat at night remembering the gory sight of burnt human flesh, walking over dead bodies of her family members to reach a safer place..... Bichitra is afraid that she will be branded by the community as a witch. The question that all these women are asking is - Why me?³²

This is usually the first reaction to trauma and violence.

The case of seven-year-old Farid (son of a local politician hailing from Tengakhat in Tinsukia district who was shot dead by militants on 20 January 1991), who watched his father crash onto the ground when hit by bullets triggered by unknown gunman, is a classic one. In the aftermath of the incident, the child was hit by post-traumatic stress disorder. He used to keep repeating the number of the car apparently used by his father's killers, and would often say, "That's the car they used". "For a year he did not sleep at night. He refused to go to school and I had to keep him on my lap most of the time. He was gripped by fear. It was tough bringing him back to a semblance of normalcy", said Kamrun Nissa, his step mother who looked after him and his small brother after their own mother eloped with some other man.³³

There is a complex relation between trauma and mental health, something that is not easily clear to an ordinary person. Combined with poverty, violence and trauma affect general

mental well-being, and can induce mental disorders in the most vulnerable way.³⁴ Talking about women, depression, anxiety, stress disorders, personality disorders, dissociative identity disorder, psychosis, and eating disorders are the problems most commonly associated with the experience of violence. Among these, the most damaging problem is stress disorder. Two types of stress disorders are found: acute stress disorder (ASD) and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). ASD occurs within two days of a traumatic event and lasts for a month or less, while PTSD begins within a month but not more than three months. It has been observed that though women are more prone to PTSD, most cases go untreated as the symptoms are rarely taken seriously. A substantial stress has been associated with the anxiety of living in an ambience of constant aggression, particularly on women.

The effect of insurgency violence on women naturally impacts on the lives of children in terms of the child's well being, personal development and social interactions that may continue after the child turns an adult. Many children develop a sense of taking revenge on the killers of their father. When Premadhar Konwar, 53, was shot dead on 27 July 1993 by armed insurgents in Namrup, three lives were affected the most-his wife Hemoprova and the two sons, Preeti Bhushan and Bibhuti Bhushan. The impact on the 14-year-old Preeti worried his mother, who herself was in a daze after the tragedy. "Preeti was getting increasingly restive. He began to talk about taking revenge. He kept asking why his father was killed, why anyone would want to do that". Preeti Bhushan was probably suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and in the absence of any professional counseling, the family was unable to calm him down. His mother Hemoprova sank into depression.

I stopped visiting anybody in case they thought that I had gone to them to seek help. I also hesitated to venture out in the market. I was apprehensive of the people's response. I was slowly becoming an emotional wreck. I remember just sitting and doing nothing for long stretches of time. When my younger son would come to me for help with his school homework, I would send him away, asking him to manage on his own,...said Hemoprova.³⁵

Tribeni Baruah of Nalbari district, who lost her husband in a car blast on 27 February 2000, had a tough time as she had to run the family and counsel her children, leaving her own trauma aside. "My children turned a little aggressive. My daughters developed revulsion for black cars as their father had been riding one such on that fateful day. Besides, they began to hate politicians and ministers, and would either switch off or change channels on TV if any minister appeared in the programme."³⁶ Such behaviour indicates post traumatic stress disorder. "The trauma and stress of mothers and children is something that cannot be quantified. We do frequent counselling so that they feel they have someone to fall back upon, something like social security,"³⁷ said Dr Jayanta Das, a well-known psychiatrist and counsellor for the Project Aashwas, conducted by the Assam Police.

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