

Research Article

Floods in Assam: a Post-Disaster Impact on Women and Livelihood

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ABSTRACT

Floods are a recurrent phenomenon in India, and it is a disaster creating massive loss of life and property. Assam is one such affected state, but the intensity of destruction remains neglected due to biased media coverage. The main reason is the feminisation of poverty leading to women, in general, as an excluded group in our male-dominated society. Their unpaid nature of work within the house and low-paid nature of work outside house are not considered as worthy. Women are the one who suffer the most in post-disaster situation in any flood-affected region. Their livelihood in the village, which is mainly farm based, eroded and resulted in impoverishment and vulnerability.

Keywords: Biased, Feminisation, Impoverishment, Unpaid, Vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

Of all the physical, geological and natural phenomena that affect the Earth, floods are the most widespread. There is no place in the world which has never experienced a single event of flooding. Floods are so intertwined with human history that myths about floods abound in all civilisations. An examination of the mythologies shows these to express and be grounded in definite psychosocial contexts and predicaments. This is an important evidence of the way knowledge is a social construct. Myths reflect the views and problems of particular classes or activities (Hewitt, 1983).

Flood can be defined as spilling of water body over the normal level of discharge. Flood is a natural hazard that occurs in response to heavy rainfall, but nowadays, due to extreme human interferences like deforestation and cutting down of mountains for personal benefits, the intensity of flood has increased many times (Joseph, 2005). The occurrence of flood is one of such situation that has the potential to become a disaster, as it affects life and property. The people residing near the river and the sea beaches are in the high-risk zone and are prone to flood hazards. Floods are the most powerful natural phenomena, and its impact, which is mostly widespread, is unpredictable as well. The subsequent increase in the flood is the result of increasing global warming in the environment. As a result of global warming, the ice in the polar belts melts continuously, which has increased the occurrences of flood in the whole world. Flood is also accompanied by landslides, deforestation, soil erosion, washing away of land masses and so on as a cause and effect of flood. Asia is the most flood-affected region, accounting for nearly 50% of flood-related fatalities in the 21st century (Doocy *et al.*, 2013).

India has a long history of floods, which has caused large-scale destruction to life, property, infrastructure and livelihood of people. Floods in India, mainly the Bihar and Assam floods, are the most famous ones, which have taken away the life of many people and also destructed the whole of state's economy. As seen in the recent times, the flash floods in Uttarakhand and Jammu Kashmir laid bare the vulnerability of communities in the face of extreme weather-related events. When the rest of the world is engaged in doing some productive activities and generating power, India faces severe flood situations almost every year. The floods occurring have disrupted the economy of the country and have influenced the people here negatively creating loss of life, property, livelihood and disruption if infrastructure is recreated every time after flood. Bihar is one amongst the most famous states known for floods, leading to huge destruction of crops, submerging habitation for days together, curing of communication links, disruption of roads and distress migration for survival. The Kosi River is one of the important sources of Bihar floods. The floods in Bihar, which is one of the most discussed flood due to the large-scale devastation that it causes to the people, affects mainly the people living below poverty line. Those flood hits are the same for all the people living in that locality, but the degree of impact is different for all the people (Mishra, 2008).

BACKGROUND OF FLOODS IN ASSAM

The history of floods in Assam is headed from earthquake in the 1950s, which has created a situation of frequent floods in Assam; however, the vulnerability in situation

and coping mechanism differ from community to community, which is not sustainable. One of the natural causes for the occurrence of floods in River Brahmaputra is the major earthquake that occurred in Assam in 1950, which resulted in the rise of river bed and hence submerging large areas and caused flood in the areas which never had floods before. The flood situation gradually increased causing floods for several weeks continuously and water logging, damage to crops, epidemic diseases to people and livestock and so on (Goswami, 1998).

The total area in Assam, which is 78,438 sq. km, and most of the part is affected by flood. The total land mass of the state consists of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys named after the mighty Brahmaputra and Barak Rivers and the two hill districts. All the rivers in Assam are liable to floods mainly because they receive heavy rainfall within a short time (Das, 2014). Due to deforestation in the upstream and downstream areas of surrounding hill states, the river waters collect a tremendous amount of silt and other debris and raise the level of the river beds, making it impossible for the main channel to cope with the vast volume of water received during the rains and hence causing flood. People living in these sites are primarily engaged in agriculture and belong to marginalised communities, and such vulnerable sites are also amongst the least developed, and the consistence of floods through various intensities in this region makes these communities vulnerable (Gogoi, 2008).

Assam is one of the worse flood-affected states in India. Flooding in Assam is usually caused by heavy rain in the hills upstream from Arunachal Pradesh in the north and is often intensified by breaching of embankments along these rivers. Because of this direct causal relationship between rainfall and floods, any change in the rainfall regime as a result of climate variability is reflected in the flood patterns (Das *et al.*, 2009). The embankment on the River Jiyadhhal has protected people from floods for more than 30 years, but breaching of the embankment has caused devastating floods from time to time. The other river, that is, the Na-Nadi is an unmanaged river that is also responsible for flood in the low-lying areas of Assam (*ibid.*). The people who are most vulnerable to these floods are the women in household, women-headed household, single women or deserted women, and hence, the severity is much more than that of men.

Assam is possibly India's most flood-prone state. The state has seen at least 12 major floods since 1950. Assam has always been prone to floods, but the 1950 Great Earthquake in the region led to massive changes in its topography and made things worse. The state's Brahmaputra Valley has, thereafter, been seeing increased

devastation due to floods. More than 40% of Assam's land is susceptible to damage by flood waters, and the total flood-prone area in the Brahmaputra Valley alone accounts for 9.6% of India's total flood-prone area. The Brahmaputra River has become more unstable after the 1950 earthquake, and the shifting of river channels and erosion have become more severe and frequent (Bhaumik, 2015).

POLITICS AND IGNORANCE OF MEDIA TOWARDS NORTHEAST

Although floods in Assam have become a regular phenomenon, there should have been better plans developed for proper coping mechanism, but to our surprise till now, there is no proper planning developed for flood management. Lack of planning and red-tapism in Assam is also evident, as Guwahati, which is the largest city in Assam, has been flooded in September 2014, whereas the floods in Kashmir got full media attention and the floods in Assam and Meghalaya did not make it to the television news channels that cry hoarse over other trivial matters. While several donor agencies have landed into Kashmir, Assam and Meghalaya have been ignored, it is their fault perhaps that they are located in the periphery, more like an appendix that causes occasional spasms. In the last few years, India witnessed two major flood incidents, which led to a lot of devastation in Uttarakhand and in Jammu and Kashmir. When floods came in these two regions, scores of 'mainstream' journalists also went these states to cover each and every possible dimension of the natural calamities in the states. In both cases, huge coverage was given and even the state governments were criticised for their poor preparations for such calamities. The way central government handled the flood situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir is laudable, but things are not happening in the north-eastern area at the same pace. The Army and NDRF's emergency aid and rescue missions were very little very late (Sharma, 2014).

The faulty riverbank management and ageing embankments, rampant earth cutting for construction projects and unauthorised habitations on slopes are the reasons behind these recurring floods and landslides in the region, which kills a number of people every year and leads to a lot of devastation. So, instead of blaming each other for the flood mess, the central and state governments should come together and plan on how to handle the current situation in the state. Along with allocation of funds by centre from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund, the state governments should focus on how to be prepared for such situation in the future and how to bring the confidence back in the people who have suffered this much (ibid.).

The developmental paradigm in the northeast is tending more towards the power generation for the state, whereas its effect, which is faced by the people in terms of flood, has not been taken into concern. The dam construction in Arunachal Pradesh in the northeast India for the hydroelectric power generation resulted into submergence of around 500 villages by the flash floods generated by the release of stored water. It shows a biased bend towards the developmental aspect that is in dam construction, whereas the consequence of the dam construction through severe floods in lower Assam is not at all taken care of (Singh *et al.*, 2004). Another major reason which is complementing and hence deteriorating the flood situations in Assam is deforestation. As long as there was sufficient forest cover, the volume of water coming downstream remained within predictable limits by and large. But degradation of forests owing to extensive tree-felling and now the ravages of dam-building, rule out absorption of excess precipitation by forests (of the three proposed dams on the Subansiri, the one in Lower Subansiri will rise to a height of 116 metres, the highest in the country, and submerge an area of 33.50 sq. km). The government is also a step ahead in deception of the flood-affected people as, in the name of compensating the people for their losses, huge sums of money were ceremonially handed over to some MLAs and MPs of affected areas, and that was the last time the people heard about the money (Gohain, 2008). The people who are affected by flood due to such dam constructions, deforestation or naturally occurring flood are the ones who lose their life and property, livelihood, livestock and so on. As an aftermath of flood people who lose their livelihood, which was the only source of income for them, are further exposed to severe vulnerabilities.

WOMEN AND WORK IN ASSAM

All women are usually workers, whether or not they defined or recognised as such. In all societies, and particularly in developing countries, there remain essential but usually unpaid activities (such as cooking, cleaning and other household chores, household needs, childcare, care of the sick and the elderly and at community-level activities), which are widely regarded as the responsibility of the women. This pattern of unpaid work tends to exist even when women are engaged in outside work for an income, whether as a wage worker or as self-employed workers. Women from poor families who are engaged in outside work also usually cannot afford to hire others to perform these tasks. These are passed on to girls and elder women in the household or become a 'double burden' of work for these women. These processes are integral to capitalism. The production of the use value and exchange values of women is for accumulation process (Ghosh, 2013).

Livelihoods activities are usually carried out repeatedly within an income stream such as agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, employment within a market sector, or as an entrepreneur, which are prime sources of employment in Assam. The state of Assam is frequently affected by floods as a natural hazard which creates a long-time impact on the livelihood of people. There exists significant correlation between the chance of being harmed by a natural hazard and being poor (DFID, 2008). With this understanding in mind, it can be asserted that development work for poverty reduction should also be diverted to reduce vulnerability due to disaster. Therefore, it becomes important to identify the possibilities of sustainable livelihood and use it as a framework to access people's vulnerability. In general terms, livelihood can be defined as a set of economic activities by using one's endowment to create enough resources for meeting the requirements of self and the family (Deka, 2013). Livelihood is an important form of living life, as it fetches both monetary and non-monetary form of benefits for self and the family. Basically, livelihood is a sustainable means of earning, and hence, it means something more than just employment. Livelihood aspects in rural areas of Assam are primarily dependent on agriculture, forest economy, casual wage workers, small-scale industries and handicrafts, and these are one of the main aspects of economic existence in rural Assam. There are several small-scale industries based on the resources like agriculture, forest and minerals available here, and these resources come from the rural areas, which is the only source of livelihood for rural people. In spite of being richly endowed with natural resources, the state lags behind the rest of India in many aspects. The women along with contributing economically also contribute their human effort in doing all the household chores (Nakagawa, 2004).

All women who are working are of the same opinion in one such field, that is, their performance of dual responsibility. The women have to perform dual responsibility both at home and at the work site. The women who are at home have to work at home and also work in their own farmland as a part of non-economic activity. Other women who work in other's farm field have to finish the household chores and then go to the field and work as a part of earning for their family income (Ahmed, 2004). All sections of women have the sole responsibility of the domestic work regardless of the work load of her outside commitments of her contribution to the family income. The pressure of this double burden implies that they have little time to spare to acquire for new skills to start an alternate source of employment, which is very important in places of flood where most of the women are employed as farmers. Hence, the women are willing to accept jobs at lower wages, which is probably closer to their place of residence so that they can also visit and assist the

family during intervals. The entry of women in the labour market in poor households is used as a household strategy for survival. The entry of women in labour market is used as household strategy to earn additional income to support the family economically, as the earnings of just one male person is not enough to satisfy the needs of the family. Hence, the availability of women in the labour market for the agricultural sector is matched with the type of the job. The forced migration caused in the flood hit areas for women is restricted by burden of domestic chores and social barriers on their physical mobility. All these restrictions in mobility for women restrict the total number of employment opportunities for them. The macrostructure of work force and female participation are constrained by social and ideological forces that guide individual women to seek economic activities within limited boundaries (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). For example, social forces like women should not stay out of home for work, women should be doing the household chores, rearing the children and taking care of each and every member of the family are some of the restrictions which prohibit the free movement of women for better livelihood opportunities.

WOMEN AND FLOOD

Flood is a natural disaster and its affected area is the same for all the people affected by it. But, there are certain sections of the society which are more vulnerable to flood affects because of certain practices followed. This creates a section of society which receives greater flood impact than the rest. Women are one of the most vulnerable sections of the society and its severity can be understood in the flood situation. It causes loss to all the people affected by flood, but women being the most suppressed group in the society remain a major sufferer, which is unfolded.

The inhabitants of a flood-prone area do not have the same level of risk to flood. The households that are firmly constructed and are located at a distant place are safer than the households and families that are near the riverside. The most important and immediate effect of post-disaster is on health, which is more among the women and the children, as they are more vulnerable to flood hazards than men. The women are the ones who primarily take the responsibility of shifting all the family members to a safer place at first, and at last, she makes a move to that place. She also takes the responsibility of shifting the livestock, stocked food grains, fodder and makes it convenient for everyone to shift to a safer place. In the process, the women are the ones who stay in the flood water for the maximum amount of time leading to serious health hazards. The nature of work shifts due to floods, which basically means that disasters like floods increase women's responsibilities in the

domestic sphere, paid workplace and community through the disaster cycle of preparation, relief, reconstruction and mitigation. Post-disaster stress symptoms are often faced by women (Hogger, 2004). Women generally take time to come out of the stress and the distress that is created by a massive flood effect. Loss of dear ones and loss of family income also add up to the stress of the women. There are increased rates of sexual and domestic violence against girls and women in disaster contexts, as there are mushrooming organisations that come up during the flood hits. Sometimes, the organisations that come up are not authentic and fraud; the affected people are mainly girls and women in the name of providing livelihood sources in the cities and create chain of human trafficking. Likewise, there are organisations and government institutions that come to the rescue of the people, but people mainly dependent on livelihood from forest and natural resources are the worst affected (Dutta, 2013).

Assam is a place of huge forest resources, which serves a place to access raw material for various medicines, herbs, firewood and fodder and for various sources of livelihood like small-scale industries and so on. The households who have a piece of agricultural land and cultivated by the people of the household do not consider the women of the household as the main contributors to the farmland; they are better referred as a 'helping hand to the household', which depicts the neglected situation of the women both in the household and at the workplace (Dhar, 2002). Most of the women earn a livelihood for their family by working in other's farmland as casual workers. The women are easily accessible to work, as they have nimble finger for work and they do not have bargaining power for wages unlike men does (Neethi, 2014).

EFFECT ON LIVELIHOOD AFTERMATH DISASTER SITUATION

The women in Assam are mostly engaged in the farm sector as casual wage workers as well as employed in the small-scale industries to earn a meagre income in order to support their family financially. The working condition of the women and the other working dimensions like meagre wages paid to them, long working hours and bad working condition are some of the major issues faced by the women in this reason (Deka, 2013). One prime reason is that women are easily accessible to the employers, as they have a welfare approach in their mind to keep the well-being of the family at the cost of their own self. The women see themselves having the responsibility to look that everybody in the family is well fed, although they themselves remained half-stomach fed. Although there is a long struggle from

the primitive times for fighting and getting the rights of the women, this section is still fighting to get back their workers right (Shankaran, 2013).

It is known fact that Women's movement in India started in the 1920s structured on the 19th century social reform movement. Despite the longstanding and continuous women's movement, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in India, influencing the structure of its economic, political and social institutions and determining the opportunities open to women and men (Deka, 2013). Likewise, the whole community of women in a flood-affected region is more prone to the economic hazards and are more vulnerable than those of men. Although India has made significant fall in the poverty ratio, there is still a long way to go ahead with over a quarter of world's poor living here as the proportion of people living in poverty has fallen more slowly in the rural areas, as the focus have grown to the secondary and tertiary sectors rather than agriculture. Poverty and poor are associated with (1) resourcelessness, (2) Choicelessness, (3) insecurity and (4) deprivation which creates hindrances in accessing a dignified life in a society (Sharma, 2012:38). The feminisation of poverty is a term used to represent overwhelming representation of women among poor. The situation of poverty in terms of women is not very different in the developing and the developed nations as the studies have shown that women are more subjected to poverty than those of men. The focus of poverty being on capability of an individual in the society has shown that women have comparatively lower capability to adequate income or education or health services or they feel powerless of lack of political freedoms. The Marxist feminist claimed that women who participated in the agriculture and worked for longer hours than men in order to contribute to the economy of the family remaining 'invisible'. She is seen as a helping hand to men and is referred in reference to men as a helping hand to men. In this way, the hard work and the sincere contribution done by women is totally neglected in this male-dominant society. This is a prime reason of feminisation of poverty. Feminisation of poverty is originated in United States to show the precarious condition in economic terms faced by women (Moghadam, 2005). Basically, it means that the incidence of poverty is higher among women than among men; their level of severity is more serious than those of men particularly because of gender discrimination, there is no access to property right or to any family asset like ownership right to land for women and they fail to get access to basic right to health services, formal education, sanitation and so on. This is how economic deprivation of women can be linked to the importance of livelihood in the life of women. The women tend to overlook the social relationships underpinning poverty like lack of land rights or lack of political

representation to raise their issues faced particularly by women. The multidimensional nature of poverty for women due to reasons few of which have been mentioned above has led to a more holistic concept of livelihood and its importance in women's life more essentially than those of men in general and it also applies in a situation of disaster like flood. A livelihood pattern can be termed as sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its assets at present and also in the future (Rowbotham, 2001).

The economic transition for women livelihood in a situation of flood leads to more time and energy spent on domestic work. More time is spent by women in doing the unpaid works that is the household chores like in the situation of flood the women are the ones who are engaged in collecting water for the household from long distances. Women may lose the source of paid work like agricultural wage labour as the lands are inaccessible and crops are destroyed, and at the same time, it is difficult for the women to move out of their villages. As the women have to cater extensive caring roles to the family members, it mainly results in no-movement of women from their household in search of job, and it also results in the migration of male members of the family to far-off areas in search of jobs. Other gender-based discrimination, violence against women and girls and sexual exploitation of women when men are not at home to protect their women, as they mostly migrate in search of employment, are some of the most severe effects faced by women as an effect of the disaster situation (Deka, 2013).

Despite the social, economic and physical hardships that women have faced as a result of living with periodic and recurring floods, they have also become resilient, finding ways and means to ensure the survival of their families. It is the women who go to work on relief sites, as they tend to be closer to villages. They are ready to work as a casual worker or even on contractual basis whatever is available to them for providing economic support to the family even after going through lots of hardships during and after the disaster. These are some predominant arguments highlighting the vulnerability of women in a disaster situation, and there are lots more, which shows why it is important to study the livelihood of women in a situation of disaster. Assam, as being affected by flood almost every year, need to find some alternative livelihood strategies that should be sustainable in the long run.

CONCLUSION

In the Indian context, the women occupy a subordinate level at both social and economic levels. Flood hits the whole area, but the level of impact on women is

more intense and severe than the other groups. The loss and destruction due to flood directly affects livelihood and the income-generating sources of the people. The patriarchal ideology and the societal norms have led to the dual role of women and the problems associated with it. The issue of dual responsibility vest on women, which is encircled by livelihood, their relationship with spouse and in-laws, societal norms to be performed by women and, most importantly, the acceptance of women of doing the same by them. The impact of flood on women varies from socially marginalised women to old-aged women. Women in the lower caste are more mobile in terms of work than women in the upper caste. The women in the upper caste are not allowed to move frequently out of their house for livelihood. The lower caste people also have less access to resources, property and less transfer of land from one generation to the next. So, the family is left with only one option to work in other's farm, as that is the only traditional skill that they are grown up with. Apart from this, they also work as casual wage worker in construction site and also on a day's wage in other's houses to earn some additional money for the family expenditure. The money earned by the joint work of the men and women of the house is not enough to fulfil the daily needs of the family and went to the hand of the male only. Floods caused social disruptions and resulted in scarcity of drinking water, as surface water got contaminated. Cases of diarrhoea, cholera and other diseases increased remarkably during and after floods in the district, and people mainly women and children were worst affected. As there is lack of proper road connectivity and transportation facility, the health of the women and the children are compromised. In many of the families where women alone earn and nurture her family, aftermath disaster creates havoc in their families. The farm-based women in Assam lose their livelihood, which is the only source of income. As government policies are concerned, there is less emphasis on women who are one of the vulnerable sections during flood situations. There should be better policies formulated taking the flood-affected women into concern. A qualitative approach taking the experiences of flood affected women into concern is important to be studied. So, there is a need to focus on women in specific in both pre- and post-disaster situations to pacify or for minimal damage to their livelihood.

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