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Women In Spaces Of Ethnic Violence In Chirang District, Assam

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Abstract: Ethnic conflicts often result in large-scale loss of life, displacement, and human rights abuse. Conflict disrupts economic activities, leading to poverty, infrastructure damage, and loss of livelihoods. Women and children constitute the majority of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in conflict zones. Displacement exposes them to further risks, including exploitation and inadequate access to healthcare and sanitation. Conflict disrupts economic activities, and women, who often work in informal sectors or as primary caregivers, may lose their sources of income. This economic instability can lead to increased poverty and dependency. The state of Assam in India has experienced various ethnic conflicts, particularly between indigenous Assamese groups and migrants. These conflicts have had profound impacts on women, affecting them in unique and severe ways. Women are usually the primary caregivers, tending to the wounded, caring for children, and maintaining households under extreme conditions. This role is vital for the resilience and survival of communities. Ethnic violence has led to large-scale displacement of families. Women in refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps face harsh living conditions, lack of privacy, and increased risk of sexual exploitation. Displacement and violence disrupt livelihoods, and women often bear the brunt of economic hardship as they struggle to support their families with limited resources and opportunities. Displacement and the destruction of infrastructure during conflicts limit access to healthcare, particularly maternal and reproductive health services. Mental health issues also arise due to trauma and stress. This paper attempts to raise the specific issues faced by the women in ethnic conflict in Assam with their narratives and issues of first hand experiences and coping mechanism.

Key words: Ethnic Conflict, Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), Violence, Health care, Mental Health, Coping strategies.

Introduction: Assam has witnessed several episodes of ethnic violence, largely due to the diverse demographic composition and competition for resources. There have been several instances of ethnic violence, such as the Nellie massacre in 1983, one of the most infamous episodes of ethnic violence in Assam, the Nellie massacre resulted in the death of around 2,000 people, mostly Bengali Muslims, in a single day. It occurred during the Assam Movement, which sought to expel illegal immigrants from Assam. The Bodoland region has seen recurring violence between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims. Notable instances include the clashes in the 1990s and more recent in 2012, which resulted in significant loss of life and displacement of thousands in conflicts between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims. Bodo Santhal conflict is part of a larger pattern of ethnic violence in the region, driven by competition over land, resources, and political power. The conflict between Bodos and Santhals first erupted violently in 1996, resulting in the deaths of hundreds and the displacement of thousands. The violence included arson, looting, and brutal attacks on villages. Another major outbreak of violence occurred in 1998, leading to further deaths and displacement. The clashes were marked by similar patterns of arson and violence as seen in 1996. Despite periodic lulls, tensions between the Bodo and Santhal communities have persisted, occasionally flaring up into violence. The underlying issues of land, resources, and political representation remain unresolved. Conflicts between the Karbi and Dimasa communities have also been reported, driven by competition over land and political control in the Karbi Anglong district. However, the study will focus on only two major conflict between Bodos with Bengali Muslim and Bodos with Santhals and their impact on women and their coping strategies.

Background of the conflict

The Bodo conflict with other communities in Assam is a result of multiple factors rooted in historical, political, and socio-economic issues. The Bodos have felt marginalized in Assam, both politically and economically. This sense of marginalization led to the demand for a separate state called "Bodoland" within India, where the Bodos could have greater control over their affairs. In 1947 census, it was found that the Bodo population constituted 49% of Assam's population. But this percentage has dropped to 29% according to 1971 census because of internal and external migrations and due to several state restructurings. (Gogoi 2020:105). The demand for Bodoland involves certain territories in Assam where Bodos are a significant but not the majority population. This has led to conflicts with non-Bodo communities residing in these areas, who fear displacement or losing their rights under a Bodo-dominated administration. The Bodos have a distinct ethnic identity, language, and culture, which they feel have been threatened by the dominance of the Assamese-speaking population and other communities. The movement for Bodoland is partly driven by the desire to preserve and promote Bodo culture and language. The urge to preserve the Bodo identity has been another major cause behind the Bodo movement, and it runs counter to the effort of the Assamese to Assamize Assam. (George 1984:882)

The assertion of Bodo identity and the demand for a separate state have led to tensions with other ethnic groups, such as Bengali-speaking Muslims, Adivasis (especially Santhals), Koch-Rajbongshis, and Assamese people, who also have deep-rooted claims to the land and resources in the region. Land is a crucial issue in Assam, particularly in the context of the Bodo movement. Bodos have sought control over land in the proposed Bodoland area, leading to conflicts with non-Bodo communities who fear they will lose access to land and resources if Bodoland is established. The Bodo areas have seen significant migration over the decades, especially of Bengali-speaking Muslims, which has altered the demographic composition. This migration is seen by the Bodos as a threat to their land rights and cultural identity, fueling conflicts.

Bodos have historically felt underrepresented in the political sphere in Assam. The creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 was a step towards addressing these concerns, but political competition within and outside the Bodo areas has led to friction with other communities. The demand for Bodoland was backed by insurgent groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). These groups engaged in violent activities, including attacks on non-Bodo communities, leading to cycles of violence and retribution.

The Bodo areas have historically been economically underdeveloped, with high levels of poverty and lack of infrastructure. This economic deprivation has fueled the demand for autonomy and control over resources, leading to conflict with other communities who also depend on the same resources. Economic competition between Bodos and other communities, particularly over land, employment, and political representation, has exacerbated tensions, leading to periodic outbreaks of violence. However, The Bodo movement was neither a reform movement nor a revolution but rather one in between these two, i.e. a transformative movement aiming at bringing about middle level structural changes in distribution of power and in the system of differential allocation of resources.(Sharma 2006:148)

Various peace accords, including the Bodo Accord of 2003 and subsequent agreements, aimed to address Bodo grievances by creating autonomous regions and granting political and economic powers. However, the incomplete or inconsistent implementation of these accords has often led to dissatisfaction and renewed tensions. Even within the Bodo community, there are divisions and rival factions, which complicate the peace process and sometimes lead to intra-community conflicts, further destabilizing the region.

The Bodo conflict with other communities in Assam is a deeply entrenched issue with no easy solutions. It involves a complex interplay of ethnic identity, political power, economic resources, and historical grievances, making it one of the most challenging conflicts in the region.

Bodo Santhali Conflict

The conflict between the Bodos and the Santhals is rooted in complex issues of land, identity, and political power: The Bodo-Santhal conflict is a significant and tragic episode in the history of ethnic violence in India, particularly in the northeastern state of Assam. This conflict primarily revolves around tensions between the Bodo community, an indigenous ethnic group in Assam, and the Santhal community, a tribal group originally from the central and eastern parts of India.

The Bodos are one of the largest indigenous groups in Assam, with a strong cultural identity. They have long demanded a separate state or greater autonomy within Assam, which led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2003. The demand for a separate state has been driven by issues related to land rights, cultural preservation, and political autonomy.

The influx of non-Bodo communities, including Santhals, into areas traditionally inhabited by Bodos, led to growing tensions over land and resources. The Bodos feared that their cultural identity and political influence were being undermined by the increasing presence of other ethnic groups. The conflict escalated into violence in the late 1990s. One of the most severe episodes occurred in 1996 when clashes between the Bodos and Santhals led to widespread violence, resulting in the loss of hundreds of lives and the displacement of tens of thousands of people. Both communities suffered heavily, with villages being burned, people being killed, and many being forced to live in relief camps for years. From the Bodo viewpoint, the conflict is often framed as a struggle for survival and autonomy in the face of demographic changes that threaten their cultural identity. The Bodos see themselves as the indigenous inhabitants of the region and believe their rights to land and self-determination are being eroded by the influx of other communities.

The Santhals are one of the largest tribal communities in India, originally from the eastern and central parts of the country, particularly in the states of Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, and West Bengal. In Assam, the Santhal community primarily comprises laborers who were brought to the region during the British colonial period to work in tea plantations. The Santhals are an Adivasi group who migrated to Assam primarily for labor opportunities in tea plantations and other industries. Over time, many Santhals settled in various parts of Assam, including areas traditionally inhabited by the Bodos.

The Santhals began migrating to Assam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, largely due to labor demands in the tea industry. The British colonial administration recruited Santhals from their native regions to work in the tea gardens of Assam, where they became an integral part of the labor force. Over time, many Santhals settled in Assam, forming their own communities in various parts of the state. The Santhals are primarily found in the tea garden areas of Assam, especially in districts like Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Dhubri, and parts of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). They live in close-knit communities and have maintained many aspects of their traditional culture, including their language, customs, and religious practices.

The Santhals in Assam speak Santhali, a language belonging to the Munda group of the Austroasiatic language family. They have a rich cultural heritage, with traditional music, dance, and festivals playing a significant role in their community life. The Santhal dance, "Hul," is a well-known cultural expression, often performed during festivals and community gatherings. The Santhals practice Sarnaism, a nature-based religion, although some have converted to Christianity over the years. Sarnaism involves worship of nature and ancestral spirits, with a strong emphasis on community rituals and ceremonies.

The Santhals in Assam, like many other Adivasi communities, face significant socio-economic challenges. Despite their long presence in the region, they remain economically marginalized, with many working as daily wage laborers in the tea gardens. Poverty, lack of education, and limited access to health care are common issues faced by the community. Land rights have been a major issue for the Santhals in Assam. Many Santhals do not have legal ownership of the land they live on, making them vulnerable to displacement. This issue was particularly acute during the Bodo-Santhal conflict, where many Santhals were forcibly displaced from their homes.

The Santhals, along with other Adivasi communities in Assam, have struggled with political representation. They are not recognized as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Assam, unlike in their native states, which limits their access to certain government benefits and reservations. This lack of recognition has been a longstanding demand of the community.

The Santhals in Assam were heavily impacted by the Bodo-Santhal conflict in the late 1990s. The violence, which was part of broader ethnic tensions in Assam, led to the displacement of thousands of Santhals from their homes. Many Santhal villages were destroyed, and the displaced people were forced to live in relief camps for years. The conflict exacerbated the already precarious situation of the Santhals in Assam, further marginalizing them socially and economically. Although large-scale violence has subsided, the legacy of the Bodo-Santhal conflict continues to affect the Santhals in Assam. Many displaced Santhals have not been able to return to their original homes, and issues of land ownership and security remain unresolved.

The Santhals, on the other hand, view themselves as victims of ethnic cleansing and discrimination. They argue that they have been unfairly targeted and displaced by the Bodos, despite having lived in the region for generations. The Santhals emphasize their right to live and work in any part of the country, including Assam.

The Santhals in Assam, along with other Adivasi communities, have been actively involved in movements to secure recognition as Scheduled Tribes. This recognition is seen as crucial for accessing government benefits and preserving their cultural identity. The lack of ST status in Assam is a major point of contention, with Adivasi organizations frequently organizing protests and demanding rights. Despite the challenges, the Santhals in Assam have managed to preserve their cultural identity. Festivals like Sohrai and Baha are celebrated with traditional music, dance, and rituals, maintaining a strong sense of community and cultural continuity.

The Santhals in Assam represent a unique blend of migration, adaptation, and resilience. While they have faced significant challenges, including economic marginalization, lack of political representation, and the impact of ethnic conflict, they continue to strive for recognition and rights within the broader social fabric of Assam. Their story is one of survival and the ongoing struggle to secure a place in a rapidly changing region.

Bodo Bengali Muslim Conflict

The Bengali Muslim community in Assam is a significant and historically important demographic group, with roots tracing back to various phases of migration and settlement. Their presence in Assam has been shaped by complex historical, social, and political factors, and they have played a crucial role in the region's cultural and economic life. The migration of Bengali Muslims to Assam can be traced back to the medieval period, but it intensified during the British colonial era. The British encouraged migration to Assam from Bengal, particularly from the densely populated districts of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), to cultivate the fertile but sparsely populated lands in the Brahmaputra Valley. This migration was driven by the need for labor in agriculture, particularly in the production of rice and jute.

The partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) led to further waves of migration of Bengali Muslims into Assam. This migration was often driven by socio-political unrest and economic opportunities. Bengali Muslims primarily settled in the fertile riverine areas of Assam, particularly in the districts of Dhubri, Barpeta, Goalpara, Cachar, and Nagaon. These areas were conducive to agriculture, and the migrants contributed significantly to the agricultural economy of Assam.

The Bengali Muslims in Assam generally speak Bengali, although many also speak Assamese, especially those who have been in the region for generations. Their culture is a blend of Bengali traditions and local Assamese customs. They observe Islamic religious practices and celebrate festivals like Eid with enthusiasm. Over time, many Bengali Muslims in Assam have integrated into the broader Assamese society, adopting Assamese as their primary language and identifying themselves as Assamese Muslims. However, there remains a strong sense of Bengali cultural identity, especially in districts with large Bengali-speaking populations.

The question of citizenship and the status of Bengali Muslims in Assam has been a contentious issue for decades. The Assam Movement (1979-1985), led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), was largely driven by concerns over the perceived influx of "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh, including Bengali Muslims. The movement culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which aimed to identify and deport illegal immigrants who had entered Assam after March 25, 1971. The issue of citizenship gained renewed attention with the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. The final NRC, published in 2019, excluded about 1.9 million people, many of whom were Bengali Muslims, raising concerns about their citizenship status. The process has been criticized for its complexity and alleged bias against Bengali Muslims and other marginalized communities.

Bengali Muslims in Assam have been an important voter base, particularly in districts where they are a significant demographic. However, their political representation has often been complicated by the identity politics surrounding the issues of citizenship and migration. The Bengali Muslim community has sometimes been at the center of communal tensions in Assam. These tensions are often fueled by political rhetoric and fears about demographic changes in the region. Incidents of violence and discrimination against Bengali Muslims have occurred, further complicating their relationship with other communities in Assam.

Bengali Muslims have been instrumental in the development of agriculture in Assam, particularly in the cultivation of rice, jute, and vegetables. Their contribution to the agricultural economy of the state is significant, especially in districts where they form a large part of the rural population. Despite their contributions, many Bengali Muslims in Assam face socio-economic challenges, including poverty, lack of access to education, and healthcare. The uncertainty surrounding their citizenship status has also created insecurity, affecting their social and economic well-being.

The implementation of the NRC and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 have intensified debates over the status of Bengali Muslims in Assam. The CAA, which provides a path to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighboring countries, has been seen by some as discriminatory against Bengali Muslims. The intersection of the NRC and CAA has created a climate of fear and uncertainty within the community. The Bengali Muslim community in Assam continues to navigate the challenges of identity, citizenship, and socio-economic development. While they are a vital part of Assam's society and economy, their status and rights remain subjects of intense debate and political maneuvering.

Impact of Ethnic Conflict on women:

The impact of ethnic conflict on women has both general and specific features that vary, depending on the context, the nature of the conflict, and the cultural and social environment. Addressing these impacts requires comprehensive approaches that include political context, legal protection, economic empowerment, healthcare access, and education. Empowering women and ensuring their participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes are crucial for sustainable recovery and lasting peace. The ethnic conflict in Assam has both general and specific features that profoundly impact women.

It is worth mentioning here that when the demand for political autonomy for the Bodo people mooted by various Bodo intellectuals led by the ABSU began, it was felt by the ABSU and the senior citizens that the Bodo women should not be sidelined in the process as they could play a special contributory role to the overall welfare of the Bodo Society (Chaudhary T. 2017:193). It is however important to note that although the accords have been signed in BTAD, women have not directly participated in the high-level peace negotiations in 2003 and 2020 between the government actors and former armed militants, in reality, they are often left out of the decision making process during the transition and post-conflict institution building.(Saikia A,2021 :5)

In general any conflict women are often targets of sexual violence during ethnic conflicts. This includes rape, sexual assault, and sexual slavery, used as tactics of war to intimidate, humiliate, and destabilize communities. Women suffer long-term physical and psychological trauma, social stigma, and health complications, including sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Women and children constitute the majority of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in any conflict zones that resulted in loss of homes and livelihoods, increased vulnerability to exploitation, and lack of access to essential services like healthcare, education, and sanitation. During the process of displacement, women and men deal in different ways with terror, trauma and uprooting, renegotiate diverse aspects of their identities, rebuild social network at a dissimilar scale, and reformulate sometimes divergent hopes (Meertens 2005:134). Several studies have indicated that protracted conflicts do generally lead to shrinking spaces for civil society, causing people to withdraw from social life into secure private spaces (Hussain 2005).

Conflict disrupts economic activities, and women often face greater challenges in securing employment due to their roles in informal sectors and its increases poverty, dependency, and difficulty in supporting families. On the one hand it affects the individual woman and her independence on the other hand in other context it affect the entire economy of family as well as local area. However, the women affected by the conflict are playing significant role in upholding the responsibility of family financially as well as emotionally. Santhali women works equally in both front, either outside work, manual labour work, agricultural work or making handicraft and selling oil to market. At the same time Bengali Muslim women largely focus on family and take care of household, which is no further less important. By focusing on family, these women support families emotionally and pacifies the resentment in young people making them constructive and focused on positive aspect. By focusing on themselves as individual women or as interdependent women of self-sustaining communities, they are adjusting their own agency.(Goswami 2021:9) Breakdown of healthcare systems during conflicts affects all in general and specifically the women's access to medical services, particularly maternal and reproductive healthcare. Stress and instability caused by conflict often lead to an increase in domestic violence in all the places and physical and emotional abuse, further endangering women's safety and well-being.

Some specific and unique impacts of ethnic conflict on women depends on the nature of conflict, social, cultural and political background. In some cultures, conflicts exacerbate existing gender inequalities and social norms that restrict women's roles and rights. Reinforcement of patriarchal structures, limited mobility, and reduced access to education and employment opportunities. In many conflict-affected areas, women take on new roles as heads of households and primary caregivers due to the loss or absence of male family members and this increased responsibilities, but also potential empowerment and shifts in gender roles within families and communities. Ethnic conflicts can either marginalize women from political processes or create opportunities for them to become involved in peacebuilding and decision-making. Conflicts often disrupt educational

opportunities for girls more than boys, due to safety concerns and gender norms prioritizing boys' education. The effectiveness of legal and institutional mechanisms to protect women's rights varies greatly across regions and conflicts. In some areas, women have access to legal recourse and support services, while in others they face significant barriers to justice and assistance.

Chirang

Ethnic conflict and women:

Before discussing the impact of violence on women in Chirang district conflict between Bodos and Bengali Muslims, firstly we have to understand the background, history and root cause of the history. The ethnic conflict in Chirang, a district in the Indian state of Assam, primarily involves tensions between the Bodos and the Bengali Muslim communities. This region, part of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), has experienced periodic ethnic violence over issues related to land rights, ethnic identity, and political representation. The Bodos are an indigenous ethnic group in Assam with a long-standing demand for autonomy and recognition of their cultural and political rights. The Bengali Muslim community, often labeled as "immigrants" from Bangladesh, has settled in Assam over many decades, leading to demographic changes. However many Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants were brought to Assam by the British to cultivate the fallow lands in lower Assam and meet the scarcity of food production (Guha 1977). The most significant episodes of violence occurred in 2012 and 2014. Clashes between the Bodos and Bengali Muslims led to numerous deaths and the displacement of thousands of people. The brutal killings in April, 2014 are a cruel reminder of the violence of 2012, in which hundreds were killed, and over 400,000 people were displaced and sheltered in 273 temporary relief camps. The violence marked the largest internal displacement of people in India since the partition in 1947. These conflicts were fueled by underlying issues such as competition for land, political control, and ethnic identity. The Bodos seek to protect their land from encroachment, while the Bengali Muslims often face allegations of illegal land occupation. The Bodos' demand for greater autonomy and political representation has led to friction with other ethnic groups. Both communities strive to preserve their cultural identity and assert their presence in the region. The possibilities of fresh conflicts and more violence always remain open in these areas: the Bodo-Muslim riots of 2012 and the ethnic cleansing by Bodo militants in 2014 are recent examples (Bhaumik 2012; The Guardian 2014). It was also reported that no lady police officer was stationed in any of the relief camps when most of the inhabitants were women, girls and children.(Goyary S 2020;3845)

Women have been direct victims of violence, facing assault, and murder during clashes. However there was no rape reported in this conflict which is very common in any ethnic conflict. Almost all women have been displaced, forced to leave their homes along with their families and live in relief camps under harsh conditions. Displacement often leads to loss of livelihood. Here in Chirang, Bengali Muslim women, who were dependent

on agriculture or small businesses, find it challenging to secure a stable income. Widows and single mothers face heightened economic difficulties, with limited access to resources and support.

“Our life has been changed completely. We were living there peacefully and comfortably. Though we were not very rich but we had enough to survive and feed to our children. But after the violence, we had nothing. We lost everything, though we managed to save our jewelries and some cash we survived. Atleast we had something to eat and, wear. We also help others too. But we had not much to survive very long, after living in camp for a month, we decided to shift in Odalguri 2 and bought some land and built a small house and after settling us in that house my husband went Korkrajhar for work, he found some work there and almost after an year we settled properly here and skipped the thought of going back to our previous village.”

- Bengali respondent from Odalguri village, Chirang District, Assam

Displacement camps often lack adequate healthcare facilities, leading to health issues for women, particularly pregnant women and new mothers. Many pregnant women forced to deliver their child in relief camps under unhygienic condition since the circumstances were very volatile and moving to hospital may be dangerous for both the new mother and other relatives. Poor sanitation in camps can lead to diseases and further health complications.

The violence and displacement have caused significant psychological trauma. Women often bear the brunt of this stress, dealing with the loss of land, homes, livelihood and a sense of security. Support services for mental health are limited, exacerbating the long-term impact on women's mental well-being. Displacement disrupts education for girls. Many are forced to drop out of school due to the instability and economic pressure on their families. The lack of education opportunities hampers their long-term development and empowerment.

The Bodo-Bengali Muslim conflict has left deep scars, particularly on women, who face unique and severe challenges in the wake of violence and displacement. Addressing their needs and ensuring their empowerment is crucial for lasting peace and development in the region.

Bodo-Santhali Conflict and Impact on Women:

The conflict between the Bodos and the Santhals in Assam primarily revolves around ethnic tensions, land disputes, and struggles for political dominance in the region. Both communities have distinct cultural identities and historical grievances, which have occasionally led to violent clashes. The Bodos are one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Assam, with a significant population in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). The Santhals, an indigenous tribe primarily from Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, have migrated to Assam over time, often working as laborers and farmers.

One of the significant episodes of violence between the Bodos and the Santhals occurred in 1996, leading to numerous deaths and the displacement of thousands of people. Another major conflict erupted in 1998, further deepening the mistrust and animosity between the two communities. Competition for land and resources has been a central issue. The Bodos seek to protect their traditional land from encroachment, while the Santhals, being relatively newer settlers, often face accusations of illegal occupation. The creation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) to grant autonomy to the Bodos has led to political friction with other ethnic groups, including the Santhals, who feel marginalized. Both communities have strong cultural identities and strive to preserve their heritage, leading to tensions over dominance and recognition in the region.

The conflict between the Bodos and the Santhals in Assam has had a profound impact on the communities involved, particularly on women. Women have been direct victims of violence, including physical assault, violence, and murder during clashes. Displacement has forced some entire villages along with women and children into relief camps where they face inadequate living conditions and security concerns.

Unlike other communities Santali women were very active and use to contribute in household income and participate agriculture, handicraft making or labor work. In the Santhal society, the status of women is equal to that of men. A woman has a positive role in the family since she also participates in the economic activities equally with the man. (Basumatary and Sarkar, 2019,247) The key role in the economy of the Santhal society are played by the women. Most of the domestic works are performed by them. They engage themselves in domestic works, collection of firewood, rearing of child and domestic livestock, selling and marketing for the family (Das N .J 2015:208).The loss of homes and livelihoods due to violence and displacement severely impacts women, who often play key roles in household economies. Many women struggle to find new sources of income, exacerbating poverty and economic instability for their families.

“Our life completely changed after the incident. First we lost everything our home, its things and cattle and other precious things. On the other hand, somehow there were no casualty in my family during violence but after few days when we were staying at camp my mother in law passed away due to diarrhea. Since there was no arrangement of clean water we used to drink water from the pond. That pond water was not clean enough to drink but we could not go to fetch the clean water towards the river, since there was threat. So we used to drink that water. Many people died because of diarrhea. Few years later I lost my father in law also passed away due to malaria. There was no treatment here. CRPf doctor gave us some medicine but that could not cure my father in law.”

- Santhali Respondent from Koraibari village near the Deoshri Camp, Chirang District, Assam

Displacement camps often lack basic healthcare facilities, affecting women’s health, especially during pregnancy and childbirth. Poor sanitation conditions in camps lead to health issues, particularly for women and

children. The victims of both the conflicts had to stay in relief camps that were congested and unhygienic and hence many women and children died of different sicknesses. (Musahary 2016:579)

The experience of violence and displacement causes significant psychological trauma. Women often bear the emotional burden of coping with loss and instability. Limited access to mental health services means many women do not receive the support they need to recover from trauma. The constant threat of violence creates an environment of fear and insecurity, restricting women's mobility and freedom.

Displacement disrupts education for girls, leading to higher dropout rates as families prioritize immediate survival over schooling. Lack of education limits future opportunities for girls, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. . The armed conflict has a vicious cycle of impact on women. As stated above, the violence during the Bodoland movement and the fratricidal killing among the rebel groups resulted in the loss of life and property.(Brahma :2022:30)

Conclusion: Ethnic violence often leads to mass displacement, forcing women to flee their homes and live in relief camps. Displacement camps frequently have inadequate facilities, leading to poor living conditions. Overcrowding, lack of privacy, and insufficient sanitation are common issues. Displacement disrupts women's economic activities, leading to loss of income and livelihood. Many women, especially those in agriculture or small businesses, find it challenging to secure new sources of income. Women, particularly widows or single mothers, bear an increased financial burden as they struggle to provide for their families in the absence of stable income. Inadequate sanitation facilities lead to health issues such as infections and diseases, disproportionately affecting women and girls. The trauma of violence, loss of family members, and displacement leads to significant emotional and mental health issues. Women often experience anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Displacement disrupts the education of girls, leading to higher dropout rates. Many families prioritize immediate survival over schooling, limiting educational opportunities for girls. While large-scale violence has reduced, underlying tensions remain, and sporadic incidents of conflict continue. Efforts by the government and NGOs focus on promoting peace, development, and equitable treatment for all communities, with special attention to the needs and empowerment of women.

Addressing the unique challenges faced by women in the context of ethnic conflict in Assam is crucial for their well-being and for achieving lasting peace and development in the region.

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