

FOOD SECURITY & FLOOD VULNERABILITY IN SOUTHERN ASSAM: A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The Barak river flowing with gusto completely submerged the second-largest urban conglomeration in the state of Assam in June 2022. As the river water level rose 1.5 metres above the danger level, the southern Assam region was engulfed in doom and despair. Assam had recorded a rainfall of 858.1mm, the highest in the past 121 years. To put things in perspective, the inundation caused large-scale food and water scarcity as all sources became either inaccessible or too polluted for human consumption. With no source of fresh drinking water and lack of accessibility to food, lakhs of people in the region were stranded with nowhere to go and no relief coming their way for a very long time. Hunger, starvation, misery and unspeakable pain echoed the entire district. Millions of people were displaced by the flood, had to endure separation from their families, lost their possessions & documents and experienced extreme trauma, especially those falling within the vulnerable groups. The death count rose to 173 within a span of two weeks. Under such circumstances, it has become crucial to understand how the adoption of a human rights-based approach to flood management in Assam to ensure food security has become a subject of utmost importance, which is the scope of this paper.

Introduction

People of the North-Eastern state of Assam, usually have a stoical approach to the monsoons and the consequences thereof. Unlike the rest of the nation, especially the Northern belt where rains are seen as a relief against the heat waves, monsoon showers bring with them severe flooding and landslides in Assam. Within a span of a month (June 2022), Assam witnessed two major flood waves with over 55 lakh people being affected and 100 deaths in over 373 relief camps in 32 districts of the State. Assam has lost over 7% of its area to land erosion triggered by floods, which is 4.3 lakh hectares since 1957. Approximately 32 lakh hectares of Assam's land lies in a highly flood-prone area. Given the nature and scale of floods in Assam, the support of the union government and central aid comes into question. At this juncture, it must be noted that the Assam government sought a fund of Rs. 2,642.99 crores to initiate restoration tasks in 2020-21, yet the centre released a trifling amount of Rs.44.37 crores only. There are several other issues such as river-basin management and the failure to declare the same as a national calamity. However, it was the issue of food security which left the masses baffled during the June 2022, Assam flooding. A large portion of Assam's agricultural land is rain-fed and therefore, rain is not only desirable but is essential to sustain life and livelihood in the state. Yet when the torrential rainfalls begin, excessive rain from the neighboring states collects in the plains of Assam causing havoc along with the overflowing of the two major rivers: Barak and Brahmaputra. The state's bowl-shaped topography combined with short-term band-aid solutions by policymakers and rejection of claims made by leaders hailing from the state as partisan or regional in nature leaves the people of the state in a state of misery and haunting gloom. People struggled for food, water, medicines and survival. Under these circumstances, it has become crucial to understand how the adoption of a human rights-based approach to flood management in Assam to ensure food security has become a subject of utmost importance, which is the scope of this paper.

Human Rights and the issue of food security during the Assam floods of 2022

Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." However, the same does not apply to the north-

eastern states of India, including Assam. While discrimination based on place of birth is prohibited under most international and national human rights instruments, Assam as a State has remained far from the periphery of mainstream India and has been subjected to historical neglect and apathy. Cachar District of Assam was one of the worst-hit districts during the June 2022 floods. The headquarters of the district is a town known as Silchar, which is surrounded by the Barak river. The river traces its origins from the Liyai Kullen Village in the state of Manipur and flows through Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram before entering the state of Assam. The district has seen many floods of lesser magnitude over the past years including a few major ones in 1989, 2004 and 2007. However, the flooding of the district in June 2022 was of an unprecedented scale. The district of Cachar experienced two floods within a month. Every inch of the headquarters was inundated and the suffering of the people knew no bounds. Assam started witnessing incessant rainfall in mid-May and within a few days, the low-lying areas of the district were under water. Dams and embankments were severely compromised. The rains continued and within a month, the water levels crossed danger levels. Once the Bethukandi embankment was damaged by a few miscreants, the Barak river flowed into the town and submerged it completely in less than 24 hours. The water levels covered the ground floor of many hundreds of households, electricity was snapped abruptly, mobile and internet connectivity was severed too. With no source of fresh drinking water and lack of accessibility to food, lakhs of people in the district were stranded with nowhere to go and no relief coming their way for a very long time. Hunger, starvation, misery and unspeakable pain echoed the entire district. Millions of people were displaced by the flood, have to endure separation from their families, lost their possessions & documents and experienced extreme trauma, especially those falling within the vulnerable groups¹. For instance, for every man who dies due to drowning during floods, there are at least 3-4 who die of the same cause². Women displaced during the floods were also alleged raped and sexually abused, however, there is an absence of any formal reporting of the same. Thus, the repercussions of the floods on the lives and livelihoods of the people of Assam was manifold.

¹ Walter Kälin, for example, found that 70% of the tsunami-affected population in one country had lost their documentation. *Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters: A Working Visit to Asia by the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons Walter Kälin, 27 February-5 March 2005*. Washington: Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2005, p. 20.

² Lorena Aguilar, "Acknowledging the Linkages: Gender and Climate Change," Presentation at the World Bank's Workshop on Social Dimensions of Climate Change, March 2008. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/244362-1170428243464/3408356-1170428261889/3408359-1202746084138/Gender_Presentation022808.pdf

One of the major implications of the flood was the lack of access and availability of food and water. Food security is considered to be one of the universal human rights, yet ensuring the same in developing countries especially during the times of such crisis continues to be a major challenge. During the recent floods, as water gushed into the towns and villages of southern Assam, most sources of water like rivers, ponds, lakes and reservoirs either became inaccessible or were so highly polluted that they became unfit for human consumption. Bottled water ran out in many parts of the state, where it was available was being sold at exorbitant prices, sometimes as high as 70% raise from the usual rates. This left the stranded residents of the state, with no option but to drink collected rainwater. However, it must be noted that while the region stayed underwater for over ten days, rain was not an everyday occurrence. Sun shone bright on many days while the region remained under water. The effects of climate change became very evident. Food scarcity and limited government relief induced starvation and death.

Adopting a Human Rights approach to flood management in the State of Assam

The unprecedented Assam floods of 2022 which affected around 25 lakh people³, made this a grave humanitarian crisis *prima facie*. As the state faces acute shortage of food and water, human sustenance in the area became perilous. The eastern state faced continuous rainfall coupled with landslides which left little to no means for people to move out seeking safety. Apart from the unfortunate loss of lives, the problems faced by those in distress are multi-faceted. According to the Situation Report by Human Aid International, over 2,00,000 people are taking shelter in around 555 relief camps due to loss of homes as an apparent consequence of the floods.⁴ Taking the severity of the situation into account, it is imperative to analyze the food security as a part of flood management in Assam through the human rights lens. When policies regarding flood management come forth for discussion, it is extremely necessary to look at issues and probable solutions from

³ *The Assam Floods and the Unfolding of a Food and Water Crisis*, FIRSTPOST, June 29, 2022 <<https://www.firstpost.com/india/explained-the-assam-floods-and-the-unfolding-of-a-food-and-water-crisis-10850421.html>>

⁴ *The Assam Floods and the Unfolding of a Food and Water Crisis*, FIRSTPOST, June 29, 2022 <<https://www.firstpost.com/india/explained-the-assam-floods-and-the-unfolding-of-a-food-and-water-crisis-10850421.html>>

the human rights standpoint as one cannot look at the problem as purely technical and scientific. It is the duty of national and state authorities to protect the rights of such vulnerable communities. These rights include civil, political and most importantly, basic rights to access food and clean drinking water, along with proper sanitation. As a matter of fact, assistance to people by providing food and water should be of utmost priority as part of disaster relief mechanisms adopted by States. Article 22 read along with 25 of the UDHR state that persons affected by disasters have a right to have access to or be provided with (a) essential food and water; (b) basic shelter and housing; and (c) appropriate clothing.⁵ One of the main problems that relief workers face is logistics like transportation. It is crucial that authorities have to work with such workers in harmony to arrangements for efficient delivery of basic requirements

Victims of natural disasters are subject to multiple human right violations. As the disaster management infrastructure of developing countries like India have weak implementation measures, reparations for victims of such violations remain debatable. The main issues are insufficient funds, lack of governmental cooperation, irregular data assessment, delayed response by officials, etc. Apart from such evident predicaments, the underlying issue lies in the identification and recognition of both close and far fetched negative impacts on such victims. Paying heed to how the people of Assam are left economically and financially handicapped, it is also essential to highlight the depravity of their basic rights.

The first and foremost issue that comes along with any natural disaster is accessing clean water and food. It is commonly understood that global stressors such as climate change and urbanization are the two main driving forces for increase in natural disasters, both in frequency and intensity. Coupled with other factors such as population, access to healthy food during large scale disasters such as the Assam floods becomes a matter of luck for people. This circumstance is detrimental to society and deters their trust in authorities. Assam is an agricultural state with more than 80% of the residents relying on this sector for their livelihood. In the recent floods, it is estimated that around 85,000 hectares of land and the rabi crops that were ought to be harvested during this month have been lost, cutting off their source of food. Loss of shelter has caused farmers to set up tents on highways and dry the 20% of the crops remaining in order to pay loans and have some income,

⁵ *Human Rights and Natural Disasters: Operational Guidelines and Field Manual on Human Rights Protection in Situations of Natural Disaster*, Brookin-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, March 2008

however meager⁶. Here, it is important to note that authorities have made provisions for securing livelihood, but paid little heed to basic food requirements of the people.

Apart from ongoing food scarcity, there exist numerous other issues which need redressal. In the year 2017, when Assam faced severe floods, the issue of food availability persisted even after the floods receded.⁷ With camps put up by NGOs and the Assam Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) withdrawing, victims of floods faced inadequate access to drinking water and food as access to the same was withdrawn along with the removal of flood camps immediately after the water levels recede. Several reports are testament to the inadequacy of relief provided by the government as well as failure of implementation.

Far reaching human rights issues also include gender discrimination in relief camps and how such discrimination worsens accessibility to food. Women and children are subject to vulnerabilities owing to pre-existing disparities in society. With stressful conditions such as floods, access to basic supplies becomes more tedious and difficult. The socio-political environment may add to women's vulnerability by limiting the opportunities women have to access support services for recovery. Therefore, post-disaster or post-conflict situations hold women back from a faster rate of recovery and from regaining their confidence.⁸ Due to limited relief camps and cramped spaces, sanitation is an obvious concern. According to international standards, clean water and sanitation facilities are to be provided within such camps and special care has to be taken to ensure that these facilities along with adequate privacy were to be provided for women and children. However, this is not the case in the state. An article by an independent journalist showed that women forced themselves to not consume food and water in order to avoid defecation as there were no sanitation facilities around⁹. This, apart from an obvious health hazard, is also a human right transgression. This calls for particular attention on location of and access to water points, bathing and sanitation facilities, sources of fuel, food distribution points, health, education and other community facilities. Apart from providing food packets and clean drinking water, it has to be ensured that the

⁶ Ratnadip Choudhary, *Farmers Use National Highway To Dry Crops As Flood Ravage Assam*, NDTV, May 24, 2022 <<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/assam-floods-farmers-use-national-highway-to-dry-crops-as-floods-ravage-assam-3006504>>

⁷ Sumir Karmakar, *Assam's Flood-hit Faces Food Scarcity*, THE TELEGRAPH, July 12, 2022, <<https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/assam-39-s-flood-hit-face-food-scarcity/cid/1436598>>

⁸ Subhasis Bhadra, *Women in Disasters and Conflict in India: Interventions in View of the Millennial Development Goals*, Int J Disaster Risk Sci 8, 196–207 (2017) <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13753-017-0124-y>>

⁹ Geeta Lama, *A flood of Fear: Women in Assam Refuse Food To Avoid Defecation*, QRIUS, June 30, 2022 <<https://qrius.com/a-flood-of-fear-women-in-assam-refuse-food-to-avoid-defecation/amp/>>

camps are secure and are constantly monitored. The State of Assam has seen a continuous shortage of food and water even in relief camps, owing to disrupted transportation facilities, and such shortage is bound to cause havoc, making safety one of the primary concerns. As floods force families to evacuate and live in makeshift tents or other forms of temporary shelter, women and children are highly vulnerable to harassment. Loss of lives and means of income, make the situation difficult after the floods have receded. In order to start from ground zero, greater preference is given to men for limited income opportunities as in the eyes of the employer, girls and women are more efficient in the domestic household regime.¹⁰ Women are not allowed to work even if they are physically able to, due to persisting cultural drawbacks.

As floods persist and families are displaced, the issue of education also comes into question. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights secures the right to education. It is stated that as soon as children recover from natural disasters, they have a right to receive education, free at the primary level. As schools and other educational institutions were also destroyed due to floods, as soon as conditions improve, the disaster should not be used as an excuse to halt education. The State must take efforts to resume education to children, even if displaced by setting up interim educational programmes by tying up with various organizations. It is important to observe that by securing education to children, it is one step closer to making nutritious food and water available as many schools provide mid day meals and other similar community services can be availed.

Conclusion

Disaster management policies in India have been inadequate in providing suitable and sufficient relief to the affected people. The need to adopt a humanitarian viewpoint in policy making is expedient, especially with respect to ensuring food security during floods. As observed, loss of lives and housing is not the sole fatalistic repercussion, though grave. The State of Assam has been subject to floods and landslides annually. Under such circumstances, it is evident that a non-discriminatory disaster management approach should be adopted. Discrimination can either be intentionally discriminating against certain communities, religions, sex, age, place, physical disability, etc. or adopting policies which can be discriminatory in effect. The government of

¹⁰ Shreya Raman, *In Bihar, Women Face Floods And Increasing Violence*, PREVENTIONWEB, January 12, 2022 <<https://www.preventionweb.net/news/bihar-women-face-floods-and-increasing-violence>>

Assam and the Government of India should adopt principles of equality and non-discrimination in flood management. One of the major issues in ensuring food security was the failure to inform and consult. The Assam administration adopted a centralised approach, which led to the worsening of the crisis as the people felt excluded from the planning process and could not communicate their needs, heightening the sense of displacement and disempowerment. Vulnerable groups such as the aged, the sick, pregnant women, people with disabilities and children had special needs during the crisis, which could not be appropriately addressed. Further, the displeasure was furthered due to the lack of communication of correct and complete information to the affected masses. Further, effective monitoring mechanisms were not established to keep a check on those internally displaced. No standard operating procedures were issued which created confusion and chaos among the masses leading to violence and theft in order to access enough food for mere survival.

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