

MARGINALIZATION: A NARRATIVE OF THE ADIVASI COMMUNITY IN ASSAM

Monisha Behal
North East Network

This paper is about north east India, a region that has emerged through a difficult journey of struggles, conflicts, acrimony, with little support from the Centre and a population that kept to itself, holding its affinity to its own land based practices and cultural norms. Indeed, so strong were these groups, especially in the hill areas, about their own identity, that the entry of 'foreign' entry was fought tooth and nail in the 19th century.

Despite the strong stand off, the region experienced unprecedented movement of a work force, which was brought by the British colonialists towards investment on jute production, timber and tea industry. Of course, the rapid expansion of the industry and its highly labour-intensive nature meant that a large source of labourers were required. This was indeed an important investment in the British expansionist policy of north east India.

The north east region was characterized by a low population, poor economy with low production and low output, in the beginning of the 19th century up to the 1920s. The economic backwardness of the region as well as the sense of distrust and reluctance of the peasantry to join the work force resulted in the colonial rulers bringing in labour from neighbouring areas of Assam, such as Bengal, Orissa and Chota Nagpur, the erstwhile East Bengal including the border areas of eastern Bihar and Nepal, to be precise. Post independence brought in a bureaucracy, which had scant understanding of the north east region. This was neither too encouraging nor did it incite any sensitive thought of development by administrators and the bureaucracy. In the midst of this 'underdeveloped' economy the region, nonetheless, witnessed more migration, new encroachments and of course a tremendous increase in population by the beginning of the 20th Century.

This paper will factor the lives of Adivasis, particularly the women, who lived and still live lives of deprivation, discrimination (both within their community as well as

the state) and extreme vulnerabilities. It is the story of marginalization. The term 'Adivasi' is applied to the labouring communities of Assam tea plantations. They were recruited and transported to perform labour under the notorious indenture system in Assam plantations since 1860s. The locals generally preferred cultivation and, if at all, would work in the tea gardens out of temporary necessity. Furthermore the locals had a rather self-sufficient pre-capitalist economy and even considered tea garden work as derogatory.¹

Between 1860s and 1940s an estimated three million Adivasis were mobilized from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by tea industry to work as labourers. A very large section of this labour force were women and children. Women labour force was subjected to wage discrimination, sexual exploitation and physical coercion. They were paid lower wages than men for the same amount of work and were also burden with reproduction and household responsibilities. They worked long hours under terrible conditions and suffered sickness and high mortality during the colonial period. Their plight has not improved much, even after independence, and they have remained poorly paid, uneducated and in poor health. The growing marginalization of the Adivasi community has forced them to send their children to work as labourers to the metro cities and earn some money. They are also deprived of the benefits of affirmative policies of the Indian state. Some of their counterparts enjoy the status of ST in their areas of origins, but they are denied the same in Assam.

While the Indian Constitution recognizes all persons as equal in the eyes of the law and society, there are stark differences and hierarchies based on caste, tribe and gender distinctions, which dominates the social-political-economic-cultural relations and associations in the society. The 20th century saw to the formation of Sixth Schedule areas which started with the objective of ensuring that the tribal structures and order of things could continue to play their protective role towards the poor and the marginalized segments within them.² The past history of the

¹<http://northeastindiadiary.blogspot.in/2008/04/adivasi-struggles-in-assam.html>

²Assam comprises several tribal identities which led to the establishment of Autonomous District Councils for purposes of efficient and smooth governance. Such divisions in Assam led to the

autonomous District Councils (ADC), show that structures and functions under the Sixth Schedule went through trials and tribulations with the general view that the system of running the ADCs did not quite fulfill the objectives and did not draw good enough support in safeguarding people lives as well as their socio economic exclusion.³

Despite a sizeable population which needs an identity, the Adivasi communities in Assam is only seen with the backdrop of enslavement in Assam's tea plantations. This view has determined the nature of their identity as immigrant labour. They have been called the 'Coolies' till some sense came into public consciousness to address them as the *Saothalis* or Adivasi by the Assamese.⁴ They suffered social exclusion on one hand and the absence of entitlements, as local citizens, on the other. They face these forms of marginalization and social distancing today too.

The first question to ask is the identity of Adivasis in Assam, which needs analysis. We need to ask why Assam is the only state in India to rebuff Adivasi community their basic right of giving them their tribal status after Independence. Whereas, all over the country, the Government of India made special safeguards to protect them from exploitation and ensure social justice since the inception of Planning in 1951.

redrawing of new administrative boundaries. The North Cachar Hills sub-division of the United Mikir and Cachar Hills district was upgraded to district in 1970. The Mikir Hills District section was renamed as Karbi Anglong in 1976. Both districts have Autonomous Councils. The Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) was constituted under Sixth Schedule in February 2003. The Tiwa Autonomous Council and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Councils came up under the Act of 1995 in order to accommodate the respective ethnic groups. Similarly the Dima Hasao came up recently three years back. No status has been given to the Adivasi community which has laboured in Assam for more than 170 years.

³The Autonomous District Councils came under the control of new local leaders who were expected to shoulder responsibilities of governing the areas. New to the rule of power and rule of law, they were neither experienced nor exposed to handle development projects, schemes and larger issues of good governance. At the same time the ADCs did not get the desired support from the capital, Dispur, and thus were left to their own, leaving critical areas of governance to the point of oblivion. It was all too soon that the politics of power were quickly picked up by the new rulers many of who engaged in corruption and mistrust. This led to more disparities within the communities, and the tribal districts of Assam, leading to confusion and animosity among the local populace besides deepening factionalism and alienation from the state headquarters.

⁴The term Adivasi refers to indentured tea labour and those communities within it such as the Munda, Santhal, Oraon, and so on

Reservations for jobs, access to education and also access to participate in electoral processes were granted to the Adivasi/Dalit communities in India. But that never was the case in Assam and till today the community suffers a marginalized status in society. The general opinion of the government and perhaps the public too, is that the Adivasi community of Assam are not the original tribals of the region *per se* as they are migratory peoples of another state. Instead, they have been classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC) or More Other Backward Classes, (MOBC). So is the case with many more indigenous people of Assam, who too, are also demanding ST status for gaining more economic and educational opportunities.

Several Adivasi organisations exist in Assam such as the All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA), the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA) and the All Assam Adivasi Women Association (AAWA). All of them have questioned the absence of the government's policy which, in a sense, denies the community a social status and identity. They strongly feel that granting the ST status to them would remove their current condition of oppression, denial of entitlements and attitudinal bias against them as a 'labouring' community. To deny the community their constitutional rights is certainly an injustice today.

Contemporary Assam features a multi ethnic and multi caste population of which the Adivasis reside in the tea gardens as workers and the rest, outside, wherever they can procure land. Adivasis have no land rights whatsoever which drive many to find a place in the forests around the tea areas. Because of their 'non status' as SC or STs they do not have rights over forests either, and are thus prone to the dangers of eviction. The hard truth is that Adivasis have nowhere to go and therefore have to stay in the forests, tracts of which belong to the Forest Department and or to the traditionally landed ethnic communities such as the Bodos, Tiwas, Assamese and Karbis. There are past incidences of Adivasis houses being burned down and ravaged by Bodo offenders and criminals. The acts of violence are known as ethnic clashes and also interpreted as ethnic cleansing, which may not be the case, but certainly an expression of the offenders reclaiming the forests which, with the gradual degradation, are potential for agriculture work.

There has been sporadic and yet systematic attacks of the Adivasi community between the 1990s till date, by the Bodos, the latest one being that of an eviction notice given to Adivasis at the Ripu Chirang forest reserve of Kokrajhar and Chirang districts of Assam by the Forest Department. Again, at least 17 Adivasi families were evicted by forest authorities of Bodoland Territorial Council on September 12, 2016, from Deosri forest in Chirang.

Because of the mass killings in 1996 and 1998, in Kokrajhar district followed by sequential attacks against the Adivasi community, several Adivasi youths took to arms forming into militant groups such as the Birsa Commando Force (BCF), the All Adivasi National Liberation Army, (AANLA), Adivasi Peoples' Army (APA), Santhal Tiger Force (STF), Adivasi Cobra Militant Army (ACMA). All of them wanted to “avenge the killings” and also continue to struggle for recognition as for the Scheduled Tribe status for the community. All through the years they did appeal for scheduled tribe status, primarily through peaceful processes such as campaigns, processions and filing petitions to the Government of Assam. They experienced repressions and violence in the process.⁵

It is interesting to note that five of the Adivasi militants laid down their weapons before former Union home minister P Chidambaram in 2012. Whatever the reason, it is obligatory on part of the government, which ever is in the ruling party, to look at the plight of the Adivasis, their demands for ST status in view of the total deprivation that the community lives in today. The current Prime Minister has recommended modalities in granting ST status to several communities in Assam, including that of the ‘tea tribes’. This was promised by him during the 2014 Lok Sabha poll speeches. Recently, however the Coordination Committee of the Tribal Organisation (CCTOA), has asked the state government to stop the process of

⁵On November 7, 2007, hundreds of people belonging to the Adivasi community, many of them among the tea labour fraternity, marched towards the capital city of Assam, Dispur, with the sole purpose of demanding for ST status. Laxmi Orang, a 16-year-old girl from the tea workers community was stripped, assaulted and beaten by hoodlums in full public view on a busy road at Guwahati. The shocking incident was televised, sensationalized and talked about for days. Ironically neither did a debate or discourse emerge out of this incident. Nor did the citizens of Guwahati or the media able to influence the public about this gross human rights violation. Till today the ST status eludes the community and more than 60 lakh tea garden workers in Assam despite a history of protests.

granting ST status to all six communities in the state as it feels that the communities are relatively 'more advanced' than the existing tribals in both social and economic terms!⁶

The sense of insecurity echoes in all Adivasi minds because of their lack of access to land, lack of jobs and lack of food. This unsettling atmosphere remains to be of the fate of a sizeable population of Adivasis of Assam. Education levels, health indicators and poverty levels for Adivasis are among the worst among all communities in Assam. According to a study in 2006, most of the workers in the tea gardens are illiterate (52.9%).⁷

Marginalization among the Adivasi community, now known as the tea tribe, is at its worst and the denial to the state, the larger public to alleviate their status is not forthcoming. Even the Assam Human Development Report of 2003, does not feature a figment of the human condition of the tea plantation workers. The only mention is that most women workers are employed in the tea gardens in large numbers as organized labour. But research shows that most of the women are paid very poorly and working on a temporary basis. Many Adivasi families find it difficult to get their children into educational institutions and later into finding proper employment. Furthermore, while Adivasis, both tea garden and ex-tea garden communities form nearly 20% of the population, their representation in the legislative assembly is very scant.

Health facilities are not adequate in most of the tea gardens and there is evidence of sickness, poor health and malnutrition among the women and children. As mentioned earlier, in a research done in 2006, it was found that 65 % women workers are in poor health. A little over 4000 were interviewed of which 2,153 were women and most of them suffering from anemia with respiratory infections

⁶<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Tribal-body-opposes-ST-status-for-six-communities/articleshow/54534570.cms>

⁷A study done by Regional Medical Research Centre at Dibrugarh, 2006 .
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17130664>

including traces TB and Filariasis, (Infection from round worms and highly treatable) with work infection of the general kind, (65.4% 217 of 332). The denial of food, electricity and water, is a result of the gardens not being in the purview of the Panchayati Raj system.

An adviser of the central committee of All Assam Adivasi Women Association (AAWA) spoke about the status of education for children in villages outside the tea plantations. She reported that young children can access the Lower Primary schools, which are free of cost. Like many schools in India, however, there is a dearth of teachers, over crowding of children and the absence of care. The prevalence of underweight children in a tea plantation (2006), was 59.9% (357 of 596) a total of 59.9%, (357 of 596), are underweight.⁸

Those whose parents work in Christian missionary schools or hospitals, as care takers, may be lucky to send a child or two to Convents for schooling. It may be noted there are Don Bosco schools in the districts of Assam which has given attention to underprivileged children and youth for accessing education. There are instances of free mid-day meal services given in those areas where the Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan is being implemented. And yet, way back in 2002 a survey commissioned by Assam Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan Mission, (ASSAM), showed that 25% of children in the age group of 6-14 are out of school in entire Assam, while 43% are from among the tea gardens. ASSAM constituted by the Tea Garden Education Committee (TGEC) and Assam Human Development Report estimates that 1,000 Tea Garden Education Committees were set up by 2003. While the government manages the schools in Barak Valley and Golaghat district, the remaining schools are handled by the tea plantation management themselves.⁹

Women of the Adivasi community comprise tea workers, daily wage labour,

⁸<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17130664> (Dibrugarch 2006).

⁹Biswajeet Saikia: Dialogue January - March, 2009 , Volume 10 No. 3
Development of Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam
http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_Jan%2009/bisw.htm

vegetable sellers, domestic workers, in neighbouring towns and also into the states of Arunachal and Nagaland, and so on. They are either self employed or belong to the tertiary sector. It is interesting to note many are engaged in missionary work, but again as paid workers.

The condition of women workers, both in the tea plantations as well as outside it, are not sufficiently remunerative, and wages paid are much lower than the prescribed minimum wages. Such a situation brings in extreme forms of vulnerabilities among them such as discrimination, different forms of violence that are both physical and mental, lack of access to education and health care services. For instance there are no maternity benefit schemes available for the tea garden labourers. It is generally witnessed that during the pregnancy and post delivery period the women perform the same intensity of hard work in the plantation as someone without it.

As mentioned earlier, government schemes are not implemented in the 'Coolie Line' as they are considered private land of the tea garden and do not fall under Panchayati Raj system. Although the state government, through DRDA, was willing to implement these schemes in the tea garden areas the management did not express any willingness to provide a 'No Objection Certificate, (NOC) for allowing the DRDA to initiate IAY, PMGSY. (Indira Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana on housing for widows and rural road connectivity for economic development respectively.¹⁰

Institutional neglect in the areas occupied by Adivasi communities are seen in the state's denial of providing rations to households, admission to school education for children, for instance. Most of the women are deprived from accessing government schemes like the PMRY scheme where no initiatives have been taken to include those tea garden labourers who do not have any job in the plantations only worked in places as manual workers with a nominal wage.

¹⁰Information provided by the Advisory Committee of the All Assam Adivasi Women Association (AAWA), 2016. It is known however, that the IAYS scheme which started in 2007 ended in 2014 and now has a new name, Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana..

Few women victims of domestic violence brought to our purview that Gossaigaon police station of Kokrajhar has denied to register their cases and instead asked them to take their case to the village headman. (NEN field work, Kokrajhar 2015)

Adivasi men and women of Basuargaon of Kuwari Panchayat of Biswanath revealed that despite living adjacent to the town, their lack livelihood opportunities and they have to depend on daily wage work, which is also not regular. Women expressed that due to lack of work, higher number of men are getting idling and getting addicted to alcohol. As a result mortality among men is increasing at a very early ages. Young women in their early 20s are becoming widows thereby leading to feminisation of poverty. These widows have still not been able to access any benefits of Government social assistance programmes. (NEN field work, Biswanath, 2016).

Working with rural women in Assam we have evidence of the levels of discrimination against Adivasi women in several districts. Violence is perpetrated, at any point of time, by members of the family, the community itself, the state, and of course in intimate relationships. Public safety is a big issue in both rural and urban areas which affects most women, especially those from the labour population.

One of the main cause of mental and physical trauma in women living in the labour lines is that of the practice of gambling and drinking. All household goods are mortgaged by the men because of loans taken for purchasing the local drink or because of losing a game of cards. This has led to sheer helplessness of women in running their household or preventing their own children from picking up similar habits of their fathers. One of our NEN's field animators, influenced the women by composing slogans about doing away with alcohol. Of course she was criticized and confronted by few of the men and also told to back off because she is an outsider, (*bahira manuh*).

Another incident that needs special mention is that of drinking dens that come up during Puja time. One such den was being propped up. The women protested with the NEN field member leading the protest. Things came to head when women were attacked and manhandled by men in context. A phone call by the NEN field member

brought in the Mizo battalion, to the spot. The commandant of the battalion was in his civilian clothes. Not knowing his credentials the crowd manhandled him too, which brought the battalion to come down heavily on the ring leaders of the 'adda'

Another of the horrifying narrative given by a surveyor of NEN came up in the district of Golaghat, in 2011 at the Bokial TE where a young 13 year old girl was raped and then murdered. In order to make it look like a suicide, the body was hitched up a tree and hung up by the perpetrator/s for people to see. Though some people in the neighbourhood suspected the brother in law of the victim as the perpetrator, no conviction was made. Neither were there any protests made. NEN's surveyor proceeded to meet with a group of women in the village adjacent to the tea garden and influenced a teacher of the lower primary school to join her in talking about the incident. In anticipation of the women becoming too vocal, the Secretary of the Labour Committee, held a meeting discouraging the women not to associate with our NEN surveyor and warned that none of them would get any benefits from the schemes, in the near future. The fact is that a total of 2000 women had come for this.¹¹

Trafficking of Women: The most dangerous fallout of poverty, discrimination and the non-caring attitude of the state/public towards this community is that of trafficking of women both within the north eastern states and elsewhere in India. Trafficking of women and children basically involves their exploitation for financial gains. This is a serious violation of fundamental human rights. Trafficking, however, is complicated by its link to migration. Research shows that most of the women who are trafficked have a strong desire to migrate because there is abuse in the home, by men of the community or because of dire poverty. Once trafficked the nature of work is abusive whether vary from commercial sexual exploitation, different forms of forced labour.

¹¹While the Committee succeeded in preventing action against the perpetrators, the NEN surveyor was able to influence the women, convincing them that their collective strength in strategising and learning pro women laws would bring positive results in combatting violence against women. The importance of this incident is process in which women became sensitized to confront violence. The police too took note of this incident positively.

Most of the trafficked girls and children, among Adivasis are from the tea areas of Udalguri, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon and many other *Char*(or river bed) areas of lower Assam. In general, victims are lured either by kidnapping or offered prospects of better income/better life and then forced to work in establishments, (invariably against their wishes). There are arguments which state that countering trafficking by preventing women's migration is to lock them into domestic systems of oppression. We are also told that parents of a girl may want to give their child away for work because there is no other option for the girls to earn in their area. Measures taken to prevent women from migrating such as requiring permission of male members of the family or government sanction may actually compound the problem, which needs discussion and debate.¹²

Efforts of the enforcement authorities between Assam and New Delhi have to be mentioned. There was a joint investigation by the Assam police and their Delhi counterpart who had found 36 Delhi-based placement agencies in trafficking Assam girls and children to Haryana, Punjab, Mumbai, Delhi and several other metropolitan cities.¹³ Most women are sent by train and housed in placement agencies, which often acts as under the façade of giving jobs to them. It is however an irony that most state governments do not have an equipped force for handling cases of trafficking or of missing children. There is no meaningful engagement of the state to bring out clear terms of reference in preventing women from being abused and trafficked during the process of migration in conflict induced areas. Anti-human Trafficking Units have been set up but there are no clear guidelines about their role

¹²The number of provisions in the Indian Penal Code and special laws which seek to capture data relating to trafficking include: (i) Procurement of minor girls (section 366-A IPC) ; (ii) Importation of girls from foreign country ((Sec. 366-B IPC); (iii) Selling of girls for prostitution (Section-372 IPC);(iv) Buying of girls for prostitution (Section -373 IPC); (i) Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act 1956; (ii) Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.

¹³ Seven Sisters Post April 2, 2012. These placement agencies are located at Rajouri Garden, Raghbir Nagar, Uttam Nagar, Kalkaji and several other areas in New Delhi. There are efforts to bring out strict guidelines for the placement agencies operating in the capital state though it is not certain whether these agencies will stop the trafficking network.

in vulnerable areas. The Justice Verma Committee, in 2013, addressed the problem and stated that a huge responsibility lay with the enforcement agencies to stop the trafficking network of agencies. The state is obligated to fulfil promises made in the Constitution, as part of the ruling party's manifesto and the UN human rights mechanisms to which India is a signatory.

Witch Hunting: Assam witnesses the targetting of men, though mostly women through witch hunting.¹⁴ It points to women and is structured around the exploitation of her being, her assets and the aim of making women completely powerless. A woman who inherits land from her dead husband is likely to be targeted as a 'witch' by the rural power structure which results in taking away her property and banishing her from her home for ever.¹⁵ NEN's field work has also revealed that those women who have transgressed social norms or non-conformed to the social standards or have been assertive in demanding their rights were prone to victimization and labeled as witches. The criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013 has inserted a separate Section to criminalize disrobing or any attempt to disrobe a woman.

While men are also sometimes targeted there is deep concern about the rise in gender based violence & discrimination against women through the practice of witchhunting. There is however a favourable change with the Gauhati High Court Ruling on Victim Compensation Scheme amounting to Rs.200,000 in 2012. In

¹⁴A national study on witch hunting led by the Partners for Law in Development (PLD), covers states of Assam, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Chotanagpur. The situation of women under this category is perhaps the most violent with no reparative justice to them considering the fact that police action is not forthcoming in remote places where the community controls society. Clearly, belief systems which are related to superstition, magic, the unseen spirit and ancestor worship are embedded and attuned to seasonal cycles of local lives. Any peculiar situation such as a drought, illness, death or misfortune is believed to be caused by an individual or a couple who are possessed, have supernatural powers and who are believed to be practicing witchcraft.

¹⁵ (Interview of Birubala Rabha, by Monisha Behal, October 2011 relating to a woman from Khamari village, Assam, Zubaan)

addition, a State Law to combat witchhunting was drafted by the State Commission for Women in 2011. Though it did not take a consultative process the Commission is expected to work positively towards it from a woman's rights framework, in collaboration with the enforcement forces and women's rights groups in the state.¹⁶

The stigma that is attached to women who are labelled a "witch", and the rejection they experience within their communities, leads to various violations and is an obstacle to gaining access to justice. Such labelling affects family members across generations. There is reportedly little or no official investigation into such violations.¹⁷

Displacement is common in several districts of some states in India. In terms of our experience with Assam, the attacks and killings of Adivasi men and women in the past have created relief camps which house women and children. These camps are either set up in schools, play grounds and community centres of the village. The 'take over' of schools by security forces on one hand and its use as relief quarters for sheltering victims, on the other, creates a vacuum where children are made to discontinue their classes and the little learning they acquired in normal situations.

The post-conflict period often represents lack of law and order and there are large numbers of vulnerable, especially female refugees and internally displaced populations (IDPs). The susceptibility of these areas becoming a source of human trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labour is significant. Women and girls suffer disproportionately from lack of access to resources and support, thereby

¹⁶The issue of witch hunting has been discussed and argued out in many forums by feminist researchers and organisations like North East Network. Several of the points made by NEN were incorporated by the authorities responsible for drafting the Anti Witch Hunting Bill, which now awaits the President's sanction. The issue was mentioned in the Shadow Report made to the CEDAW Committee in 2000 and reciprocated within the Concluding Comments of the CEDAW Committee (Nos. 26 and 27, 2007). The Special Rapporteur was also informed of brutal acts of violence against women, including executions, commonly referred to as "witch-hunting".

¹⁷ Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo, mission to India, Human Rights Council, Twenty-sixth session, 1st April 2014.

heightening their vulnerability to various forms of exploitation. While this phenomenon occurs in normal circumstances the condition of the women in relief camps are worst. Cases of pregnant woman dying in camps has also been reported, (ethnic conflict, Biswanath, 2014) The net result of staying in this conflict induced atmosphere are (1) Loss of the affect people's habitat, alienation and extreme fear (2) Poor living conditions including housing and other amenities (3) Food security and livelihood options and heightened dependency (4) Health degradation and mental trauma (5) Violence, Fear and Psychological impact of past violence, (6) Uncertainty about future, and security, migration and trafficking.

The number of internally displaced persons are about 113,000 people, of which women could be a larger percentage as they are have no access to mobility. The Assam State Relief Manual does not give any practical clauses of helping those women who have reproductive problems, menstruation cycles, need for water and hygienic use of the camps. The reason is clearly because there is no law that protects the rights of Internally Displaced Persons, (IDP). There is evidence of such women living in 'relief' camps for prolonged periods, some times over decades, who are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and unsafe migration.¹⁸ India has not signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol of the same. We therefore should recommend the a legislation on IDPs in compliance with the international definitions.

Peace Committees formed aftermath major conflicts are seen as inconspicuous structures without any composition and guideline. Participation of women or representation of women's issues seems to be of lesser known interest thereby leading to a major drawback in such Committees. The peace committees set up by

¹⁸The link between IDPs and vulnerability to trafficking has to be studied. Assam alone has witnessed population of more than five lakhs people being displaced due to major ethnic conflicts during 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. But in the absence of any gender sensitive policy addressing conflict induced displacement, critical needs of women are not being met and gaps exists in the resettlement and rehabilitation procedures.

government after major violence in the affected areas needs a more structured bottom-up approach with representation of affected communities and women in particular. As drawn from experiences worldwide, women are known to play crucial roles in building trust, and preventing further escalation of violence in conflicts. Even the ongoing formal peace negotiations have undermined women's agenda and women's representation in the process.¹⁹

Conclusion

The narrative on Adivasi community of Assam needs to be highlighted in a wider platform with the sole purpose of influencing the State to be mindful of their deprivation and oppression in society. There is academic debate on the issue though it would be practical for civil society organizations to take it up for purposes of advocating change in the policy and mind sets of the political rulers and administrators. This will be a hard task as one has to consider resources for the communities belonging to the OBC and MOBC status, Having said that wider discussion and initiatives must come from women's groups because there have been success stories in influencing the government on one hand and the affected groups on the other. A number of initiatives should be taking place to evaluate and monitor the efficient functioning of peace committees and work towards for durable solutions. More voices need to be built up to encompass the tea community of Assam within the ambit of Government programmes. Accountability is required on part of tea management committees as there are unreported cases of exploitation and violence occurring within their vicinity. Plight of Adivasi women has to be taken care of and special attention needs to be taken to develop this segment of

¹⁹ The official statement from Department of Social Welfare, Bodo Territorial Council, (Assam), issued some figures in relation to Relief Camps and IDP's living in those camps on August 13th, 2012. (This could be both Adivasis, Bodos and Muslims). The camps recorded were Kokrajhar, Chirang, Bongaigaon and Dhubri Districts. where the total number of relief camps were 237 and the number of children below 6 years in those camps were 46868. The number of Pregnant Women in those camps were 3204 while the number of adolescent girls were 18947 . (North East Network 2013).

population in the backdrop of illiteracy, superstition, conflict and failed development indicators.

