

# **Displacement, Development and Gender: Examining the Challenges faced by Women IDPs in Northeast India**

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## **Abstract**

In the era of rapid progress and development, nations worldwide are often seen engaging in a fervent race towards modernisation. This pursuit has led to the establishment and implementation of numerous developmental projects; construction of dams, mining activities, industrial and allied infrastructure development, transport network, urban development as such. Consequently, it has given rise not only to socio-political and economic problems, but also to environmental problems that have resulted in both natural and man-made disaster. In addition, the continuation of this infrastructural growth, somehow, contingently causes deterritorialisation of the people which is very apparent in the domains of Northeast India. Due to the socio-political and economic transition, constant weakening in environmental order, the region of Northeast India has experienced a massive internal displacement of individuals, known as “Internally Displaced Person” (IDPs). Among these IDPs, women are often being impacted disproportionately, rendering them not just economically vulnerable but also imbibe them to undergo a significant socio-cultural displacement. Accordingly, for the comprehensive study on IDPs in northeast India, it is imperative to examine the challenges faced by women IDPs, without which the study remains incomplete. Hence, the paper seeks to explore the socio-cultural, economic and environmental challenges faced by women IDPs with special reference to the Northeast India. Furthermore, the paper also urges the need for the upliftment of these northeastern women which could cater towards the overall development of India as a country.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Developmental projects, Internally Displaced Person (IDPs), Women, Northeast India

## **Introduction**

As globalisation and modernisation shaping today's world, states are making efforts to match the swift pace of development, because infrastructural development is widely regarded as a prerequisite for achieving holistic progress. Consequently, numerous developmental projects are being undertaken. Unfortunately, these projects often lead to the displacement of individuals, forcing them to abandon their original homes and adapt to new environments, including changes in their occupations and lifestyles. For the development of a state numerous developmental projects, such as the installation of major hydropower dams, irrigation schemes, coal mining, national highway expansions, railway lines, the establishment of parks and sanctuaries are taking place. For these projects there is a need to acquire large area of land which has resulted into the displacement of many people [1]. The term displacement encompasses both people

who are physically relocated to accommodate a project and those who lose access to their resources and means of livelihood. It commonly occurs through the loss of land and the breakdown of social and economic ties [2]. In India, developmental projects have caused various socio-economic, ecological and environmental difficulties. It is still apparent that the nation's economic strategy is often pursued at the cost of marginalized sections, including tribals, Dalits and lower caste communities [3]. Displacement is not just an economic issue but also generates profound socio-cultural problems. It disturbs the intricate social networks that uphold a community's ethos and way of life. Further it also impacts traditional activities and social structures. Consequently, displaced individuals are forced into unfamiliar occupations and environments. The disruption of social patterns comes with no compensation for the social upheaval, subjecting people towards an intense pressure and resulting in a state of socio-cultural stress [4].

Development projects are considered as an indicator of national progress. On the positive side, these projects offer job opportunities, promote new skill development, increase income levels and improve infrastructure facilities. However, most development projects significantly redefine or alter land use patterns, leading to the displacement of people from their ancestral homes and causing the large-scale erosion of traditional occupations [5]. For a country to achieve progress and prosperity, economic development is essential. Without it, growth and survival are impossible. It plays a key role in improving the quality of life for citizens. Building infrastructure such as roads, railways, large dams, irrigation system industries etc. are necessary to support economic development. These projects not only provide employment but also enhance the socio-economic well-being of the population. However, it is important to recognize that while economic development brings many positive outcomes, it also leads to negative impacts, including the displacement and involuntary resettlement of affected communities [6].

In India, it has been observed that since 1950, millions of people have been forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands and homes. The country is one of the largest builders of dams having more than 5000 dams in the world. Although precise project-specific data is lacking, estimates suggest that the total number of people displaced due to planned development initiatives between 1951 and 1990 ranges from 11 million to 18.5 million [7]. Since independence, the development policies adopted by successive governments have resulted in large-scale displacement. It is estimated that approximately 0.5 million people are displaced annually due to government-led land acquisition. This number rises significantly when considering those displaced by unplanned projects and other causes [8].

A major issue resulting from displacement today is the rise in the global population of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Although there is no universally accepted definition for internally displaced persons, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) outlines guiding principles on Internal Displacement. According to these principles, IDPs are individuals forced to flee or leave their homes or habitual residences due to armed conflict, internal unrest, widespread human rights violations, or natural or man-made disasters. Unlike refugees, IDPs remain within their country's borders and do not cross internationally recognized boundaries [9].

### **Defining IDPs**

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees are some of the most marginalized and excluded groups in society. Though their circumstances are quite similar, the distinction between them lies in the fact that refugee cross international borders, while IDPs stay within their country's boundaries. Technically, an IDP remains a citizen, but in practice, they often experience life as a refugee within their own nation. Both groups lack representation and often go unnoticed and remains outside the public's awareness. Their

experiences of alienation, marginalisation and exclusion make it crucial for both the government and civil society to focus on their needs [10].

With the advent of globalization, development-induced displacement (DID) has become not only a human rights issue but also a matter of international relations. Development planning is no longer confined to individual nations but is shaped by global policies driven by a handful of wealthy countries and multilateral organizations like the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a result, DID has been increasing significantly due to these global strategies. However, most people get displaced by such projects, as well as by conflicts and disasters, must rely on national policies for protection rather than the support of international agencies. The United Nations has established a specialised agency, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to support international refugees, yet no such entity exists for internally displaced persons (IDPs) despite the large number getting affected by disasters, conflicts and development projects. The growing number of IDPs threatens human dignity and requires greater attention [11]. The problem of IDPs remains prevalent in India. Since 1950, more than 25 million individuals in India have been displaced due to development projects. Unfortunately, fewer than half of these displaced persons have been rehabilitated. The rest have been driven into poverty, with 40 percent of these individuals belonging to tribal communities [12]. Particularly in the northeast India it is believed to have the highest concentration of IDPs in India. Further to delve deeper into the issue, the comprehensive account on IDPs in northeast India is given below.

### **IDPs in Northeast India**

Northeast India stands out as a unique region in terms of its civilization, geography, socio-economic, cultural and political landscape within the country. Consequently, this region has been heavily impacted by environmental degradation, socio-economic disruptions and political changes, leading to a substantial internal displacement of its population. North-east India possibly has the highest concentration of IDPs than any other part of India, with a very high citizen to IDP ratio. Although determining the exact numbers is difficult, it is evident that all the seven states in the northeast region are home to all three categories of IDPs. First, those displaced by environmental factors, second by conflict and third by development. The people of northeast India have suffered greatly from environmental degradation, harsh impacts of state-driven development and the violence resulting from political conflicts over identity and territory. The region has remained a politically charged and troubled area since the beginning of its post-colonial history. Unfortunately, the issue of conflict-induced IDPs has not been incorporated into the peace and conflict resolution agenda for the region. Rehabilitation rights have been granted exclusively to ex-insurgents, while actual IDPs are routinely denied these rights [10].

Development projects in the North-east region have had a direct impact on impoverished and vulnerable tribal communities, both in the hilly and plain areas. The lack of sufficient resettlement and rehabilitation policies for those displaced has resulted in increased impoverishment, marginalisation and helplessness among the affected populations [9]. It is challenging to determine the exact number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the northeast, as even the state-level authorities do not maintain comprehensive data on them. Admitting the existence of these IDPs is a challenge for the state, as it would suggest some level of governmental failure. Transparency in this matter is lacking from the state's side. While it remains hard to estimate the number of IDPs displaced by environmental factors, such as floods, riverbank erosion and landslides. However, despite these challenges, it is still possible to make reasonable inferences about the gravity of the situation [10]. Among the northeastern states, Assam stands out for having a higher visibility

of development-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs). The oil industry in Assam has played a substantial role in exacerbating the displacement problem. The creation of new oil townships across different regions of upper and lower Assam has led to the eviction of local populations. Despite this, it is challenging to ascertain the exact amount of land that has been acquired for oil industry purposes in Assam [9]. In 2004, the floods in Assam affected more than 10 million people, with the majority being ordinary peasants. An especially severe flash flood in October 2004 in Goalpara district resulted in the deaths of nearly 1,000 people. The government did offer relief to some of the flood-affected individuals, but it was insufficient. Beyond the floods, the people of Assam have also been displaced by severe riverbank erosion, which has affected millions. According to official data, the Brahmaputra River has eroded 429,657 hectares of prime agricultural land. Approximately 7 percent of the land in the plains of Assam was eroded between 1951 and 2000. This erosion has displaced at least three million peasants over time. These displaced individuals now represent the most impoverished section of the population in Assam's plains. Due to the lack of an effective resettlement and rehabilitation policy, many of them have faced multiple instances of displacement. Additionally, the absence of a comprehensive database makes it difficult to determine the exact number of development-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northeast India. Nonetheless, some general insights into the scale of the issue can be gathered from the following facts. The Dumber hydroelectric project in Tripura displaced 40,000 people who were living on prime agricultural land, resulting in the displacement of around 2,00,000 tribal people. Similarly, about 40,000 people affected by the Kaptai project were relocated to the then North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now known as Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, relief camps have been established in the districts of Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Barpeta, Karbi Anglong, North Cachar and Cachar in Assam. At one point, more than 2,00,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) were residing in the relief camps in Kokrajhar district alone, most of them victims of the Bodoland movement. Many of these conflict-induced IDPs have been living in these camps for over a decade. The government's support to the camp residents is limited, providing only rice for 10 days each month. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the camps lead a dehumanised existence. In addition, around 40,000 Reang/Bru IDPs are living in government run relief camps in Assam and Tripura after being displaced from Mizoram due to ethnic conflicts. Meanwhile, a significant number of IDPs in Manipur have been displaced due to the ongoing Naga-Kuki conflict. The Hmar-Dimasa conflict has also led to the displacement of thousands in the North Cachar Hills district of Assam, while the Karbi and non-Karbi conflict has forced many to flee in the Karbi Anglong Hills district. Furthermore, movements against outsiders in Assam and Meghalaya have displaced large numbers of people [10]. Among these displaced people, women are the most affected ones. Thus, for the comprehensive understanding, the following section outlines the challenges faced by women specifically in northeast India.

### **Challenges faced by Women IDPs in Northeast India**

Women play a crucial role in driving economic growth by performing domestic work over the course of their lives. In rural parts of India, it is commonly observed that the majority of women are involved in agriculture and the collection of natural resources. This access to natural resources allows rural women to generate their own income for personal use while also contributing to the family's overall income [3]. Women are engaged in various household tasks, including cooking, raising children, gathering natural resources like animal fodder and in addition working in agricultural fields. In rural India, with no exception to northeast India, many women rely heavily on agriculture and forest products for their livelihoods. For

tribal communities, the forest serves as a primary source of sustenance, providing food, fruits, edible roots, herbs and honey etc. Their social and cultural lives are deeply connected to the forest. When displaced from their ancestral lands, women face significant economic hardships, as these lands have supported their livelihoods for generations. Displaced women often find it very difficult to maintain their social identity after relocation. Most of these women come from impoverished backgrounds and are hit hardest by displacement. It is evident that development projects tend to benefit the wealthy, while the displaced poor bear the costs. As a result of these projects, millions are forced to leave their native lands, and their traditional way of life is disrupted. For displaced women, living conditions deteriorate significantly, often pushing them below the poverty line. Their health, nutrition, and socio-economic status also suffer after being displaced. Women are especially vulnerable during this process, and displacement frequently changes their roles, compelling them to work outside the home to support their families financially [13]. Internally displaced persons represent one of the largest marginalized groups within society. The experience of being displaced from one's home and environment is profoundly tragic, as individuals face significant losses in essential life-sustaining resources, including social networks, neighbours and access to communal resources. Furthermore, the situation for internally displaced women is even more dire than that of men. Many women work in the informal sector, gathering forest products, farming, or selling goods, and displacement often leads to the loss of these livelihoods, exacerbating their economic difficulties. As poverty levels rise, opportunities diminish, which negatively impacts reproductive health, especially considering that around twenty-five percent of displaced women are of reproductive age at any given time [14]. Displaced women who previously sustained their livelihoods by raising livestock and collecting forest products, supplying items such as milk, butter and meat, experiences a dramatic loss in economic status when they were forced to leave behind their livestock. This loss of resources led to a steep decline in their financial security [15]. Following displacement, conflicts within families frequently arise over personal expenses, as most women find themselves depending on their husband's earnings. The challenges for displaced women become even more pronounced due to their loss of access to vital resources like fuel, fodder, and food collection opportunities. A clear example of this can be seen in the case, where the entire villages had to relocate because of the Narmada and Tehri dam projects. After being displaced, many women were forced to seek employment outside the home to sustain their livelihoods and contribute to their family's income [16]. Women who have been displaced experience gender-based inequalities in both their families and the broader society. Moreover, policymakers often discriminate against displaced women in terms of resettlement options and compensation packages. Studies have found that forced displacement tends to increase the prevalence of domestic violence, while women's participation in productive economic activities significantly declines or stops altogether. This decline leads to a loss of their social status, and their influence and rights in decision-making processes become further diminished [17].

Within internally displaced person (IDP) communities, it is primarily women and children who endure the most suffering. Across the northeastern region, the conditions for the displaced are dismal and deplorable, with no inter-governmental or international organizations available to assist them. Many displaced individuals are forced to live in degrading conditions within public buildings and temporary shelters. They have lost their most valuable assets, including their land, homes and means of livelihood [10]. Development-induced displacement also carries a gender dimension, as the entire family feels the effects of unemployment, decreased income and falling below the poverty line. While access to resources declines for the whole family, women experience an even steeper decline compared to men. Job opportunities



created by development projects typically favour men, except in households led by women. Additionally, when land is allocated for rehabilitation, it is usually assigned to men, leading to a concentration of domestic power in the hands of men and eventually passed down to their sons [18]. Thus, after displacement, women face a higher unemployment rate than men, which often confines them to personal sphere making them dependent on their husband. Sanitation is another major significant challenge faced specifically by displaced women, yet this issue rarely receives the attention it deserves due to its unique nature. Additionally, the responsibility of collecting water almost invariably falls on women. When dams take over water sources or when water is contaminated by developmental projects, it is women who are most adversely affected. The period of transition between actual displacement and resettlement is particularly challenging and during this phase, women often bear a heavier burden. Frequently, it is the women, along with the elderly and children, who are left behind. Furthermore, it has been observed that during times of unemployment, when jobs are scarce, women are typically the first to lose their positions. This is not due to a lack of skills; rather, it stems from the necessity to prioritize men for available jobs [9].

Displaced women are compelled to abandon their traditional livelihoods and face the loss of their social and cultural identities. They experience various hardships, including unemployment, lack of shelter and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. The loss of access to common resources, such as fodder and fuel leads to a decline in their income. In India's patriarchal society, women are often denied compensation for their land and overlooked in resettlement acts. Despite having cultivated the land for generations, women lack the rights to have it registered in their names. In order to address the challenges faced by displaced women, it is essential for the country to implement a policy that guarantees them adequate support and fair compensation. Prior to initiating any development projects, thorough surveys should be conducted to address women's concerns. It is crucial for both the central and state governments to collaborate on resettlement and compensation processes, with special attention given to protecting marginalized communities from the adverse effects of development initiatives in the future [3].

## **Conclusion**

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are among the most marginalized groups and within this community, women and children are often the ones who suffer the most. Women play a pivotal role in nation-building and contribute significantly to the country's economic development. Majority of development projects are concentrated in rural areas, where a large portion of the women population is involved in domestic work, agriculture and the collection of natural resources. However, when development projects displace these women, their lives are disrupted in numerous ways. They lose their homes, livelihoods and access to the natural resources that sustain their families. Forced displacement also pushes them into situations of increased vulnerability, often leading to violence, exploitation and social exclusion. Unemployment becomes a harsh reality for many of these women, who, after displacement struggle to find new means of income. As a result, their economic independence is severely diminished, which not only affects their personal lives but also has broader economic implications for the nation.

For a country to be developed in a true sense, every section of its population must have the opportunity to grow. Similarly, in case of India, the plight of women IDPs in the northeast, who face some of the most severe hardships from displacement cannot be overlooked. Therefore, addressing their unique needs and uplifting them with resources, skills and opportunities is essential to fostering their inclusion in the nation's progress. Ensuring their access to fair compensation, employment opportunities and support systems will

not only improve their livelihoods but also contribute to the overall development and economic growth of the country. By uplifting the status of these women, particularly in northeast India, the country can work towards a more equitable and inclusive future, where all sections of society can share in its prosperity and progress. Thus, uplifting women IDPs is not just a matter of social justice but a crucial step toward building a stronger and more resilient nation.

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