

Changing Livelihood, Disaster and Human Trafficking - A Study of the Disaster Affected Areas of Assam

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ABSTRACT: *Human trafficking is an age old practice. In early age it was formal and traded human being in open market termed as slave trade. At present it is though illegal, it is a global industry that generates an estimated five to seven billion U.S. dollars each year. Human trafficking threatens human security and human development. Millions of women and girls have been trafficked across borders and within countries in recent years. It is estimated that 300,000 to 450,000 people are trafficked within Asia each year, of which more than half take place in South Asia, according to UNDP report. Women and children, particularly girls, are trafficked within country boundaries, to other countries within the region and across regions and continents beyond South Asia. The growing trafficking problem in South Asia has been recognized and has become a serious concern over the last decade. It can be called the modernized form of age old slave trade. In Assam it has been witnessed that a large number of women and girl child missing and also reported that a large numbers of them has recovered from various parts of the country. Moreover, there is an increase in the number of missing people cases, particularly of young women and children. Youths from various parts of India are trafficked every year, thousands of young girls and women are lured by people and taken to different parts of India, to work as slave and in most of the cases they lands up in brothels. Those who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation as domestic labourers, are particularly at risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and unwanted pregnancy. The people of conflict and hazard porn areas of Assam into search of their optional livelihood seek work elsewhere; even if the offers come from dubious people and falls in the prey of the trafficker. This paper going to address the hidden cause of the trafficking problem how they were became victim of traffickers. For this paper data are collect from NGOs who were working against the human trafficking in grass-root level in Assam. It is expecting that the paper will inspire policymakers and key stakeholders to explore further links between human trafficking and livelihood.*

KEY WORDS: *Disaster, Human Trafficking, Livelihood, NGO, Rural area*

I. INTRODUCTION:

Human trafficking is a burning problem of the universe. It is being treated as third largest illegal global trade after drugs and arms. Human trafficking is a violation of human rights. It also violates the right to health and health care, liberty and security of person, and the right to freedom from torture, violence, cruelty or degrading treatment.¹ According to UNDP report human trafficking threaten human security and human development. Millions of women and girls have been trafficked across borders and within countries in recent years making human trafficking is a global industry that generates an estimated five to seven billion U.S. dollars each year. It is estimated that 300,000 to 450,000 people are trafficked within Asia each year, of which more than half take place in South Asia. Women and children, particularly girls, are trafficked within country boundaries, to other countries within the region and across regions and continents beyond South Asia. The growing trafficking problem in South Asia has been recognized and has become a serious concern over the last decade.² Though women and girls are trafficked for other purposes besides sexual exploitation, this remains the single largest category of exploitative trafficking crime throughout the world. The majority of victims are young girls and women from poor, illiterate families. The Asian Development Bank estimates that between one and two hundred thousand Nepalese women and girls, roughly a quarter of who are less than eighteen years old, are held against their will in Indian brothels.³ For human traffickers India is a source, transit and destination. Receiving children from Bangladesh and Nepal and sending women and children to countries in the Middle East is a common occurrence. India and Pakistan are the main destinations for children under sixteen who are trafficked in South Asia. An estimated 9,000 girls are trafficked annually within South Asia from

¹ Renu Sharma, Trafficking in Women and Children in India: A Situational Analysis in Maharashtra, IJCJS, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2007

² UNDP Human Trafficking and HIV, Exploring vulnerabilities and responses in South Asia 2007

³ State of World Population 2006, A Passage to Hope: Women and International Migration; UNFPA

Nepal to India and from Bangladesh to Pakistan; a little over half of all girl sex workers in India are from Nepal or Bangladesh.⁴ Within India Assam is a source of human trafficking, whom were exported to comparatively richer northern states of India. *Sakti Bahini*, an NGO reported that Assam, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh & Himachal Pradesh are prime supply zones from where the trafficking in guise of migration for coerced or forceful marriage, domestic servants and agricultural labour is taking place. The primary cause of the problem is considered as the livelihood problems in Assam, where the people were migrated from their age old occupation in search of alternative livelihood option due to disasters and fall in the prey of the lured person. The approach in the present paper has been a mixed one in respect of methodology. I have studied the situation of the people who are fall in the disasters like flood, erosion and other manmade disasters as a whole and at the same time analyzed the view of secondary sources to understand the problem. For this I have depended on secondary data and data available with various NGO/INGOs. The paper is done basically to find out the causes and solution of the problem which is spreading knock and corner of society and to give suggestion.

II. MIGRATION AND TRAFFICKING – A GENERAL OVERVIEW:

Migration is characterized by choice. Migration happens for better livelihood option in their willingness. Migration is processes of movement of people from one place to another (in case of international migration one country to another) in order to take up employment or establish residence or change their place of residence for various reasons, otherwise, trafficking by coercion, deception or force. It is involving exploitation and violation of human rights. Trafficking in persons, therefore, mostly results in abusive exploitation and human rights violations. A person, by being in the hands of traffickers, loses control of his/her fate and freedom⁵ and ends up in a harm situation. Though the movement or mobility is a common element of both trafficking and migration, it is the presence or absence of coercion, exploitation, abuse, and loss of control on life options could be considered as determining factors. Absence of some or all of these makes a person's movement migration and trafficking. Both trafficking in persons and migration, share the same migratory space as both involve movement. Nevertheless, the two phenomenon's have very different reasons behind movement and outcomes, with trafficked persons being exposed to a harm situation and end up in slave like situations. Exploitation, profit and illegality are all central to the idea of trafficking in persons' Trafficking is viewed as an anti-social and morally degrading heinous event. However, migration is widely considered as a process that could enhance social progress in both the origin and destination countries, if managed properly, it could also be an empowering process for the migrants.

III. DISASTER AFFECTED AREAS OF ASSAM, LIVELIHOOD AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING:

In Assam urban population standing at 12.9% of the total population of the state, a huge chunk of Assam's population is based in the rural areas and of these people, a large number are living below the poverty line. The people are based on agriculture and it depends on the weather of the session. Last few decades Assam has witnessed large scale displacement of people for natural or manmade disasters. Due to disasters the people of the affected areas has been walkout in search of alternative livelihood option. It has been observed that from Assam large scale migration of the local population to the comparatively richer parts of the country. The growing need for better livelihood options and employment has turned Assam into a fertile place for human traffickers and in the past few years, thousands of young men and women of the state have fallen prey to the designs of traffickers and have been exploited as cheap labour. A recent police report says 3,184 women and 3,840 female children have gone missing in the state since 1996.

IV. CAUSES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ASSAM :

There are many supply side reasons for trafficking. The first reason is poverty. The primary reason for the increase in trafficking into the global menace it has become is the breakdown of traditional livelihood options. Industrialization and globalization has destroyed the viability of traditional livelihood especially in rural areas. The erosion of livelihood in the source areas and the availability of better livelihood opportunities in other areas initiate migration of poor people towards high-income areas.

⁴ 'Combating Trafficking of Women and Children in South Asia', Regional Synthesis Paper for Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. 2003: Asian Development Bank

⁵ IOM, Migrant Trafficking and Human Smuggling in Europe: A review of evidence with case studies from Hungary, Poland and Ukraine, Geneva, 2000

People migrate all the time for various reasons from personal and professional development, usually middle class professionals to semiskilled, unskilled and low skilled workers. However, the chances of migration turning into trafficking are higher for those who are at the bottom level in terms of skills, who also happens to be poor. Women and children form a large group of poor unskilled labour due to systematic gender and social discrimination against them. Internal and international movement of women into the labour market has exposed them to the vulnerability of sexual exploitation. Women and children amongst migrants are coerced and deceived at the place of their origin, during movement and transit and at their destination.⁶

Another factor responsible for human trafficking is the lack of employment. It has been found that approximately 25 lakh job seekers in the state are waiting for their favour of destiny. Though the number of unemployed people is on the rise, the government has failed to provide adequate jobs to the youth. This fact has turned youth. This fact has turned Assam into a ripe hunting ground of bogus employment agents and human traffickers who lure the gullible youth with false promises of employment, only to turn them into victims of trafficking. The gender ratio of Assam is 954 females against 1000 males, where in overall India it is 940 against 1000 males according to 2011 census. This inequality results in the degrading status of women folk in the society. There is an increase in the instances of violence against women who are marginalized in the public domain, making them soft targets for human trafficking and other forms of sexual abuse. In fact, the human rights violation against women and children are more registered in areas that witness armed conflict and insurgency. Conflict aggravates the process of displacement of people for better possibilities of a livelihood. The ethnic assertion, language movement, Assam movement and various other armed conflicts are responsible for making Assam a disturbed state. Among the Northeastern states, Assam has registered the highest number of insurgency related cases, right from the killing of civilians to kidnappings for ransom.⁷ Political disturbances in Assam have made its poorer people more vulnerable to human trafficking. Moreover, most of the victims of human trafficking are generally illiterate or semi – literate, which have little or no knowledge about the evils of human trafficking. Assam has a literacy rate of 63.35% against the national literacy rate of 64.84%. Due to the lack of proper education and awareness on the issue, unscrupulous employment agents can easily coerce their victims by showing them false documents and certificates. Most important reason behind human trafficking is that Assam is severely affected by natural calamities which lead to large scale migration of the people to metropolises. Loss of agricultural land and other standing crops people were come out for alternative livelihood option and fall in the grabs of traffickers. A majority of the victims hail from the Char areas, Dhubri, Bonaigaon, Kokrajhar and Kamrup districts and the number increasing in areas like Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and other disaster prone areas. The average age of the victims is 12 to 22 years of age and they generally belong to poor families and have low levels of literacy.

V. CONCLUSION - WHERE IS THE SOLUTION?

“Trafficking is a complex development issue. It is an economic problem, as the vast majority of women seeking to escape poverty are lured into trafficking by the false promise of economic gain. Trafficking is a health problem, as trafficked women and children are most at risk from HIV infection. It is a gender problem, as unequal power relations reinforce women’s secondary status in society. Lastly, it is a legal problem, as its victims are stripped of their human rights and lack any access to redress for the crimes committed against them.”⁸ Human trafficking is a multi dimensional deep rotted phenomenon and its prevention is possible if it is tackled by keeping in consideration the legal, social and economic aspects related to it. Without understanding the problems it is too difficult to go ahead for preventive measures. Trafficking has to be understood and addressed more as an exploitative process in a continuum of events and conditions, and not as a one-off, exploitative situation. Economic aspects like poverty, lack of opportunities, and breakdown of livelihood options are factors, which make people easily fall prey to the exploitation and trafficking. It is also important to deal with issues of gender, age, class and caste dimensions, which have very clear roles to play in defining vulnerabilities. Lack of proper education makes them more vulnerable from every aspect

⁶ Krishnan, S & Vetticatil, J. Role of Livelihood Options in the Migration/Trafficking Paradigm, Paper Presented in Regional Conference on Revisiting the Migration and Trafficking Nexus: The South Asian Scenario, Dhaka Bangladesh, 4-6 April, 2005.

⁷ The Assam Tribune, 31st January, 2005.

⁸ ‘USAID Strategic Treatment for the Asia Regional Anti-Trafficking Initiative.’ May 25, 1999 (draft). Washington, D.C., 1999, USAID.

The need of the hour is that those who are in an advantageous position should come forward to help their co-partners who are underpowered. The first step in this connection is to empower them and make them understand their basic rights like political, social, legal and reproductive rights or rights of their body. The second step is to follow the modern concept of empowering women, i.e., sensitizing all sections of the society, which includes men too. Thirdly, all policies relating to the development and betterment of women must touch the grass root level, where the real peril prevails. There's an oft-repeated saying, "Educate a man and you educate an individual, (whereas) educate a woman and you educate a family". So, the fourth step would be to take necessary measures to enhance the educational facility for girls with infrastructure and gender sensitive curricula. The fifth and the most important step is to make the womenfolk realize their potentialities and feel proud to be women so that they can realize the worth of their existence as women, and can also participate with the male folk in any field of activity. The schemes of the government like *Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana*, *Mukhyamantrir Asom Bikas Yojana*, Self-Help Group formation for avail various welfare schemes and other skill development programme subsidized by government etc. should be introduced properly. Awareness generation, capacity buildings through proper training among the communities are some important work to prevent these types of illegal work.

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