

# **A STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF ARMED CONFLICTS ON HOUSEHOLDS, AND THEIR COPING STRATEGIES IN VILLAGES OF BTAD (BODOLAND TERRITORIAL AREA DISTRICT), ASSAM**

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## **Introduction**

The land of undulating plains, lofty mountains, meandering rivers, serpentine roads, lush greenery, diverse cultures, innumerable dialects and colorful attires is Assam. The demographic landscape gives accounts of numerous communities living together from generations.

Yet, surpassing the beauty of this land is a vicious cycle of conflict that has robbed its people of peace and tranquility. Insecurity and uncertainty encompassing Assam and BTAD induce a mesh of varied social, political and economic issues. It comprises of more complex events where violence is perpetrated at multiple levels. In this environment any panic in each of the communities can demonstrate historical tensions which turn into larger confrontations.

The conflicts are of varying nature - within ethnic groups, between two ethnic groups or between ethnic groups and immigrants. While a majority of the conflicts are confined to the boundaries of the region; some of the conflicts are prolonged and have continued for years while some have taken a downward trend over the past years. The reason for the conflicts in the BTAD is multipronged and different terminologies have been used to describe them. Some are called insurgencies and separatist movements, others are termed ethnic conflicts and yet others entail an international angle.

Conflicts carry various direct and indirect implications which strongly affect the living conditions of households at the time of the conflict and for many years thereafter. Once conflict subsides, a new form of vulnerability and exclusion emerges, which may transpire into future outbreaks. Such a setting, followed by insecurity and fear may decrease the ability of individuals and households to rely on their human cognition to cope.

In spite of the past frequent conflicts, little research has been carried out to see its effects on households, and how distressed survivors cope in the aftermath. The question focuses on the factors that influence their choice of strategy when there is a degree of change or stability during the conflict.

Present literature about conflict in Assam focuses on the nature and causes of conflict, individual participation, peace building, displacement, and conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) staying in relief camps. Less is known how households are those directly affected. Less attention has been devoted to estimating the effects of conflicts on households and their coping mechanisms.

The study will focus on the factors determining the strategy of the affected households in BTAD during conflict and other effects permeating through various channels. It will explore the ways in which households respond to changes in their own characteristics and surrounding institutions.

## **Methodology**

The study is predominantly a mixed research in which both quantitative and qualitative data are used. Qualitative method was used to analyze data containing mostly semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires collected from the members of affected communities such as the *Muslims*, *Bodos*, *Assamese*, *Adivasis*, *Koch-Rajbonshis* and *Rabhas*. The data was collected to understand the effect of conflict on household irrespective of religion and their coping strategies.

## Study Sites

| Area (District) | Sites         | Sample Size |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------|
| Kokrajhar       | Haguma        | 15          |
|                 | Howriapet-I   | 9           |
|                 | Niloyjhora    | 4           |
|                 | Dotoma        | 6           |
|                 | Maktaigoan-II | 6           |
|                 | Goanchulka    | 10          |

For the household coping strategies both qualitative and quantitative methods containing structured and semi-structured, open-ended questionnaires to analyze the determinants of coping mechanisms.

The research study is modeled as explanatory in nature as weightage is directed in understanding the coping-mechanism adopted by the households in the conflict settings, The sources of data collection during my study were both primary and secondary.

A combination of two sampling methods was used for data collection. One was purposive sampling and the other was the snowball sampling method. The selected areas comprised equal numbers of mixed population in all villages. The selection of villages of both communities is done to understand the coping mechanism of the household in conflict-affected areas. A total of 50 respondents formed the sample size and information was collected from the respondents of six (6) villages respectively.

The data was analyzed by employing codes categorized around the discovered phenomena to simplify the large set of qualitative data and converting it into a quantifiable one. The emerging qualitative themes were supported by quantitative variables which helped to validate the findings of the study.

### **Kokrajhar: History, Its People and Conflict**

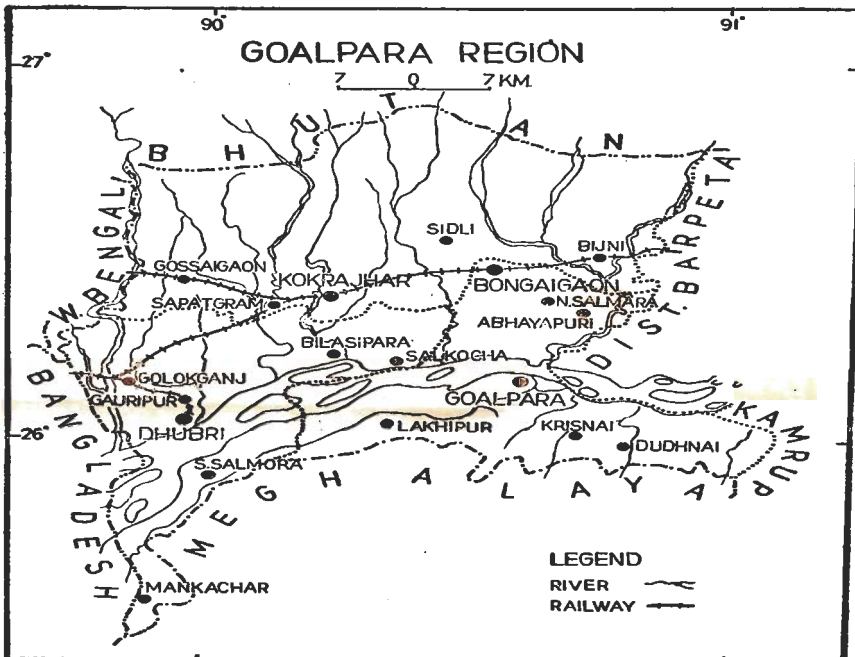
It is exigency of the research paper before positing on underlying factors of intra-community conflict in the region; much is to understand about the history, people and the conflict. The section will help in understanding the long existing social cohesion and strife within them and factors for existing tangible and intangible conflict. Also, the section will provide an insight

into the fragile community relations; in describing the various forms of conflict that have erupted in BTC region.

### *Introduction to the Field*

Kokrajhar district is one of the thirty-five districts of Assam and is the gateway to the north-eastern region of India. Kokrajhar was part of the undivided Goalpara district till 1956; the region was created carving out parts of Dhubri and Goalpara. The area of the district extended from the Manas River in the east to the Sonkosh River on the west. During 1989, further reorganization of the district led to a loss of 40% of its geographical area for inclusion in Bongaingon district. The district later formed part of the present day BTAD area. (Bodoland Territorial Area District)<sup>1</sup>

**Map 1: Undivided Kokrajhar before 1956**



**Source: Revenue Department, Govt. of Assam**

<sup>1</sup>District Administration, Kokrajhar  
Accessed at: <http://kokrajhar.gov.in/>

### ***History of Kokrajhar: Background & Creation of District Council under 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule***

Assam emerged as a political entity within the colonial jurisdiction during the period 1826 to 1947. Later during post-colonial period, the geographical boundaries have changed with the creation of smaller states for the various tribes of North East India.

During post-independence times there were demands from the hill tribes of Assam seeking better political status within the constitutional framework. In ensuring their demands, a subcommittee was formed to set up District Councils in the tribal areas of Assam, with the final inclusion under the 6th Schedule to the Constitution of India. The Schedule envisioned certain rights for the creation of autonomous district in areas of Assam to preserve their culture and traditions with maximum autonomy in managing their affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The (6<sup>th</sup>) Sixth Schedule under (Para-20) of the Constitution of India, the autonomous districts or region is categorized into Part A and Part B, the newly formed Bodoland Territorial Area District falls under Part I. The BTC which enjoys the status of district council came into effect from 10 February, 2003 under the 6<sup>th</sup> (Sixth) Schedule Amendment Act, 2003.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Bodoland Movement and the formation of Bodoland territorial Council***

The formation of Bodoland Territorial Council has been through various stages. The "Bodos" are considered to be one of the indigenous tribe of Assam, belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese speaking Indo-Mongloid tribes of North East India. Linguistically, the Garos, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Hajongs, the Dimasas, the Boroks of Tripura, are part of Bodo Race<sup>4</sup>. The Bodo people are considered the earliest settlers of and forms the largest primitive tribe of the present demography of Assam. The majority of the population is

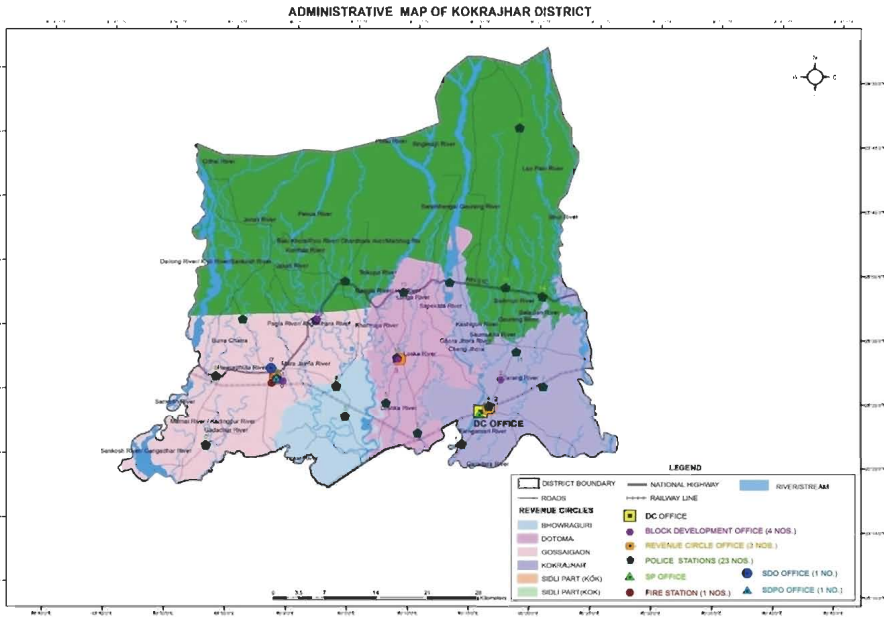
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<sup>2</sup>Gassah, L. S. "Sixth Schedule: It's Relevance with Special Reference to Meghalaya," *Proceedings of the North East India Political Science Association*, Shillong, 1993, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Memorandum of Settlement, Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). A tripartite agreement signed by the Government of India, Government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) on 10 February 2003, to form BTC

<sup>4</sup>Grierson, G. *The Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, Part. II, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1903  
Accessed at: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/books/lsl/lsl.php?volume=3-2&pages=540#page/11/mode/1up>

## Map 2: Present Kokrajhar Administrative Boundary



Source: [http://kokrajhar.gov.in/map/administrative\\_map.pdf](http://kokrajhar.gov.in/map/administrative_map.pdf)

The movement was binary in nature, with the spirit of renaissance the Bodo student movement started with emphasis on preserving the culture and tradition by producing literatures. Youth took part in elections of the provincial legislative council held in 1928<sup>5</sup>. The realization among the educated youth led to formation of All Assam Plain Tribal League in Roha, 1933 which focused on catering to the needs of all sections of plain tribal under one umbrella<sup>6</sup>. The organization failed to achieve its objectives and dwindled, meanwhile the problem of land alienation was emerging alarmingly. To protect the tribal land the Tribal League drew an agreement with Muslim League in 1939, the latter accepting the "Line System"<sup>7</sup> in return to support the Muslim League in forming a coalition government in Assam.

<sup>5</sup>Roy, Ajoy. *Boro Imbroglia*. Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2005, p. 56

<sup>6</sup>Brahma, U. G. *Bodo Politics, Trends and Future*. Dummi. ABSU, 2006, p. 89

<sup>7</sup>By the middle of the second decade the flow of immigrants assumed a menacing problem and both the public opinion as well as the other nationalist legislators raised a strong

The failure of the Government in addressing the demand of the tribal led to agreement with Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in 1946 and getting certain provisions of Chapter-X Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886 amended<sup>8</sup>.

However, there were grievances from the Bodo leaders failing to protect tribal lands, with historic steps in 1947, the Government formed Tribal belts and Blocks.

There was a major literary awakening to safeguard the distinct Bodo language which resulted in the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The demand for introduction of the bodo text book in schools did not reach any conclusion and the political awakening led to formation of the All Bodo Student Union<sup>9</sup>.

In action by the government and the failure of various bodo groups<sup>10</sup> exacerbated in forming an armed outfit BLT (Bodo Liberation Tiger Force) in 1996. The group joined with ABSU in reviving the demand for separate area, and the movement entered a new phase as it was held by the armed BLT outfit. Meanwhile, the Central government initiated tripartite talks with the outfit finally led to the Memorandum of Settlement with the Government of Assam and India on 10 February 2003<sup>11</sup>. The settlement led to the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council under the 6<sup>th</sup> Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India and reorganization of existing geographical boundaries to carve four districts namely, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri.

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voice against the Government policy of waste-land settlement and immigration of Muslim peasants from east Bengal. The Assam Government then introduced what was popularly known as the "Line System". Under this dispensation the Government drew imaginary lines in the districts under immigration pressure to segregate the settlements of the indigenous population and that of the immigrant population and the new arrivals of immigrants were thereafter allowed to be settled only outside this line.

<sup>8</sup>Assam Gazette, 22 October 1947

Accessed at: [https://legislative.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf\\_utility\\_folder/departments/legislative\\_medhassu\\_in\\_oid\\_3/menu/document/The%20Assam%20Land%20%26%20Revenue%20Regulation%20%28Amendment%29%20Act%2C%201947.pdf](https://legislative.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/legislative_medhassu_in_oid_3/menu/document/The%20Assam%20Land%20%26%20Revenue%20Regulation%20%28Amendment%29%20Act%2C%201947.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Lahiri, Monoranjan. *Bodo Thunlaini Jarimin*. Ansumui Publishers, Kokrajhar, 1991, p. 25

<sup>10</sup>PTCA - Plain Tribe Council of Assam, PTCA(P) and ABSU

<sup>11</sup>Memorandum of Settlement (BLT with Government) 10 February 200

### **People of Kokrajhar**

Assam is a land of varieties of colourful culture, different races and tribes lived in this region from ancient times and all these tribe's customs, tradition, living style formed a peerless Assamese culture and society. The demography of Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts owes its composition to the colonial administration of the British Raj.

During Ahom rule, when the British came to Assam, the Bodos were scattered in different parts of lower Assam. They isolated themselves from other communities as they had a separate type of socio economic culture. As the British tried to encroach the whole of Assam and made it a part of their colonial administration, Bodos felt a kind of insecurity in terms of their language, culture and economy. Slowly and steadily they organized themselves and started a demand before the authority to protect them from the assimilation.

British, through their tea plantation programme, opened the Bodo inhabited areas for the non-Bodos like Adivasis, Santhals, Nepalis and East Bengal Muslims to engage them as tea labour for commercial purpose. As the tribals had no permanent land documents, it became easy for the British to encroach the tribal land for their business. Before the arrival of British to Assam, the Bodos used to do Jhum cultivation and used land for a temporary period. However, the colonial power was not in favor of such cultivation as it did not help them to collect revenues. As a result, the British encroached land lying vacant in tribal areas for the purpose of business.

However, the British also realized the possibility of well directed protest against the land alienation policy. To make their administration permanent, the British used dual policy regarding tribal land. On the one hand, they themselves encroached those lands to increase their revenue and on the other hand, they introduced "Line System" to keep those areas free from other immigrants. Under this system an imaginary line was drawn in those districts under pressure to settle immigrants in segregated areas.

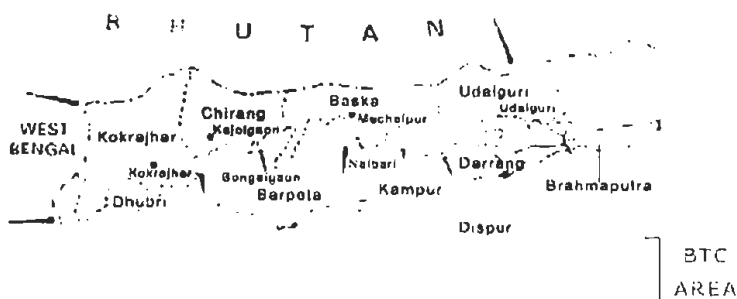
With time, this led to the formation of a heterogeneous population in character thriving in aspiration of development in the districts under Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts. The population of the tribe in Assam as per 1971 census is 6,10,459 accounting for 45.4% of the total state tribal



population. With major concentration in Kokrajhar district followed by undivided northern belt of Kamrup and Darrang<sup>12</sup>. At present as per official census of 2011 and population data of 2018 has a majority share of Hindu population. The total population of Kokrajhar district is 887,142 as per census 2011. Hinduism constitutes 59.64% of Kokrajhar population. Muslims play an important role in the electoral process of Kokrajhar forming a significant 28.44% of the total population with Christians taking up 11.40% and a negligible proportion of the total population of the district belongs to other religions. The district is predominantly inhabited by Bodos but also has a sizeable Rajbongshi and Santhal population clubbed among Hindus and Christians.

**Map 3: BTC and Population pattern**

**MAP OF BODOLAND TERRITORIAL COUNCIL**



**POPULATION PATTERN OF BTAD**

| SLNO | NAME OF THE DISTRICT | ST        | SC       | GENERAL   | TOTAL     |
|------|----------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1.   | BAKSHA               | 338,630   | 45,967   | 333,045   | 717,642   |
| 2.   | KOKRAJHAR            | 528,774   | 32,609   | 337,808   | 898,991   |
| 3.   | CHIRANG              | 169,811   | 30,035   | 143,780   | 343,628   |
| 4.   | UDALGURI             | 317,412   | 28,933   | 324,685   | 671,030   |
|      | TOTAL                | 1,354,627 | 1,37,544 | 1,139,118 | 2,631,289 |

**Source: Government of Assam**

<sup>12</sup>Bordoloi, B.N. *Tribes of Assam*. Tribal Research Institute, Assam, 1987, Part-I, Page 1-17

### ***Conflict in Kokrajhar***

The genealogy of conflict in Kokrajhar traces back to identity consciousness dissent in forming Bodo identity and the Autonomous Council. It is important to circumscribe the autonomy movement as the state which exhibited social discrimination, where the dominant group imposes a nationalist dogma, where majority ethnic groups are prevented from expressing their custom and languages. Such a situation triggers ethnic conflict, and serves to mobilize ethnicity members. Studies show that conflicts occur when dominant ethnic community in the country exercises prejudicial control over all economic opportunities leaving members of the other group dis-advantaged; this increases the likelihood of political violence (Saleh, 2013).

The time has witnessed severe intra ethnic conflict in Kokrajhar district. The Bodoland Movement has resulted in offsetting violence in the region, which is based on historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural underpinnings and has erupted in various phases<sup>13</sup>. The annals provide accounts of Bodo - Bengali *speaking* Muslim- Santhal (1996, 1998, 2012, and 2014) conflict occurred in Kokrajhar district. The issues of immigration, encroachment of tribal lands are the major factors which manifested in large scale confrontations.

There is acute absence of peace within the Kokrajhar, BTAD region; to understand the ongoing conflict and the study draws from Johan Galtung seminal work of peace and violence. To engage further it is significant to discuss violence which "is identified when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations (Johan Galtung, 19869, p. 168). He states that personal or direct violence involves actors who cause direct harm by maiming or killing someone so that they fail to reach their potential. It was evident from the earlier conflict which directs towards the attacks on people which validates the presence of structural or indirect violence. Structural violence is related to the uneven distribution of resources which then leads to social exclusion and marginalization of people. Galtung, refers to it as social injustice and it is

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<sup>13</sup>Kundu, Dilip Kumar. *The State and the Bodo Movement in Assam*. New Delhi, A.PH Publishing Corporation, 2010, pp. 42-43

characterized by unequal access to education, health, water, food, shelter and other basic services. Structural violence equates to social inequality and leads to impaired human growth and development. It delays self-actualization and, in most cases,, people fall short and fail to reach optimum potential realization. The narratives of people exposed to structural violence are underpinned by struggles, deaths, and frustrations. Another aspect that is worth considering is that of cultural violence. From the definitions given by Galtung there is a clear link between structural violence, social injustice, and social inequality. It can be argued that it is only in the absence of structural or indirect violence that a community can experience positive and sustainable peace in Kokrajhar, BTAD.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Conflict Theory***

In defining the conflict theory, it scientifically seeks to explain the general contour of conflict in society: how conflict starts and varies, and the effect it brings. The fundamental concerns of conflict theories are the unequal distribution of scarce resources and power. The resource vary according to how one implies it. Conflict theorist generally sees power as the central feature of society, rather thinking of society as held together by collective agreement concerning a cohesive set of cultural standards, as functionalist do. Where power is located and who uses it (and who doesn't) are thus fundamental to conflict theory; it is a primary factor that guides the society and social relations (Coser, 2006).

Conflict is instinctual to humans and is found everywhere in society. There are conflicts in daily lives and relationships and there is also conflict of war. But the notion of conflict is very different to human than any other animals as these conflicts are goal oriented. Primarily, there is something that one tries to achieve through conflict. Moreover, conflict being the integral part of human annals it has its impact on society. From an economic angle it has direct and indirect cost that adversely impacts the living conditions of households thereby affecting them for many years thereafter. The major costs that conflict result into are loss of lives, human suffering and destruction of

communities. Studies show that the number of death due to civil wars have increased three times more than intra-state wars since World War II (Fearon and Latin, 2003).

There has been seminal work which done to understand why one takes up arms. It involves a complex process which includes many actors in a wide range of conditions and circumstances. The relative deprivation theory gives an explanation that is based on the contrast between group's expected and actual access to power and prosperity (Gurr, 1970). This approach is closely related to group entitlement theory (Howritz, 1985) which places more explicit emphasis on the ethnic factors which accompany the economic and political. However, the theory of conflict (Galtung, 1958) provides an interesting insight on the dimensions and formation of conflict. In simple terms, conflict has been defined in terms of incompatibilities, of contradictions, and he states that it should not be confused with the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of conflict, often destructive.

Original conflict, through the mechanisms of behavioral escalation, leads to new incompatibilities, a string of derived conflict generated by acts of physical and verbal violence. Since they are derived their solution in isolation will not solve the basic conflict, but may serve the purpose of de-escalation, and hence prepare the ground for solving the basic conflict. Another aspect is the use of derived conflicts for bargaining according to the general principle that the more issues two parties have in common, the more possibilities would there be for trading off one issues against the other. But that also constitutes an incentive to engage in destructive behavior.

In this entire conflict dynamic attitudinal processes also take place, with their well-known tendency to develop in a parallel fashion. There are important symmetries in the perception; they are to some extent mirror images of each other, through imitation and projection.

But the literature of violent conflict and its economic consequences views it from different dimension—macro-level, game theory approaches and an emerging field, which analyzes the micro-level consequences of conflict, i.e., at household level (Schindler and Bruck, 2007). The macro-level literatures focus more on the causal phenomena of conflict. In recent years most of the conflict theories on intra-state war revolve around "greed" verses

"grievance" debate (Murshed & Tadjoeeddin 2007). The greed theory was theorized by Paul Collier, and is more popular amongst economists. The greed theory was put forwarded by Collier using a large sample of conflict affected countries and using empirical results found that the greed theory prevails. According to this view, conflict occurs due to greed meaning opportunity to fight which includes: financing, recruitment and geography. Financing mainly comes from natural resource endowments such as oil, diamonds, remittances from abroad, contributions from foreign states and others. While recruitment means the opportunity to induct fighting man-power and geography meaning mountains and terrains thus providing safe havens to insurgents. The greed theory considers rebellion as industry that generates profits from looting. Natural resources play a major role in greed theory. In simple terms, greed means "economic opportunity" to fight. But the approach of looking conflict through greed theory has received much criticism in recent years. There are many new macro-level theories given by different scholars to show the relationship between grievances and conflict. Most of these theories predict relative deprivation<sup>14</sup>, horizontal inequality<sup>15</sup>, religion, ethnicity or unjust political regime (Ballentine and Sherman, 2003) to be the primary factors of conflict. Studies at macro-level also deal with economic consequences of conflict that includes military spending, allocation of aid during and post-civil war.

In contrast, game theory approach focuses more on individual and group behavior of those who engage in conflict. Fearon (1994) with his game theory model showed how problems in a newly formed independent state may arise, if the state is dominated by one ethnic group but containing at least one powerful minority group. The model described, if an ethnicized state leadership was unable to credibly commit itself to protect the lives and property of subordinate ethnic group, it might then generate interest in fighting for independence. The subordinate groups might not wait to see whether the leadership honors its commitment to protect them but rather

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<sup>14</sup>Disparity between aspirations and achievements

<sup>15</sup>Horizontal Inequality is defined as inequality among culturally defined or constructed groups, in contrast to Vertical Inequality which is inequality among household or individuals. Horizontal Inequality is multi-dimensional and includes political, social and economic and range of elements.

indulge into violence immediately.

Another study carried by Yurendra Basnett (2009) in Nepal showed that one of major reason that led to "People's War" in Nepal was the CPN-M role in unifying collective grievances among diverse population in Nepal and transforming them into a collective force. Collective grievances although present throughout histories did not result into violence, until a rise of dissident organization (CPN-M) which could mobilize group behavior emerged in Nepal.

At present there is a new field emerging in conflict studies that focuses on the micro-level, i.e. at the household level. Most of the data collected at the household level consist of quantitative data available through household surveys. The World Bank since 1980s has conducted many household surveys using the Living Standard Measurement Surveys (LSMS) to provide high quality data to policy makers in order to assess the effectiveness of interventions which were designed to improve the living standards of individuals, households, communities and to understand their behavior and choices. The surveys were conducted in the conflict affected regions of Azerbaijan (1995), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2001-2004), Guatemala (2000), Kosovo (2000), Iraq (2006), Nepal (1995-2006), Timor-Leste (2001), Tajikistan (1999), Serbia (2002) and Malawi (2004) (Bruck et al., 2010). Similar surveys were carried out in Indonesia, Northern Uganda, and Rwanda with a different objective to assess the micro-level impact of conflict at the household level. But the household survey data has its limitations mainly because of migration or displacement of affected people and interruption of administration and record keeping during conflict. In most cases it's very difficult to collect data from households because of potential ethical and security challenges in these conflict-affected areas.

From all the literature which has looked into various aspects of conflict present contrasting analysis on how it affects a household. The different theories which have been studied helps in understanding the coping strategies of a household in conflict setting. In addition, however it becomes difficult to draw a conclusion on looking into one set of mechanisms because it varies geographically and depending on gender too.

### ***Literature on Household and Coping Strategies***

The household in economic literature is considered as the smallest analytical unit of production and consumption. It has the feature of co-residency, so it is also considered a unit for policymakers, as it is perceived to be congruent with housing. Furthermore, family is a pre-condition for the household. Therefore the household is often assumed to be the basic decision-making unit regarding, fertility, marriage, divorce and migration (Kujjsten and Vossen, 1988:4f). The household is a socially recognized domestic group. Its members are likely to share a common residence and to organize and carry on a range of consumption, inheritance, and reproductive activities. The specific content, intensity, and frequency of these activities vary by society, stage in the life cycle, and economic status of household members. Household inhabitants may be kin, but they may include friends, lodgers, and servants, and there are certainly family members who are not temporarily or permanently co-resident and cooperating. A part of this literature is used in the analysis of household behavior during violent conflict, and their coping mechanism.

### ***Coping Strategies***

The traditional coping strategy literature has focused on household activity choices leading up to, and during, natural disasters and famine.

The available literature on coping strategies analyses response to drought and famine (Reardon, Matlon and Delgado 1988). There is literature that studied activity choices and income diversification, and these choices are found to be affected by household size, social institutions and property rights. Coping strategies include the decision to include in forms of risk sharing and non-market forms of risk diversification.

The studies on coping strategies see it from the tactics applied by household for survival. This has been complemented by understanding the phenomenon of various mechanisms during famine. Strategies adopted by the household during conflict vary from region to region, as well as among different age group and gender. Past studies have identified different coping strategies of a household in famine.

The available literature on coping strategies overlaps with the mechanisms

of natural disaster and famine. But this alone is not sufficient to justify the strategies will be same in both of the cases.

The very visible effect of conflicts is the change in economic and social behavior of households affected by violence. There is significant development economics literature on coping strategies adopted by households in times of economic crises. The literature has shown abundant evidence that households living in risky environments generally develop a complexity of (ex-ante) risk-management and (ex-post) risk-coping strategies. (Dasgupta, 1993) reports increases in fertility amongst households living in uncertain environments. The increase in fertility rates is thought to compensate for the loss of children in the early years, as well as increasing household labor and creating an insurance mechanism for old age. Dercon (1996) describes how households in risky environments choose to undertake economic activities with lower return but likely to involve a lower economic risk, such as subsistence agriculture or cultivation of safer traditional crop varieties rather than riskier but higher return varieties. This strategy is also popular amongst households with little assets that could serve as collateral for credit access. Kazianga and Udry (2004) analyze strategies followed by households to smooth consumption during a period of severe drought between 1981 and 1985 in rural Burkina Faso. These include livestock, grain storage and inter-household transfers. They find that households rely almost exclusively on self-insurance in the form of adjustments to grain stocks to smooth out consumption, with little reliance on risk sharing or the use of buffer stocks such as livestock.

These strategies adopted by households in response to economic risks and shocks in peaceful regions may differ from those used in conflict settings. Political shocks such as civil war have a covariate character, but households that are salient to the conflict may be particularly badly hit by violence. For instance, while a high level of education may be a secure source of income in times of peace, it can become a liability in times of violence as was the case during the Cultural Revolution in China or the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (de Walque, 2006), in which educated population groups were specifically targeted. As a result, males of school age during the period have lower educational level than previous or



subsequent cohorts. Other known household insurance mechanisms and consumption smoothing strategies may fail in a situation of conflict. These perverse effects of conflicts are likely to have severe negative long-term impacts on the accumulation of human capital and assets in households and communities affected by violence.

There is empirical evidence on coping strategies adopted by households in conflict settings when facing the loss of household members, the destruction of assets or forced displacement. In many instance, households in conflict areas face these effects simultaneously. From all the studies available there are household coping strategies which is similar during conflict setting as well: accumulation of savings and buffer stocks, return to subsistence agriculture and low-risk activities, reallocation of labor supply amongst household members, self-recruitment of household members into armed groups and migration.

### ***Conceptual Framework of Coping Strategies of Household***

Within the broad and diverse field of coping strategies there exist numerous underlying theories which seek to mitigate the effect of conflict on households. The interventions and strategies of household is examined by using a theoretical framework developed by Michael J. Watts, "Arid Land Studies; for response to household food shortages, coping strategies employed by household".

The model explains the farmers coping strategies in maintaining household food security. In situation of food insecurity; households productive and reproductive viability is threatened farmers employ strategies that increases their income. It designates the response trajectories of household over time and provides details of stages which either overlap or similar during natural disaster and conflict. It also presents how household transition from the initial shortage of food or inability to provide sufficient quantities of food to all members of the households. There has been common indicator which is found in the coping strategies and stages which start from trivial to extreme.

The First stage is marked by initial shortage of food or inability to provide food to the members of the households. And with time there are

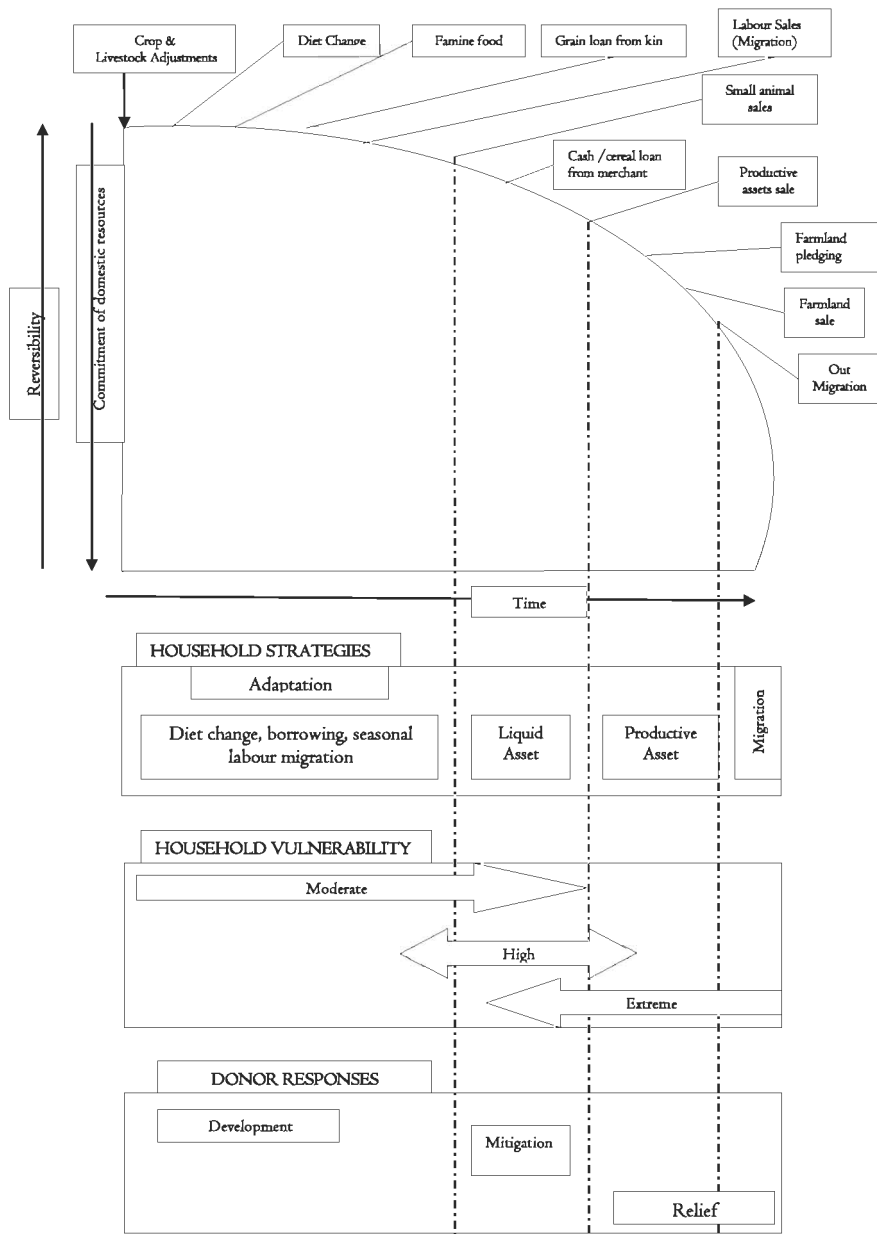
dietary changes. It is important to see that the frequency and severity of coping strategies will vary according to the cause of food shortage.

Secondly, the sale of assets specifically non-productive assets and temporary migration for work or land. In addition, due to sale of non-productive assets there is onset of loans/or credits from merchants.

In the Third stage there is shift of priority from assets preservation to food consumption. At this point the situation has worsened a lot and all assets are sold for survival. These disposals of assets jeopardize the future security of the household.

The final stage represents complete destitution; where the household no longer exists as it once did and there is permanent migration (in order to resettle on suitable place and find livelihood). There is complete dependence from external support, as the individual can no longer sustain himself/herself.

The types of coping strategies employed by households not only indicate vulnerability to food shortage; but correspond to different types of government and donor responses. The framework formed the foundation to fathom and recapitulate elements of coping strategies of household affected by conflict in Kokrajhar, BTAD.



Source: Adapted from Michel J. Watts (1983), Office of Arid Land studies. University of Arizona.1991

## **Findings**

The findings of various coping strategies of a household in conflict affected villages is presented under themes of social-economic impact in terms of occupation, migration, savings (cash), access to markets and social network which are some of the primary drivers which influence the choice of strategy. In political aspects, issues such as affiliations, monetary supports from parties/foundations were analyzed. It also presents the findings and analysis regarding the household response to conflict and suggestions for the role of NGOs during pre-post conflict situations.

### ***Occupation***

Occupation refers to the kind of work performed in a job; whereas a job is a "set of tasks and duties performed or meant to be performed, by one person, including for an employer or in self-employment." The concept of occupation is defined as a "set of job whose main task and duties are characterized by the high degree of similarity." A person may be associated with an occupation through the main job currently held, a second job, a future job or a previously held job. Occupation is an activity that serves as one's regular source of livelihood. There can be multiple occupations that one performs.

Occupation can also be a professional and non-professional, physical and non-physical, etc. In 6 villages under the study area the occupation varies between physical and professional like farmers, daily wage earners, carpenter, government servant like teachers and others. Prior to the riots majority of households were primarily dependent on agriculture before conflict, and during off season they take up other work to help them to sustain their livelihood throughout the year. Another source of livelihood is animal husbandry. They have a natural propensity to rear animals like pigs, goats, cows etc.

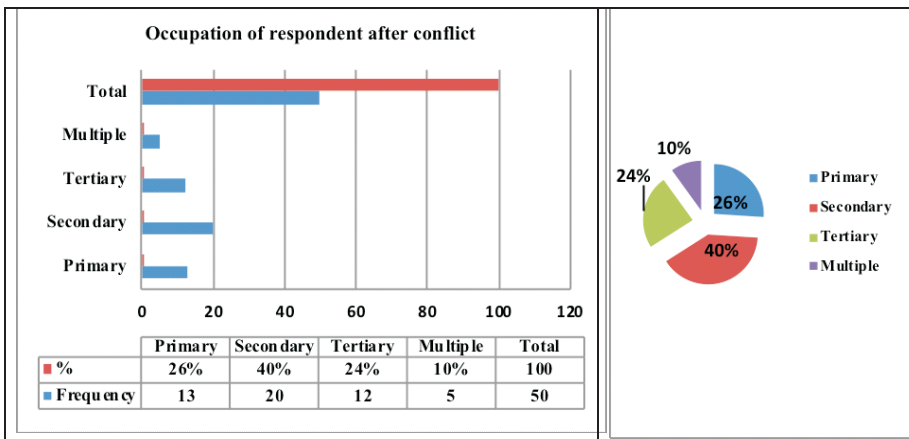
Majority of the people in the affected villages were dependent on the other communities for their livelihood. Because good number of the people were engaged in secondary occupation ranging from, mason work, and carpenters, artisans etc. All those who are involved in earning from such

livelihood need to sell it in the market. And due to conflict access to other community was not possible which reduced income.

The location of all the conflict affected villages was such that every Bodo village has a village occupied by Muslims right next to it. This peculiar structural setting of the villages made people largely interdependent upon each other for livelihood.

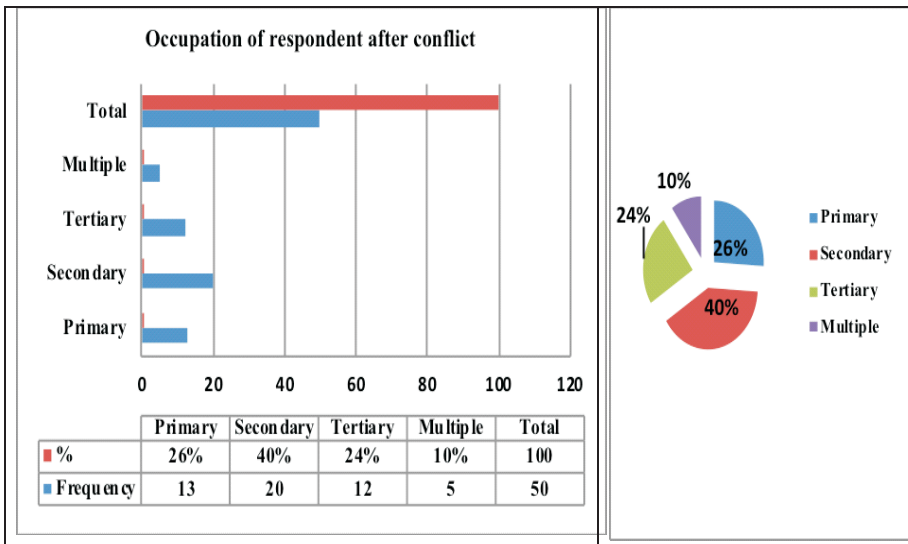
Table 1 enlists occupations of all 50 respondents and is divided into four categories: *primary* as family who depends mostly on farming/ agriculture, *secondary* as family who depends on business, wage laborers, skills like masons, carpenter, artisans, drivers etc. and in *tertiary*, where member of family are engaged in government and non-government services. The families who were involved in more than one type of occupation (example: farming and business) were categorized as *multiple*.

**Table 1: Occupation of the respondent before conflict**



There are a range of occupations that existed in these villages, such as carpentry, masonry, artisans, government jobs and business, etc. The people in government jobs are more secure in terms of income and the rest of the people are who are engaged in other occupations rely on other communities for livelihood. *For example*, an individual engaged in carpentry, travels and relies on the other community or villages, and due to conflict the access to those villages stopped.

**Table 2: Occupation of the respondent after conflict**



In *Table 2* the occupation of respondents after conflict shows 28 percent of respondents were dependent on primary occupation followed by 38 percent in secondary and 24 percent in tertiary, and 10 percent were still engaged in multiple occupations.

There has been 31.5 per cent decrease in primary occupation after the conflict followed by 53.8 per cent increase in secondary occupation. The increase in secondary occupation after conflict was because a majority of the respondents "primary" has shifted to :secondary" occupation. This was because the households that were dependent on farming/agriculture were unable to continue with their work due to unavailability of agricultural workers.

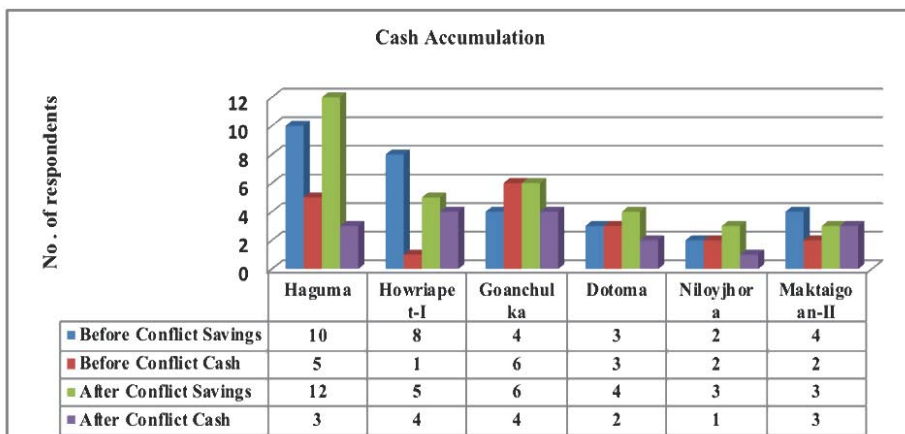
♦ **Savings (including cash)**

The term *savings* refers to the money set aside for the purpose of future use. Savings generally represents only one part of individual assets and unlike investment this has minimal exposure to risks. Savings are usually used to meet short-term needs. People save in order to deal with emergency situations and meet unexpected expenses. One of the most important elements of saving is that they are safe, can be accessed at any time but it does not generate any profit.

Savings is the prominent coping strategy adopted by household during conflict settings. It is the important determinant of the ability of the household to cope with the income shocks. During conflict the most common effects are the intentional destruction of property, looting, market and assets. It has been common in most villages under my study that the household sell their asset during times of need. The ability of households to adapt their welfare status to shock situations also depends on the level of savings of the household. If the household is not able to insure its income against shocks or is not able to borrow, then they resort to savings.

In *graph 1* below, conflict affected village households have resorted to saving cash rather than relying on buffer stock.

**Graph 1: Cash Accumulation before and after conflict**



The most visible form of coping strategy used by the households was the sale of livestock. But during conflict livestock can be a risky source of

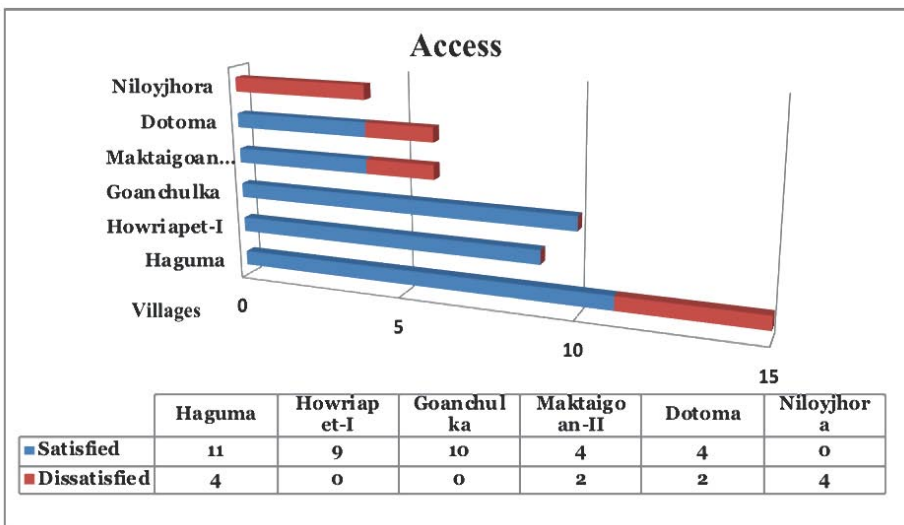
savings as it can be easily stolen and killed. In six (6) villages it has been found that households have lost livestock's due to theft and pillaging. As a result, the households are no longer resorting to accumulation of and sales of livestock to protect their welfare in difficult times. The usefulness of livestock as a buffer stock can be risky in the face of threat and violence. This is because during conflict, access to market areas where livestock could be sold is prevented due for safety reasons, and at the same time they are insecure assets. Moreover, households have to sell the livestock below market price, because the household is in dire need of money and they lose the ability to bargain with the buyer.

One of the household response was, *"We earn just little to feed ourselves, how can we think of savings"*

♦ **Access to market**

The term *access* refers to the ability or right to make use of market. As visible in the chart, it was found that households don't have the access to markets and are not able to sell their livestock or assets in time of need. For the research "access to markets" was used in terms of the distance travelled, to understand the satisfaction and dissatisfaction level of the households under study.

**Graph 1: Access to markets**





A total of 78% were satisfied, whereas only 24% households faced difficulty in accessing market after the conflict. In *graph 1* the two villages Niloyjhora, Maktaigoan-II and Dotoma show that majority of dissatisfaction level while accessing market. Either of the villages facing difficulty travelling have to pass through villages of other communities and vice-versa. The villages fear threat of violence and insecurity; a majority of the households in those villages prefer to go in groups when traveling by road passing through the villages dominated by other community. Moreover, the unavailability of other modes of transportation after the conflict further exacerbated the situation. It has affected every household, irrespective of their occupation and religion.

There has been constant threat of theft while going to sell livestock and other assets. It has not only affected the household in accessing markets but also limited the access to inputs (food) of the household. However, it has been observed that all the area with mixed communities fare much better in mobility, whereas in areas where only two communities resides i.e., Bodo and Santhal, feel uncertainty over sudden eruption of violence.

On being asked of difficulty in accessing market one of the aged respondents who run a shop replied, "*We are surrounded by the people of other communities. I am old and live alone, they come and loot my shop. I am not scared of dying however there are others in communities who are threatened.*"

#### ◆ Migration

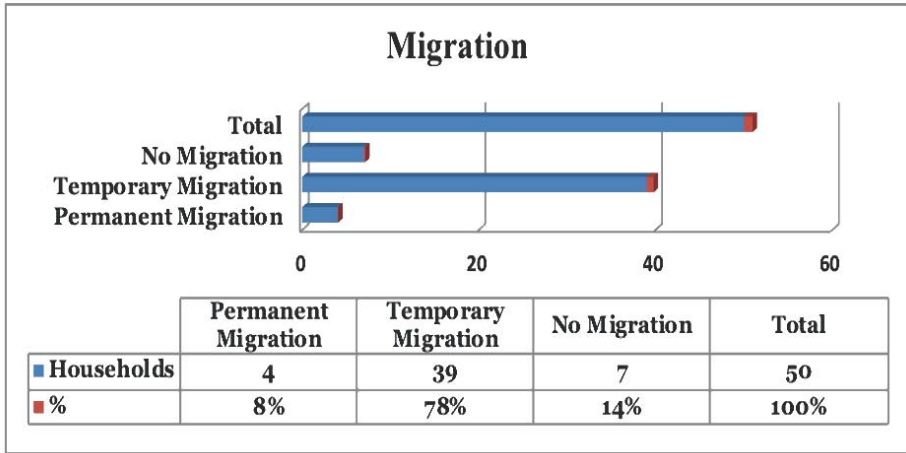
Migration is one of the difficult decisions to make where there is movement of people from one place to another for the purpose of taking up permanent or semi-permanent residence, usually across a political boundary.

There are various types of migration but in context of the study, the focus was on "*Internal migration*" i.e., moving to a new home within a state whereas "*External migration*" refers to moving to a new home in a different state. Migration is not a new phenomenon. It has been practiced by humans throughout history. There are numerous factors which press people into choosing to migrate, including: poverty, armed conflict, economic hardship, social strife and political turmoil.

In the villages it has been found that conflict has severely impacted livelihood. Income of wage laborers decreased, assets were lost to pillaging,

and moreover access to markets was seriously affected. With food and alternative employment increasingly scarce, outbound migration has increased.

**Graph 1: Migration of households**

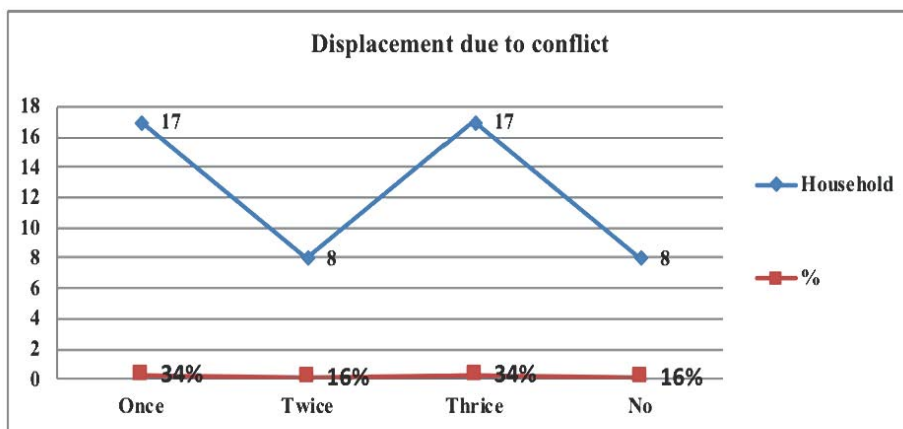


In *graph 3* migration of households was divided into three categories: cases of no migration are those where people did not migrate at all, in temporary migration households migrated for a limited period of time, and permanent migration is where are households permanently and completely left a place.

Migration is one of the avoidance strategies the household undertake to cope with their situation. Different kinds of mobility are practiced, such as labor's migration and displacement. Mobility is not merely the automatic response to conflict. This movement does not take place in search of security, but for other reasons which prompt this decision.

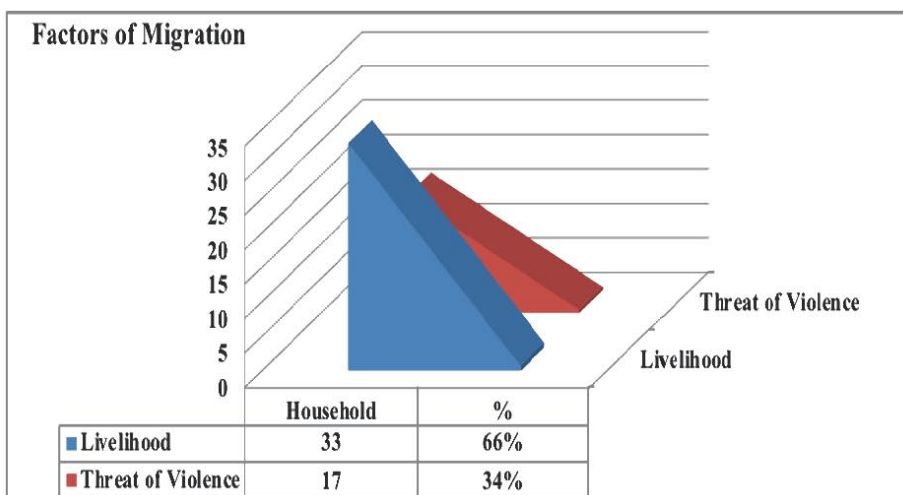
The study found that the household which were displaced more than thrice have permanently migrated to other areas (*graph 2*). There are households unwilling to leave behind their ancestral home because of their attachment. A majority of households did not migrate because they did not have the means to migrate or were too poor. Few of the households responded, "*Where should we go? We don't have any other place to migrate.*"

**Graph 2: Displacement of households**



In *graph 3* economic factors or the search for better livelihood in different place, opportunities and threat to violence determinants led household to settle in different area. It has also been found that households no longer want to live in an environment where there is constant threat to one's life. Moreover, educated households preferred to avoid living in such situation.

**Graph 3: Factors for migration**



♦ **Social networks**

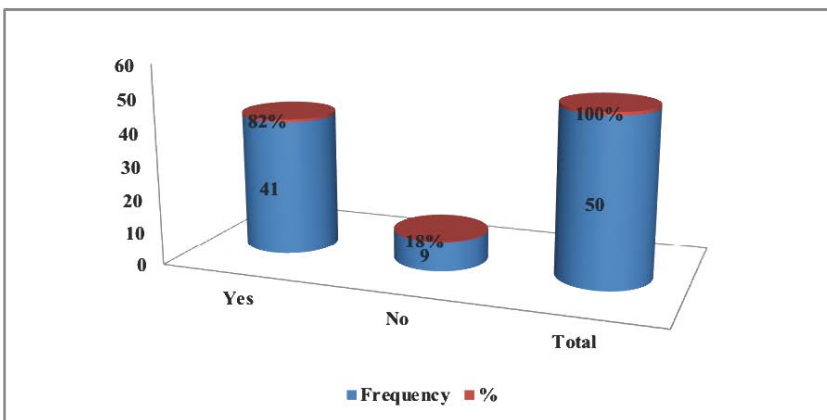
Social networks play a very important role, especially at the time of crisis. These include interaction with family, friends, neighbors and the wider community. The influence of one's social network will determine the recovery of a household especially during a disaster. Evidence from various studies on conflict show that conflict often disrupts the social network within a community (Justino, 2007).

***Relation within the village***

In the villages under study social networks play a major role in household response to conflict. For instance, one respondent said, "*Whenever there is less production of rice in a year, I never worry. I always ask from my neighbor or take rice from Bhoral<sup>16</sup> and return the same when my agricultural production is good.*"

The villages in the study area share a robust social network. A household maintains good relations among themselves and help each other on various socio-cultural occasions. After the riots people were seen helping each other during reconstruction of houses. It has been found, as presented in graph 1, that the community mobilized groups as a coping strategy to keep vigil to protect the assets and life.

***Graph 1: Mobilizations of Vigilante Groups in Village***



<sup>16</sup>A house raised at least 1 foot above ground to store grains to protect from moisture and rodents

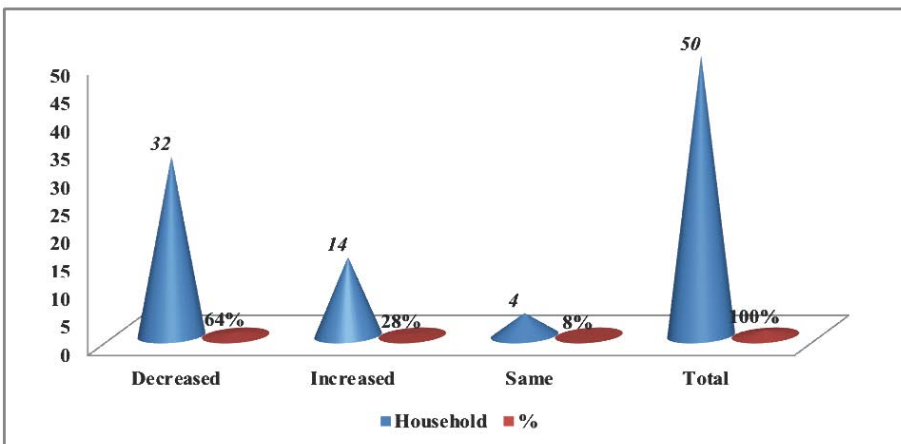
However, there were grievances from few households that they do not want to maintain relationship with the neighbors who were not helping them in their difficult times, especially to those who were unaffected during the riots. The riots had impoverished many households and most individuals were unable to support the members of their own community. One of the major implications of the riots was the breakdown of local institutions in villages. Before the riots, community groups helped in bringing the community together through meetings, organizing festivals and other forms of interactions within the community. But this traditional institution is fractured and non-functioning in the villages which can affect the existing social networks within the villages in the long term.

**Relations with other villages**

"Ethnic solidarity results from high levels of communication. As a result, in everyday interaction within an ethnic group, if someone takes advantage of someone else, the victim will be able to identify the malfeasant and refuse to future cooperation with him or her." (Fearon et al. 1996)

Before the riots the relationship between various communities was good. There was a high level of interdependency among villages thus maintaining the sustainability of all communities. However, after the riot the relations between communities and the quality of their interactions declined.

**Graph 2: Social Bonding among communities**



*Graph 2* presents the breakdown of social cohesion and trust among people of all communities. This definitely had a negative impact on household recovery in the long run. During my interview many of the households expressed that they can never rely on the opposite community who had devastated their lives during riots. Thus, the existing community relations between them deteriorated, affecting their occupation due to limited access to villages, credit arrangements based on informal ties and exclusion from new norms and institutional processes.

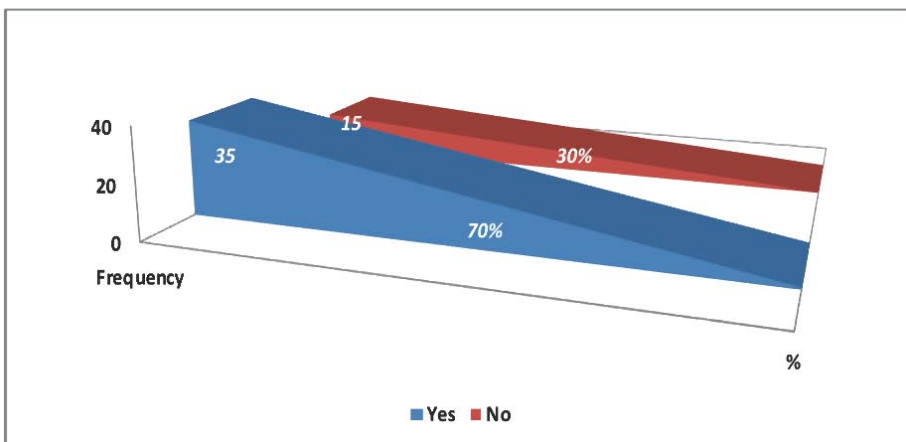
♦ **Political Affiliations**

Politics - is a necessary evil of society. It occurs due to diversity of people and scarcity of resources. Politics or struggle for power itself influences the society and social problems that have equal impact on political developments.

Politics here is dealt with as a process by which people seek affiliation to immunity which will act as a shield to deter the consequences of conflict on the entire community. Moreover, the situation creates porous areas for parties to recruit individuals in their party.

It was found during the study that few households vote for their respective parties. However, after the conflict the arrival of political parties escalated to enroll new members in their party as presented in *graph 1*.

***Graph 1: Political mobilization***



The conflict in Kokrajhar is largely over land, natural resources and encroachment of the latter communities seen as "illegal immigrants". The complex issue of typical suspicion towards the latter communities has made them vulnerable to oppression. Moreover, the entire issue of "illegal immigrants" has been politicized and has affected the entire Bengali-Muslim population.

The dominance of one group or political party has led to political exclusion of other communities. Misdirected intervention by the central and the state government in addressing the vulnerability and insecurities of different communities living in the region has led to politics of competitive extremism in the region and consequent polarization. The policy of appeasement and pacifying one aggrieved ethnic group by the state has often ended up making other communities insecure, perpetuating conflict in the region. This has created resentment among the *non-Bodo* communities and increased insecurity about growth prospects, collective fear fuming from state weakness, discrimination crystallizing in the form of other populist ideologies.

## **Role of Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs)**

### ***Government - the First Responders***

Governments have massive responsibilities to shoulder during crises. They have the power and the authority to take decisions and they have ample resources to deploy in order to contain any crisis situation. While the local governments should be able to singlehandedly take care of the people affected by natural disasters or conflicts, it is often seen that the magnitude of crisis exceeds the local government's capacity to handle making them turn to the centre for support. This brings humanitarian organizations to the rescue of affected people or communities.

### ***INGOs/NGOs***

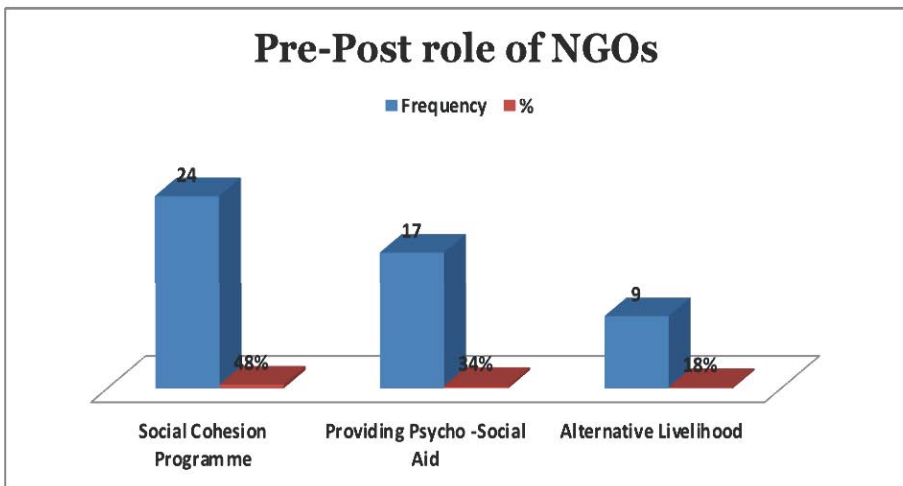
NGO intervention in Assam is a common phenomenon following any humanitarian crisis since the state government fails to address them effectively as seen in the past incidences of floods or conflicts in the state. A number of local, national and international NGOs have intervened during emergency

situations in Assam, whether natural disasters or conflicts.

Some of the organizations have been successful in making an impact on the lives of the affected people. These NGOs are successful because of the best practices that they adopt to address the issues at hand. However, there are sectors to cover in bringing perpetuity of sustainable peace in the conflict affected areas of Kokrajhar, BTAD.

During the study it was found that respondents had benefitted from the immediate interventions they received in the form of food items and non-food items. There is a general consensus among people who believe that there is a need for transition of NGOs from responders to adopt an inclusive long term approach.

**Graph 8: Role of NGOs**



It is evident from *Graph 8*, that 48% of households agree that they need long term programmes for social cohesion and trust building among the communities. Whereas, 34% press for psychosocial aid for the household after the conflict; and referral if there is further need for psychiatric care.

## Conclusion

The study was undertaken to understand the effect of conflict on households and their coping strategies. The study conducted in Kokrajhar



area is considered due to its complexity from being one of the most virulent zones of conflict. Living in an environment of chronic fear and anxiety gives birth to a culture of distrust in the region, which shapes the social transactions within the community. In such a dynamic, how a household functions and copes with conflict settings is being analyzed.

An array of literature on coping strategies of households during famine and natural disaster has been referred to, in order to analyze the mechanism of households. However, this analysis of coping strategies is very complex due to the demography of the region under study.

The findings suggest that the dominant coping strategies include migration, selling of livestock and savings. The poor household predominantly relied on "community resource sharing" of water and food for their sustenance during conflict. In addition, informal support mechanisms such as kin and social networks, credit from merchant helped them to cope with the devastating situations. Thus "social capital" was crucial and contributed to gaining access to other resources, including loans and opportunities for daily labor. People of the villages diversified their livelihood by engaging in different on and off-farm activities in response to risks.

Coping strategies based on real time situations have been far more significant than external assistance. Although they have limited options, a household searches for strategies to adapt to the reality of severe disruption of their livelihoods. Due to a lack of financial and physical capital, households increasingly rely on natural, human, social capitals, but these capitals are not enough, which impedes their capacity to cope as well. The findings identified enormous economic loss among the conflict affected and communities.

The Government and NGOs took initiatives in order to support the coping and recovery capacity of the household, but it only partially helped the long-term impacts of such responses which were not enough to recover livelihoods. There is a need to capitalize on the inherent social and cultural capacities of the communities for household recovery.

In Kokrajhar micro-level study of conflict on households and their coping strategies is limited. The unavailability of data undermines the ability to understand the various coping strategies adopted by households headed by women. A future study on "gender-based coping" strategies will be

constructive in understanding the multidimensional and complex mechanisms towards effective interventions that promote building of robust coping strategies to reduce psychological distress and livelihood recovery.

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