

Circular Migration, Resilience, Suffering, and Trauma: Understanding the Experiences of Survivors of Assam Floods in India

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the lived experiences of survivors of Assam floods. Drawing on qualitative data from semistructured interviews conducted with 12 participants, we found that their suffering and trauma stem from loss of property, livelihoods, and loved ones. While many participants experienced significant suffering and trauma, they also demonstrated resilience in their grief, anxiety, and depression. Our findings suggest a need to develop targeted interventions and policies that address their needs and enhance their well-being.

Keywords

Assam floods, circular migration, India, resilience, suffering, trauma

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Introduction

Migration

Leaving one place of residence from another is a central feature of humanity. Over the last three decades, India—the most populous country in the world—has experienced a large-scale of rural to urban migration, having a huge impact on the socioeconomic structure of the country (Kumar et al., 2022; Singh, 2016). According to Kumar et al. (2022), more than two-thirds (69%) of India's 1.42 billion people live in rural areas. Many of them are unable to secure a meaningful livelihood (Kumar et al., 2022), pushing them to migrate to other regions. Many theories attempt to explain why people migrate. People move for different reasons—social, economic, political and education (Udah, 2017; Udah and Francis, 2022) Sometimes, environmental changes can cause people to migrate to new destinations for safety (Millock, 2015).

In the Indian context, migration is driven by many reasons such as marriage, work, business, education, poverty, discrimination, drought, floods, and food crises, but mainly guided by the push and pull factors (Abbas and Varma, 2014). The push factors are poverty, lack of opportunities, unemployment, underdevelopment, caste atrocities, social prejudice, low wages, and low agricultural productivity (Kumar et al., 2022). The pull factors motivate migrants from rural areas to new regions and urban cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and other metropolitan areas of possible betterment, high employment opportunities, better working conditions, education, and less social discrimination based on caste (Abbas and Varma, 2014), resulting, sometimes, in a more efficient allocation of human resources to sectors and regions where they are better utilized (Datta, 2022).

In the 2001 Census of India, a person is considered a migrant when he or she is at a different place than his or her place of birth or place of last residence. Marriage, especially among women, is the primary reason for female migration, accounting for 91% of rural female migrations and 61% of urban female migrations (Abbas and Varma, 2014). However, most Indian men migrate for work-related or business-related reasons. Employment accounts for 56% of urban male migrations. While migration for marriage among women is skewed towards closer distances, men do not seem to factor in distance when migrating for employment, and education. Most internal migrants are between 16 and 40 years old (Abbas and Varma, 2014). In some situations, these migrant individuals come back to their original locations because migration often requires physiological and behavioral adaptations.

Indian migrants are distinguished as permanent, semipermanent, and seasonal or circular migrants. Semipermanent are temporary migrants, whose duration of stay may vary between 60 days and 1 year and are more likely to have precarious jobs in their destination areas or lack the resources to make a permanent move. Many semipermanent migrants have homes and families in their sending districts while residing in their destination cities for years or decades. In Assam, frequent and severe flooding lead to circular migration patterns, where individuals migrate seasonally in response to recurring environmental disruptions, mirroring a broader pattern observed globally (Panigrahi and Suar, 2021). The annual floods in Assam not only displace local communities but also necessitate a return to flood-prone areas, illustrating how ecological conditions can shape migration dynamics in specific regions based on their socio-environmental challenges (Saikia and Sarkar, 2019). By contrast, seasonal or circular migrants, may stay, temporarily, at their destination cities due to environmental climatic changes such as floods for 6 months or more and are likely to return to their homes after a short period (Kumar et al., 2022).

Flood-related circular migration is a unique variety of migration in India which has received negligible attention in research and academia. It is a phenomenon comprising colossal tragedy where people living on the riverbanks and adjoining areas are forced to migrate to other regions to survive and secure a livelihood (Sreekumar and Mandal, 2024). It is becoming a common

happening and challenge and perpetual in nature. In India, millions of people are affected by floods every year, wherein people from all ages face multifaceted problems in floods hit regions, causing people to leave their locality and migrate to other regions to survive (Mahanta and Das, 2017b). However, the temporal duration of seasonal migration resulting from floods is only a few months of rainy seasons, creating life threats to the people living in those localities.

Flood-related circular migration in the state of Assam poses difficulties of survival and adaptation for many Assamese communities in Northeast India. During flood times, they leave their houses and move to higher grounds or safer places, often, in another region. They return to their homes whenever the water recedes, maybe 1 to 3 months, to recover and start life again. Their movement is not just once in a year but regularly whenever there is flood (Coelho, 2012; Mahanta and Das, 2017b). Often, they may not have jobs or are just employed in the low-paying, insecure, and unprotected informal market jobs. As seasonal migrants, they have poor access to health services, and no housing. Often, they do not have any government identity proof of the cities where they come for work (Abbas and Varma, 2014).

Studies also demonstrate that survivors of floods experience significant suffering, including trauma, grief, anxiety, and depression, stemming from loss of property, livelihoods, and loved ones (Lee et al., 2009). Research indicates that traditional healing practices, community support, and religious/spiritual coping mechanisms play pivotal roles in the healing process for survivors of floods (Norris and Anbarasu, 2017). Access to mental health services and psychosocial support is often limited to flood-affected regions, making it challenging for survivors to seek help for their healing journey (Saha, 2021). At the same time, studies highlight the importance of social capital in the healing journey. Disaster volunteers, through the cultivation of social capital, strengthen community resilience, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of disaster policies and strategies (Akbar and Aldrich, 2018).

Resilience

Resilience is evident when a given event has little or no impact on an individual who is, presumably, able to mobilize internal resources that existed pre-trauma, and transform their experience post-trauma (Harvey, 2007). Resilience among survivors of floods emerges as a multifaceted concept, with studies emphasizing the significance of social support, community cohesion, and adaptive coping strategies (Udah et al., 2019, 2024). In their study exploring the precursors of resilience among survivors of the 2018 Kerala floods, Kiran et al. (2021) found that resilience depends on dispositional, cognitive, and situational attributes. Self-efficacy, hope, optimism, striving, and grit are examples of dispositional attributes that combine adaptive mechanisms to address emergent problems (Philip and Vithya, 2023). Cognitive attributes such as reframing and flexibility help survivors analyze problems and devise adaptable responses. Situational attributes include social support, community embedding, and collective efficacy, all of which provide a means of overcoming situational pressures. These characteristics help survivors' resilience in the face of adversity (Panigrahi and Suar, 2021). Despite this, flood-related circular migration is both a challenge and an adaptive strategy that contributes to the resilience of survivors, as it provides access to resources and opportunities for recovery (Khatun et al., 2018; Borah et al., 2023).

While much has been written about the experiences, challenges, and difficulties of permanent and semipermanent migrants in India, less attention has been given to the plight, suffering, and trauma experienced by the Assamese communities resulting from flood-related circular migration. This article, therefore, aims to address this by focusing on the experiences, suffering, trauma, and resilience of Assam people impacted by flood-related circular migration. Before proceeding, we provide a brief historical context and unique challenges of Assamese people in India.

Assamese people in India

The Assamese people are the indigenous inhabitants of the northeastern state of Assam in India. Assam, also called the Gateway to Northeast India, has a rich cultural heritage, history, and tradition that shape the identity of the Assamese people (Baruah, 2020). Historically, Assam region has been a melting pot of various ethnic communities such as the Assamese, Bodos, Ahoms, and Mishing, including the Australians, Mongoloids, and Caucasoids (Hussain, 2021). Assam has rich natural resources and is home to numerous tribes, each with their own heritage, culture, attire, and way of life. Most tribes have their own languages; however, Assamese is the state language. Culturally, Assam is renowned for its vibrant festivals, traditional dances, and classical art forms. Assamese people exhibit three unique cultural traits: the Vedic or Hindu culture, the Tibeto-Burman or Tribal culture, and the Tai or Ahom culture (Hussain, 2021). The assimilation of diverse cultural influences is evident in the art, language, and traditions of the Assamese people. Managing the aspirations and concerns of these diverse tribes continues to pose a challenge for the state (Cantlie, 2022).

The Assamese language, Assamese script, and literature contribute significantly to the cultural identity of the region (Baruah, 2020). The Ahom kingdom ruled Assam for about 600 years before British colonialism and played a crucial role in shaping its unique cultural identity and political landscape. The British introduced tea plantations which became an important part of the Assam region. Assam has been primarily rural since prehistoric times. Even during the reigns of Bhaskarvarma and other notable monarchs, Assam had few towns. Villages occupied over 90% of the land area. Furthermore, farming and agriculture employed 80% of the population. As a result, it would not be wrong to argue that Assamese culture was founded on agriculture (Gogoi, 2002). Also, socio-demographically, one-quarter of the Assamese population is Muslim. The Hindu faith and the Vedic civilization form the foundation of Assamese culture. The Vaishnavas (a Hindu group) constitute most of the Assamese population (Dutta and Goswami, 2021). The Assamese community being predominantly dependent on farming and fishing and owing to their Hindu faith have a strong symbolic relationship with water where water is worshipped and considered an important resource for livelihood generation (Mitra, 2023). These factors not only shape the socio-economic landscape but also contribute to the unique identity and strength of the Assamese people.

The lush landscapes and the mighty Brahmaputra River further add to the unique geographical and cultural features of Assam. While the water from the river Brahmaputra and other water bodies is revered in religious and cultural contexts, the annual monsoon floods, exacerbated by the Brahmaputra's swelling, pose a perennial threat and persistent challenge to the people of Assam, bringing devastation, affecting agriculture, and causing displacement and disruption to normal life (Nayak and Panda, 2016). Year after year, the Assamese population is forced to leave their homes due to the floods and move to safer places, often, for long periods of time. This comes also with the challenge of finding new means of livelihood and moving back to their villages after the floods subside leading to what scholars have described as "seasonal circular migration" (Kumar et al., 2022). In what follows, we discuss circular migration in India and the theoretical and conceptual framework that we drew on to think about and write up the data collected for this article.

Circular migration and survivors of Assam floods in India

There have been a lot of disparities in the literature as to what constitutes circular migration (Solé et al., 2016; Wickramasekara, 2014). Many scholars use circular migration to refer to the temporary and repetitive movement of people between two or more places, involving migration from a

home country to a destination country and back (Skeldon, 2012). It is cyclical in nature, with migrants moving back and forth between their home and host locations. Circular migration can be long term, which involves the person going to a new place due to factors such as job opportunities and better prospects for at least 1 to 6 months or more, or short-term or seasonal migration, which is usually due to natural disasters like floods or forced displacements due to various reasons. Factors influencing circular migration patterns include economic considerations, social ties, cultural traditions, and access to resources in both origin and destination locations.

In India, circular migration is used interchangeably with seasonal, short-term, temporary, and spontaneous migration which, in essence, is a move made for a short period of time with the intention of returning to the place of usual residence (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003). Temporary migration is also perceived as a transitional step before a permanent change of residence (Pham and Hill, 2008). It involves temporary stays in both the home and destination cities and states. Moreover, contemporary trends indicate that a growing number of Indian migrants do not intend to settle permanently and choose to retain strong links with their villages because of social ties and a long-term intention to look for a better life in the village (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003). It has also been pointed out that research is yet to capture the magnitude of short-term seasonal or circular migrants (Srivastava, 2012).

Seasonal circular migration has multilayered impacts ranging from physical loss of family members, livestock, and cattle to transitory homelessness and the forced need to find a new identity and to suffering, emotional trauma, and constant looming uncertainty and insecurity (Chowdhury et al., 2020). It can also contribute to economic development through the migrants' remittances to their homes. In the economy of rural households of India, temporary migration plays an important role, not only by securing household survival but also by providing income to household members (Keshri and Bhagat, 2010). However, short-term circular migrants differ from other migrants in India. They are most vulnerable, often residing at worksites or in the open, while a small percentage live in crowded tenanted places. They are also heterogeneous in terms of their characteristics.

Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC)¹ are overrepresented among them (Srivastava, 2012). These migrants enjoy a tenuous relation with the villages from where they come and have no civic rights or entitlements in the areas where they migrate to. This includes lack of access to the public health facilities and, in many cases, even to the banking system (Kumar et al., 2022). Long-term circular migrants to cities negotiate their spaces with urban interlocutors over a prolonged period, obtaining some civic entitlements. Even among this group, access to benefits remains limited, and many of these migrants engage in the informal economy as wage workers or self-employed (Srivastava, 2012). In contra-distinction to long-term migrants, short-term circular migrants are from poorer and landless groups (Srivastava, 2012).

The cyclical nature of short-term migration in India poses challenges in terms of mental health and social integration, as migrants often grapple with feelings of rootlessness and a lack of stability. In addition, studies indicate that circular migrants often face adverse mental health impacts due to factors such as discrimination, cultural bereavement, language difficulties, identity crisis, substance abuse, and poor healthcare access (Kumar et al., 2022). A large majority of circular migrants are daily wagers who have low income, financial constraints, and poor living conditions that are dilapidated, unhygienic, and scarce of basic amenities like clean water supply and electricity (Kusuma et al., 2014). However, circular migration can help migrants maintain intimate bonds with homelands despite disaster risk because of factors such as place attachment.

During and post-COVID-19 pandemic, India witnessed a surge in circular migration. Millions of people, especially migrant workers, were forced to indulge in circular migration (Kumar et al., 2022). Also, climate change and natural disasters like flood and erosion have led many Indians to

become circular migrants. In the Indian context, climate-displaced populations are vulnerable and suffer from reduced visibility and legitimacy, which increases poverty and economic degradation (Kiran et al., 2021). Migration pressures due to climate change such as the Kerala and Karnataka floods forced many to become circular migrants and adapt to new environments (Kiran et al., 2021; Marino and Lazrus, 2015). Around 2 lakh people in 20 districts were affected in the 2022 Assam floods. Similarly, the survivors of Assam floods suffer a loss of income and are forced to go into debt by taking high-interest loans to make up for the loss of crops and rebuild their damaged houses. Frequent floods in areas of Assam also have a damaging impact on people who rely on fishing and agriculture for their livelihood (Bora, 2010). They also experience significant suffering, including trauma, grief, anxiety, and depression, stemming from loss of property, livelihoods, and loved ones (Bora, 2010). As a result of the recurring challenge of managing the floods, many of them are at risk of falling deeper into poverty (Bora, 2010). Thus, the cyclical nature of migration, resulting from the floods, poses challenges in terms of mental health and social integration among Assamese. Survivors, often, grapple with feelings of rootlessness and a lack of stability (Gogoi, 2023). However, the psychological impact of seasonal circular migration on the Assamese people is under-researched. Hence, it is important to examine the experiences of trauma, suffering, and resilience and coping strategies among the Assamese affected by floods. The extended time frame and disruptive nature of floods are such that the effects of secondary stressors are highly significant as they prolong the welfare, physical, and psychosocial needs of those affected (Johal and Mounsey, 2016; Kiran et al., 2021). Therefore, this article seeks to understand the unique challenges and impacts of flood-related circular migration on the survivors of Assam floods and develop targeted interventions and policy recommendations that address their needs and enhance their well-being. In addition, this article contributes to the broader field of disaster psychology, where research has often centered on immediate response and post-traumatic stress.

Locating the theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical lens adopted in this article builds on ecological and Indian psychology perspectives. The annual flood-related circular migrations indicate that many Assamese people in India suffer and experience trauma from floods affecting their communities. While their experiences of suffering and trauma will differ, women and children, despite their similar cultural contexts, are more likely to be at higher risk of poor mental health and social integration (Hassan et al., 2018). Hence, the ecological perspective of community psychology offers understanding of diverse sources and expressions of resilience among trauma survivors (Harvey, 2007). The ecological perspective sees the individual within a system, as part of interconnected systems. It emphasizes the interdependence of individuals and communities, and the engagement of persons and social contexts in resilience. Applying this theory enables understanding of the various systems, including family, community members, values and beliefs, government, and relief agencies, influencing the resilience of trauma survivors of Assam floods in the promotion of policies to ensure well-being and resilient responses to human suffering.

As Harvey (2007) explains, resilience is multidimensional and trauma survivors are simultaneously suffering and surviving. According to Harvey (2007), both trauma recovery and the process of post-traumatic growth require the survivor to somehow access their resilient capacities. Thus, the ecological “resource” perspective contends that human communities, like other living environments, evolve adaptively and can be described in terms of their development, preservation, and exchange of community resources—such as the abundance of community members, the values, attachments, culture, and beliefs vital to community life; and the events that mark, celebrate, and sometimes challenge the community’s identity (Harvey, 2007). Drawing on the ecological

perspective, we consider resilience as both transactional and contextual in nature, arising from the reciprocal engagement of persons and contexts and evident in qualities that are nurtured, shaped, and activated by a host of person–environment interactions (Harvey, 2007; Udah et al., 2024). Thus, we see resilience as

‘the result not only of biologically given traits, but also of people’s embeddedness in complex and dynamic social contexts, contexts that are themselves more or less vulnerable to harm, more or less amenable to change, and apt focal points for intervention’ (Harvey, 2007: 17).

In these contexts, individuals are not just passive recipients of resources but people who are agentic and capable of navigating and negotiating available resources (Udah et al., 2024).

Furthermore, we draw on Indian psychology to understand the experiences of the Assamese population. Indian psychology, as opposed to the psychology of the Indian people, refers to an approach to psychology based on ideas and practices embedded in indigenous Indian religious and spiritual traditions and philosophies (Cornelissen et al., 2014). From the Indian perspective, suffering can arise from physical causes (*adhibhautika*), mysterious agents (*adhidaivika*), and oneself (*adhyatmika*). *Moksha* (pursuit for liberation) is one of the major goals that people are expected to pursue in life. Indian psychology promotes the acceptance of suffering as transitory and not solely negative but a just consequence under the laws of Karma (Kumar et al., 2024). At the core of positive outcomes from suffering and stress is the unquestioned faith in the paranormal power of healers—the guru–disciple paradigm.

Thus, Indian psychology places a strong emphasis on spiritual growth and self-realization, recognizing that these are key components of mental and emotional well-being (Rao and Pranjpe, 2016). Without rejecting objectivity, control, and simplicity of experimental exploration, Indian psychology offers a unique and holistic approach to understanding the complexities of the human psyche and behavior, encompassing not only the individual but also the collective consciousness. It recognizes the need to go beyond experimentation to capture the richness and complexity of human experience within the larger context of cultural, social, and spiritual factors. For healing to occur, therefore, the most important quality of an individual, the psychic being, is that they are inherently joyful, connect with their inner selves and achieve a sense of peace and contentment (Rao and Pranjpe, 2016). Hence, Assam’s people’s flood experiences and suffering can be understood from Indian psychology and cultural framework, which encourage people to accept sufferings as a duty. Greater acceptance of suffering leads to lower impact of pain. In applying an ecological and Indian psychology perspective to the experiences of suffering and resilience of Assamese people in India, we seek, therefore, to develop and inform community interventions to address vulnerability, foster resilience and promote healing at individual and community levels. In the remainder of this article, we draw on ideas from these theories to explore and analyze the everyday life and realities of survivors of Assam floods in India.

Methods and procedures

This study was conducted in the Bajali and Barpeta districts of Assam,² a state in India known for its cultural richness, wildlife, archeological sites, and tea plantations. The study received full ethics approval from the University of Delhi. The primary purpose of the study was to obtain a better understanding of the lived experiences of survivors of Assam floods 2022. In this study, a qualitative research design was chosen to allow for an in-depth examination and understanding of participants’ experiences from their stories, perspectives, and perception (Patton, 2015). Survivors of Assam floods ($n=12$) were selected using purposive sampling through the researchers’ professional and

community contacts, allowing for inclusion of participants with firsthand experiences of flood impacts. This approach was chosen to ensure that participants could provide in-depth information relevant to the study's objectives (Patton, 2015). The participants consisted of young adults ($n=8$) and older adults ($n=4$) who have directly experienced circular migration due to floods in their locality for 3 consecutive years. We had equal numbers of males ($n=6$) and females ($n=6$) between the ages of 18 and 80 years in participation.

In-depth semistructured interviews were used to collect data. The interviews were exploratory and stimulated the narration of experiences that would yield rich data (Udah, 2023). The interview guide (see Appendix A, Supplemental material) was developed through a multistep process to ensure alignment with study objectives and relevance to existing research. Initially, the research team brainstormed and identified key thematic areas critical to the study. A preliminary guide was collaboratively drafted and reviewed. Following revisions, the guide was translated into Assamese to facilitate participant comprehension. This translation was validated by two language experts, ensuring linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness before finalization. The interview questions focused on participants' flood experiences and understanding of suffering. The interviews lasted 40–50 minutes, during which participants' responses were probed while encouraging them to provide more details and clarification. Most interviews were conducted in Assamese language, audiotaped with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by (the first author). The translated interviews were sent to two participants for member checking and validation. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were also assured of their privacy and confidentiality. As the study involved the participants experiencing trauma, we provided them with counselling and psychological services and referral contacts to prevent them from psychological harm.

Thematic analysis was used to identify, interpret, and report common themes across participants' accounts (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the process involved six phases: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. By immersing ourselves in the data through reading and re-reading it, we coded, and grouped them into themes. Themes were then reviewed, refined, and defined to capture participant experience. Some of the key themes that emerged involved the notion of suffering, trauma, resilience, including healing. In what follows, data excerpts from the interviews of eight participants are used to establish and provide important insights into the lived experiences and plights of survivors of Assam floods. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Findings—Assam floods and participants' experiences

Floods have become an annual occurrence in the state of Assam. Each year, floods wreak havoc in the flood-prone areas of Assam. In the following paragraphs, we present themes to highlight what we found from the analyses of participants' accounts.

Theme 1: cultural, religious, and economic impacts

We found, based on participants' accounts, the floods affected many people in the Bajali and Barpeta districts of Assam. Some people faced problems going to the temple or socializing (interacting) during the flood. While some lost their houses, many were made to stay in the same house with their goats and cows, leading to the disease outbreak and death of some community members. According to one participant, Rihon, people are suffering because of the floods:

Our condition was unspeakable. Houses were completely gone. When it was raining, I had to stay out for ten to fifteen days in someone else's house. All the villagers lived in ten houses that were not under water . . . Four to five families stayed together with their cows in one house. . . the fish from the fishery was gone. The crops were gone. . . People could not interact nor go for Sankardeva and Madhavdeva³ ceremony. Everything was gone.

The quote above suggests that Rihon's community has gone through enough suffering and pain because of the flood. It also indicates the cultural, religious, and economic impacts of the floods—people did not perform their religious offering and lost livelihoods. Unfortunately, often, people are not well prepared for the floods. Describing the 2022 floods, Rihon says:

For the last two to four years, the water has risen a little higher. Say, the big flood happened in the 80's. I had not built this house then, but it would not have been under water. But after that, in 2004 the water rose. Then, in the last two years, 2020, I think, it rose again. But with last year's 2022 flood, the water rose without any notice, and everything was completely gone.

Rihon is a 53-year-old farmer, who helps in maintaining law and order in one of the villages in Assam. In the above quote, he indicates that the flood situation in Assam is getting worse. For Bharti, whose husband is a daily wage worker:

This time the flood came suddenly. We could not stay at home. All our things were scattered. Even our house was fully damaged. All the plants in the garden. No pan tamul (betel leaf and betel nut) trees are remaining. Now, we must buy everything from the market.

Furthermore, Jyotimala suggests,

This year's flood caused real havoc. Our house, courtyard, toilet, everything got drowned. In the years gone by, generally houses and road were not drowned. . . This year, we had a lot of problems. We were unable to use toilet. We had shortages of clean water. TV, refrigerator, couches to be mentioned but a few, everything got drowned. We were unable to cook food. So, we were just surviving with a very little amount of food.

Jyotimala is a 50-year-old lady, who describes herself as a housewife. She believes that the floods caused a lot of havoc and problems for her community. In the above quote, Jyotimala indicates they lost almost everything and faced a lot of challenges during the floods. From her quote, they were "just surviving". The floods impacted Jyotimala and her family, socially, culturally, religiously, economically, and mentally. According to Jyotimala,

There was panic all the time. I couldn't even have a cup of tea peacefully in the morning. The irony was that there was so much of water everywhere but there was not even a single cup of clean water to have tea . . . I was just praying that somehow the flood ends. Due to increasing water, our fishes were washed out of our pond. Our crops were destroyed. Our cows and goats also had real hard time. And this is not only our sad situation, but also same for all the families in our village.

Also, Lakshminath's narrative paints a similar picture. Lakshminath is a 62-year-old farmer, who supports his family through farming. According to Lakshminath, the floods affected his family and his farm:

The water entered our house. It was neck deep in the road in front of us. Everything was affected. We cooked food on top of our beds, what can be more saddening than that. We experienced food scarcity and

diseases. We were all affected in multiple ways. I had to spend a lot on my cattle and goats. They suffered from diseases, infections in their udders and sore throats since they must ingest all the mud.

The above quotes, from Lakshminath and Jyotimala, capture not only the material impacts of the flood but also the cost of living in regions affected by floods. The flood destroyed not only their crops and animals but also led to food scarcity, pain, debt, and misery. As Lakshminath reflects:

Our hearts were totally broken. I questioned myself and asked what is the point of living? We could not do any kind of pujas [ceremonial worship by Hindus] and other rituals. Our daily life was disrupted. Money was very scarce. My cows died. My crops were destroyed. You couldn't buy, sell nor go to the market. What do we sell? How do we survive? How can there be growth when everything was swept away?

Aimee, whose husband is a daily wage worker (Hazira), asked similar questions:

We have so many goats, but it was very difficult to sell our goats or hens to earn some money because businesses were shut down. Now suppose, I want to sell egg, hen, or goat, who will buy it? How will they buy it? So that was a very uncomfortable environment for us.

Aimee's house was also fully damaged, and they could not stay in their house. So, it was a difficult time for her family because they did not have any shelter. Similarly, Pradyut, a 67-year-old man, who describes himself as poor person, explains,

In this whole area, everyone was affected. Everything was paused. We only ate with salt and oil. We could not go to the market. Our Puja was postponed. There was no road. Everyone's house was under water. We relocated to family friends' houses and made makeshift beds. We didn't have many straws to feed our cows. We made boats out of banana trees and cut out drums to make spoons and other utensils.

The floods made it difficult for many participants. Everything around them was affected. Indeed, it was a difficult time for many of the participants. As a result of the flood, some participants felt they had offended God and been punished for not praying enough. For example, Pradyut says '*we cried so much thinking God has cursed us*'. Another participant, Ganga, says, '*Nobody can do anything. It's God's will*'. Similarly, Jyotimala states, '*We felt like God was punishing us for not indulging in any religious activities*'.

Theme 2: women and children most affected

The people most affected by the floods are women and children. As Lakshminath explains:

The women face a lot of problems and are vulnerable. They cannot use the toilets and bathrooms for days as they are flooded. The men can use their boats and go elsewhere, but the women cannot.

Other participants like Pradyut, Ganga, Jyotimala and Aimee shared the same view. They suggested that women suffer more in terms of personal and toilet hygiene, while children missed out on schooling during the floods. According to Aimee, whose husband is a daily wage worker (Hazira), the flood affected their children education and their livelihood:

During the floods, the children could not study anything or even go to school because there was water everywhere. There was also no electricity, and we did not have kerosene oil to burn earthen lamps. We were praying that the flood water would decrease soon so that our children could also go back to their studies.

Describing her experience as a woman, Jyotimala says:

Our village is very poor. Being a woman, I faced problems using the toilet during those days because one of the toilets was totally submerged and the other toilet was being used by so many community members. Also, a woman must take care of her children and her family members. Our children face problems in going to schools in the monsoon seasons.

Theme 3: debt, anxiety, and mental health

After the floods receded, some participants were forced to go into debt, leading to having debts they did not plan for. To survive after the floods' destruction, many participants went and borrowed money. According to Lakshminath, '*Whatever savings we had, we used that. We borrowed from our neighbors*'. Explaining why they borrowed money, Pradyut says:

Money was scarce. There was no daily wage work during floods. The produce was destroyed. Not only mine, but other people faced the same issue. We borrowed money and survived. We borrowed money from people, and need to pay it back when we restart working.

However, participants recognized the dangers, anxiety, and mental health toll associated with the annual floods. According to Bharti,

Our mental strength has become very low and weak. The fear of floods is always there in our minds. As soon as it rains, there is an anxiety that there may be flooding again. Mentally, we are disturbed. It affects us very badly.

Similarly, Narayan, an 89-year-old retired professor of English, explains:

If no measures are taken to prevent the floods, the impact will become permanent on people's mental health. We will not be able to do anything as the floods may come again and will affect us economically, socially, psychologically, and mentally.

Narayan taught at the government college during his active years. During the floods, he traveled by rubber boat to her daughter's house. He is spending his retirement working for the betterment of his village and people. According to Narayan, '*the whole village was affected*'. However, Bharti captures the despair and mental health toll of the floods among many participants:

What else to say? There is no end to these problems in our life. We will have to face it year after year because we are staying next to the river. These problems will remain in our life forever. It's all karma so we must deal with it.

Theme 4: circular migration and flood caused by human activities

The participants suggested that human activities are causing the floods. For example, Jyotimala suggests that the construction of roads and use of land are causing the flooding:

I think due to the construction near the rivers and filling of the shallow lands, these floods occur. And after all, it is a natural disaster, so what can we do.

Also, Lakshminath attributes the flooding to human activities. According to Lakshminath:

The roads are getting higher. There aren't enough embankments. So, there is no way for the water to escape. The water tries to escape through Patacharkuchi town, but ultimately it rises. So, the water always overflows. We don't know what will happen this year. The water comes in quickly, but as there are no ways to escape, it takes about 7-8 hours to recede.

In the above quotes, Jyotimala and Lakshminath suggest some of the causes of the Assam floods, indicating that new road constructions and embankments are making it difficult for the water to escape or recede quickly. According to Pradyut:

The reason is all the roads have become higher. Our roads are lower compared to others. Earlier, they were level, now they have become lower. So, since our roads have become lower, water enters our courtyards. It keeps rising and entering our houses. We also have a river nearby which overflow. And when Bhutan opens their dam gates or floodgates, the water level rises rapidly.

For this reason, people often go to a safe place during the flood and then come back to their houses when the situation is settled. Lakshminath bemoans the situation:

We have lived here for years. However, if every year such flood comes and destroys our homes, our fields, our produce, our animals, then there is no meaning in living here. There is nothing we can do collectively. Every year from April to July there is sporadic flood. It does not segregate between groups. It comes and sweeps up everything. We generally plan to migrate to higher safer places and come back to reclaim whatever little remains in our village and must restart our lives once the floods are over.

Theme 5: lack of government support

Participants worry about the loss of their culture and language because of the floods. These participants call for government support. According to Ganga, *'we are very poor and needy people, and the government should help us by giving some economic support so that we can survive'*. For Narayan:

This is a natural phenomenon occurring every year. The government must take some preventive measures, help people and plan properly to prevent the devastating effect of the floods. The government must unite with the villagers to fight this problem.

While as a community, they are incapacitated to do anything to mitigate the floods. Many participants are disappointed with the government. Despite their sufferings, pain, and the havoc wreaked by the floods, there is no help from the government. Instead, the government is going in the opposite direction from what the community members desire. For these participants, they want the government to come to their aid and provide some support during floods. According to Rihon:

If we must run again due to the flood, maybe there will not be any way to get rid of the flood in our area. Whatever the government is doing for our area, the government is going in a kind of opposite direction. They have raised the dam, and the roads, but so far, people are living on the edge, the trouble increases.

For Pradyut:

We would like to have the roads repaired. They have made the roads higher, but the water level has also increased over the years. If the water increases more, then people's houses will be totally submerged.

Similarly, Lakshminath indicates that the government needs to come to their aid. He states:

Due to rising water, we cannot go anywhere. The government must construct good roads for us. Doctors don't visit because of the muddy roads. We brought our cattle to the roads somehow; there they gave them injections. A lot of people died during this time as it was difficult to keep them alive without proper medical attention and infrastructure.

Discussion

This article has examined the lived experiences of survivors of the Assam floods, revealing both their resilience and the hardships they face as well as the cyclical migration patterns they follow during the rainy season. Recurring floods compel Assamese communities to engage in circular migration every year, a practice that gives rise to complex sociocultural, economic, and psychological challenges warranting a nuanced analysis. Through participants' narratives, the floods are often framed as an act of "God's will", reflecting a religious and cultural attribution that shapes their collective response to disaster. While floods temporarily unite communities in mutual aid, their aftermath exposes latent social divisions and tendencies towards complacency, suggesting a need for a sustained, collective response. The (un)predictability of these floods calls for meaning action about community cohesion, government accountability, and the psychological resilience required to mitigate flood-related disruptions.

Participants' accounts also bring attention to the unique religious and cultural ties of the Assamese in Hinduism, the predominant religion in India. In Hinduism, water holds strong significance. Water is a divine element in Hinduism. It is symbolized as the container of life, strength, and eternity. It is one of the five indispensable elements of nature which is intricately linked to purification, washing away of sins, rituals, and spiritual growth (Mitra, 2023). The association of water with God and the nature of water's ebb and flow in Hinduism add a profound layer to the experiences of suffering and resilience among the survivors of Assam floods. In Hinduism, water is revered as a sacred and purifying element closely associated with the divine, symbolizing both creation and the sustenance of life (Kumar, 2010). Holy rivers like the Ganges are believed to embody the goddess Ganga and purify those who bathe in them, linking water to spiritual cleansing and liberation (Alley, 2002). Furthermore, in the context of water, the concept of pain and suffering can be linked to both the destructive and life-sustaining components of this element. While water is necessary for life, floods and other water-related disasters can cause pain and misery (Singh and Swer, 2004). Water can represent the cyclical aspect of life, with both joy and grief being essential components of human experience. Therefore, investigating these ties may unveil insights into the spiritual and social fabric of the Assamese community. It would also help in understanding not only trauma and the complexity of emotions experienced by survivors but also the coping mechanisms embedded in their religious and community practices. Bathing in sacred rivers or tanks is thought to cleanse the soul and promote spiritual growth. Hence, it is important to recognize the religious and cultural nuances of the Assamese people for designing effective interventions.

Incorporating community practices and support aligned with religious beliefs can potentially enhance the effectiveness of psychological and social support systems (Garner, 2020; Perera et al., 2022). The findings also emphasize the dual nature of circular migration—both a challenge and an adaptive strategy contributing to resilience by providing access to resources and opportunities for recovery (Khatun et al., 2018; Borah et al., 2023). Consistent with existing studies, our participants' accounts confirm that survivors of Assam floods engage in circular migration as a coping mechanism, moving between disaster-affected areas and safer regions in search of temporary relief, livelihood opportunities, and support networks (Borah et al., 2023). Factors influencing circular migration patterns among participants include economic considerations, social ties, cultural traditions, and access to resources (Mahanta and Das, 2017a). However, the cyclical nature of

migration and recurring floods present challenges to mental health and social integration, contributing to feelings of rootlessness and instability among participants (Rahman and Roy, 2020). While the suffering and psychological toll on survivors are substantial, encompassing trauma, grief, anxiety, and depression, stemming from loss of property, livelihoods, and loved ones, yet limited access to mental health services poses a significant barrier to professional help for survivors (Mahanta and Das, 2017a).

Given the magnitude of suffering experienced during floods, understanding trauma and coping strategies is crucial. It is also important to explore the psychological impact of flood-related circular migration on survivors and their adaptive coping mechanisms, which may play a significant role in their healing and resilience. Thus, the psychological suffering and the multitude of deeply layered problems the Assamese people must face year after year without getting the kind of intervention and support that they must get requires deeper exploration. Hence, our findings highlight the critical need for increased investment in mental health services in flood-prone areas to alleviate the mental health challenges associated with the floods and enable survivors to seek professional help. Integrating traditional practices with modern mental health approaches can create a comprehensive support system for survivors (Hussain, 2021).

In addition, the findings' implications extend beyond immediate responses to floods. Understanding the cyclical patterns of suffering, migration, and recovery in the context of floods will enrich our knowledge of disaster resilience, offering a broader perspective on disaster management and psychological support in similar contexts. Hence, this article contributes to the broader field of disaster psychology where research has often centered on immediate response and post-traumatic stress. The ecological model presented in this article underlines the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and ecosystems in providing effective interventions to foster wellness and resilience. It also emphasizes the need for interventions at various levels—individual, community, and societal—to enhance the relationship between person and context in fostering well-being and resilience. Recognizing that most trauma survivors will not turn to psychotherapy (or any other highly specialized form of professional care), the ecological framework also acknowledges the importance of environmental interventions to foster wellness and enhance resilience among trauma survivors and their communities (Harvey, 2007). Hence, it is important to adopt an ecological perspective and consider the broader environmental context in which survivors exist (Udah et al., 2024). Interventions should not only address immediate needs but also focus on creating resilient communities with diverse resources (Preston et al., 2015).

Future research, therefore, needs to incorporate attention to the experience of trauma survivors from diverse contexts and at various points in the recovery process, as well as inquiry into the cross-cultural applicability of constructs and assessment tools developed in the context of trauma recovery (Harvey, 2007; Perera et al., 2022). The study findings' implications also extend to policy formulation at both local and national levels for disaster management and development strategies that address the diverse needs of the Assamese people. Acknowledging the unique circumstances of the Assamese people, inclusive policies are deemed crucial for sustainable development, focusing on economic stability, mental health support, and fostering community resilience to build a robust foundation for the Assamese population. Therefore, policymakers should prioritize inclusive policies that consider the challenges posed by floods.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on interview data extracted from participants to provide insights into the experiences of survivors of Assam floods and inform policy decisions. Understanding the cultural, psychological, and ecological dimensions of suffering and resilience is imperative for

developing effective interventions and support systems. By adopting a multidimensional approach and addressing the multilayered challenges posed by circular migration and recurring floods, the government can contribute to the long-term well-being and sustainable development of the Assamese people. Therefore, understanding the patterns of suffering, migration, and recovery in the context of floods will enrich knowledge of ways in which floods and circular migration interact with other factors to marginalize and disadvantage certain citizens, providing valuable insights for disaster management and building resilience and psychological support in similar contexts.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In India, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are three categories of communities identified by the government for the purpose of affirmative action and social justice. SC refers to those untouchable communities or castes that have historically faced discrimination and marginalization. Like SC, ST comprises various indigenous tribal communities who have traditionally lived in geographically isolated areas with distinct cultural practices and lifestyles. OBC includes communities that are socially and educationally disadvantaged but do not fall under the categories of Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes. The government has implemented reservation policies for these three communities in education, employment, and politics to address historical inequalities and promote their socioeconomic advancement and protect their distinct identity.
2. Assam is prone to natural disasters like floods. In the past 10 years, floods occur every year in the Bajali and Barpeta districts, which have a negative impact on overall development.
3. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva laid the foundation of Assamese culture and identity through their contributions in the field of literature, dance, drama, song, music, painting, handicrafts. Their literary and artistic contributions are living traditions in Assam today. They connected Assam to the mainland culturally and spiritually, as an important part of the Bhakti movement that swept through India in the 15th and 16th centuries. The sect of religion they preached is practiced by a large population and Sattras (monasteries) that they established.

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