

Life History of Rashmi Narzary

Rashmi Narzary, a Bodo woman is originally from Nijlaguri village and presently living in North Simlaguri which is a distance of 12 kms from the main market and from the government dispensary of Shantipur. She presently has three daughters and one son. The Bodo-Adivasi conflict of 2014 saw her life turn upside down.

Counting Losses of 2014 Conflict

Her husband was a daily wage labourer and they had no land for cultivation. On 24th December, 2014 he went for daily wage labour in a nearby village called Nangdorbari. Fighting broke out between Bodos and Adivasis and her husband went missing. The people from Nijlaguri relief camps along with the army went searching around the place where he was working but unfortunately they could not find his body. She says the *“santhals cut my husband”*. The search team confirmed his death when they discovered his clothes and shoes scattered at some distance from where he worked that particular day. But they never found the body.

Rashmi and her family fled their village and went to live in Nijlaguri LP School Relief Camp where they stayed for a month. It was tough living in the camp and all she got to eat was some rice, dal and potatoes given as relief by the government. Her health deteriorated as a month before the conflict, she had delivered a baby girl. She remained in the relief camp as she was told that she could get compensation for her losses only if she remained in the relief camp. But she got nothing and was denied any compensation because her husband's dead body was never recovered. *“While I lived in the relief camps with all the losses and emotions, all that I received was the tent, rice, dal and sympathies of people around.”*

Even as she was reconciling herself with her husband's death, the infant daughter also died in the relief camp. *“One day, the baby started to cry since morning, yelling and kicking her legs with great pain. Some NGO people helped take the baby to Kajalgaon civil hospital but she did not survive and died the same day”*. Rashmi feels that some dyna (witch) is involved in taking away her daughter from her as she says *“many people in the camp would come and see and kiss the baby because she was so cute and they felt pity as she had no father. One of them must have been a dyna and killed my daughter.”*

Settling into a new place

Rashmi had a very difficult time because of the mysterious disappearance of her husband and the death of her baby. She still had to look after her three other children, two daughters and a son. "Although we had small quarrels over family issues, I was never worried when my husband was alive. I used to work hand in hand with him to keep the family going. Even when I was pregnant I used to go for work to help my husband. We used to go and collect firewood in the forest and sometimes in the river. Together we brought back the firewood for selling in Shantipur market". Her brother, a farmer advised her to move to North Simlaguri (where he also lived in a nearby village) and she also felt the need of getting some land for the future of her son.

"My sister and I were the first to come to North Simlaguri as soon as I heard that there would be a land distribution here (for families affected by the violence). I was allotted 8 bighas of land." She feels that land in North Simlaguri was not distributed equally but still it was land she got but now she feels insecure as the previous year, the 'phakras' (armed militants) had come asking the new families to move out of this land. She feels insecure as "once more they (militants) send us a notice, we will have to move out even if the forest people (the forest department) allows us to stay".

In the beginning of her stay in North Simlaguri, Rashmi was supported by her brother who gave her some rice. She went to catch fish and collected wild vegetables and sold them in the market. "My husband's family could not support us because they themselves had nothing". She also had to spend two thousand rupees for one of the closing rituals of her dead husband recently. Their 'house' was built in one day. The tin roof was brought from her previous house in Nijlaguri and she made walls from the plastic *tirpal* (sheet) which she received from some NGOs. "I did not receive any compensation because my husband's body was not recovered while other families who incurred loss of lives or injuries received huge compensation even up to 5 lakhs. I did not even receive the compensation amount of 50,000 rupees as my house in Nijlaguri was neither destroyed nor burnt during the conflict. I just received some help in cash from some NGOs."

Rashmi now earns through *hazira* (daily wage labour). She also has a kitchen garden from where she is able to sell the produce in order to purchase other essentials. “My previous house in Nijlaguri was better. I planted some chillies and maitha (sour leaves) in the present village (North Simlaguri) but some insects destroyed it. In the previous year (2015) I had given out our land for mustard cultivation to others and got 500 rupees as rent for the year.”

When she does not find any *hazira*, she goes to the river where she catches small fish, crabs and snails and sells them in Shantipur market – 12 kms away. She recently tried a new business i.e. purchase vegetables from other villagers to resell in Shantipur market. “It gives me a slightly better earning but the effort and time is extreme for me. I have to go early in the morning in search of vegetables, by noon I come back home to prepare lunch and then leave for Shantipur daily market to occupy my place for selling the vegetables. I take the last vehicle from Shantipur that goes towards our village. By the time I reached back home it's 7.30 pm. I have to walk for about 3 km after getting down from the vehicle to reach our village since there is no vehicle that goes till the village”.

In her earlier village, she used to supplement her income with brewing and selling rice beer. Now she has not been able to invest any money for brewing rice beer and she is also not sure if it will sell in this new place.

“We hardly cook meat in the house nowadays. We are not vegetarians but I am unable to buy meat with my little earnings.” Almost all the profit she makes from selling vegetables in Shantipur is just enough for her transportation and to buy rice. “I earn a maximum of ₹150 in a day. I buy 5kg of rice for ₹110, twenty rupees goes for the travel and ten rupees for salt and other essentials.” She often is in debt with the Shantipur shopkeepers. Comparing the shopkeepers of Shantipur with shopkeepers in her earlier village of Nijlaguri, she says “The Nijlaguri shopkeepers were never bothered if I bought things from their shop on credit but in Shantipur I have often been shooed away”. She currently has a debt of 60 rupees – 20 to another vegetable vendor she took money from, 10 rupees in one pharmacy for some medicines she took, 10 rupees to a neighbour and 20 to the auto rickshaw driver. She hopes

to clear the credit in a few days and is careful about visiting familiar shops to win the trust of the shopkeepers from whom she can get help during emergencies.

The family eats twice a day, once in the morning and once in the night. Whenever she feels tired she is reminded of the fact that the family would go hungry if she did not go out for work, and hence she never takes any off days from her work. “We have not been able to have a satisfactory meal since the day my husband went missing.”

Life in the present village

She does not get any PDS rations in the present village (North Simlaguri) though in the previous village she got ration rice 4 times. She has a job card which she submitted to the VCDC as she was told that on giving the ration card, she would get paid cash now.

“When we fall sick, we go to Shantipur (government hospital). The children never fell so seriously ill till date so I have not needed to take them outside except to Shantipur.” She feels lucky that “with two-three tablets they (the children) are fine”. When anyone in the family falls ill, the daughter sends the money and if not, Rashmi manages somehow. She also goes to a place where there are NGO workers and if she asks, they will give her medicines. In Shantipur she gets some treatment for typhoid and malaria. Though their earlier village Nijlaguri was much easier to get to the hospital but she is here with the hope that her son will have land in the future. But “if there is no chance of getting land here at all, then I am ready to move back to my old village”.

Photos of North Simlaguri Village where the displaced Bodo families now live post the 2014 conflict; they have not been able to build their houses and still live under plastic sheets



Rashmi was a member of a village Self Help Group (SHG) back in Nijlaguri. Their SHG used to spend a portion of group funds to purchase pork during the week long Bwisagu (April Harvest Festival) festival. The meat was equally divided among the group members. “I remember that I received around 2 ½ kg of pork every year during the Bwisagu festival.



My husband and I together used to borrow money from the SHG during emergencies. It was a good source to borrow money because it charged less interest from the group members.” Rashmi is still a member of the Nijlaguri SHG but her association with the group has diminished because of the distance. “I also have very little time to spare to be involve in its activities because I am busy working the whole day. I have failed to attend the meetings of the groups many times so I had to pay fine to the group. I am actually unable to pay those fines because I have money enough just to be spent on food.”

“We could not celebrate the Bwisagu festival of 2015 because of the conflict in 2014. My experiences were too bitter to go for enjoyment.” Like the people of Kombla Mondir, Rashmi was living in the Nijlaguri relief camp during the 2015 Bwisagu festival season. The people were rendered helpless as they had lost all their harvest and livestock during the conflict. Above all, living in the relief camp with all the sorrows and grievances they did not have any reasons for celebration. “All we could do was to grieve over our losses and watch the nearby villages enjoying Bwisagu festivities.”

“Even after the people resettled in North Simlaguri we were not in a position to afford to celebrate Bwisagu of 2016. The wounds of 2014 conflict are not yet healed; the people were still struggling to build their homes in their new village. We had nothing to harvest, the spring had no difference for us, it was too early for the villagers around to involve into these newly settled group of people living near their village for the festival.”

Rashmi and her neighbours decided that they would be celebrating the forthcoming *baisagu* festival (harvest festival) of 2017. They feel that they would gain some stability by then and