

Ethnic Violence in Assam: an Essay on the Conflicts Between Bodo Community And Bengali Speaking Muslims In The Years 2012 And 2014.

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore the conflicts and its impacts of the ethnic violence between the Bodo community and Bengali speaking Muslims in the state of Assam. The violence that has been taking place since early post-independence of the country has badly hindered development in the region. Using both structured and semi structured open ended interview method, I have tried to find out the reasons resulting in violence and its impacts that these violence have left in the society. The interviews have brought the conclusion that losing of land, cultural identities, neglect, deprivation and showing of power has resulted in the violence which have given nothing but destruction and underdevelopment.

Keywords: *Bangladeshi, Culture, Community, Deprivation, Neglect.*

1. Introduction

Assam is one of the North-Eastern States among seven others. It is one of the richest states in terms of culture and natural resources in the Indian sub-continent. There are over thirty ethnic groups residing in the state of Assam only. Bodo, Tiwa, Kachari, Sonowal are some of the major tribes to name a few. Since my interest primarily lies on the conflicts between the Bodo community and Bengali speaking Muslims, I would like to focus on these two communities only.

Bodos are primitive community of Assam. They are recognized as a plain tribe under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Bodo community has bitterly experienced neglect, deprivation and discrimination in the state for quite a sometime. After independence they were given ST status by the Indian Constitution to enjoy the privileges like that of mainland Indians, but was in vain. The bitter experience with the state has led to the creation of armed militant groups like NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and BLT (Bodo Liberation Tiger) in the years 1986 and 1996 respectively. Both the groups had started fighting for separate Bodoland in their own ways by targeting Armed and other forces, civilians and especially the state government. In the year 2003, BLT came into a truce with the central and state governments and formed Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) with four districts viz. Chirang, Udalguri, Baksa and Kokrajhar¹ under its territory by a tripartite agreement of Memorandum of Settlement (MOS). The geographic area of BTC is about 8,969.98 square kilometer with a total population of 3,151,047 (as of 2011 census). Out of the total population, Bodos are about 30 percent, Bengali

¹ Headquarter of Bodoland

speaking Muslims are 22 percent, Koch-Rajbongshis are 16 percent, Adivasis (Santhals and Kurukhs) are 18 percent and other communities like Bengali Hindus, Nepali and Hindi speakers are 14 percent living in 3082 villages under Bodoland Area Territorial Districts (BTAD).

Most of the Bodo people practice Hinduism and Bathouism as their religion. Christian religion among the Bodo people was introduced by the missionaries during the 19th and 20th centuries as tribal are easy targets for the Christian missionaries to convert religion for their greater benefit. But they are yet to achieve success like that of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and the two hill districts (North Cachar and Karbi Anglong) of Assam. Most of the Bodos remained Hindus. As of the 2001 census, most of the Bodos living in Assam practiced Hinduism. However the fact of growing Christian Bodo population cannot be denied. According to 1991 census data, 8.58% of the Bodos practiced Christianity which grew to 9.40% in the 2001 census data which resulted in decreased Hindu Bodos to 90.31% in the census report of 2001 than 91.31% reported in the data received by the census in the year 1991. 2478 Bodos were reported in the 1991 census as practicing Animist religion. This number decreased drastically to 141 in 2001 census.

The Bodo community is known for their innocence and simple ways of living lives. But in recent times it has been noticed that the community is engaging in conflicts with other communities especially with the Bengali speaking Muslims. Before going any further, let me clarify that in Assam Muslims are of two types in the state i.e. the indigenous Muslims who are living in the state from centuries and the Bangladeshis (Bengali speaking Muslims) who illegally cross the international border and settle down in various parts of the state as well as the country. In the year 2012 and 2014, BTAD witnessed unprecedented conflicts between Bodo community and Bengali speaking Muslims. In the incident of 2012, about 80 people lost their lives and over 5 lakhs became homeless. Then in 2014, suspected Bodo militants (NDFB) shot dead 22 Muslims in tea growing areas of the state.

Bengali speaking Muslims are said to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in the state. Bodo people claim that the illegal immigrants from the neighbouring country have been carrying a major threat for the community. The conflicts between both the groups can be traced back to the year 1952 followed by 1979, 1985, 1991, 1994, 2008, 2012 and in 2014. The Director of the North-East Indian Studies Program at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi Dr. Bhagat Oinam says that the riots were the result of settlement of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants and the consequent loss of land and cultural identities of the Bodo community.

Between 1951 and 1961, the Muslim population in Assam grew by 200%. This data is provided by the census commission of India. According to the data published by the Registrar General of India, 10 lakh Pakistanis entered Assam between 1951 and 1961. An uproar was erupted in Assam when this data was published. On 13th November the then Central Home Minister of India Guljarilal Nanda visited Assam and in the meeting of Eastern General Council he said that in that year alone 3 lakhs Pakistanis entered Assam. The speech by Mangalchandi Brahma, Vice President of Assam Tribal Youth Organization, in the first week of January 1969 reflected a dangerous situation of illegal immigrants. Not only the lands of Assam's plain tribe or protected areas of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) were being affected by these illegal immigrants, but the land of common farmers were also being affected.

In the century 1871-1971, the growth rate of Muslim population in Assam was 1.594%. The total population of Assam in the year 1871 was 2,122,015 out of which Muslims were 250,470 meaning 11.7%. The 1971 census shows the total population as 14,625,152 and Muslim population as 3,994,006 which stands at 24%. From 1901 to 1951, the Muslim population growth rate in Assam was 39.6% and from 1951 to 1971 it was 93%. (VIK Sarin, North East India in Flames).

The 2012 violence between the Bodos and Bengali speaking Muslims was triggered by killing of two Muslim youths by unidentified gunmen. After the violence, Assam witnessed a horrific tragedy of inhumane condition in its history. About 5 lakhs of people belonging to Bodo and Muslim communities were forced to take shelter in 273 temporary refugee camps. More than 500 villages were burnt down and about 97 people were killed during the violence.

There is least doubt of immigration from Bangladesh. The Bengali speaking Muslims emigrated from erstwhile East Bengal to Assam during the British rule from 1826 to 1947 and it continued after independence as well. It reached its peak during 1971 with the creation of Bangladesh leading to the census to record a 34.98 percent increase in Assam's population from 1961 census (Haque and Bhattacharya 2015). But the claim of Assam being flooded by continuous immigration from Bangladesh goes contrary so far as the national growth rate of population is concerned as the growth rate of population in Bodoland as well as Assam have recorded a decreased population growth in the last few decades against all India growth rate of population.

Hypothetically, if we take the entire population of 33 lakhs in Assam in 1901 to be 'indigenous' and we apply the all India growth rate of population increase of 74.82% between 1901 and 1941, the population of Assam in 1941 should have been 57.69 lakhs instead of 67 lakhs. That means approximately 9.31 lakh people had migrated into Assam in this period. If the same all India rate of population increase during this period is applied, then the population of the Muslim in the year 1941 had to be 8.8 lakhs instead of 16.9 lakhs. From the data this can be inferred that the increase was the result of the settling of immigrants in the state and that the majority of these Muslim peasant migrants who settled in Assam during this period were East Bengali Muslims (Hussain).

The Muslim migrants initially settled in the undivided Goalpara district which now has been divided into four districts i.e. Bongaigaon, Dhuburi, Kokrajhar and Chirang and then went on to settle in different parts of central and lower Assam. The growth rate of population of Goalpara went up to 30% during the decade of 1901-11 against 1.4% and 2 % during the decades of 1881-91 and 1901-1911 respectively. The decadal growth of the district reduced by 15.8% during 1921-31 as the migrants moved to other places like Nagaon and Kamrup districts. The Barpeta sub-division of erstwhile Kamrup district witnessed an unprecedented rise of population by 69%. However, 4.98 lakh migrant Bengali speaking Muslims was recorded in Goalpara district alone.

Kokrajhar district, the head quarter and political seat of power under BTAD, has witnessed a tremendous growth of population in recent decades. The growth rate of population in Kokrajhar district in the period 1971-91 was 76% whereas the Muslim population growth during this period was 17%. But the Muslim population growth increased in later decades as recorded by the census and stood at 19.3% and 20.4% in the years 1991 and 2001 respectively. Susanta Krishna Dass has argued in his paper on *immigration and demographic transformation of Assam between 1891 and 1981* that since 1951, the rate of increase of Assam's population has been much higher than that of the country as a whole or of any of its state or province. This heavy increase, unlike in other states has been the result of an acceleration of the natural rate of increased arrival of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan and heavier migration of Indians from the rest of the country. He goes on saying that while it was mainly the Bengali Muslims who- motivated by political as well as economic factors migrated to Assam between 1891 and 1947, similar migration has taken place since 1947 to 1981, mostly due to political reasons, has been predominantly of Bengali Hindus. The population growth rates of Assam during 1991-2001 and 2001-2011 are 18.92% and 16.93% respectively. On the other hand the decadal growth of population in Kokrajhar in the 1991-2001 decade was 14.49% and surprisingly it grew by 5.19% in 2001-

2011 meaning that the growth rate of population of Kokrajhar has declined from the previous decade by 9%. The reasons could be that people have moved to other places post formation of the BTC² in the year 2003 or the death rate in the district has gone up during this period or both.

Coming back to the conflict, it has been pointed out earlier that the ethnic conflicts in the BTAD areas are not new – especially the conflict between Bodos and Bengali speaking Muslims. Many scholars have tried to find out the reasons behind the clashes and some others are still working on the said issue. Monjib Mochahari (2013) has found out the possible reasons of the clashes to be the representation of media and failure of local administration. Media Houses publish news taking side of a particular group and it leaves an impact on the society. His paper shows that about 45 percent news coverage held Bodos responsible for the riots. Namrata Goswami in her paper (2014) finds out unprecedented increasing number of Bengali speaking Muslims especially in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts during 2001-11. The cause of the underlying violence was land related issues as these so called illegal immigrants started owning/possessing land by various means.

2. Objectives

My area of research interest lies in the field of ethnic violence. As I belong to the state of Assam I have seen, heard and learned about the conflicts between the Bodo community and the Bengali speaking Muslims which have developed an intense interest in me in this subject. The basic objectives of this study was to study and understand the conflicts between the Bodo community and Bengali speaking Muslims that has been termed ‘ethnic’ and the impact that those violence left in the BTAD area of Assam.

3. Methods

My interest in this field study was in ethnic violence and its impact. My focus in this study was the conflicts and its impact between the Bodo community and the Bengali speaking Muslims. Clearly the violence have other dimensions, particularly in the developmental sides.

I chose two villages for the field study namely Narayanguri and Batabari of the same taluk with almost same numbers of households of which former was inhabited by the Bengali speaking Muslims and the later was by the Bodo community. Both the villages come under Baksa district of BTAD, Assam. Narayanguri village was selected as it witnessed the highest degree of violence in the conflict. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied for the study to collect primary and secondary data. Both Structured and Semi structured interview methods were used in the field study. Snowball sampling method was used to reach the victims of the conflicts. Quantitative data like total population, voter’s lists, ration cards numbers etc. were collected from the village headmen of both the villages. Fieldworks were conducted in both the selected villages during the months of November and December 2015.

Apart from some individuals, a total number of seventy five households were selected for interview in both the villages. The interviewees were asked questions using both structured and semi structured open ended questionnaires regarding the conflicts of 2012 and 2014 which has reflected the severe decadence of humanity. Some archival resources have also been used in writing this paper.

² Bodoland Territorial Council

4. Results and Discussion

Since the time Assam was annexed by the British in the year 1826, many historical discourses suggest that one of the major sources of ethnic bitterness and tension in the region is protracted demographic invasion from erstwhile Eastern Bengal. The ongoing Bodo-Muslims clash is an offshoot of this bitterness. Lt. Gen.(Retd.) S. K Sinha, the then governor of Assam submitted an alarming report to the President of India in 1998 on continuous demographic invasion by Bangladesh and called the infiltration a *"national threat"*. The report warned that *'if the present trend is not arrested, the indigenous people of Assam would be reduced to a minority and there may, in course of time there will be a demand for the merger of Muslim dominated bordering districts with Bangladesh.*

On the other hand, Muslims claim that Bodos want a separate State, that they understand that they are in minority and are using violent means to create fear among other communities, particularly Muslims, so that they will be forced to leave the region. According to Muslim victims, the violence was coordinated and the perpetrators specifically targeted Muslim properties. They mentioned three tactics – looting and burning, blank firings and crop destruction. Political control of BTAD by Bodos and prevalence of army in the region are two factors contributing to insecurity among Muslims (Motiram and Sarma, 2014). Udayon Misra (2012) argues that the tragic situations that have emerged in BTAD areas are the consequence of wrong policies which have been pursued as part of political agenda from years immediately following Independence till the present times – all resulting in the marginalization of the tribal communities living in plains and dispossessing them of their rights to land and their distinct way of life linked inextricably to it. If the peaceful and 'indolent' Bodos are today being accused of violence against other communities residing in the BTAD area, than part of blame certainly lies with the cruel historical process aided and abetted by successive governments since the colonial days.

Ethnic conflicts have occurred often in Assam. But the Bodoland conflict of 2012 has polarized the local community and immigrant Muslims more sharply than before. Bodos and non-Bodo indigenous people, who were fighting with each other for space and identity till 1998, have arrived at a tactical alliance. The crisis in Bodoland is a reflection of the abdication of responsibility by the Indian State. It has failed to address the structural issues that confront the indigenous tribes (the Bodos), like the encroachment of their land. It has also failed to address the multicultural, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic composite culture of the region (Mahanta, 2013). It is this context amongst a whole section of population of various communities, varying from citizenships or its loss, the empowerment of marginalized tribal communities and the failure of the sixth schedule to deliver, the contest over land and resources, the lack of development and the fear of disempowered smaller groups are all tangled in the web of electoral politics of the ruling classes. The ruling and aspiring elites are playing narrow communitarian and communal politics. The present violence between Bodos and non-Bodos is a result of this politics (Pathak, 2012).

Although a pretty good number of work has been done so far in the issue of the conflict between the two communities, there is less information regarding why only the Bodos are in conflict with other tribes. As mentioned earlier there are over thirty tribes in Assam but primarily the conflict of Bodo community has been in rise with other tribes. Scholars indulging in this issue have found out different reasons for the conflicts like land issues, insecurities among the Bodo people, immigration and so on which play the role of a catalyst between the two communities leading to the violence. But the same are applicable to other tribes as well, then only why the Bodo people are tensed over those issues is a question that is still to be answered.

These people (Bengali speaking Muslims) live in the Narayanguri village which is situated on the north bank of the river Beki, very near to the Manash national park. They cut trees from the park and hunt animals. All the families have their lands in Barpeta road. They only live here to harm the park, says Mr. Dharanidhar Bodo, the DFO of Manash national park. Every day

the male members of the families of Narayanguri village go to the south bank of the river for trade leaving their wives and children back home. On the day of the violence also same thing happened and from nowhere Bodo miscreants appeared and started massacring in the village targeting the women and the children. The attack was nothing but to show that ‘you people come illegally and occupy our land and indulge in the trades which harm our society’ says an elderly person of the other village. Moreover the militants show their power by killing or kidnapping people specially the Bengali speaking Muslims that they still exist and if separate Bodoland is not given such things will continue in near future and for them no one but the Bengali speaking Muslims are the easy targets as in the state the prejudice among the minds of the people is there that Muslims who speak Bengali are the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. After the incident, Bodo people of the neighbouring villages rushed to Narayanguri village and extended their helping hands, but those people have never acknowledged their works. Government instantly started working on rehabilitation and resettlement for the victims of the violence. Monetary grant of rupees 50000 for constructing new house and 8 lakh against each lost life were given to the nearest kin of the victims by the government. During the field visit when I went to Narayanguri village some people frankly said that ‘no one of our family were dead in the violence or one more should have died so that I could have earned some extra money’.

Though people are still living in the villages affected by the conflicts, some people are still seen living in temporary camps. Agricultures have been reduced compared to the earlier times. After the incident we have started to buy foods which we used to grow earlier in our fields, says a villager of N.K Khagrabari. We used to have a big herd of cattle, now we buy milk from others, says an elderly woman of Narayanguri. We are still living in fear, my son cannot sleep at night, and he jumps off from the bed and shouts that they are coming to kill him, we are yet to overcome the incidents, says an elderly man who lost his family member in the incident.

Another big issue with the Bodoland at the present time is that some Bodo organizations are demanding a separate state for the Bodos so that they can live peacefully, without any bloodshed or violence. The demand for a separate Bodoland is not new though. Back in 1967, Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), a political party which represented the tribal of the state demanded for a Union Territory (UT) for Bodos which they wanted to be named Udayachal. The reason for demanding a Union Territory was that PTCA realized that the tribal belts and blocks of the state were gradually being acquired by the rich land lords and illegal immigrants. Towards late 1980’s, All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), driven by the decades long experience of neglect, deprivation and discrimination started demanding a separate Bodoland.

Later Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC) – under the aegis of ABSU – started the movement demanding separate Bodoland with the slogan ‘Divide Assam 50:50’ followed by the denial of Lok Sabha election ticket to Upendranath Brahma in the year 1987. But post formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in the year 1993, the movement came into a halt.

But the demand of a separate Bodoland has been bobbed up in the recent years with more intense slogans like ‘Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty,’ ‘No Bodoland, No Rest,’ ‘Do or Die for Separate Bodoland,’ etc. Monjib Mochahari says that the demand of a separate Bodoland is a glaring example of violation of human rights not only in the hands of the state authority but also the elite Brahmin-Assamese people. It is the culmination of injustices and violation of fundamental rights against tribal people that has resulted in the demand for a separate Bodoland. History bears the testimony about the injustices bestowed upon the Bodo Community by the state and some categories of people. It has gained little or no attention from even intellectuals, scholars or other categories of the people of the state. True, there is no doubt about this. But will it be correct to divide Assam into two

halves for 3,151,047 people living in one half and the rest 28,018,225 living on the other half? Moreover after the formation of BTC in the year 2003, the council has been given more or less same powers as that of a state. What has been done by the leaders since then? Instead of prevailing political, social, economic or cultural harmony, the region has witnessed violence, bloodshed and injustices. For the power seeking mindset of a certain class of people, the common innocent people have been victimized.

Above all, separate Bodoland alone will not solve the problems alone. Every side is now government oriented. Politics of power is the only aim resulting in problems everywhere. In power centered politics, there are no responsibilities for the society, nation and religion. So there is no example where a state has developed after separating from the other for being deprived. No differences have been seen in the states that got separated from Assam either. Again the question of separation have been raised in Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya. Decadence is inevitable in politics. We can do nothing but realize seeing which class of people is in rule. We cannot even think that someday politically greedy people will ever be able to create a society, state or nation.

Besides Assam, many other movements have started in the country seeking different small states. It is a natural consequence of the political system that we have accepted to exercise. It was not analyzed whether the Westminster Legislative system will fit in the nature and environment of the country. Very easily leaders are able to create differences among the people of Assam in the name of their tribes, languages, class-caste, eating habits and so on. Cultures are very different among the tribes or other people within the state which is not the case in any other part of the country. For these, it becomes very easy to create a dividing threshold among the people. To show leadership, some leaders ignite these feelings among the people and ensure their successful political career.

One big problem in Assam and North-East has been the religion conversion by the Christian Missionaries. According to the plan of making Assam and North-East a New England, religion conversion started as soon as the Britishers stepped in into the region. Already Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have been transformed into Christian states. The missionaries influenced them saying that if they stay with Assam, their existence will disappear and encouraged them to demand for separate states. As a result separate states were created. But now they have realized that the authentic characteristics of their tribe were safe in Assam living thousands of years with the Assamese but after they got their own states, foreign religion and cultures have surrounded them. Now the aim of the missionaries is to include Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura along with the tribal dominated areas of Assam. Missionaries have already become successful in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar districts of Assam. Now they are working in full swing in the autonomous territory of Bodoland. Imagine what will happen if they achieve success in BTC. Religion conversion creates differences. According to Niyogi Committee, 'the objective of religion conversion is to change the nationality. Missionaries encourage in this work, introduce themselves as the other class to the enumerators'.

So it is better to stay together as a state in unity and harmony protecting our own cultures and tribe. Former Mizo rebel and former Chief Minister of Mizoram Zoram Thanga said in a conference, 'we have brought back the Mizo Tribe which was about to vanish. You merge with your people before it gets vanished'. The world has become a global village. Europe has been united, East and West Germany became one and so have the two Vietnams. Similarly, no Indian state should be divided any further.

History reminds us that the parts where the population of Hindus were less, has gone away from India. Erstwhile Gandhar has become Kandahar. During the partition the place where Hindu became minority has become Pakistan. The mission of finishing

remaining Hindus in Kashmir is going on. Since Hindus are in minority in Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, these have become Christian states.

The leaders are fighting among themselves for the greed of wealth and power and are dividing people on the basis of castes, tribes and languages. Today extreme corruption has touched everyone everywhere. If the existence of Assam cannot be retained, then who will protect the wealth? If the conflicts amongst us are not stopped, one day we all will end up being refugees in our own country like the Hindus of Kashmir who have become refugees leaving their wealth and apple gardens behind. We should destroy the feeling of differences completely, conflicts should come to an end and everyone should come forward to work for a better, peaceful and liveable Assam.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper has tried to highlight on the ethnic violence and its impact in the society of BTAD, Assam. The village from where the violence started, shook the whole state of Assam. The basic objectives of the study was to learn about the nature of the violence between the two groups of BTAD i.e. the Bodo and the Bengali speaking Muslims which has badly hindered in the development of the state. The problem of illegal immigration from the neighbouring country Bangladesh to Assam is not new. The immigrants can easily cross the international border and enter Assam. Even the security personnel on the border allow immigrants to enter Assam by taking money. The border issue should soon be sorted out and the work of fencing the international border should be completed at the earliest. Never the less the Government of Assam has already initiated the work of recognizing the illegal immigrants of the state through NRC (National Registrar of Citizen) and one lakh illegal immigrants have been identified so far. But the story does not end there. The illegal immigrants from Bangladesh have spread all over the country as construction worker and wage labourer. They should be identified soon and should be sent back to their country, failing of which might end up in situation like that of Assam.

A strong and effective policy is required to merge the Bodos with the mainland society of Assam as well as of the country. As the primary reasons for the emergence of Bodo terrorist groups are deprivation and negligence from the mainland society and the governments, they should be provided with the feelings that they are the vital organ of our country without whom we are not complete. Government should intervene in protecting the socio-economic and cultural lives of the Bodos which I believe would eventually bring an end to all the problems faced by this community and once again we all will be living safely and peacefully in our own country.

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