



Violence in Assam Battle for the Bodo Heartland

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The recent week-long ethnic violence, principally between the Bodo tribals and the Muslim settlers, in two northern districts of Assam - Darang and Udalguri, claimed at least 55 lives and left over 100 persons injured. The serial clashes also affected other non-Bodo populations like the Rajbongshi, Assamese, Nepali and Bengali communities in these two districts. More than 2,500 houses were either torched or damaged in the clashes in 54 villages. Almost 150,000 people were displaced and have since been settled in the 97 relief camps set up by the government.

Clashes between the Bodos and Muslim settlers started in Udalguri district on 3 October in the Bhalukmari and Mohanbari villages, following rumours that a Bodo youth had gone missing. Though the youth was later traced and found to be safe, people of either community went on a rampage, setting ablaze houses belonging to those of the other community. The killing of a Muslim youth, Abdul Jabbar, within the premises of the Deputy Commissioner's Office in Udalguri, further precipitated the already charged situation and the violence that ensued, progressed unabated until 9 October.

LAND, PEOPLE & POLITICS: AN INTRODUCTION

The Bodos are the largest plains' tribe in Assam, settled primarily along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River. They once held sway over Assam, only to be scattered and submerged in later times. Since the early 1990s, the Bodos have organised themselves into insurgent as well as pressure groups, to assert their rights, which have substantially impinged upon the territorial rights of the other communities in Assam.

The Bodo Accord of 1993, which attempted to bring to an end, years of arson, violence and instability, sought to identify areas where the Bodo population exceeded 50 per cent as 'Bodo Areas', to be brought under the direct administration of the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC). An unintended consequence of this provision has been the recurring organised ethnic cleansing in areas where the Bodos do not yet constitute 50 per cent of the population. The failure and subsequent collapse of the BAC notwithstanding, Bodo leaders, drawn either from political or community-based organisations or insurgent factions, have participated in these movements. Their targets sometimes were the adivasis (tribals from outside Assam, brought to work in the tea plantations) and sometimes, the Muslims (Bangladeshi or otherwise). Between 1996 and 1999, several deaths were reported and large internal displacement of the population occurred due to prolonged ethnic clashes between the Bodos and Santhals.

According to the 2001 Census of India, 31 per cent of Assam's population is Muslim. It is however, not clear, how much of the total Muslim population in the State is constituted by Muslim migrants from East Pakistan or Bangladesh. Estimates regarding illegal migrants from Bangladesh range from a few thousand to several millions. This constant flow of primarily economic migrants has been the source of frequent turmoil in Assam. The Assam Agitation of 1979 to 1985, which culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, principally focussed on the detection and deportation of these migrants. However, successive governments in Assam failed miserably on this front and only a few thousand were deported. The issue of illegal migration, thus, continues to be an issue of concern for the people of Assam. This region has witnessed, at regular

intervals, agitations on the issue, spearheaded by various organisations demanding the identification and deportation of these migrants.

A majority of the Muslim victims (loosely referred to as 'Bangladeshi Muslims' by the media) in both Darrang and Udalguri, in the current spate of violence, are of East Bengal (which later became East Pakistan) origin. They had migrated to Assam much before the creation of Bangladesh. As per the Assam Accord, which recognised all those who entered the Indian territory before 1971, as Indian citizens, these Bengali-speaking Muslims are bona fide citizens of the country, notwithstanding their origin. That not many illegal migrants from Bangladesh have settled in these two districts is further evidenced by the fact that the Muslim population in Darrang district (of which Udalguri was carved out in 2004), increased only marginally between 1991 and 2001. Muslims constituted 31.98 per cent of Darrang's total population in 1991. In the 2001 Census, the percentage went up to 35.

Darrang district has had a volatile history of tension between indigenous ethnic communities (the Bodos and Assamese) and Muslims migrants (of erstwhile East Bengal/East Pakistan origin). It was in Darrang in 1978, that the authorities, while revising the electoral rolls for a Lok Sabha by-

In Darrang, in 1978, the authorities, while revising the electoral rolls for a Lok Sabha by-election to the Mangaldoi constituency, discovered that a large number of infiltrators from East Pakistan or Bangladesh had enrolled themselves as Indian voters.

of 1983 when over 2,000 Muslim migrants were massacred in a single day in the undivided Nagaon district.

Udalguri is one of four districts, governed by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). It is also the only district in the BTC, where the population of those constituting the 'General Category' is greater than the 'Scheduled Tribe (ST)' population, to which the Bodos belong. Consequently, the insecurity of losing out to the 'general population', which includes Muslims, is the greatest among the Bodo population in Udalguri.

The Muslim population that has inhabited this region do not display the vulnerability of a migrant population. This was made clear by the way the armed Muslim mobs carried out attacks on Bodo hamlets, mostly in the Darrang district.

II WHO STARTED IT ALL?

It is not clear whether a particular organisation played a key role in instigating the violence or if it resulted from a flare-up of the existing antagonisms between the communities. The Assam Government on 11 October ordered for an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to find the real perpetrators of the violence. In the absence of conclusive evidence against any organisation however, rumors and accusations are flying high, thereby complicating an already tense situation.

The influential Bodo students' organisation - the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) has said that the violence was a result of the larger immigration problem. ABSU President, Rwngrwa Narzary said, "The indigenous people (Bodos) are under serious threat of being overwhelmed by the immigrants. Large tracts earmarked for tribals have been encroached upon by migrants. Their number has increased to such a level that they can now easily attack the tribals and render them homeless." Other key students' organisation in Assam - the All Assam Students Union (AASU) has taken the ABSU claim further, by pointing to the role of the Jihadis in the clashes. In its statement, it said that the Jihadis from Bangladesh who have found shelter among the migrant population, were the key participants in the clashes. Supporting AASU's stance, other Bodo youth and students' organisations like the Federation of Bodo Youth (FBY) and All Bodo Post-Graduate Youth Federation (ABPGYF), in a statement on 11 October said "SIMI/ Indian Mujahideen, HuJI and

many more Islamic terrorist outfits and fundamentalists are the real culprits" of the violence. Similarly, the youth organisation, Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parishad (AJYCP) accused the Muslim settlers of unfurling Pakistani flags in Udalguri and Darrang districts. AJYCP President Putul Dutta alleged that the Assam Government was shielding Muslim extremists and indulging in vote bank politics in the State. Contesting the claims of the AJYCP, Mujammil Haque, General Secretary of All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) said, "It is an Eid flag which may appear like a Pakistani flag because it also has a green background and a star and a crescent moon on it." The Assam Government has asked for a detailed report on the flag, especially after some television channels aired clippings of it.

Besides the migrants who are suspected of having started the clashes, the role of the militant National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), has also been under the scanner. Eyewitness reports of the clashes stated that the attackers were dressed in military fatigues and carried out raids on villages, opening fire and burning down houses. The victims are reported to have said that the attackers belonged to the NDFB cadres. Some of the Bodo politicians, especially those belonging to the Bodo Peoples Front (BPF), blamed the NDFB for instigating the attacks.

The ruling Congress party, which is the political partner of the BPF, also echoed similar concerns. On 5 October, Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the violence in the twin districts was not an ethnic conflict. He said, "This is not a clash between Hindus and immigrant Bangladeshi Muslims as projected, but a systematic pogrom by the NDFB, as many of the people affected by the violence are genuine Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus, common Bodos, besides a few Adivasis (tea plantation tribals) as well." He further added on 11 October, that the NDFB's involvement was clear as the organisation has been opposed to non-tribals and illegal migrants in Bodoland. The NDFB was also accused of providing cover fire to its supporters on 5 October when they torched the Aminpara village in Udalguri district, mostly inhabited by Muslim settlers. Echoing these sentiments, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said that the ceasefire agreement with the NDFB would be reviewed in view of its participation in violence.

The NDFB has denied its role in the violence.

Spokesman S. Sanjarang called the accusations "totally baseless". The NDFB's stated position on illegal Bangladeshi migrants, however, does make it a suspect. In a speech delivered on 3 October, on the occasion of the 22nd anniversary of the organisation, the day the clashes between the two communities broke out in Udalguri district, Ranjan Daimary alias D R Nabla, Chairman of the NDFB, made a reference to a "fresh movement against the foreigners or alien people in Boroland." He added, "The alien people who intruded to our land nook and corner have not only become kingmakers but they have already become kings and queens in our land. They have already established their alien language, culture and religion in our land. Now the trend of intrusion is changing faster." Calling for action against the 'aliens', Daimary said, "Therefore it is time that all the indigenous people fight against those aliens or extinct like giant dinosaurs (sic). Law is for the people of the land. We must take the law in our own hands and fight for survival."

Notwithstanding the NDFB's suspected involvement in the violence, local politics in the Bodo heartland has also complicated the overall scenario. Divisive politics in the Bodo heartland, between the erstwhile BLT and the NDFB cadres is getting intertwined in the entire issue.

Rhetoric apart, the analyses that identifies the NDFB as being central to the violence in Darrang and Udalguri, does not stand the test of scrutiny. The militant group agreed to a ceasefire on 25 May 2005, which was extended by three months on 30 September, following a tripartite meeting in New Delhi, between the Union Home Ministry, Assam government and the NDFB. With a bulk of its cadres over ground and almost half of these lodged in designated ceasefire camps, the NDFB's capacity to initiate and sustain an ethnic cleansing drive is almost non-existent. Additionally, the NDFB's predominantly 'Christian' character does not bring it into direct conflict with the Muslim settlers. Further, the NDFB gains very little from indulging in such violence. Such charges, if proved, can jeopardise its peace agreement with the Government – a scenario the outfit would wish

to avoid at any cost.

III LOCAL POLITICS AT PLAY

Notwithstanding the NDFB's suspected involvement in the violence, local politics in the Bodo heartland has also complicated the overall scenario. Divisive politics in the Bodo heartland, between the erstwhile Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and the NDFB cadres is getting intertwined in the entire issue. The BLT, after a seven-year insurgency, had settled for a peace deal with the Government of India, which led to the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in December 2003. The BTC comprises four Districts – Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. The BTC was the second such attempt at providing the Bodos with an autonomous self-governing body, after the 1993 Bodo Accord between the Union and State Governments and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), which had led to the setting up of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). Internal divisions among the Bodos however, led to the collapse of the BAC.

The BLT surrendered en masse just before the establishment of the BTC in December 2003. A majority of the former BLT cadres have since formed the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) that rules the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD). The BPF is also a partner of the ruling Congress government in Assam. The formation of the BTC has been seen as BLT's achievement and thus, catapulted it to the position of the sole representative of the Bodo people, much to the chagrin of the NDFB, which had engaged in a 19 year-old protracted insurgency before signing the ceasefire agreement. The NDFB's over ground status bothers the BPF consisting of the former BLT cadres to a considerable extent, not just because of the low-level violence that continues between the NDFB and former BLT cadres, but also as a result of the complications the NDFB's eventual political agreement with the Government is likely to create for BPF leader Hagrama Mohillary and Co. Unsurprisingly, Hagrama Mohillary, on 4 October, pointed to the NDFB's role in the continuing violence and asked the Assam Government to call off the ceasefire with the outfit.

The ruling Congress Party is sensitive to the

demands of its alliance partner and hence, within a day, a cabinet minister and later the Chief Minister, minced no words in accusing the NDFB of playing a key role in the violence. A few days later, however, Assam's Director General of Police, R. N. Mathur said that there existed no evidence of the NDFB's involvement in the entire incident. The Assam Government has since asked for a CBI investigation.

IV THE WAY FORWARD

Not long ago, in August 2008, the same areas that were recently gripped by violence, had witnessed tensions over the issue of illegal migrants from Bangladesh. A week of tension and clashes had led to the death of at least seven persons and displacement of 5000 people. Timely official intervention, had helped calm frayed tempers at the time. However, the will to intervene quickly was found missing this time.

The Assam Government needs to ensure the return of the people in relief camps to their respective villages, on a priority basis, for which the provision of a minimum level of security in these villages will be a pre-requisite. Till then, it should ensure that there is no shortage of relief material in the camps.

To prevent the recurrence of such violence, the government needs to facilitate a dialogue between various organisations representing both communities. The probe ordered into the clashes needs to be completed on an urgent basis and its report made public. The real perpetrators of the violence must be dealt with as per legal procedures.

Moreover, the government needs to be eternally vigilant to prevent ruptures between the communities from deteriorating into full-blown communal violence.



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