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Violence in Assam: Resource Wars, Illegal Migration or Governance Deficit?

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Since 19 July 2012, a wide range of issues, combined with gargantuan administrative ineptness, has produced nearly 100 dead bodies in India's northeast state of Assam and displaced close to 400,000 people from their places of residence. The month-long violence between the Bodo tribal community and the Muslims had its impact on distant Indian cities as well where protests by Muslim organisations and a neatly crafted strategy of cyber-intimidation led to the exodus of several thousand northeasterners.³ Even as a semblance of order has returned to the four Assam districts affected by the violence, and half of the displaced people have since returned home, each of the core issues that led to the mayhem has remained unaddressed. The danger of the subdued violence reappearing and possibly with worse manifestations, in these circumstances, cannot be entirely ruled out.

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³ Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Exodus of northeasterners: Reversal of globalisation?", *New Indian Express*, 26 August 2012, <http://newindianexpress.com/magazine/voices/article594636.ece>. Accessed on 2 September 2012.

Settlers or Migrants

Two distinct sets of analyses have emerged, providing expert opinions, over the developments in Assam. The first set describes the violence as communal - between the Bodo tribal community and the Muslim settlers. The term 'settlers' portrays the Muslims as legal citizens of India with a fundamental right of movement to any part of the country. Among the known protagonists of this school are the Assam Government ruled by the Congress Party and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government in New Delhi. The second set, consisting of opposition parties including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a host of regional political and civil society organisations in Assam including several Bodo outfits, portrays the violence as between 'Indians and Foreigners', i.e. the Bodos and the Muslim migrants from Bangladesh.

Both segments of analysis contain partial truth. Nearly 30 per cent of Assam's population is Muslim. Hence, to label and denounce all the Muslims who participated in or were affected by the violence as Bangladeshi migrants is not true. Also, Assam's demography has long been altered by large-scale migration from Bangladesh. At least five of the state's districts have turned Muslim-majority as a result. Thus, the argument that the affected area had only legal Muslim settlers is flawed.⁴

Conflict over Land

However, much more than migration, which has been continuing from before the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and has in a way been accepted as a *fait accompli* in Assam, it is the pressure over depleting resources that has been the source of the current as well as the past conflicts. Assam's recent history has been dotted with conflicts over scarce land resources and the recent conflict adds to the rather long list.

By all means, the creation of Autonomous Territorial Councils as instruments of governance has been a failed experiment in Assam. Instead of being effective structures of governance, these Territorial Councils have become edifices for local power-brokering and are marred by enough loopholes for siphoning away of developmental funds, which by no means are meagre. The 2003 creation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) is even more skewed.⁵ The BTC provided the erstwhile insurgent group, the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) an opportunity to convert itself into a political party and grab administrative power.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the impact of illegal migration on Assam, see Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Migrants or Settlers", *Geopolitics*, September 2012, pp.65-67, http://issuu.com/newsline/docs/e-mag_geo_sep_12/65. Accessed on 5 September 2012.

⁵ For the 2012-13 financial year, the BTC's budget is Rupees 3.3 billion. "Bodoland Territorial Council budget session from April 9", *Times of India*, 28 March 2012.

While the BTC sought to protect the interests of the Bodo tribal community in an area where its numerical strength is significantly lower than the non-Bodos, little attention was paid to secure the rights of other minority communities inhabiting the area. Non-Bodos argue that political power in the hands of Bodos altered the dynamics on the ground. Bodos, on the other hand, allege that the immigration of Muslims, predominantly from neighbouring Bangladesh, has altered the demography of the region. Such competing narratives and rivalry over scarce land and depleting resources are bound to fuel ethnic conflicts at regular intervals.

Not surprisingly, the area has witnessed regular communal flare-ups in the past years, each veering around the same issues and each resulting in large number of deaths and displacements of thousands. The last communal flare-up in 2008 had resulted in the loss of 55 lives and displacement of 200,000 people.⁶

Governance and Administrative Deficit

In spite of the intriguing challenge Assam's ethnicity poses to the state government, described as a veritable ethnic tinderbox - "a volcano that frequently erupts due to ethnic unrest" - by the state Chief Minister⁷, there is little doubt that the current phase of violence could have been contained in its early stage. Had the authorities been alert and deployed the required number of forces quickly in the affected district, the impact of the violence could have been limited to the deaths that took place in the early days of the conflict.

Given the large number of central police force battalions and army contingents deployed in the state to deal with the now-subdued insurgency movements, moving them to the affected areas should not have been too difficult. However, while the state government erred in delaying the deployment of its own police force in the area, the Defence Ministry's dilatory tactics consumed three days⁸ before the Army personnel could be moved in.

In spite of its long experience with insurgency and inter-ethnic conflicts, the state government has glossed over the necessity to establish an early warning system. Its response mechanism, therefore, remains reactionary and highly insufficient to deal with these exigencies. It remains

⁶ Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Violence in Assam: Battle for the Bodo Heartland", IPCS Issue Brief no. 85, October 2008, http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/1418936928IB85-Bibhu-Assam.pdf. Accessed on 5 September 2012.

⁷ Ratnadip Choudhury and Avalok Langer, "Why blood will flow in Assam again", *Tehelka*, vol 9, no. 33, 18 August 2012, http://www.tehelka.com/story_main53.asp?filename=Ne180812Why.asp. Accessed on 5 September 2012.

⁸ Defence Minister A K Antony admitted in the Parliament that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) took 72 hours to give its nod for deployment of army in trouble-torn areas of Assam. "Assam ethnic strife: AK Antony admits delay", *Daily News & Analysis*, 28 August 2012, http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_assam-ethnic-strife-ak-antony-admits-delay_1733539. Accessed on 28 August 2012.

overtly dependent on the central forces and often highlights their absence, as in the context of the recent development, as the main reason for its failure to contain violence. The fact of the matter, however, remains that the official conflict management strategies remain mired by myopic policies and also arguably by vote-bank politics, allowing a large number of migrants to fuse into the state's largely pro-Congress Muslim population.

Co-opted Insurgency?

The availability of small arms, in the possession of militants who surrendered in the state, is another example of such complicity. The nature of ceasefire agreements Assam has entered into, to quell ethnic insurgencies in the past few years, has created an enabling environment for the rioters to be highly efficient killers. Neither the ceasefire agreements, which confine the militants to designated camps, nor the peace deals have given sufficient attention to the aspect of gaining control over the weapons in the possession of these insurgents.

As a result, an environment of fragile peace coexists with a large number of former insurgents with access to stocks of firearms, stashed away for both personal use and also on occasions like the recent one. The erstwhile BLT militants, who now rule over the BTC, according to an estimate, have at least 1,200 firearms⁹, away from the supervision of the authorities. Reports indicate that the Army contingent is now looking to recover the illegal weapons from these areas. It's a Herculean task, given the proximity of the area to the porous international borders and also its contiguity with other insurgency-afflicted districts.

The Future

In his Independence Day address on 15 August 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that his "Government will make every effort to understand the reasons behind the violence" and "work hard with the State Governments to ensure that such incidents are not repeated in any part of the country."¹⁰ If this goal is to be realised, immediate and long-term measures by the government need to address the basic issues that contribute to the frequent outbreaks of violence in Assam. Apart from restoring normalcy in the area by adequately deploying security forces and overseeing the return of the displaced population to their villages, the government will have to address fundamental issues of inter-community relations, illegal migration, land and resource distribution, small arms availability in the area, augmentation of police capacity and reforms of the territorial council structure. The need to establish an early

⁹ Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar, "Sporadic violence in Kokrajhar", *The Hindu* (26 July 2012).

¹⁰ *PM's Independence Day Speech, 2012*, Website of the Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1199>. Accessed on 30 August 2012.

warning mechanism and the building of a people-centred administrative approach will have to be factored into its conflict-resolution strategy to prevent the recurrence of violence and bring in ‘sustainable peace’.

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