

OUR FORGOTTEN WARS

Victimisation and Survival in Bodoland

— Dr Samrat Sinha —

The humanitarian emergency which occurred in the aftermath of the 2012 violence between Bodos and Bengali Muslims (in which more than 100 people were killed) was a crisis of immense magnitude and stretched the existing response mechanisms. According to the data provided by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), the peak of the crisis witnessed 485,921 persons displaced (in September 2012) with 246,582 persons residing in “formal” relief camps. The duration of the emergency can be gauged by the fact that as of January 31, 2013, there were still 38,959 persons still residing in “formal” camps. These camps were ethnically segregated with Bodos and Muslims residing separately.

“In modern warfare, the enemy is far more difficult to identify. No physical frontier separates the two camps. The line of demarcation between friend and foe passes through the very heart of the nation, through the same village, and sometimes divides the same family.”

— Roger Trinquier¹

REMNANTS OF WAR

ON THE FATEFUL MORNING OF July 21, 2012, at around 3.00 a.m., unidentified gunmen entered SK’s house where he and his family were residing in Ti village located 12 kilometres from Kokrajhar police station.² The gunmen opened fire at the family indiscriminately. SK died on the spot due to bullet injuries sustained on his head, back and abdomen. Another five members of his family sustained multiple bullet injuries from the shooting. Four of those injured were taken to three different hospitals. Those treated in Bilasipara Sub-Health Centre, R.N.B Civil Hospital (Kokrajhar) and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed Medical College and Hospital in Barpeta were discharged after receiving medical treatment.

Asyd, their ten-year-old son required continued treatment due to several complications that arose from injuries in his groin and thigh. He was initially treated in Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed Medical College and Hospital and then shifted to Patna with financial support from an NGO. However, financial assistance soon dried up and was not extended for further treatment in Pune.

The family then found themselves in Jauliapara in a make-shift relief camp which was set up to hold approximately 8,000 Bengali Muslims returning home. The people living in Jauliapara had originally left from their villages in the aftermath of the September 2012 ethnic violence in Kokrajhar and Chirang between the Bodos and Bengali Muslims. They became part of a floating population of more than 500,000 internally displaced people (both Bengali Muslims and Bodos).

As stated by the boy’s mother at the time, “We had to bear all financial expenses for Asyd’s treatment; with the money we pooled together and the relief money we managed to barely meet the expenditure for his treatment.” The interview was conducted in the camp in February 2013, in the midst of 8,000 people.

For those immune to the stories of violence that emanate from India’s forgotten wars, the narrative can be treated simply as an account of routine collateral damage which is intrinsic to a situation of protracted violence. From the standpoint of counter-insurgency theorists and strategic thinkers, stories such as these are the flotsam of the conflict-experience. Individual narratives from this perspective should be depersonalised and subsumed under statistical data, with conflict-induced mortality and injury becoming the primary set of indicators which highlights the ebb and flow of the insurgency (and also the success of counter-insurgency).



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The narrative is unfortunately fundamentally problematic for those engaging in the social scientific study of violence as it raises the question regarding the degree to which one can remain a detached observer or become an active participant. The craft of empirical social science is such that there is a fine balance between observation and participation.

By virtue of conducting research, one must utilise objective (and systematic) methods to

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provide data and evidence on the phenomenon under study. At the same time, from the perspective of a citizen, a researcher attains the privilege of witnessing firsthand, the actual unfolding

of events and processes, for an extended period of time in so called “peripheral” areas that are far-removed from the news debates and policy discussions. Furthermore, by virtue of living in these environments, the scale of violence and its actual impacts become increasingly personal. Statistics become living persons, with hopes for their future and dreams for their families. It is politics and the cold, rational and calculated use of violence that destroys the future for these people. There are a number of excellent works on the political dynamics underlying the causes of conflict in Bodoland. While acknowledging them, the article seeks to draw attention to the outcomes of violence and forced displacement in both 2012 and 2014 humanitarian crises in this part of Western Assam.

It is in the capacity of an academic researcher and a policy advisor to a humanitarian relief organisation (which works in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts or BTAD region) that the empirical findings being discussed in the article must be contextualised. The situation being discussed is thus based on multiple field visits to relief camps between 2012 and 2016, visits to villages destroyed in both episodes of ethnic violence, interactions with community members, interactions with injured victims, district officials, local civil society organisations, externally based humanitarian organisations and security forces.

The humanitarian emergency which occurred in the aftermath of the 2012 violence between Bodos and Bengali Muslims (in which more than 100 people were killed) was a crisis of immense proportions and stretched the existing response mechanisms. According to the data provided by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), the peak of the crisis witnessed 485,921 persons displaced (in September 2012) with 246,582 persons residing in “formal” relief camps. The duration of the emergency can be gauged by the fact that as of January 31, 2013, there were 38,959 persons still residing in “formal” camps. These camps were ethnically segregated with Bodos and Muslims residing separately.

The second crisis that occurred in BTAD was a consequence of the targeted violence and massacre of 82 Adivasis in late December 2014 across Sonitpur, Kokrajhar and Chirang. As a consequence of the massacre and subsequent retaliatory violence, approximately 289,000 people (both Bodos and Adivasis) were internally displaced and spread through 139 relief camps across Chirang and Kokrajhar. It is important to gain a comparative understanding with other crisis situations. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the total number of “persons of concern” (refugees and Internally Displaced Persons) after 26 years of full-fledged civil war in Sri Lanka was 286,372 in 2013.

WHAT IS A RELIEF CAMP?

The relief camp constitutes the basic unit for the planning of relief operations by

both governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The number of existing camps also provides a superficial index of the emergency situation. Once camps are closed, the emergency is seen as over. In theory, the relief camp is supposed to be a secure location where the communities fleeing violence are provided safety, shelter, food, water and healthcare.

In reality, the situation in the camps is contrary to what the term seeks to convey. In most cases, relief camps are unsafe, overcrowded spaces with inadequate shelter (and privacy). Families were reduced to living in make-shift tents made from with tarpaulin, tin-sheets and bamboo. There was no electricity. Families were forced to survive on supplies of basic food rations and Non-Food Items (NFIs) provided by both government and civil society organisations.

The degree of overcrowding in camps can be seen for instance in a field assessment conducted in early 2105 in Kokrajhar, which found that Patgaon Provincial High School had 8,497 “inmates” living there. Similarly, Pakhiguri Relief camp, which was established around a PHC, had 7,577 residents. The risk of waterborne diseases and malnutrition in these camps was also extremely high. This can be understood by the fact that between December 24, 2014, and January 08, 2015, alone, 2,884 diarrhea and 3,159 dysentery cases were treated by health authorities in Chirang and Kokrajhar. Also ever present is the occurrence of sexual violence, given the fact that toilets are unlit and are at a distance from the camp.

These sub-human conditions are accentuated by the fact there is also a mismatch between the actual resources available and the needs of the affected community. In the course of the assessment mentioned earlier, in Chirang, it was found that the Desori Border Roads Organisation (BRO) Office Relief Camp had six toilets servicing 2,100 residents while the nearby Deosri Relief Camp had ten unsegregated toilets servicing 6,160 residents. The lack of resources in the same district can be gauged by the fact that there were a total of eight ambulances available to attend to 19,366 displaced persons in 2015.

Those relocated to camps also faced a double burden. Not only were families trying to survive in the existing situation, the pervasive fear and restrictions on movements, meant that there was no means available to take care of one’s homestead and farmland in the abandoned villages. In many cases, individuals had left behind essential documents such as ration cards and school certificates which were the only means available to access welfare schemes.

IMPACTS ON VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

One of the least known impacts of both the crises was on health service provision and the obstacles faced by district health authorities in ensuring access to urgent medical care were insurmountable. In both 2012 and 2014, the greatest barrier to healthcare provision was the security situation. From the viewpoint of those living in camps it was virtually impossible to access Community Health Centres, sub-PHCs and PHCs due to the pervasive sense of fear and insecurity (as well as restrictions on movement due to curfews).

In the case of 2012, a large number of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANMs) and “Anganwadi” workers fled to the camps thus leaving the institutions without staff. Other effects of the conflict as witnessed in the field were the inability of Doctors, ASHAs and ANMs to access camps and work in camps due to ethnicity. There were also cases of existing sub-PHCs (such as Bengtol in Chirang District) that were converted to IDP camps which meant an immediate end to regular services being provided. There was also an increased workload for Doctors, ANMs and ASHAs who began working with new patients for whom they had no medical records or detailed case histories. The extent of this problem can be gauged by the fact that in Bilasipara sub-division (in Dhuburi District) the existing sub-PHC became responsible for extending services to around 4,000 (IDPs) overnight in four camps in addition to the normal workload.

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From the perspective of the district health authorities, the greatest populations at risk were pregnant women, infants and children below the age of five. In 2012, an estimated 4,000 pregnant women were living in camps while in 2014, there were approximately 888 pregnant women in relief camps (as per the official data) in Chirang and Kokrajhar. In 2014, in Chirang alone there were 1,149 children less than one year in age and 2,492 children in the age group one to five years living in camps. Furthermore, an estimated 1,108 children were Out Of School across eight camps in the same district.

The social organisation inside a camp must be understood as a pyramidal structure and with a hierarchy of vulnerabilities and risks. Those at the top of the pyramid in the camp are the individuals who by virtue of many factors such as location, access to information on timing of distribution, name being listed in camp lists, gender and age, are able to survive and have better access to available resources. It is precisely these individuals who stand a better chance of survival. The space on the top of the pyramid is extremely limited. The risks and vulnerabilities become magnified as we move down the pyramid and as the base broadens. Those, who cannot fend for themselves, are prone to the highest risks and are located at the bottom of the pyramid. These are pregnant women, infants, children, adolescent girls, the



elderly, injured and disabled. In any crisis, these demographics are the most difficult to monitor and they require the highest level of care and support. There are a number of documented cases where deliveries were conducted in relief camps and at least in one case in 2012, where the delivery was conducted beneath a staircase in the Bilasipara College Relief Camp in Dhuburi.

VICTIMS

On the night of December 23, 2015, PI village (Kokrajhar District) was one of the sites of a coordinated massacre of Adivasis, by gunmen who were suspected to belonging to the NDFB (Songbojit) faction. It was this massacre and cycle of retaliatory violence which sparked an exodus of nearly three lakh people, both Adivasis and Bodos. Three-year old SM was killed that night. Among the survivors who suffered bullet injuries were MB, who was three years at the time and TU aged, eight years. TU's mother was shot dead in front of him.

SB, originally from KM (a Bodo village in Chirang District which is now permanently abandoned) is two and a half years old. On the night of December 24, 2015, a group of Adivasis armed with sharp weapons attacked the village in retaliation to the massacre alluded to earlier. His mother was hacked to death and he also suffered from injuries. His infant sister, who was twelve days old, was given away to a childless couple as she could not be taken care of by the surviving family members. RB, who is now 27 years old, and from the same village, was also attacked in the same incident, suffered severe injuries to her back and neck. She is paralysed from the waist down and unable to walk. Her son, SG, who is three and a half years old, was also injured in the incident.

All those mentioned here were located in relief camps after being treated and were being looked after by the community. The survivors in the first instance have since returned home and in case of the latter victims relocated to a completely new area while abandoning their original houses and farmsteads. RB has been confined to a single room since they shifted to the new location after the camp.

The long-term impact on the victims is difficult to describe. Apart from the disability

arising out of the injuries, there are serious psychiatric effects of witnessing such extreme violence. It must also be remembered that areas also experience routine everyday violence perpetrated by both the security forces and the armed opposition groups.

Two major indices can be used to gauge the level of conflict violence and victimisation. The first is information available on Project Aashwas, which is being implemented by the Assam State Police to support children who have lost either or both parents in insurgency and ethnic violence since 2003. The children are provided a monthly scholarship which supports schooling and higher education. However, children of individuals who were suspected of being insurgents and who have been killed in the course of counter-insurgency operations are not eligible.

A total of 501 children are currently on the scheme in the districts of Udalguri, Baksa, Kokrajhar and Chirang (which constitute the BTAD). Kokrajhar has the highest number of beneficiaries, with 296 children being provided assistance throughout the district. A second is the BTAD-Violence Epidemiology Study and Conflict Early Warning Framework Database which is under construction and currently records daily violent events from publicly available news sources. It has been found that between 2012 and 2015, 288 civilians have been killed, 212 have injured and 59 abducted. At the same time, 83 insurgents have been killed and 368 arrested (with security forces suffering 35 killed and 32 injured). Accurate local level statistics are, however, very hard to build. A recent report which used official government data stated that since the launch of counter-insurgency operations in 2014 directed against National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbojit) stated that approximately 776 cadres have been arrested and 48 killed.

NOWHERE PEOPLE

To reach the “relief camp” near Shantipur Villages No 2 and No 3 in Kokrajhar, you have to cross a section of Saralpara Forest. For a stretch of 40 kilometres before reaching the camp, there is no mobile telephone connectivity. At the beginning of the road, there is a forest



department outpost, which is now occupied by the paramilitary forces. Near Ultapani, there is an army checkpoint and a few kilometres away is the “relief camp”. The hills of Bhutan loom in the distance providing a serene backdrop to the cauldron below.

Saralpara was one of the epicentres of the 2014 conflagration and 14 Adivasis were massacred here. The problem of course is that all relief camps have officially closed down and the 2014 emergency is long over. Yet, in front of us, is an encampment with all the markings and characteristics of a relief camp. The residents of the camp came and settled here as a precautionary measure even before the outbreak of violence and later shifted to the Saralpara relief camp. They have since then returned to this place but refuse to return to their original nearby villages because of a very real sense of fear. There are approximately three hundred persons living at the encampment and it is believed that as one goes farther into the forest, many more such encampments will appear. There are no water sources available and water has to be collected from the nearby Nepali *basti*. All the families live under tarpaulin sheets and have been trying to survive in this manner for more than a year. Their original fields and homes have been abandoned (and many do not have documents). The only source of income is daily wage labour which is seasonal

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and on an average, they earn 150 rupees to 200 rupees a day with work available for 15 to 20 days a month. Interviews are difficult here as the paramilitary forces are also living in the encampment.

The experience of protracted displacement, the fragmentation and dispersal of households, after the closing down of camps is one of the unknown and unmeasured consequences of the

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post-emergency situations of 2012 and 2014. The big relief camps allowed for a degree of cohesion in interpreting the emergencies being discussed. Once the camps were closed, it

became difficult to track the patterns of return. Multiplicities of such hamlets or encampments exist, where people are refusing to return, but there is no data on their exact locations.

Take for instance, NS which is a Bodo “relief camp”; the individuals shifted out of the original government-administered relief camp, into forest areas and are now in the current location. The closest health centre is eight kilometres away, through dirt track and forest. Two children, belonging to the same family, died of malaria recently. The only means of transportation that was available during a recent delivery was a bullock cart. Of the 32 children living in the encampment, only five have enrolled in school. They walk six kilometres to school. Just like the camp mentioned earlier, there is no accessible source of water. It is too expensive for families living in both camps to buy toys or books for their children. Just like the adults, they are living in a limbo, on land

which is not theirs, with no hope of return to their original home. In Bengtol, there is an encampment of IDPS from 1992, while in Deosri, there are two Adivasi encampments. Both are located opposite each other on either side of the road. One encampment is of those displaced in 2014 (and who have refused to go back) while the second is from those who have not returned home since the conflict in 1996.

RESETTLEMENT AND RECOVERY

Post-conflict recovery and rebuilding is fraught with difficulties. Take the case of BRI Village in Chirang District. To reach the village, you have to cross two rivers over rickety bamboo bridges. The village was originally a mixed village. The area is also unique in the sense that no ambulance is able to reach the village due to the topography. The lack of infrastructure means that there are hundred per cent non-institutional deliveries occurring here. All 106 Bengali-Muslim households were burnt down and all residents fled to relief camps. Two people were also killed in the same location.

However, people have returned and are slowly rebuilding and taking stock of their lost assets. Take for instance, one of the respondents, HBRI. His household consists of five members—two adults and three children. The children were re-enrolled in school after dropping out for a year due to the violence. The respondent himself owns a shop, which is his primary source of livelihood, and currently, earns between Rupees 4,000 to 5,000 a month. All the members of the household returned from Paniagaon relief camp to their original settlement after a year. Before the conflict, the respondent earned Rupees 10,000 per month but the original shop was

burnt down. It is not simply the burning down of an asset that matters here. The fact is that he lost his original customers who were from the Bodo community.

One of the most serious consequences of both crises was the burning down of houses in retaliatory violence. In most cases perpetrators were neighbours. A number of Bengali Muslim, Bodo and Adivasi villages were burnt down. Again it is difficult to access exact data on the scale of housing destruction. For instance, according to the available data, in 2012 Gossaigaon sub-division alone (Kokrajhar District) saw 6,268 houses being completely burnt down and 1,001 partially destroyed, while in 2014, approximately 278 houses were burnt down in Kokrajhar and 148 in Chirang.

The problem of rebuilding is one that goes beyond simply calculating the loss of assets and the question of economic recovery. The people who have returned are attempting to rebuild their lives with the limited resources available as well as whatever relief and rehabilitation money that was given. The principal problem is one of rebuilding trust between the communities and creating a sense of forgiveness for the acts committed. Would you be able to forgive your neighbours if they burnt down your house or would you seek revenge at a suitable opportunity?

As returnees from the camps slowly build tenuous contacts with their neighbours, there is still a sense of mistrust. The post-crises deployment of security forces was a form of insurance. The gradual thinning out of the security forces, has meant that the onus is now of the communities to maintain peace. This fragile community peace is not dependent on the capacity of the state, but on the ability of communities to enhance the level of communication, interaction and economic interdependence. In many areas, day-to-day interactions, which were once the norm, are slowly restarting.

In BRI, there is a primary school right in the middle of the village. The school and the path leading from it, now serves as a border between the Bodos and Bengali-Muslims. Children from the latter community have stopped going to the

school after 2012. The Anganwadi is located on the Bodo “side” and once a week, rations meant for the children in the Bengali-Muslim area are sent through intermediaries, as parents are still too frightened to send their children.

THE SEARCH FOR PEACE

Despite the seriousness of the situation and the magnitude of the crises, it would be erroneous to interpret the situation purely through the lens of societal violence. There are also diverse attempts being made to minimise the risk of future violence and to alleviate the plight of those affected. The creation of BTAD and the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) itself was the result of a tripartite peace process between the then Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), the Government of India and the State Government. This also led to the extension of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution to the governance of these areas in 2003. The arrangement allowed for a transfer of a number of subjects to the Territorial Council and a limited degree of autonomy. The insurgency has since been transformed, with multiple groups emerging broadly along ethnic lines. The contemporary negotiations with groups are reflected in Ceasefire Arrangements as well as Surrender and Rehabilitation policies.

According to the Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi, the current ceasefire groups include National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) (Ranjan Daimary), NDFB (Progressive), the Adivasi Cobra Military of Assam (ACMA), Adivasi People’s Army (APA), All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA), Birsa Commando Force (BCF), National Santhal Liberation Army (NSLA) and Santhal Tiger Force (STF).

A second layer of conflict prevention mechanisms focuses on maintaining community level peace and is broadly constituted by four interrelated streams. The first are Peace Committees that are functioning at the district level consisting of the District Commissioner, police officials, village headmen and other eminent community leaders as well as individuals from the ceasefire groups.

Peace holds different values depending on whom one speaks to...

The second includes the prominent Student Unions such as the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA), All Santhali Student Union (ASSU), All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AAKRSU), the Bengali Youth Students' Federation (BYSF), All Assam Gorkha Students' Union (AAGSU) and the All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (AATTSA) among others.

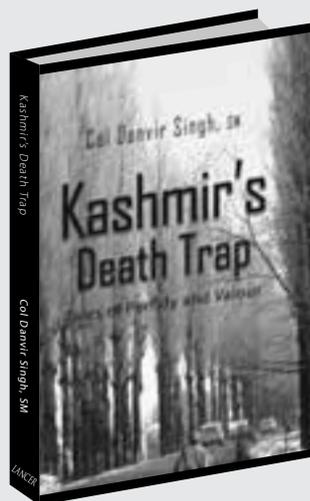
A third component includes the peace-building activities and post-conflict recovery programmes being implemented by NGOs and externally based humanitarian relief organisations. Also included are the activities of faith-based organisations. Finally, there are the traditional peace practices and negotiations between the communities themselves. The establishment of peace itself remains elusive and the risk of outbreaks remains high. Small disputes get magnified and framed as inter-ethnic issues.

NOTES

- 1 Roger Trinquier, 1964. *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Pall Mall Press: London).
- 2 Names and Locations in some cases have been changed or coded due to the sensitive nature of the information and to protect identities.

Peace holds different values depending on who one speaks to. For many of the displaced, the security forces are the answer. For others, especially the youth who are pushed into the groups, the aspirations and achievement of long standing political claim necessitates the instrumental use of extreme violence. Across communities, however, most people simply want a better quality of life, livelihood, access to healthcare, schooling for their children and an environment bereft of fear; where day-to-day transactions and interactions seem normal and not life-threatening.

The children who have been scarred by all the episodes of insurgency, counter-insurgency and ethnic clashes (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2008, 2012 and 2104) represent a lost generation. It is the next generation of children who deserve a better chance at peace. Travel off the road and cross a river to Jhawarbil, you will reach *Suluk Gwjwn* Vidyalaya (*Suluk* and *Gwjwn* mean peace in Santhali and Bodo respectively). Find the school and you will find hope.



Kashmir's Death Trap

Tales of Perfidy and Valour

Col Danvir Singh, SM

This book is an effort to recall the life in Kashmir, a state under perpetual conflict. It is a saga of courage, betrayal, passion and hatred seen from the eyes of a young soldier.

In this nature's paradise, is a human hell where the lives are lost daily in pursuit of Ideology. Armed by own set of Justifications India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris battle each other to no end in sight.

Zealous young men continue to die for a cause diseased by treachery and celebrated by heroism. The territorial desire of Pakistan has cost dearly to the generations stifled in this conflict.

This fight has devastated many a homes with ever widening chasm and deepening scars.

Punctuated by blood curdling violence, Kashmiris are prisoners of a historic mistake. In the ongoing series of Pakistan's grand design to wrest control of this state, a proxy war was unleashed by them in 1989. This war still continues as I write.

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