

Framing Muslims as Illegal Migrants in Assam: Media Hype or Social Reality?

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Abstract

In Assam and the rest of Northeast India, the most common perception is of illegal migrants from across the border threatening to outnumber the local population. This discourse dominates the regional media every now and then and peaks at times of unrest. The danger looming large is that it would seemingly upset fragile demographic ecology of the region that besides eating into distribution of economic resources would one day takeover the political reigns. There is obviously no one dimension to this problem. There are arguments and counter arguments. Some say that the problem is overhyped while others argue that majority of the Bengali speaking Muslims came prior to 1971 Bangladesh war who were given legitimacy. Whether it is real or perceptual, the threats have given rise to a number of violent responses resulting in large number of casualties. Further, every time there is violence, thousands of people move into camps leading to a huge number of permanently internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in refugee camps for decades in subhuman conditions without any hope of redress. Moreover, this has given rise to a situation of volatility. The State perceives them as vulnerable recruits of subversive elements. On the other hand, politically, new players have emerged promising succor and better socio-economic security. One such political outfit, All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) has been gaining electoral victory over the years. Thus, the media mostly takes the angle of burgeoning illegal Muslim population that is threatening the political stability rather than approaching it as a humanitarian crisis. The paper therefore, would examine the trends of media discourses using qualitative methods like textual analysis and how it generalises a complex set of population.

Key words: Illegal immigrants, Assam movement, Bodo-Muslim conflict, Media hype, Political outfit.

Introduction

Tags like outsiders, foreigners, and illegal migrants overshadow discussions on any sort of violent conflicts in northeast

in general and Assam in particular. Northeast is known for the diverse ethnic communities that are also beset with intermittent violent conflicts involving

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one community or the other. One large community that is at the receiving end of most violent clashes are the Muslims or more precisely the Bengali speaking Muslims. While no one can say for certain who is an illegal migrant from Bangladesh into Assam or any other part of Northeast India, but the tag can be easily labeled without any fear of social, political or cultural disapproval, to any Bengali Muslim. That is the antagonism most Muslims in Northeast India have to live with. Stories and images of Bangladeshi migrants in Assam are ubiquitous in the local Assamese press. We are told that migration from Bangladesh is Assam's "most fatal malady", "a plague" and a "ticking bomb" while the migrants themselves are referred to as "infiltrators" and "encroachers" who pose a threat both to the security of the state and the identity of the Assamese people (Glebova Ksenia, 201:20).

There are various versions of illegal migration ranging from total denial to the existence of some portion of population; to continuous and uninterrupted flow of migrants from across the border in search of better future. The problem is complicated for both the parties also due to indistinguishable physical features of those considered legitimate citizens from those supposedly 'illegal migrant'. Thus, while it is easy for anyone to label someone as Bangladeshi, it is tough for any one pointed at, to disprove the allegations of illegal migration. Even possession of legal documents does not assure anyone of legitimacy since these

can be dismissed as illegally acquired. The consequence of this situation is detrimental to both the sections. Keeping a huge section of the population on the edge is explosive for both. Frequent disturbances lead to a large number of unstable group of population to live with mutual suspicion of being targeted on the one hand and seen as a threat to stability and security on the other hand to those sections of 'indigenous' population.

The Muslim populations at the receiving end in Northeast are primarily in four states, namely Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland. The dynamics involved in dealing with the conflicts are different in different states. In the case of Manipur, the antagonism is at times unleashed by bloody reactions by underground insurgents. They might any fine day bump off a few 'migrants' and send a strong signal for others to leave the state. The police or army is unable to pursue the perpetrators for two reasons, one, they are underground operatives and two, since the victims are 'outsiders' there is no political or social pressure on the law enforcing agencies to apprehend the culprits. These types of killings keep happening at regular intervals, sometimes targeting Hindi speaking labourers and sometimes Bengali speaking Muslims. In the local press, the ongoing migration from Bangladesh to Assam is constructed as a security issue by means of a series of discursive strategies, most notably through arguments building a security bridge between migration and Assamese identity (Glebova Ksenia, 201:20).

The situation in Nagaland is different, especially after the ceasefire agreement, the civil society looks upon the Bengali speaking Muslims as potential threat not just to law and order problem but also a perception of eventual outnumbering the local community. The case in Tripura is cited as an example. In Tripura the indigenous tribal population is outnumbered by Bengali migrants over the years and how the economic and political power is in the hands of the non-tribal have come to stay. The history is not as simplistic as mentioned, but largely it is the case.

Even for argument sake, the Tripura case cannot be a possibility in Nagaland or Meghalaya with the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution providing a safeguard for tribal states. Further, for those travelling to, or working in Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh require ILP (Inner Line Permit), which restricts entry and settlement of outsiders on large-scale basis.

An incident in Dimapur reflects an outburst of this simmering antagonism toward the 'illegal migrants'. On March 5, 2015 a large crowd estimated to be around seven to eight thousand gathered in Dimapur who killed a Muslim youth in the city square in a medieval style lynching and public hanging in the city square tower. The man was lodged in the jail for alleged rape case of a local woman. The crowd stormed into the jail and pulled him out to the town parading him naked for six to seven kilometers before hanging him in public.

A few conclusions can be drawn from this bizarre incident; first, there is an accumulation of anger against 'outsiders' within and among the Naga people; the law enforcing agencies have developed cold feet when it comes to protecting the 'outsiders', thirdly, the reaction from the larger society towards this incident is only half-hearted; finally a word of approval to this medieval justice comes from other side of the country- the Shiv Sena that says people have become impatient to the incidents of rapes (*The Indian Express*, Mumbai, March 9, 2015), but what they tacitly do is to align with anyone who treats the Bengali speaking Muslims as 'aliens'. The whole incident therefore, is not an outrage at sexual assault per se, rather an impending anger against 'illegal Bangladeshi migrants', IBM, an acronym popular in the region.

In Meghalaya too there are sporadic incidents of protests and violence demanding a law similar to ILP in three other states, citing the reasons of 'influx' outsiders. There has been extreme violence on some targets in the name of outsiders. Presently, there is a lull in the momentum for the demand after the Chief Minister categorically ruled out bringing in such a law in Meghalaya.

Historical Background

Boundaries and borders have always been bitterly contested between nations and within nations, and northeast is not an exception to this rule. Northeast shares all of its borders with outside India, except about 27 kilometers of link that connects

with West Bengal, called chicken neck in the local idiom. Borders are drawn and redrawn overnight but cultures and people and history are age old. It is not logical to delink both the constructs and treat them as separate analytical categories one without the other. The scope of this paper does not permit dwelling into that aspect much. However, one should note that cultures and people are linked to territory but not borders.

Historically Northeast India was having migration from different parts of the neighbouring countries. As per the White Paper brought out by the Government of Assam on Foreigners' Issue, historically there were migrations from within British colony due to various reasons. The growth of tea industry necessitated import of labour force from Bihar, Orissa, Bengal and other places. Expansion of colonial administration, local economy, discovery of oil and coal brought in more people, and above all availability of cultivable wastelands attracted a large number of people from nearby districts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The White Paper says, "The peasant migration from erstwhile East Bengal brought with it superior cultivation techniques and multiple cropping" (White Paper on Foreigners Issue, Govt. of Assam, 2012: 5).

The White Paper states that due to communal disturbances in early 1950 in Assam lot of people fled back to the then East Pakistan leaving their properties behind. However, the intervention of both

the Indian government and Pakistan government (Nehru- Liaquat Agreement 1950) enabled return of those displaced persons, 161360 in all were resettled (White Paper 2012: 7). During the 1951 census under the direction of Union Home Ministry National Register of Citizens (NRC) the Assam government enumerated each person with all the details. These NRC registers were initially kept in DCs or SDO offices but later shifted to police stations to check and verify infiltrators.

The 1961 census in Assam led to the establishment of tribunals to scrutinize cases of infiltrations, the move followed after the Registrar General of Census report assessed that 220,691 infiltrators had entered Assam (White Paper on Foreigners Issue, Govt. of Assam, 2012: 8). The White Paper says accordingly between 1961 and 1966 a total of 178,952 persons were either deported or voluntarily left the country (White Paper on Foreigners Issue, Govt. of Assam, 2012: 8). As many as 35080 cases were referred to the Foreign Tribunals who disposed most of the cases. The eviction process drew flak from various quarters including international media as unfair and arbitrary. The representations by bona fide citizens of harassments caused to them led to revision of guidelines on the procedure. Accordingly, in 1969 the Government decided to deport only three types of cases: those who had Pakistani passport, the fresh infiltrators, and the re-infiltrators. The police were given detailed instructions to monitor and watch out for

the movement of infiltrations across the borders. The Indian government in the meantime instructed the state government not to send back to Bangladesh the persons who fled to India from erstwhile East Pakistan prior to March 1971.

The Assam Movement

The Assam Movement was a long and protracted agitation between 1979 and 1985 that gave momentum to Assamese nationalism. Earlier the subnationalistic spirit was carried out by organizations such as Asam Sahitya Sabha established in 1917 and the Asamiya Samrak-sabini Sabha established in 1926 and renamed Asam Jatiya Mahasabha in the 1930s.

The Assam Movement saw the birth of organizations such as ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) and AGP (Assam Gana Parishad). The Assam Gana Parishad as the regional political party that took shape at the end of the agitation managed to come to power in the state when elections were called at the end of the movement in 1985.

The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) formed in 1967 took the centre stage and played a leading role during the Assam Movement. According to Amalendu Guha (1980: 1703) the Assamese sub-nationalism was strongly nurtured from 1920s among the Asamiya middle class prodded by the British civil servants "that their own people would be turned into a minority in their homeland unless the Bengali Muslim peasants'

incessant influx into the Brahmaputra Valley since about 1905 was checked". He says this threat perception became part of the sub nationalistic moorings. The press and other communication media too were used to spread the message to the masses of the danger posed to their culture and identity. Guha (1980:1706) says in July 1978 the working committee of the Asam Sahitya Sabha passed a resolution expressing concern over the fresh influx of immigrants across the border. *The Dainik Asam* flashed the news with startling headlines and devoted large space to cover it. Doubtful statistics, often emanating from high officials, continued to be poured into that exaggerated the influx and outsiders' domination over Assam's economy, polity and culture. (Guha 1980:1706).

The Assam Movement spearheaded by AASU and AAGSP demanded the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants. The press directed its campaign against the so-called "Bangladeshis" - all post-1951 East Pakistani migrants and their progeny, most of whom did not possess readily acceptable documents to prove their Indian citizenship that was acceptable to the present regime. 'Detect, Disenfranchise and Deport the Foreigners' and 'No Deletion, No Election' were the populist demands that emerged out of the campaign. On June 8, 1979, there was the first-ever 12-hour Assam bandh called by the AASU to back the demand of foreign nationals' expulsion (Guha, 1980).

On August 26, 1979 the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad was formed (AAGSP) as an umbrella organization that consisted of Asam Sahitya Sabha, Asam Jatiya Mahasabha and others. The year 1980 began with a 58 hour bandh followed by large-scale genocide in Kamrup. Boycott of the Lok Sabha elections, schools and colleges were closed and there was virtually no administration in Assam, and the officers were often seen taking their orders from the AASU and the Gana Sangram Parishad. The January genocide in North Kamrup alone caused death of some two hundred persons, and 25 thousand people were rendered homeless by large scale arson. At the end of 1980 unofficial estimates put the number of deaths due to violence, around 1000 and most of the deaths of minorities went underreported and mostly unlamented in the press. The press in which the Asamiya progressive weekly, *Kalakhari* is printed was attacked and damaged, and a students' and youth rally, opposed to the movement, at Guwahati was broken up by force (Guha, 1980: 1707).

The AASU was invited to Delhi to hold talks on resolving the issue. The delegation met then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. In all more than 20 rounds of talks were held and the bone of contention remained, fixing the cutoff date for identifying and deporting foreigners from Assam. AASU and the Gana Sangram Parishad estimated the number of such foreigners at 45 lakhs, which meant that the AASU and the AAGSP wanted nearly one-fourth of Assam's population of 188

lakhs then, to be declared stateless and removed. They were mostly toiling peasants, artisans and workers, born or residing in the state for a period of upto 30 years, virtually as naturalized citizens. They were given shelter and relief, and in many cases even wastelands by the government. Being poor and illiterate and because of constant mobility in search of a living and in the wake of recurrent riots, most settlers lost their 'border slips', camp cards and even refugee registration certificates. Most of the settlers were already assimilated or were on the way to assimilation into their new homes (Guha 1980: 1709).

After six long years of agitation that included many violent incidents, the movement came to an end in 1985 with Assam Accord signed between AASU, the Government of India and Government of Assam in the presence of then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. The Accord set March 24, 1971 as the cutoff date for identification and deportation of immigrants from East Pakistan into Assam (White Paper on Foreigners Issue, Govt. of Assam, 2012: 13). The Accord created a provision for citizenship to any person who came to Assam on or after January 1, 1966 to March 24, 1971. An Act made in 1983, the IM (DT) Act (Illegal Migration Determination by Tribunals Act) was enforced from earlier Foreigners Tribunals to deal with the problems. The Assam Accord that featured a definition of who is an Assamese agreed upon by the signatories. The definition was then used as the basis for the controversial Illegal

Migrants Determination by Tribunals Act passed in 1983. The repeal of the Act in 2005 increased coverage and debate in the regional media.

Conflicts, Muslims and Media

While on the one hand the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants occupies predominant positions in any political discourse in the state of Assam and media uses the same framework for looking at events and issues in general and all the more during the height of violence and bloodshed. The issue of illegal migrants becomes the lens through which other flashpoints of any violence such as the humanitarian crisis, specificities, the role of state actors, individual agents, and restoration of normalcy and rehabilitation works. Let us look at some major violent incidents that broke out in Assam and how the media responded.

The Nellie Massacre

The Nellie massacre remains the goriest of all violence in Assam to this day. The Nellie massacre took place in Nagoan district when the Assam Movement was at its peak in 1983. It was said to be a six-hour mayhem on the morning of February 18, 1983 across 14 different villages claiming 2, 191 lives, most of them women and children. (Unofficial figures put it at more than 5,000). The villages included Alisingha, Khulapathar, Basundhari, Bugduba Beel, Bugduba Habi, Borjola, Butuni, Indurmari, Mati Parbat, Muladhari, Silbheta, Borburi and Nellie. Most of the victims were Bengali speaking Muslims. Neighbouring Lalung

tribe were said to have carried out the attack. The decision to hold state elections in 1983 in the middle of Assam agitation was said to be the immediate cause that sparked the massacre. Regarding the Nellie massacre, Assam's regional newspapers clearly supported the movement as well as ULFA's aspirations of reversing economic exploitation and neglect. But the absence of critical media also led to the targeting of those who questioned the chauvinism of the protestors. In 1991 press freedom took a big hit when Kamala Saikia became one of the first journalists to be killed by the militants after he dared to criticise them (Sen, 2011, Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper University of Oxford). Even though the massacre was sought to be passed off as a spontaneous act of violence by the exasperated native Tiwa community, that they were cunningly instigated and it was a premeditated act is beyond reasonable doubt. None came to be indicted for the horrific act (Nilim Dutta, 2012, Kafil.org).

Assam Floods

In addition to man-made disasters natural disasters like floods which are a perennial phenomenon in Assam sends lakhs of people every year out of their homes to temporary shelters. The changing course of Brahmaputra and its tributaries erodes vast land areas eating people's homes and cultivable lands. When houses are washed away preserving the papers is not a priority of anyone but saving lives is. In the process large number of genuine settlers would become illegal

overnight. Naresh Mitra, a Times News Network reporter wrote that “out of 20 lakh people displaced in floods and erosion in the Brahmaputra valley over the last six decades, 12 lakhs are Bengali Muslims. Whenever these displaced people move to different parts of the state for jobs, they are harassed as Bangladeshis” (TNN, Sept. 4, 2012).

Bodo-Muslim Conflict

Bodo-Muslim conflict is a series of violent attacks that started on 19 July, 2012 in Assam among two major ethnic groups i.e., Bodos and Bengali Muslims. During the humanitarian crisis that had unfolded in Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Chirang districts of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) and the adjoining Dhubri district, nearly 4 lakh people belonging to both the communities were forced to move to refugee camps and the violence left nearly 100 people dead. The problem we are focusing here is how the media converts this huge humanitarian crisis and widespread violence into a discourse of immigrant versus indigenous conflict. The Bodos are an ethnic and linguistic community, early settlers of Assam in the northeast part of India. According to the 2011 census, there are nearly 2 million Bodos in Assam which makes for 5.5% of the total population in the state, but within the Bodoland they comprise more than 30 per cent of the population.

What is very peculiar in this situation is the claim made by some of the indigenous pressure groups that most of

the displaced Muslim Bengali minorities are not genuine Indian citizens. As the homes of these people are burnt down, it is quite possible now to turn them into Bangladeshis. As their return to homes is becoming more and more insecure, what is needed to be done is not merely a packaged rehabilitation, but saving the camp dwellers from this test of citizenship to which they are sure to fail, owing to burning down of their last shred of papers (Biswas Prasenjit, 2012).

When the authors of this paper visited the region few months ago, it was found that few camps were still in place, with most people having returned to their homes. A camp in Kothalguri near Gosaigoan subdivision of Kokrajhar district has 150 families with semi-permanent structures like tin-sheet walls and roofs, but they all are housed in shelters less than 150 square feet per family. There are more such camps in the districts. Among the Bodos as per the information provided by an NGO called NERWSN all those affected during the 2012 clashes have returned to their homes, however some fresh camps have come up after an attack on Adivasis by militants resulting in the killings of about 100 persons on the eve of Christmas in 2014. The chilling shooting down of Adivasis led to fighting between Bodos and Adivasis resulting in coming up of new refugee camps in the Kokrajhar district some of which we visited earlier this month.

Framing the News

The newspapers used the terminologies like ‘immigrant Muslims’,

‘indigenous Bodos’, ‘illegal migrants’, ‘riots’ and ‘communal violence’, while all the dailies have called the people involved in violence from both sides as miscreants and rampaging mob only. The dailies used different terminologies for referring to the Bengali speaking Muslims. The news language and the news selection showed that the news reports were not written sensitively. *The Telegraph* largely covered the news using mostly ‘us vs. them’ frame. An editorial referred to the Bengali Muslims as the other. In one instance the Muslims were referred to as ‘illegal Bengali speaking immigrants’. It also used ‘Bangladeshi camps’ to refer to the Bengali speaking Muslims relief camps. On July 27, 2012 a front page story by Pranab Bora goes as follows: “Bijni is about 20km from Kajalgaon, the district headquarters of Chirang, under Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD). In both Bodo and “Bangladeshi” relief camps, there are people who talk about loved ones gone missing. *The Hindu* saw the Assam violence as communal violence. It saw the issue as the conflict between Hindu Bodos and minority Muslims. Even the editorial of *The Hindu* termed it as ethnic and communal violence. Most of the reports in *The Hindu* used descriptions as Bodos and Muslims. It referred to Bodos as Hindus and Bengali speaking Muslims as simply Muslims.

The Times of India considered that the violence was of a communal turn. It usually used descriptive terms like Bengali speaking Muslims. Both newspapers

referred to the groups as Bodo tribals and Muslims. They frequently used the term ‘ethnic riots’ for referring to Kohrajhar violence.

The Assam Tribune is one of the oldest English dailies and has high reliability quotient in the region. *The Assam Tribune* had full length lead stories with colour photographs many days on the front page during the peak of the violence. There were days in which entire first page had different stories on the violence. It used terms like the “riot hit Kokrajhar” frequently. Though it had stories with bylines, the photographs were mostly credited to UB photos agency. *The Assam Tribune* highlighted the need to protect the Assamese Muslims as “genuine minorities”. The latter again creates a distinction between Bangladeshi Muslims and Assamese Muslims as “fake” and “genuine” (Glebova Ksenia, 201:21).

The Seven Sisters Post was an English daily launched to cater to all the states of northeast India. The paper closed down when the news of Saradha group scam broke out. It was first launched on November 11, 2011 by Saradha Printing and Publications Pvt. Ltd. The newspaper mainly covered news of north-eastern India. Now the newspaper is closed and its website has also expired due to Saradha Group chit fund scam. It used almost campaign style journalism on “illegal immigrants”. It ran several full length lead stories and colour pictures on migrants in the months of April and May 2012 much before the clash began in July.

Conclusions

In the debate what is getting lost is that the issue always takes a political hue, not the fact that the two nations have shared a history in that not very long ago they were part of the same country. An environment of mutual suspicion between Hindu and Muslim communities may only serve few vested interests while majority of people on both sides particularly in villages live constantly in fear. Overall, the media coverage of the issue has been prolific and at times could be termed no less than “hysterical” especially during electoral campaigning as migration has long been a top election issue in Assam (Glebova, 2011:22). The change of Congress led government after three consecutive terms was premised on the discourse that Congress had encouraged ‘illegal migrants’ as vote bank. It is therefore a big challenge for the BJP led government to act beyond

rhetoric by legally settling the disputes. Gramsci believed that media has always had a key role in telling people to do things in their everyday lives that support the power structures. In media studies today, people look at how the media supports power structures such as government, capitalism/corporations, and patriarchy. The dailies also tend to support the power structures like government and patriarchy. The media transforms its subjects into “border problems”, “infiltrators” or “refugees”, “Muslim terrorists”, “al Qaeda agents” and so on. The same can be said of the northeast media discourse on Bangladeshi migration, where the migrants are presented in similar terms (Glebava 2011:23). Therefore, media frames people into categories where they are no more looked upon as respectable humans but as a mass of objects to be treated or modified.

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