

Bodo violence: Contest for power and territory

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On May 1 and 2, 2014, the Bodo Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) were afflicted by ethnic violence when 41 bodies were discovered in Baska and Kokrajhar districts. Non Bodos, including migrant Muslims, who constitute the majority, allege that their failure to vote for the Bodo People's Front (BPF) candidate Chandan Brahma in the recent Lok Sabha elections resulted in the fatal retaliation. This has been linked to remarks by BPF leader, Pramila Rani Brahma, who had commented on April 30 that the Muslim migrants had not voted for Chandan Brahma.

Muslims have propped up their own independent candidate, Naba Kumar Sarania *alias* Hira Sarania, a former United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) rebel in Kokrajhar. This seat has always been represented by a Bodo parliamentarian.

The Assam government suspects the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit faction) to be behind the attacks though the latter has denied any involvement. The state government is thinking of arming Bengali-speaking Muslims in Bodo areas for self-defense.

Changing Demography and Escalating Tensions

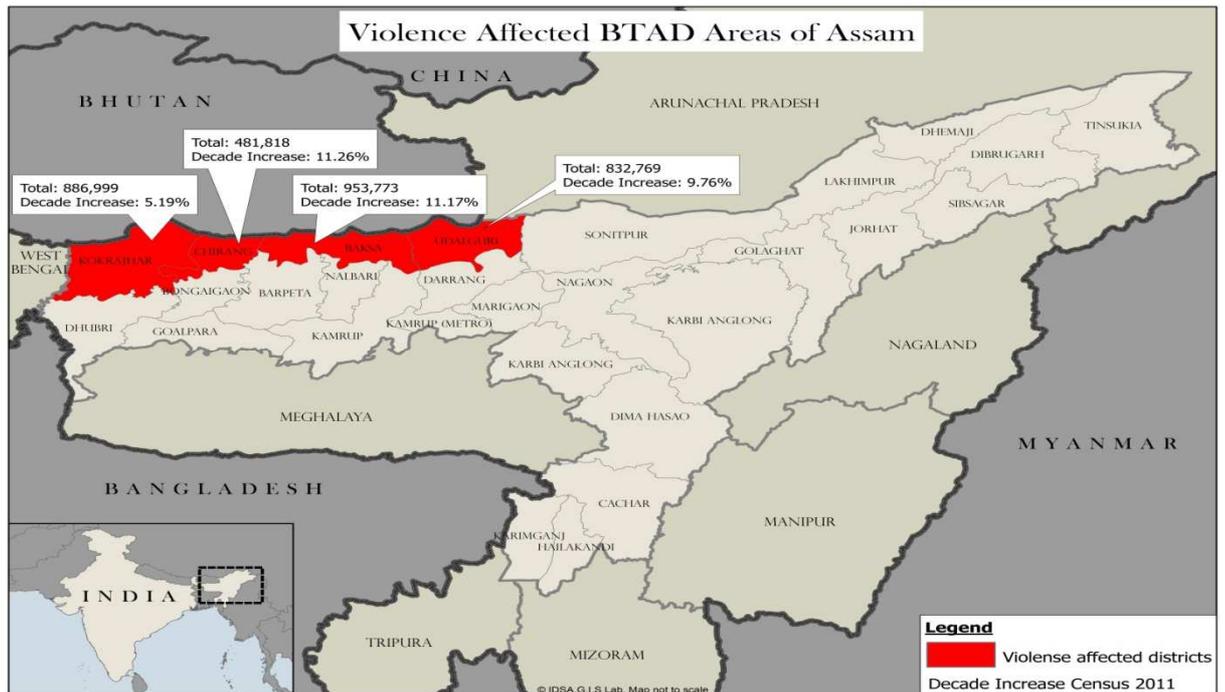
The genesis of this strife can be traced back to as early as 1978 when in a Lok Sabha by-election around 45,000 illegal migrants' names were found on the voter's list in Mangaldoi, Darrang district. That was a covert move by the Assam state to legalize migrants with voting rights at par with bona fide citizens of India clearly implicating the government, driven by seditious vested interests versus delivering on the constitutionally guaranteed rights of citizens. The failure of elected representatives to protect people's land from illegal occupation was and is one of the primary reasons for overwhelming insecurity over land holdings.¹

The first strike against this revelation was kick started in 1979 resulting in the massive All Assam Students' Union (AASU) led 'Assam Agitation' against illegal Bangladeshi migration from 1979 to 1985. During that agitation, violence against Muslim immigrants continued, with the 1983 Nellie massacre being the worst with over 2000 Muslim migrants massacred in a single day. Districts like Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Darrang, etc, had also witnessed violence during the Assam Agitation over illegal migration.

¹ For more on this, Namrata Goswami, "Assam in Turmoil", IDSA Comment, July 25, 2012 at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Assaminturmoil_NamrataGoswami_250712 (Accessed on May 05, 2014).

Notwithstanding all previous events in the decade from 2001 to 2011, as per census figures of 2011, there has been a sharp increase in Bengali speaking Muslim population. The four districts of the BTAD have had highest increases of Muslim versus Non-Muslim population growth (See Figure I). With ever escalating social tensions, in October 2008, violence over issues of land encroachments was sparked by the incident of alleged violence meted out to a Bodo youth, Rakesh Swargiary, by Muslim minority youth. The news of this attack spread like wildfire amongst the Bodo community resulting in widespread violence between the two communities.² The Bodo community was already on the edge after two Bodo youths were killed in Rowta, Udalguri in August 2008 after they had refused to take part in a *bandh* called by the All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU).

Figure I: Population Increase in BTAD



Source: Namrata Goswami

The next series of violence took place in 2012 after four Bodos were allegedly hacked to death in a Muslim dominated area in Kokrajhar district. The violence quickly spread to neighboring Dhubri district after a *bandh* was called by the AAMSU in the BTAD thereafter. Again in 2012 the underlying cause of this violence was the rising tensions between the Bodos and the immigrant Muslim communities over issues of land. Between 2007 and 2012, Muslim immigrants had migrated in large numbers from Dhubri to Kokrajhar district especially its Gosaigaon sub-division. This created enormous pressures on agriculture land, one of the vital means of livelihood for indigenous communities. In 2012, 11,066 Bengali speaking Muslim families in the BTAD had been verified as *bona fide* land-owners with legal documents to prove their ownership. The actual number of

² Ibid.

immigrant families far exceeded this number and were the bone of contention for the Bodo community.³

Legal and Administrative Remedies

The original Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983 to detect and deport foreigners in Assam was a non-starter, and consequently struck down by the Supreme Court. As Assam state and BTAD districts are faced with extraordinary circumstances with deadly consequences, law makers have to enact and enforce new laws for effective legal remedy.

But laws are useless if the executive drags its feet subservient to vested interests and political machinations. It is imperative that the government immigration agencies generate reliable verified data on the number of people coming in from Bangladesh into Assam. It is also the government's constitutional obligation to maintain the veracity of electoral rolls listing only citizens with the right to vote. Any illegal schemes and ploys to include non-citizens can have grave security implications for the country and has to be treated as serious transgression of law.⁴

To rectify the damage already done, the administrative authorities have to implement modern technology and mechanisms to replace the current ambiguous and easily manipulated land records system. If citizens have the guarantees of their legal holdings being protected by law, that will go a long way in alleviating apprehensions of the most precious commodity i.e. land resources. All unauthorized voters who figure on the official records have to be disenfranchised to protect the sanctity of democratic practices. Finally, India will have to take steps under the laws of the country to identify and deport foreigners without authorized immigration documents. Considering the scale of the issue in Assam, India would need to have consultations with Bangladesh to rehabilitate these people in their country of origin. Moreover, given the fact that there is a market for unskilled labour from Bangladesh in Assam, work permits based on a stringent visa granting process should be established where processes are transparent with effective oversight.

Ironically, it is not identity *per se* that leads to conflict but when one ethnic identity grouping assumes power and territory by illegal means thereby relegating the original ethnic identity group to an inferior status in their own land, conflicts of this nature are bound to arise.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

³ Namrata Goswami, "Violence in Bodo Areas: The Risks of Conceding 'Exclusive' Ethnic Homelands", *IDSA Comment*, September 12, 2012 at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ViolenceinBodoAreas_ngoswami_120912 (Accessed on May 06, 2014).

⁴ Namrata Goswami, "Violence in Bodo Areas: Deciphering the Causes", *IDSA Comment*, August 09, 2012 at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ViolenceintheBodoAreas_NamrataGoswami_090912 (Accessed on May 06, 2014).