

Ethnic Conflict and Internal Displacement in Assam

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, Assam has experienced multiple ethnically motivated conflicts which sometimes turned into long-lasting ethnic conflicts and results in a large number of population displacement. The issue of ethnic conflict and internal displacement has now become a serious concern not only for the states but also for the international community. Ethnic clashes by different groups have displaced thousands of people in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh. Among them the conflict in Bodo-land of Assam is one of the most long lasting and violent in nature, which produced large scale population displacement and the killings of non-Bodos living in Bodo-land. The article seeks to understand the nature of ethnic conflict in Bodo-land and how it generates such a huge magnitude of population displacement since the early 1990s and later. It will also throw light on the concept of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and explained how the conflict in Bodo-land has uprooted thousands from their homes, and what the present socio-economic conditions of these forgotten people are. For the purpose of the present research both primary and secondary sources of data have been extensively used to minimize the error and to increase the authenticity and the reliability of the research work.

Key Words : Ethnic conflict, Bodoland, Displacement, Population, North-East

INTRODUCTION

The origin of ethnic problem in South Asia goes back to the British rule and its divide and rule policies in the region. Its policies of exploiting majority/minority religion laid the foundation of ethnic conflicts in South Asia, which only accelerated after independence due to poverty and lack of development. In order to cater to imperial interest, the Britishers also encouraged inter-state migration in the region, which over the years has made the social fabric of these societies more complex. These policies also greatly affected the tribes located on the border of the South Asia. The phenomenon of ethnic conflict is not confined to any one particular region or continent; it can be found everywhere. Sometimes interstate conflicts are

wrongly described as an ethnic conflict, which may not be ethnic in character.

Ethnic conflicts based on demand for secession or greater autonomy has generated significant number of internally displaced people in India. The oldest IDPs in India perhaps have been the Kashmiri Pundits. Autonomy movements based on particular identity has also lead to violent ethnic conflict in Punjab as well and it's become a frequent phenomenon in Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) areas of western lower Assam which produced highest number of conflict induced displacements in the history of the post colonial Assam.¹

Latest conflict on 28th July 2012, in which Assam has experienced severe ethnic clashes between Bodo tribals and Bengali Muslims living in the Bodoland

1. Montserrat Guibernua and John Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism Multiculturalism and Migration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997, p. 81.

Territorial Autonomous Districts in Western Lower Assam. The violence which occurred in three districts - Kokrajhar, Chirang and Dhubri where both Bodos and Muslims engaged themselves in a series of violence which lasted for several weeks. People from the non-Bodos fled their homes to safer places. The destruction and looting by the miscreants has triggered immense panic among the common people. Many died and thousands of Bengali Muslim displaced which is regarded as the largest internal displacement in India. According to the initial estimates, 59 people have died and 400,000 people have been displaced who were sheltered in 270 relief camps which affected more more than 45,000 families covering almost 500 villages.²

Concept of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS):

The working definition of the United Nation, which is based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacements (1998), is as follows:

*“Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflicts, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State Border”.*³

Internally displaced persons always remain within the border of their own country, which made them different from Refugees. However, Refugees have a well known protecting mechanism namely United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) where as IDPs do not come under any such protecting mechanism. The responsibility of protecting and assisting IDPs largely remains with the respective governments, which may itself be responsible for their plight. Or, in some cases, authorities are unwilling or unable to protect and assist their displaced people for various reasons, and, still again,

in few exceptional cases, if there are no government installed. In such a situation, it becomes imperative for the international community to involve itself in assisting the people at risk. However, the notion of sovereignty still remains the main hurdle for the international interventions in such cases.⁴

Background:

The conflict in Bodo-land is not new, it is one of the latest chapters of the decade long violence which resulted the killing of the thousands of people and innumerable population displacement and the loss of property.

The conflict is ethnic, religious and territorial in nature. Bodos are engaged in fierce ethnic violence with the Non-Bodos living in the Bodo-land from last two decades. Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus, Assamese, Rajbongshis, Ravas, Nepalis and Adivasis of Chota Nagpur origin are the other major groups who live in the region. Of them, Bengali-speaking Muslims are the most dominant. Previous conflict's of 1993 and 1994 has displaced hundred thousands of Bengali Muslims, among them 3,867 families which consist of 18,052 people who still live in the makeshift relief camps established in Bongaigaon, Kukrajhar and Chirang districts of Assam. In May-June 1996, Bodos massacred Santhals living in the districts of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar, about 250,000 Santhals (the tea tribes, Santhals, Oraons and Mundas, whose origins are in central India) became homeless and more than 1000 were killed. After this again in May 1998, Bodos attacked Santhals and this time Bodos have got some retaliation, one-fifth of those who displaced and killed were Bodos, about 2, 31,989 Santhals and Bodos fled to 67 relief camps in Kokrajhar and 8 camps in Dhubri district of Assam.⁵ In 1999, Santhals from Dhubri districts of western Assam has become the target of Bodo militancy; more than 7000 displaced this time, few Bengali Hindus were also affected, subsequently they were resettled or return to their original place with help of the NGOs.

2. Report, Ethnic Violence in Assam, Relief Web, Geneva, 31 July 2012.

3. Erin Mooney, “The concept of internal displacement and the case for internally displaced persons as category of concern”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 24, Issue 3, 2005, p. 11.

4. *The State of The World Refugees 2006, Human Displacement In New Millennium*, UNHCR (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 156-160.

5. Bhaumik Subir, Little wars And Internal Displacement In Northeast India, in Mishra Omprakash , (ed) *Forced Migration In The South Asian Region- Displacement, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution*, Centre for Refugee Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2004,p 412.

Bodos constitute the single largest tribal group of Assam sharing approximately six per cent of the total population of the State. Bodo movement was started in 1960s; initially the Plains Tribes Council of Assam (PTCA) and Bodo Sahitya Sabha were leading the movement but after few years, from the year 1986 the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) has emerged as the main representative from the Bodos. They demanded separate state for Bodos by dividing Assam into two parts, after six years of violent statehood movement, in 1993 they awarded the 'Autonomy' and subsequently First Bodo Accord was signed between All Bodos Students Union (ABSU) and its political wing Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC), with the Center and the Assam Government on 20th February 1993. But unfortunately Bodoland was created without any demarcated territory, in some areas Bodos do not have constituted the simple majority which came under the Bodoland; there are more than fifty per cent non-Bodos living in Bodoland which created the confusion and resentment among the Bodos and BAC become a failed experiment. Some of them took up arms and founded outfits like the Bodo-land Liberation Tigers (BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodo-land with their bases in Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The Bodos resent and resist the existence on non-Bodos in Bodo-land and they started to dislodge them in a violent manner. Non-Bodos especially Bengali Muslims, Santhals become the main target. In 1994 Bodo militant group killed about 1000 people and burned down hundreds of villages in Barpeta district of Assam which adjoin the Bodo-land Territorial Council, Bodos massacred Muslim peasants living in Bongaigon and Kokrajhar in a phase wise manner and executed their plan very smoothly. The reaction from the government is not satisfactory even after the killing of thousands of Bengali Muslim people. The violence against the non-Bodos was executed very intelligently, so that they can capture the space for Bodos and create the majority for Bodos in Bodo-land. Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodo-land (NDFB), the two militant outfits of Bodos again started violent statehood movement which resulted the signing of Second Bodo Accord on February 10, 2003, but the problem remained same. This

accord also failed as it failed to protect the Non-Bodos living in Bodo-land.

Types of Displacement:

Internal Displacement is a major problem in North-East India particularly in Assam. The state is having all three types of IDPs like:

- 1) Conflict Induced Displacement
- 2) Development Induced Displacement
- 3) Natural Disaster/ Environment Induced Displacement.

Getting the exact number of natural disaster/ environmental/development induced internal displacement is not easy. However, it is relatively easy to calculate the number of conflict induced internal displacement because of media coverage. Continuing environmental degradation, flood and river-bank erosion and landslide has resulted hundreds of death, destruction and innumerable population displacement. Big rivers including other small and medium size rivers have caused huge destruction in both Brahmaputra and Barak Valley region, and displaced hundreds of thousands people.⁶ Development induced displacement is another unnoticed problem in Assam, in most cases poor and tribal people are directly affected by the development projects.

The ethnic conflict and population displacement is a burning problem in north east India. No official estimates of the number of displaced people actually exist, and one can get the information of the IDPs in Assam in local newspapers only, so it is not so easy to estimate the exact number of IDPs in the region. Violence by different groups like Bodos, Nagas, Kukis, Karbis, Dimasas, Paities, Mizos, Reangs, Bengalis, Chakmas have displaced thousands of people in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh. However, Assam, Manipur and Tripura have generated the highest number of displaced people. About 10,000 people have lost their lives due to separatist violence in Assam in last 25 years.⁷

“Ethnic conflicts become endemic in postcolonial North East India, here ethnic conflicts include the conflict between the state and ethnic group/ insurgent groups, inter ethnic and intra ethnic conflicts. One particular situation of ethnic conflict may reflect one, two or all these three

6. Hussain Monirul, Phanjoubam Pradip, A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta-Research Group, Kolkata, 2007, p 18-19.

7. Ibid., p 35.

kinds of conflicts simultaneously".⁸

On February 12th 1983, over 1,200 Bengali Muslims were killed at Nellie, 70 kilometer east of Guwahati. Independent sources put the number of death toll as many as 3,000. But in this case there was no displacement.⁹

*"Among all the north eastern states Assam is regarded as the home of the highest number of internal displacement and most of them are displaced because of conflict. Among the displaced in Assam which consist of thousands of Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims as the state experienced numbers of conflicts during 1960s, 1970s and 1980s because of anti foreigners movement, during July-September 1960, there are about 50,000 Bengalis has crossed over to West Bengal as the violence erupted. Language issues have against displaced more than 14000 Bengalis in 1972-1973."*¹⁰

Half of the total numbers of conflicts induced displacement in India are in North-East. The Global IDP survey 1998 has estimated the number of conflict induced displacement in India is 390,000. The World Refugee Survey 2001 has estimated the number of IDPs in India is about 507,000, among them 290,000 are refugees from other countries.¹¹ National Human Rights Commission Report 2005 has estimated that there are about 1.25 lacks internally displaced persons from 23,742 families living in 130 camps in three lower Assam districts of Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, and Dhubri. Most of these

displaced are the victims of the Bodo-Adivasi conflict in 1996-1998.¹² The population displacement in Lower Assam due to Bodoland conflict, has reached more than 3 lacks at one stage.¹³ Conflict in recent years Bodoland has increased the number of displacement drastically in which most of them are still living in the relief camp.

Severity of the condition:

North-east is the home of ethnic conflict. According to the Times of India report published on 26th August 2011, about 1 million people may have been forced out of their homes in the North-East India in the past 20 years alone and the displacement continues. The population in the north east is not very high which is even ethnically more diverse, among 635 tribals recognized by the Anthropological Survey of India, the region is the home of more than 213 tribal groups¹⁴ and at least 30 to 40 rebel groups.¹⁵

Historically Assam is the home of various ethnic groups which is extraordinarily plural. The geographical location of the state and its complex political nature and the lack of development have made it more vulnerable to various kinds of conflict, violence and huge population displacement. The western districts of Assam which is now under the jurisdiction of Bodoland are historically a shared homeland for different ethnic groups. Numbers of racial, religious, linguistic, ethnic and cultural groups who migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley from different points of time and settled permanently in this part of the state.

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8. Hussain Monirul, Phanjoubam Pradip, A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta-Research Group, Kolkata,2007,p7.
 9. Ibid, p 396-397.
 10. Hussain Monirul, Phanjoubam Pradip, A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta-Research Group, Kolkata,2007,p 18-19.
 11. Bhaumik Subir, India's Northeast: Nobody's People in No-MAN'S-LAND in Banerjee Paula, Chaudhury Ray Basu Sabyasachi, Das Kumar Samir (ed), Internal Displacement in South Asia- The Relevance of the UNs Guiding Principles, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2005,p 149.
 12. Indias Human Rights Report, (ed), Chakma Suhas, Asian Centre for Human Rights, New Delhi, 2005, p-28.
 13. Hussain Monirul, Phanjoubam Pradip, A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta-Research Group, Kolkata,2007, p7.
 14. Hussain Monirul, Phanjoubam Pradip, A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta-Research Group, Kolkata,2007, p5.
 15. Mandal Monika, Internal Displacement in India: Status, Condition & Prospects of Return, Refugee Watch, No 33, June 2009, p 35.

The Role of International Community toward IDPs in India:

It is very difficult to get the information about the condition of IDPs in India, which mostly remain unknown. Numbers of Books and articles have been written about the displacements in India, which only reach to the domestic audiences. International community largely had been remaining unaware about the condition of the IDPs in India. They play no role regarding internationally displaced persons in India.¹⁶

India is not a signatory of either 1951 Refugee Convention or 1967 Protocol. However, India is having a seat in Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Program (ExCom). The government of India continues to deny UNHCR to access it either Refugees or displaced people.¹⁷ National Human Rights Commission of India in 1995; received a petition from the displaced Kashmiri Pandits which demanded:

*The authorities should extend facilities and rights (non-refoulement, humanitarian assistance, right to seek asylum etc) by virtue of their internal displacement. The petition also demanded that the government implements the recommendations of the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs and invite him to meet the IDPs from the Kashmir Valley.*¹⁸

In reply to the NHRC the Government of India has argued that Kashmiri Pandits are simply 'migrants' rather than IDPs. By recognizing them migrants it was successful to avoid international attention and involvement.¹⁹ The Government of India defends its stance of not accepting the role of the international community on the issue of protection and assistance to IDPs;

- The Indian government argues that international attention to IDPs has to remain within the bounds of the concept of national sovereignty and that
- International actors have no role in displacement

caused by development projects

- The government also argues that the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement do not have intergovernmental approval.²⁰

The following are the exact texts from the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations;

[...] The primary duty and responsibility of protecting and assisting the IDPs is that of the State concerned. International action with regard to IDP should remain within the bounds of the concept of sovereignty, which should not be diluted in any manner. [...] Within countries, the law of the land has to prevail, and what is important is to ensure that these laws reflect a high level of protection for the human rights of all persons. With regard to displacement occurring on account of development projects, my delegation is of the view that in democratic societies, such decisions are made by the elected representatives of the people. We do not believe that external agencies have a role in this.²¹

International action must be at the request of the governments concerned. We do not share the opinion [...] that some governments might not have the capacity or be willing to discharge their responsibilities. No evidence has been presented for this sweeping charge. [...] There are also Guidelines on IDPs, prepared by the SG's Representative, which do not have intergovernmental approval; however, it is these that the UN system seems to find most attractive.²²

Legal Protection of IDPs in India:

In India, the rights of internally displaced persons are dependent on the government for protection and guarantee because while refugees have international legal and institutional systems of protection to depend on, IDPs only have their own states legislation and policy with regard to land. In the absence of national policy on resettlement and rehabilitation there has only been an ad

16. Hussain and Phanjouban, n. 10, pp. 81-82.

17. Ibid., p. 62.

18. K. C. Saha, "Rethinking the Guiding Principles: the case of the Kashmiri Pandits" *Forced Migration Review*, no. 8, p. 26.

19. Hussain and Phanjouban, n. 10, p. 65.

20. Profile of Internal Displacement: India, *Compilation of the information available in the Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council* (Geneva, July 30, 2001), p. 81.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

hoc initiatives at the state level.²³

In India there is no national or institutional framework to protect either IDPs or Refugees. Absence of any formal mechanism for how the national and state governments should respond to situation of internal displacement has clearly indicated the authorities' indifference toward the issue of internal displacement.²⁴ Draft National Rehabilitation Policy for rehabilitation of persons displaced as a consequence of Acquisition of Land 1994, proposed by the Rural Development Ministry is the only legal basis which makes the state liable for compensation. However, Land Acquisition Act has come under much criticism for being a bit too outdated. It does not deal with any other types of displacement except the displacement due to land acquisition. The Draft for IDPs has totally disregarded the plight of other types of displacement like, those arising out of human rights violations or due to physical violence or other tensions.²⁵

However, the proposed Draft National Policy for Rehabilitation has the provision for rehabilitation, which is not reflective in reality. It covers,

The entire community (landless labourers, landholders, houseless, householders and even the unemployed and the forest dwellers). Their socio-cultural cost of displacement, and economic dimensions such as up-gradation of skill levels and the accumulation of physical assets as well as social capital.²⁶

There have been parallel policies drawn up by the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC 1993, the first displacing agency to have rehabilitation policy), Coal India (1994) and the Water Resources Department (WRD-1994, now at its third draft, the biggest displacing agency). Apart from the National Policy Draft, states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa have also drafted policies and legislations for resettlement and rehabilitation for their own. However, despite the

flurry of activity on paper, "it is cruel joke that for 50 years the (Indian) Government did not wish to promulgate a National Policy on rehabilitation for serving its own people or discharging its constitutional responsibilities".²⁷

In most of the cases states are agreed to give access to its displaced those caused by natural disaster. But in majority of the cases in which displacement arises from conflict or political causes, governments are hesitant for outside access. Even if sometimes the state allowed outside access for humanitarian assistance, it may remain suspicious as humanitarian assistance may strengthen rebel groups, which may undermine their own authority. The issue of Internal Displacement has now become a worldwide phenomenon, numbers of international agencies, human rights organizations, humanitarian agencies are now extending their support for the protection and assistance of internally displaced people, which includes UNHCR(now assisting more than 5million displaced people in the world), the ICRC (80% of its caseload are now related to internal displacement), the World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF, The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and a number of NGOs.²⁸

Conclusion:

In India, the rights of internally displaced persons are dependent on the government for protection and guarantee because while refugees have international legal and institutional systems of protection to depend on, IDPs only have their own states legislation and policy with regard to land, In the absence of national policy on resettlement and rehabilitation there has only been an ad hoc initiatives at the state level.

No concrete attempts have been made by the

23. Chowdhury R. Abrar and Mohendra P. Lama, (ed.), *Displaced Within Homelands: The IDPs of Bangladesh and the Region* (Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, 2003), pp. 162- 163.

24. Hussain and Phanjouban, n. 10, pp. 66-67.

25. Abrar and Lama, n. 22, pp. 162-163.

26. Ibid., p. 163.

27. Walter Fernandes and Vijay Paranjapai, (ed.), *Rehabilitation Policy and Laws in India, A right to livelihood* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1997), p. 1.

28. Roberta Cohen, "Some Reflections on National and International Responsibility in Situations of Internal Displacement" in Omprakash Mishra, (ed.), *Forced Migration in the South Asian Region- Displacement, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution* (Kolkata: Centre for Refugee Studies, Jadavpur University, 2004), p. 345.

government or by the civil society to solve the issue permanently. There is no lasting peace in the Bodoland even today. All communities living in Bodoland came closer by realizing that they cannot vacate the place for others, they have to learn to live together by forgetting all differences among them. Neither security forces nor even military can grant the permanent peace in the Bodoland till the conflicting parties come forward by their own.

By implementing these suggestions authorities may partially if not fully improve the situation of these displaced people:

- There is no visible role of civil society that can be seen in Bodoland. When authorities are failing to discharge its duties to protect its IDPs, it becomes an imperative for civil society to intervene.
- Government has to come out with a comprehensive framework for the relief and rehabilitation of those displaced.
- State and central governments must take all possible measures to bring all conflicting actors to negotiating table and try to solve the problem in a more democratic way.
- Authorities must come out with an appropriate and concrete plan to stop frequent occurrence of violence in Bodoland. Local authorities and security forces must remain high alert for any

incident which may take the shape of violent conflict.

- The issue of illegal immigrants which is a very sensitive issue for the future of the state needs to be addressed very carefully. The Bodo conflict is an outcome of demographic changes which Bodoland has experienced for long.
- Special care must be taken regarding the health of women and children.
- Authorities can improve the living condition of the displaced by granting adequate “*Indira Awas Yojana*” (Indira Gandhi Housing Scheme) for the displaced families without making any discrimination.
- The authorities must take appropriate steps regarding the education of the children in the camps.
- Non-availability of clean drinking water is one of the major problems that can be seen in all camps. Water-borne diseases are common in the camps, life becomes harder in rainy season, diarrhoea and cholera epidemics are almost annual occurrences.

It is the sole responsibility of the government to assure the protection and promotion of the rights of IDPs as they always remain within the border of their home state. By implementing these policies government will be able to improve the situation in Bodo-land.
