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The Great ‘Exodus’: Violence in Assam and its Aftermath

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The recent (and continuing) spate of violence in Assam and the purportedly related scare of retaliatory attacks on those from the northeast, living in different parts of India, have drawn unprecedented media attention towards the region. This may not be the type of attention that the region has yearned for but nonetheless presents an opportunity to put the crucial issues afflicting the region into perspective. The series of events also brings to light some pan-Indian issues that affect a much larger constituency. This paper analyses the background to the violence itself, the ‘exodus’ of northeast-origin citizens back to their home states and what all these mean for India as a whole.

‘The enemy is fear: we think it is hate, but it is fear’ - Mahatma Gandhi

Fearing for their lives amidst threats and rumours of retributive violence, many citizens from Northeast India have fled the Indian metropolitan centres of Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Pune, and some smaller towns and cities. Within four days, up to 30,000 students and workers returned to their homes in the northeast² from Bangalore alone in August 2012. Media images showed packed railway stations across the state capitals with hordes of northeast-origin citizens

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² Bangalore under tight security for one more week, *The Hindu*, 22 August. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/article3804381.ece?homepage=true>. Accessed on 23 August 2012

waiting to board trains bound for Guwahati, the only railhead connecting the region to the rest of India.

This ‘exodus’ was in response to SMS messages and word-of-mouth rumours suggesting that Muslim youths and organisations were planning an attack on northeast-origin citizens living in different parts of the country. About a month earlier, violence had erupted in the district of Kokrajhar in Assam. The incident involved the indigenous Bodo community and ‘illegal’ Bengali migrants from Bangladesh. Thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims were forced out of their villages after an attack by the indigenous Bodo tribe.

Before the rumours went viral, a software professional from Manipur was beaten by miscreants in Pune. In the next few days, several other attacks were reported following which the 10,000-strong community formed an association in Pune³. In Kerala, migrant workers from Assam, working in a hollow brick manufacturing unit at Manjeri in Malappuram district, were allegedly threatened by a 12-member gang asking them to leave the state failing which they would be harmed⁴. Elsewhere, welfare associations of different northeast communities sent out cautionary notes to their members, citing minor incidents and sharing precautionary warnings by Muslim landlords about possible attacks and sharing news about these landlords encouraging them to take shelter elsewhere.

Most northeast migrants coming to different Indian cities are either students or workers, mostly employed in the retail, hospitality and call centres, moving to get away from the violence and insurgency back home and in search of better economic opportunities⁵. Dr Duncan McDuié-Ra, author of *North-east Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*, writes that northeast migrants working in Indian cities help in recreating a ‘life abroad in India’ experience for the upper and aspiring middle class in Indian cities by projecting a global aesthetic, particularly an East Asian aesthetic. This is in reference to the East Asian features of the Indians of northeast descent.

As the northeast people went on an ‘exodus’, officials in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as well as the Union Home Minister and the Union Home Secretary tried in vain to allay fears, dismissing the rumours as mischievous and unfounded. The Deputy Chief Minister, also Home Minister, of Karnataka, R. Ashok, went to the railway station to dissuade the northeast-origin Indians from leaving, but was met with scant success. Meetings between leaders from the

³ Doctored MMS provoked Pune attacks on North-Eastern community, NDTV, 14 August 2012. <http://www.ndtv.com/article/cities/doctored-mms-provoked-pune-attacks-on-north-eastern-community-254540>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

⁴ Workers from Assam threatened in Kerala, the Times of India, 20 August 2012. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-20/india/33286813_1_migrant-workers-assam-manjeri

⁵ Duncan McDuié-Ra (2012), ‘The North-East’ Map of Delhi’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLVII No 30. Pg. 70.

northeast communities and the Muslim community were called and security forces were deployed in large numbers across the cities. Media channels interviewed students and workers from the northeast. Some of them said they were intent on leaving while a few others said they would stay despite expressions of fear and concerns of safety.

Even on Independence Day, 15 August, many were on their way back to Guwahati or preferred to play it safe. Many others anxiously waited to see what might happen after the holy month of Ramadan. Security forces continued to be placed on high alert in the cities and patrolling was intensified in areas considered sensitive.

The incidents in Kokrajhar and neighbouring districts are not the first time that Muslim migrants were attacked. The Bodos accuse the Muslims of being illegal migrants from Bangladesh, which is just south of the region. According to some analysts, Assam's Muslims 'first migrated here in the 19th century from Bengal when this was all part of colonial India. Over time, the Bengali migrants prospered, just like immigrant communities all over the world. This created a sense of resentment among the native Assamese communities as they both competed for resources and jobs'.⁶ This resentment is shared by other tribal communities that inhabit the border regions of Northeast India and Bangladesh. State governments and the central government in India have been fencing the border but work has not been completed as planned. In fact, following the recent incidents, calls for the speeding up of fencing work has been made by political parties, students unions and various other local groups in the region.

In 1993, more than 100 migrants were killed in one of the raids at Bansbari, a makeshift camp for displaced Muslims, by Bodo rebels. The Bodos, who have been demanding a separate state, have an autonomous territorial council controlled by the Bodoland People's Front (BPFT). They, however, feel migrants have taken over much of the land they traditionally occupied and fear the threat of losing their identity because of assimilation and swamping by the migrants. One of the demands of the separatist group in Assam, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), is for more concrete protection for indigenous populations against what is described as 'relentless illegal migration from across the border'.⁷

Bodos mainly practice Hinduism, Bathouism and Christianity while a few continue to be Animists. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese family and according to the 2001 census there were about 1.3 million Bodos, rising to about 1.5 million by 2007⁸.

⁶ How the Assam Conflict creates a threat to India, BBC, 20 August 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-19315546>.

⁷ Subir Bhaumik, What lies behind Assam violence?, BBC, 26 July 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-18993905>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

⁸ Languages of the World: Bodo, http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=brx. Accessed on 23 August 2012

While heightened violence in Kokrajhar and the neighbouring Chirang district have been brought under control, curfew was imposed but sporadic incidents have continued and the death toll has surpassed 80 [as at the time of writing], while over 8,000 refugees have left camps for homes in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts. Those in temporary shelters in Dhubri and Bongaigaon continued to stay⁹. Nevertheless, Eid celebrations were largely peaceful amid high security all over Northeast India.

BBC correspondent Subir Bhaumik says the debate over so-called ‘infiltration’ is at the heart of Assam's troubles. This is also true for the other states that border Bangladesh. While this has served as a fuel for the incidences of violence, the larger problems can be traced to issues of scarcity, lack of economic opportunities, access and benefit, sharing of resources and the fear of a loss of identity.

In an article titled, *On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict*,¹⁰ published in the fall of 1991, Thomas Fraser Homer-Dixon of the University of Toronto predicted that future wars and civil violence will often arise from scarcities of resources such as water, cropland, forests, and fish. Robert Kaplan has built on this, in his essay, *The Coming Anarchy*,¹¹ and identified ‘surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution, and, possibly, rising sea levels in critical, overcrowded regions like the Nile Delta and Bangladesh’ as ‘developments that will prompt mass migrations and, in turn, incite group conflicts’. Added to these, he mentions poor governance and corruption as drivers for conflicts which will make ‘more and more places like Nigeria, India, and Brazil ungovernable’. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler further identify (low) level of income per capita and (low) rate of economic growth as two of the three most significant drivers of conflict¹². These are persistent and pervasive in large parts of Northeast India, including Kokrajhar in Assam and other border regions. For northeast and the communities reeling in low-income subsistence agriculture, the lack of access and inability to benefit from resources that surround them (often due to poor infrastructure facilities to exploit them), chronic underdevelopment, and the pressure of hosting migrant communities have been a particularly huge burden.

This pressure has fanned out in the towns and cities in the region too. And, the symptoms have manifested in terms of intolerance towards migrants from other parts of India as well as from

⁹ Two labourers killed in fresh attacks in riot-hit lower Assam, *The Times of India*, 22 August 2012. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Two-labourers-killed-in-fresh-attacks-in-riot-hit-lower-Assam/articleshow/15604885.cms/> Accessed on 23 August 2012

¹⁰ Thomas F Homer Dixon (1991), ‘On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict’, *International Security*, Vol 16, No 2. Pg 76-116.

¹¹ Robert Kaplan (1994), *The Coming Anarchy*, *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/ideastour/archive/kaplan-2.html>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

¹² Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler (2002), ‘Aid, policy and peace: Reducing the risks of civil conflict’, *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 13 (6), pp. 435-450.

within northeast itself. In the early 1980s, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) led a spirited campaign against migrants which led to the signing of an accord that promised to disenfranchise migrants who came after 1966 for a period of 10 years, after which they would be included in electoral rolls. Delhi has since reportedly promised a replay of the 1985 Assam accord - disenfranchisement of the migrants who came between 1966 and 1971 for a period of 10 years¹³.

In 2003, violence erupted in Assam and Bihar over the issue of preferential appointment of local job-seekers in the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR). Candidates from outside the State who had travelled to Guwahati for tests conducted by the Railway Recruitment Board, for appointment to lower level jobs were prevented from taking the test. According to some reports at the time, they could not take the test because some local aspirants for these jobs seized and destroyed their entry cards. Among those affected were candidates from Bihar and Tripura. On this occasion the local-'outsider' divide was drawn along the lines of Hindi-speaking and non-Hindi speaking people. In retaliation, students and mobs allegedly led by politicians attacked passengers of trains going to and from Assam, while they were passing through Bihar¹⁴.

In Meghalaya, the Khasi Students Union (founded in 1978) is notorious for its agenda against illegal migration. Many non-tribal, non-Khasi businesses have been driven out of Shillong over the years and what was once a cosmopolitan capital of Northeast India is now a shoddy remnant of the past. Militant-like campaign by the KSU made even owning property or seeking jobs by migrants from other northeast states difficult, as efforts to preserve jobs and economic opportunities for the local community grew fierce. Many Nagas, Mizos, Assamese along with Bengalis moved out of Shillong, and many had to sell their properties at below-market rates. Besides this, in Meghalaya too, illegal migration from Bangladesh is a serious issue. In the midst of the continuing violence, political parties across the board as well as civil organisations and student groups have come out strongly, warning against any movement into Meghalaya by those trying to flee the violence in Assam¹⁵.

Across northeast, the determination to keep economic opportunities within the community has been juxtaposed with the overwhelming fear of a loss of the distinct identities by the different groups. Even conflicts among the different tribes within the region have been seen to be 'waged not merely on questions of land, immigration and settlement, but also on the overweening fear of loss of identity itself'.¹⁶ Further, studies have also shown that reproductive behaviour in the

¹³ Subir Bhaumik, What lies behind Assam violence?, BBC, 26 July 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-18993905>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

¹⁴ M.S.Prabhakara, Outrage in Assam, Frontline, Volume 20 - Issue 25, 6-19 December 2003. <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2025/stories/20031219006800800.htm>

¹⁵ After Assam violence, parties caution Meghalaya against influx, DNA, 26 July 2012. http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_after-assam-violence-parties-caution-meghalaya-against-influx_1720116. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

¹⁶ Bhagat Oinam (2003), 'Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in the North-East', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol - XXXVIII No. 21

region is strongly influenced by the insecurities associated with the fear of identity loss and the perception of becoming a minority¹⁷.

This fear is magnified by the example of Tripura where Kokborok, a Tibeto-Burman language, was the lingua franca of the state but is now mainly spoken by the tribal population. The indigenous people, including the Tripura, Reang, Jamatia, Kaipeng, Naotia, Koloi, Halam, Hrangkhal, Mog and Bangcher, who accounted for 95 per cent of the population of Tripura in the 1931 census, had been reduced to just 31 per cent at the time of the 1991 census. This has led to serious discontent among the tribal communities who have become a minority on their own lands. The genesis of insurgency in Tripura has always been traced to the massive influx of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan following partition¹⁸.

This fear of loss of identity also plays out in the economic realm and influences businesses. The grant of contracts by politicians to non-tribal population or non-locals is frowned upon and the setting up of any business by non-locals, without a local partner is near impossible. There is great sensitivity to the use of the region by the central government and any perception of exploitation is easily magnified. For tribal communities, whose identities, culture, customs and daily life are intertwined with the environment around them, any change or disruption to this is vehemently unacceptable. This could be seen in the protests against the Tipaimukh hydro-electric dam, proposed to be constructed on River Barak at the tri-junction of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam¹⁹. Indigenous-rights groups as well as students' organisations also opposed the building of a gas pipeline that was proposed from Sittwe in Myanmar to West Bengal²⁰ as there were concerns of environmental degradation that might affect livelihood opportunities and practices and therefore cause a change in the lifestyle of those affected.

The Indian central government's suspension of the requirement of an Inner Line Permit (ILP) for foreigners and Indians from other states, in January 2011, was met with protests and opposition²¹. This affected Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram but even in Meghalaya where this

¹⁷ Uday Saikia, 'Threats from migration, socio-political injustice and reproductive behavior in tribal communities - a study in the Khasi tribe in northeast India', Irmgard Coninx Stiftung Publication (Population and Politics). http://www.irmgard-coninx-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Population_Politics/PopPolitics/Saikia.pdf. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

¹⁸ 'Tripura Backgrounder', South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)/ Institute for Conflict Management. <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/tripura/backgrounder/index.html>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

¹⁹ Internal attack, Down to Earth, 31 January 2005. <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/node/9035>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

²⁰ Students' organisation say no to gas pipeline in northeast, Down to Earth, 15 September 2006. <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/node/8390>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

²¹ NSF Warns Centre on Inner Line Permit Issue, Eastern Panorama, http://www.easternpanorama.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=430:nsf-warns-center-on-inner-line-permit-issue-&catid=38:august-. Accessed 23 August 2012.

rule had been relaxed earlier, there are demands for the imposition of an ILP-like requirement²². And, the lure of economic benefit that might accrue from increased tourist arrivals and development of tourism has done little to dampen the campaign against the suspension and for the restoration of ILP.

While the roots of the current tension can be traced to unresolved issues in the region, the current events, along with the recent case of an alleged murder of a Manipuri boy in Bangalore and the increasing incidents of assault on northeast women in cities across India bring out questions that affect Indians as a whole. While the inter-tribal and regional divides within the northeast have been known to exist, these recent incidents bring to light the fragile state of the integration process of minority Indians. Within the region, tribal groups have contested each other for political power and territories through the use of force for centuries; and, localised incidents involving groups from the border regions of different states have, from time to time, played out, often leading to loss of lives. On the other hand, while a feeling of alienation is known to exist amongst the northeast communities living in different parts of India, the manifestation of their sense of being segregated and targeted and the resultant sense of insecurity among them had not played out as clearly up to this point in time as to warrant an ‘exodus’ that now took place in large numbers.

This episode also brings out another pan-Indian concern. This is about the concern related to the ability of the state to protect lives and the confidence that citizens have in the state to protect them. As the Indian Parliament debated the issue as a matter of national importance, and rightly so, central and state government officials pleaded for calm. However, the assurances by the Home Minister of Karnataka, the Director General of Police of Karnataka, the Union Home Minister, the Union Home Secretary as well as their counterparts from other states which saw an ‘exodus’ went unheeded, and the ‘exodus’ continued.

In a rare display of incisive empathy, Arun Jaitley of the Bharatiya Janata Party, while speaking in the Indian Parliament on the issue, said: “Their (northeast communities’) presence in various parts of the country, in fact, promotes national unity and integrity. And therefore a situation like this, where a fear psychosis is created amongst them and some of them have to move back to their states in a state of panic, is a challenge which each one of us faces. In fact, so genteel in their behaviour are those persons whose interview I was watching, that, as they sat in the compartments on the trains, they yet wanted to deny the fact that they were being intimidated. They wanted to give other reasons for going back to their regions. And, I think it is an onerous responsibility on each one of us to make sure that this panic situation comes to an end, rumour mongering comes to an end, central government, state governments, all political parties, all

²² Inner line permit demand gets louder, Northeast Today, 22 August 2012. <http://www.northeasttoday.in/our-states/meghalaya/inner-line-permit-demand-gets-louder-in-meghalaya/>. Accessed on 23 August 2012.

communities speak in one language and make sure this exodus stops immediately and those who have been misled to go back return to their place of work and study.”

The tone and tenor of the speech provided the backdrop for some positive tangent in this story. The episode has provided an opportunity for a transformative response. Even as people thronged the railway stations in the southern Indian cities, Muslim youths as well as Hindu organisations held placards proclaiming amity and brotherhood. Some even distributed food and went about hugging those waiting for trains. Some Muslim leaders gave assurances and the media went full throttle. There was round-the-clock broadcast of the issue. The media interviewed northeast students and workers living in different cities of India and also others who expressed solidarity with the north-east communities and asked them not to leave in fear. There were emotional calls and broadcasted appeals for calm and a timely proclamation of affinity towards people from the northeast. While all this did not change the minds of people intent on ‘being safe than sorry’, as one girl who was interviewed put it, some of the messages will linger in the subconscious. There may be an increased interest in Northeast India among people who do want to know more about the region and the people. This may even lead to a better understanding about the people from the northeast in the Indian metropolitan cities.

Similarly, an opportunity also presents itself for the government to prove that unfounded fear was created by miscreants and to prevent an escalation of the situation into further violence. If the government seizes this opportunity, this can prove to be effective for the future. Security forces can demonstrate ability to protect lives, save citizens and allay fears. Politicians can demonstrate that they can rise to the occasion and present a united front.

That all of this should happen just a few days after the entire nation cheered and celebrated Mary Kom, a five-time world champion boxer from Manipur, for her success at the London Olympics, is the greatest irony. There was a mini Mary Kom fever across India. Yet, the situation is still fragile. Fear persists among the north-east communities; and, in Assam, sporadic violence continues as affected communities have yet to find time and space to grieve their losses and adjust to their new circumstances. Some organisations in Manipur and Nagaland have in turn threatened Muslims in the state with ‘eviction’²³.

Meanwhile, the Indian government has now come out saying that the sources of the SMS/MMS clips have been identified as originating from Pakistan; and political parties are accusing each other of playing vote-bank politics, fomenting divide and now bidding to take advantage of the

²³ Subir Bhaumik, India’s north-eastern Naga groups in ‘evict Muslims’ call, BBC, 20 August 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-19316282>. Accessed on 23/08/2012 & Manipur alert after warning, The Telegraph, 23 August 2012. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120823/jsp/northeast/story_15883319.js p#.UDWYZKNQCKc. Accessed 23 August 2012.

situation. These are common refrains and rhetoric that Indians are used to hearing, to a point of indifference. While fear might not manifest in more untoward incidents as the rumour mills predicted, it may yet foment hate and the politics of division that Indians have become accustomed to. Fear would have done its job, giving way for hatred to take a life of its own.

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