

BODO STIR

The November'10 Carnage

A r u n i K a s h y a p

In the beginning of November 2010, the anti-talks faction of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) carried out a state-wide massacre of non-Bodos, mostly Hindi speaking settlers in Assam in a revenge-killing spree after Mahesh Basumatary, who allegedly was a cadre of NDFB, was killed by the Indian security forces in Assam's Sonitpur district. The Bodo militant organisation claimed that the person was an innocent civilian and wasn't linked to their organisation in any way while the security forces claimed otherwise. A recent report aired in a local television news channel DY365 records the victim's family and his resident village's viewpoint that matches with the claims of the NDFB.

A few days before Mahesh Basumatary was killed by the forces, the anti-talks faction of NDFB had issued a press release saying that they would kill at least twenty "Indians" if the government continued to kill innocent Bodos in Assam in the name of counter-insurgency operations by staging encounter killings. This is almost like an open-secret in Assam as this is alleged by almost every human rights organisation and insurgent organisation. According to some estimates, more than 50% of the people killed by security forces are innocent victims who have nothing to do with the armed rebel-groups of Assam. The massacres by NDFB militants took place in around seven places of Assam. They targeted non-Bodos, mostly Hindi speakers, but also Bengalis, Nepalese and Assamese, mostly in places that are under the BTC: Bodoland Territorial Council. The brutal mayhem and the savage nature of the killings have shocked the whole country since some of the victims were tortured by chopping off their limbs before they were shot. Assam is now resonating with another series of condemnations, shutdowns and protest marches.

Persecution of linguistic and religious minorities have always run parallel in the story of insurgency and counter-insurgency in Assam. The Nellie Massacre of 1983, where thousands of supposedly illegal migrants of Bangladesh during the peak of the Assam Movement were killed is widely known but the killings in Gohpur and Phulung Chapori, where linguistic minorities were targeted by jingoistic Assamese people during the same movement are rarely spoken about. Another brutal incident where around 1000 Muslim peasants were massacred in Barpeta, in 1994 by Bodo militants, the 2007 massacre of Hindi speakers by ULFA across Assam, Bhimajuli Massacre (2009) and the Doomdoma Killings (2007), Kakopathar Massacre (2006) by Indian security forces are some more shocking mass-murders that most people outside Assam don't know about. The death of Mahesh Basumatary, who as it seems from recent media reports and claims, was an innocent daily wage earning villager, isn't the only context that the recent carnage should be looked within. It is also not wholly true as some sections of the media have been claiming that this was a desperate act by the anti-talks faction of the NDFB insurgents to gain nation-wide publicity—which was perhaps one of the desired goals, since killing of Hindi speakers sends ripples across the nation. The immediate visit of P Chidambaram is a strong proof of the same. To derive such conclusions is to reduce the complex history of the Bodo insurgency to a simple story; there may be nothing wrong with simple stories except that they are incomplete.

The Bodos, also known as Kacharis, are the largest group of plain tribes in Assam. For long, they have been alienated by the Assamese middle class and the consecutive governments since independence. The history of the development of Bodo nationalism has many strands but some milestones that led to the insecurities of Bodos are: All Assam

Student Union's demand for ending reservation for scheduled tribes, former Assam Chief Minister Sarat Chandra Singha's opposition on the adoption for Roman script for the Bodos instead of the Assamese script and the historic Assam Accord. The subsequent euphoria of the Assam Accord that brought Asom Gana Parishad, a regional party into power which also gave India its youngest ever Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta, created an insecure atmosphere for the Bodos in Assam. Persecution of Bodo-speakers during the Assam Movement in Phulung Chapori and Gohpur had already made them suspicious of the movement that had started with popular support but was soon taken over by chauvinism and a narrow jingoistic form of Assamese nationalism. The Bodo leaders who voiced the larger ethnic aspirations were ignored by the Assamese middle class, the Assam government and were patronised by the Rajiv Gandhi government at the centre. Perhaps, the only newspaper that provided wide coverage and a platform to the Bodo objectives was *Budhbar*, edited by Parag Kumar Das, who was later assassinated.

In 1987 the demand of "Divide Assam 50-50" was raised by the Bodo nationalists. The xenophobia was noticed from early on: 'Quit Notices' were served to non-Bodos in the areas with large Bodo concentration and a violent movement for a separate Bodo homeland thus began from then onwards. In 1993, an accord was signed but was resented by most people who lived in areas with sizeable Bodo population. The gruesome Barpeta Massacre where people who took shelter in relief camps were also followed and killed soon followed as a result of this in July 1994. In 1996, an armed struggle for a separate Bodo state was revived and the Bodo movement saw a split: while the Bodoland Liberation Tigers demanded a separate Bodo state, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (that carried out the November massacre) started the armed movement for a sovereign Bodo nation. After a long series of events that comprised ethnic riots and struggle with Indian security forces, the BLT emerged stronger by gaining more popularity among the Bodos. After a unilateral ceasefire, peace talks followed and in 2003 the Bodo Accord was signed. But conflict didn't end there—soon after the accord, about eighteen non-Bodo organisations formed an organisation called Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS) to start a democratic movement against the accord—their main demand based on the fact that the areas included under BTC has only 25% of Bodos. The NDFB continued their struggle until Ranjan Daimary, chief of the anti-talks faction of the outfit was arrested this year. Since then, different forces have been trying to create a conducive atmosphere for peace talks and bring stability in the Bodo areas. This has considerably weakened the NDFB and since then, they have been trying to show their might by carrying different acts of terror, including the recent one.

This is the story of Bodo movement in Assam in very broad strokes. Needless to say, behind each and every development, brutal counter-insurgency operations have run parallel. The allegations of human rights violations : rapes, encounter killings, torture are abundant. If Mahesh Basumatary was an innocent man and had no links with the insurgents, people should keep in mind that there is one more kind of unjust massacre that led to the recent disgusting massacre which is probably evident in the excerpt from the press release :

'The Government of India/Assam has been killing innocent Bodo people doing fake encounters in the name of NDFB. School students, cultivators and simple living innocent Bodo peoples are killed by Indian forces. And these fake encounters are continuing. So the Bodoland army, NDFB strongly warn the government of India / Assam to stop the killing of innocent Bodo peoples in the name of fake encounter. We, the Bodo people and the Bodoland Army, NDFB bear all these for long years. The government of India/ Assam has done much against the Bodo peoples. Patience also has limit and now our patience is over.'

There is strong public opinion across Assam that no peace talks should be initiated with mass-murderers. Considering the strong emotions that followed the killings, this is understandable. But somewhere they aren't thinking what happens during counter-

insurgency operations or what would be the consequences of further militarisation of Assam. It is the tussle between two groups of mass-murderers that is taking the toll of innocent lives? The Assamese separatist movement has already taken a toll of nearly 30,000 lives.

The saddest plight is that of the families who lost their members belonging to the Assamese-settler communities, who call Assam their home since the last two-three generations are turned into 'outsiders' suddenly. The massacre could have been avoided probably—it seems, the Government of Assam almost waited for it to happen by not taking adequate precautionary measures soon after the press-release was circulated among media houses. But that's the nature of the Indian state, which doesn't move until gun shots are fired. So people wait : from one massacre to another. From one blast to another.

After the 2007 massacre of Hindi speakers, the whole family of a friend of this writer sold their property and returned to their native village in Bihar. Before leaving, he had asked a friend to keep sending him *Prantik*—an Assamese fortnightly—because he wanted to finish reading the novel that was serialised in the magazine. As a reader, he was scared of an incomplete story. Sadly, very few understand the perils of an incomplete story. □□□