

Socio-Political Impacts of Bodo-Muslim Conflicts (2012) in Western Assam

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Abstract:

The ethnic conflicts between the Bodos and Bengali Muslims community erupted in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) region and neighboring Dhubri district of Western Assam in July 2012 resulted in more than four lakhs persons getting internally displaced and they took shelter in over three hundreds relief camps. It had greater impact on both the communities due to crisis of food, shelter, medicines, clean drinking water, clothes, sanitation and hygiene and it led to a humanitarian crisis in the state recent history. Beside basic necessities, the victims of the conflict had lost their valuable property: the land and livelihoods. The victims had suffered from loss of land, unemployment, loss of home, and lack of food. The present paper tries to explore the socio-political impact of the conflicts on the both communities.

Key Words: Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis, Displacement, Mistrust, Social Disintegration

Introduction:

The ethnic conflicts that broke out in Assam's Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) and neighboring Dhubri district in July 2012, which led to the biggest humanitarian crises in the state's contemporary history. The conflicts were triggered by tensions between the Bodos and Bengali Muslims community. The conflicts resulted displacement over 400,000 people, forcing them into more than 300 relief camps. This internal displacement has been described as the largest one since India's partition in 1947.

The main factors behind the conflict between Bodos and Bengali Muslims lies in Changing demographic pattern, conflict over land, immigration issues, language issues, growth of political consciousness among the Bodo community, failure of Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, economic deprivation and underdevelopment, rising of different insurgent groups etc. The losing of land and identities linked with land had been one of the root causes of the ethnic conflict between the two communities.

Objective of the study: The main objective of the study are:

- (i) To explore the socio-political impacts of the conflicts
- (ii) To know the role of government in rehabilitation process of the victim peoples.

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Review of Literature:

Shishir Tiwari & Gitanjali Ghosh (2017) in their article titled as *From Conflict to Accord and a Decade Thenceforth – The Plight of internally Displaced Persons in Bodoland and the Law* has discussed of the IDPs of Bodoland. The IDPs of Bodoland were awfully pathetic. They are devoid of basic rights and amenities. In the absence of a comprehensive law pertaining to protection and rehabilitation of conflict induced IDPs, their problems have been aggravated. Their writing aims to shed light not only about the problems but also makes a humble attempt advancing a few suggestions towards remedying the same.

Manjil Basumatary (2017) in his article titled as *Conflict Induced Displacement of Assam (India): The Impact* has dealt with that the conflicts which erupted between the Bodos and Adivasis during the nineties and again between the Bodos and the immigrants Muslims in the beginning of 21st century displaced more than 300,000 and 400,000 people respectively from their habitants, forcing them to stay in the temporary relief camps in the most dehumanized conditions

Sourashree Pathak (2017) in her article entitled as *Conflict Livelihood Security and Children in the Conflict Affected Kokrajhar District, BTAD, Assam* has investigated the livelihood insecurity of the people in the conflict prone areas and its impacts on the overall development of the children of the area. The article mainly focusses on the two communities in Kokrajhar district of Assam i.e, the Bodos and the immigrants Muslims which had experienced a series of ethnic conflicts. She argued that the conflicts had led to a mass displacement of people from the both communities forcing them to leave their homes and to live in relief camps. The victims of the conflicts living in the camps were deprived of basic human right to life and livelihood. Many of them were living in the relief camps for more than one decade, with no scope of education and skill development as educational institutions were used for relief camps. Even those were not displaced or had returned to their villages lost livelihood due to the breakdown of civil infrastructures.

Murshed Mussarraff Chowdhury (2020) in his article entitled as *Ethnic Conflict and Internal Displacement in Assam* has explained the nature of ethnic conflict in Bodoland and how it generates such huge magnitude of population displacement since the early 1990s and later. The article also throw light on the concept of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and explained how the conflict in Bodoland had uprooted thousands of people from their homes, and what the present socio-economic conditions of these forgotten people are.

The author also argued that internal displacement is a major issue in Assam. According to him, there are three types of IDPs in Assam such as:

- (i) Conflict Induced Displacement
- (ii) Development Induced Displacement
- (iii) Natural Disaster\Environmental Induced Displacement+

Dewan Abu Rayhan (2025) in his article entitled as *Migration, conflict and internal displacement in North East India: A Study with focus on conflict induced displacement of Nepalis and Bengalis in Assam* has examined the displacement of Bengalis and Nepalis in

Northeast India due to war, with a particular in Assam. His study also examines institutional and governmental perspective about rehabilitation and aiding these internally displaced victims.

Research Gap:

The review of the literature on the conflicts between Bodos and Bengali Muslims illustrated the internal displacement issues more clearly but the number of studies focusing on socio-political impacts of the conflicts is less. Many of the studies in this particular field have only focused on the conflict induced internal displacement issues rather than actual problem of the victims of the conflicts. The study is aimed to explore the socio-political impacts of the conflict.

Methodology:

The methodology design for the study is mixed research method. Qualitative and quantitative data are used for the study. The study is mainly based on primary as well as secondary sources of data. For the study, some of the data are collected from field -Kokrajhar, the Bodo heartland. Secondary sources of data are collected from Books, article, thesis, newspaper, internet sources, report of various organizations, government's report, National Human Rights Commission's report etc.

Demographic profile of BTAD:

Bodo comprises of only 32% of the total population in BTAD. Other notable ethnic groups of BTAD are Bengali Muslims, Adivasis including Santhals, Koch Rajbanshis, Bengali Hindus, Nepalis, caste Assamese, Sarania Kachari and Rabhas also share a good portion of the total population in BTAD region. Bengali Muslims consists of 19%, Adivasi communities including Santhals consists of 17%, Koch Rajbanshis consists of 16%, Other communities including Bengali Hindus, Nepalis, caste Assamese, Sarania Kachari, and Rabhas consists of 16% of the total population in BTAD region (Kalita, 2016. pp.25-26)

Discussion and Analysis:

Impacts of Bodo-Muslim Conflicts (2012) in BTAD Region:

The conflicts started in July 2012 in the BTAD region consisting of Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar and Uadalguri and its adjacent Dhubri district of Western Assam have claimed 90 lives and displaced over four lakhs people and they took shelter in over three hundreds relief camps. Assam had faced the highest number of conflicts induced internally displaced persons during the conflicts of 2012 between the Bodos and Bengali-Muslims. This internal displacement has described as the largest one since India's partition (ACHR report ,2012, p.1). Besides displacement, shifting and resettlement of victims from one place to another place is also a significant impact of the conflicts.

The most important impacts of the conflicts between the Bodos and Bengali Muslims (2012) were: families of the both communities lost their homes, land and livelihoods that led to food insecurity, homelessness and joblessness. Government school and other buildings have been converted into relief camps thereby affecting the school children and general public. There were about 279 relief camps in Kokrajhar, Chirang and Dhubri district of Assam respectively

with more than four lakhs' victims of the conflicts (Basumatary.2017. p.279). The Relief camps were overcrowded in where basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter and drinking water, and sanitation were insufficient. Children suffered acutely from shortage of baby food, while women faced indignities due to lack of privacy and inadequate clothing. The absence of proper bedding, mosquito's nets, and hygienic toilets led them to misery, resulting the conditions for growing disease outbreaks (ACHR Report, p.22). As per government report, there were 79 relief camps in the Kokrajhar district alone.

Below table shows subdivision-wise relief camps and inmates in Kokrajhar as on 30.07.2012

SL No.	Name of Subdivision	Number of Relief camps	Number of Inmates
01	Kokrajhar	24	23,434
02	Gossaigaon	40	74,396
03	Parbatjhora	15	159,900

Source: Brahma, Akash: A Study on Communal Conflict of 2012 in Kokrajhar District of Btad, Assam

Beside material loss, the conflict had generated mistrust and disintegration between the both communities. Many victims people feared to return in their homeland due to insecurity and lack of compensation. Even after the relief camps were officially closed, victims people resisted leaving, demanding permanent security arrangements. Some of the victims were unwilling to return back their villages as their houses and properties had been damaged fully. Some of the victims were willing to return if permanent security were provided in their villages and sufficient compensation given to them. Fear and lack of security had remained the prime concern of all the camp's inmates for unwilling to return their homes. Allegation of police collusion with miscreants generated mistrust, leaving returnees vulnerable. The reluctance to return their homeland revealed how the conflict had fractured not only the property and livelihoods but also the sense of belongingness and security.

The conflict's had greater socio-political significance beyond the humanitarian concerns. It led to ethnic polarization, generating stereotypes and helped to divide between Bodos and Muslims. The internal displacement issues also strained Assam's already fragile socio-political environment, with landlessness and joblessness which led to cycle of poverty and marginalization. The deletion of common property rights and community cohesion weakened the foundations of cultural pluralism in the region. Moreover, the conflict transformed a localized clash into a broader crisis of identity.

Beside displacement, shifting and resettlement of the victims from one place to another is also a significant issue. Overcrowded, unhygienic and very humid conditions led to the sleep disorder and due to lack of fresh air. Therefore, the victims of the conflict staying in the relief camps couldn't revive earlier socio-economic condition. On the other hand, lack of equitable fund allocation to face emergency situation in the conflict prone region is another issue. As a

result, the victims of the conflict were economically deprived. The compensation provided by the government was also inadequate that also generated a unrest among the victims.

Education of children who were residing in the relief camps and who were studying in the schools which were used as relief camps that affected adversely in the conflicted area as most of the schools in the study area were closed for long time in order to shelter for the victim people.

The loss of fellow-felling and goodwill among the members of the both communities is the major long -lasting impact of the conflicts.

The state government's response revealed its systematic weakness. Rations often arrived days late and distribution of ration was uneven across the relief camps. Although NGOs and civil society helped to fill the gap, government's aid remained inconsistent. Healthcare care facilities were provided but limited, with doctors visiting only during the day time and medicines were often provided in delay. Clean drinking water facilities were inadequate that led to rely on unsafe tubewells. Lack of equitable fund allocation to face emergency situations in the conflicts was a major issue. As a result, the victims of the conflicts were economically and socially deprived. The compensation provided by the government was also inadequate. This failure revealed how unprepared the state government administration was to control mass displacement. There were several warnings about the forthcoming conflicts but the State Government of Assam failed to take note of the early warnings. According to Asian Centre for Human rights, the riots in Assam that started on 20 July were absolutely preventable but not prevented by the state government of Assam and Ministry of Defense. (ACHR Report,2012).

While the conflict started on 20 July ,2012, the State Government of Assam refused to rush in its own 27,595 State Armed Police force and 27,178 Civil Polce forces as well as the Central Armed Forces deployed in other parts of Assam. Moreover, the State Government of Assam waited for the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to send its troops from neighboring States (ACHR report,2012).

From the above it is clear that the State Government failed to learn any lesson including identification of the sensitive issues for necessary security measure. Then the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi who came to power in 2001 was much more aware that four major conflicts already took place under regime- Karbi-Dimasa Conflicts September-November 2005 displacing about 45,000 people; Bodo-Muslim Conflicts in Darrang and Udalguri districts in August,2008, leading to displacement of about 200,000 people ; between the Dimasas and Nagas in the North Cachar Hill district in March-May2009 leading to displacement of 11,737 people and Garos and Rabhas in January 2011 leading to displacement about 50,000 people(ACHR report,2012). The refusal of the Army to obey the Unified Command mainly led to the spread of the conflict. Moreover, no action was taken on the request of the State Government of Assam made on 21.07.2012 as the army was still studying the situation. Finally, army was deployed only following a request by the Ministry of Home Affairs (ACHR Report,2012).

It is important to that lack of timely appropriate actions from both the state government and union government had escalated large scale of conflict in the BTAD region. If the government

could take necessary steps in time, there would be less damage and less casualties. This conflict had created an atmosphere of suspicion, fear and hostility among the people of both communities in the BTAD region of Western Assam

Conclusion:

The 2012 ethnic conflict between Bodos and Bengali Muslims was not only an episode of ethnic violence; it transformed Assamese society that revealed the fragility of Assam's social harmony. The humanitarian crisis revealed the failure of state government's mechanisms, while unwillingness of the displaced people to return home indicates a deep-rooted insecurity. As a result of the conflicts, lot of people had lost their most precious property i.e, land, home, lives and livelihood. They had been suffering from landlessness, homelessness, joblessness, food security, increased morbidity, loss of access to common property rights and social disintegration. Moreover, the conflict had created a situation of suspicion, fear, mistrust and hostility as wells social disintegration between the two communities in the BTAD region of Western Assam.

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