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The Historical Geography of the Assam Violence

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The violence in western Assam where armed groups attacked Bengali-speaking Muslims and Bodos needs to be understood in the context of long-term processes of ecological, economic and social change within the larger framework of colonialism and the modern state. Unless the state and its institutions recognise these interconnected linkages, the conflict will keep recurring, like it has for the past many decades.

Assam is back in the national limelight. Violence, which is largely rural in nature, has gripped the western districts of the Brahmaputra Valley since the last week of July. Questions are being asked about what ails Assam. Is it the illegal migration from Bangladesh? Is it the ethnic aspiration of the Bodo community? Such questions are framed from the perspective of the Indian state and its political institutions. Answers can be found, we are told, in narratives of large-scale immigration from Bangladesh as well as in the inherent flaws that exist within the Indian constitutional provisions of the Sixth Schedule. But these narratives do little to help us understand the historical specificities that shape the lives and actions of the people and communities living in these areas. Also, these narratives lead to confusion, create distrust amongst communities and increase political polarities. A brief exploration highlighting the historical transition of this region will help clear some ambiguity.

Distinct Agrarian Practices

The western borderland of the Brahmaputra Valley has historically witnessed the presence of various forms of agrarian economy. How does one understand the nature of agrarian economic practices of various communities? For the sake of discussion, this commentary is confined to the study of two communities – the Bodos and Muslim peasants.

The Bodos depend on an agrarian economy that is largely for self-sustenance. They are non-commodity producers and their economy is minimally connected with the markets. Historically, they lived closer to the forested areas along the foothills of the lower Himalayan ranges (Allen 1905). Here, the soil is primarily of coarse gravel and shingle deposits. Such soil could not retain water for long and was less supportive for paddy production. This soil supports the growth of sal (shorea robusta) forests (Hart 1915). The Bodos have innovatively-re-engineered the water flow into these areas and created a localised irrigation system (Guha 1982). But this did not support an overall production of surplus crop. Often, the Bodos exchanged dry fish with rice from the Bhutias due to insufficient rice production locally. The low-cost irrigation works facilitated through community labour did not stand against their tradition of shifting agriculture to which I will return a little later.

Their dependence on forest-based produce allows them to mediate between the hill and valley-based economy. Communities across the fertile river valleys and hills exchanged agrarian and forest-based products. This also helped create vibrant but informal trade relations amongst these communities. The colonial government preferred the Bodos as mediators between the hill and forest products and metropolitan markets rather than as an advanced agrarian community. Most neighbourhood communities like Khasi, Garo and Bhutia interacted with each other and the Bodos for exchange of forest products. The interdependence of these communities is of a very complex nature, evolving continuously. These exchanges defined the economic relations of the communities before the 20th century – relations that changed as the Bodos slowly took to permanent cultivation with paddy production emerging as an important feature of their economic life.

The Muslim peasants had historically emerged as sedentary farmers in precolonial and colonial Bengal. High population density and integration with a state system required that they produce a surplus. By the mid-19th century, they were known for cash crop production, which always put them at the mercy of the markets. Though their agrarian practices led to the rapid exhaustion of their soil, the extensive river networks and annual floods replenished their lands. A natural equilibrium helped their agrarian practices remain viable. On the other hand, surplus production and capital accumulation also led to intense social and economic stratification of the

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Muslim peasantry. Their economic condition was, and continues to be, determined by factors like price fluctuations that are beyond their control. The migrant Muslim peasants settled along the fertile alluvial riverine tracts. These tracts were conducive for cultivation and processing of jute. The low-lying lands also supported the cultivation of the Boro variety of paddy which could be grown along with jute. As the 20th century progressed and the jute-dependent economy became unprofitable, Muslim peasants slowly diversified their choice of crops.

Throughout the major part of the 20th century the two communities were hardly interdependent due to the very nature of their economic practices. This also facilitated a distinct settlement pattern within the rural geography. However, post-1930, as jute prices fell, the Muslim peasantry began to turn to paddy cultivation. This pushed them towards the upper reaches of the valley where paddy could be cultivated. Often, such tracts were purchased from the Bodo peasants. Unlike this, the interdependence between Assamese caste Hindu peasantry and migrant Muslim peasants was more firm, rooted as it was in trade and share-cropping arrangements.[1]

Over the years, reclaimable areas across the valley, western Assam in particular, have declined. Throughout the 20th century the government reaffirmed control over the forested tracts (Saikia 2011). Also, the slow transition of the Bodos to permanent peasant cultivation is a recent phenomenon. Like many other tribal communities in the region seeking permanent cultivation, the Bodos hardly find any free land for agriculture. Further, increasing demographic pressure, often accentuated by peasant immigration, was rarely paralleled by an outward flow of the rural population. This has now strained the pattern of geographical distribution and ecological dependence outlined above. This means two agrarian communities producing differently came to share similar natural resources.

Evolution of Land Tenure

If the agrarian practices of the two communities were and have remained dissimilar, the historical evolution of the pattern of landownership of both communities is distinct as well. For long, the Bodo remained shifting cultivators in a flat valley. At least till the 18th century, they were yet to be fixed into a permanent geography. This meant they would hardly practise a permanent form of cultivation though slowly they became less mobile. Moreover, historically the Bodos have practised communal landownership. This was equally true in their preference for collective labour which was needed for irrigation works and during the sowing or harvesting seasons; even hunting was a collective effort. Unsurprisingly, communal labour discouraged provisions of any wage. Sidney Endle (1911), a 19th century British ethnographer, wrote eloquently how, within this communitarian work nature of the Bodos,

> every man as a rule works for the time being at high pressure, his toil being lightened by much merry talk and laughter, and many jests and jokes...There is a pleasing absence of the mercenary element in the whole transaction; for as a rule no money payments whatever are made to the workers.

During colonial rule, a majority of Bodo peasants, like many others in the Brahmaputra Valley, refused to accept permanent land tenure. The colonial ruler's unhappiness about the practice of temporary cultivation among the Assamese peasantry (read tribal peasantry) was well known. The colonial government's portrayal of the frequent and large-scale relinquishment of landownership by the Assamese peasantry was not only a way to escape from increasing revenue assessment but also a refusal to enter into a permanent fiscal arrangement with the state. The much talked about practice of relinquishment of land titles was closely connected to the fluidity of the idea of landownership. Colonial rule even failed to infuse a permanent nature of cultivation among the Bodos. This was true for most tribal communities of the region. The Bodos rarely tried to secure written records of landownership.

The Bodo peasantry received a major setback and their fluid agrarian frontier was put under serious restrictions from the last quarter of the 19th century. This happened when the colonial forestry programme made a major headway in the western districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Large tracts of land necessary for future requirement of shifting cultivation now became government-controlled forestland unavailable for agriculture. As the forestry programme slowly intruded into the spheres of community rights, it also infringed upon the way the community was dependent on forest-based produce. It so happened that over the century the fact that the Bodos were historically a forest-dependent

community disappeared from the Assamese public imagination.

On the other hand, unlike this flexible nature of land tenure, the Muslim peasantry had been under pressure to remain fixed to their landholding even before their migration into the valley. Intensive food crop production – to sustain a large population – meant adopting permanent cultivation. This ensured easier adaption to fixed land tenure and also facilitated the easy imposition and collection of government taxes. In the wake of the struggle for citizenship in post-Partition India, landownership became the most sought-after official institution for this purpose. The Dewanias, a class of middlemen, negotiated between the petty revenue bureaucracy and Muslim peasants to confirm landownership.

Fluid Boundaries

The subject of population flow across the region also needs to be given due attention. Several communities inhabiting these areas since precolonial times, which include the Bodo, Garo, Khasi, Bhutia, Rajbanshi, etc, had settled across a wider geography characterised by similar ecological features (Nathan 1936). Over the second millennium of our common era, the process for consolidation of these habitats began. The Bodos, too, underwent this process. One of the reasons for this was the territorial expansion of a powerful state. The Bodos were continuously, albeit slowly, on the move for a long period. This practice was fairly true for most communities who resisted any entry into the formal state-led fiscal system whether it was the Mughal, Koch and Ahom rulers or the British colonial government.

The historical movement of populations was often determined by local ecological pressures like a crisis of resources to support an increasing population or natural disturbances like the rapid change in the course of some river. The visible absence of boundaries representing the nation state also allowed a free flow of people. The region thus helped in the growth of a distinctively hybrid space of ecology and linguistic practices. Later, the new demarcation imposed by the partition of India restricted this free flow. The creation of East Pakistan, and subsequently Bangladesh, imposed further restrictions on this historical movement of people. However, this did not restrict the flow of people from northern East Pakistan, and later from Bangladesh, in the second half of the 20th century.

The consolidation of the Hindu Assamese peasantry in the flat fertile valley over the past few centuries had demarcated agrarian boundaries. The tribal peasantry was further boxed inside a fixed geography, a process that made them strangers within the Hindu Assamese agrarian territory.

Making a departure from this traditional pattern of the flow of population, the colonial regime expedited a new pattern of migration in this region. It was their conscious preference to bring the Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants from the north-east Bengal districts rather than the Hindi-speaking Bihari landless peasants. Two factors – the Muslim peasants' long history of jute cultivation and their comparatively easier forms of migration and travel to western parts of the Brahmaputra Valley – played a crucial role. The first phase of migration, largely between 1905 and 1933, was primarily aimed at creating a supply zone of raw jute for the jute mills of Bengal. A combination of factors accelerated this migration and helped the new settlers acclimatise rapidly in the new landscape. Apart from the high demand for jute from the Bengal jute factories, it was the flow of credit from various quarters – which included the Assamese and Marwari traders, both of whom were partially funded by Calcutta-based credit markets – that accelerated the process of jute cultivation.

At the local level, this land reclamation led to critical ecological imbalances as local resource use patterns were destabilised. The traditional economic linkages between the hills and valleys, pointed out earlier, were disrupted. Further, the spread of cash crops prompted the individualisation of land tenure and encouraged the dissolution of communal modes of ownership. The Muslim peasants who came to the western districts brought with them a history of anxiety over securing tenurial rights. Long deprivation from individual tenure meant they would always strive to keep their land tenure rights protected and at par with the demands of contemporary land tenure practices. This was in sharp contrast to the aspirations of the Bodo peasants whose historical experience had been starkly different.

The absence of formal land tenure, as seen through the eyes of the modern nation state, turned the Bodo peasantry into encroachers or illegal settlers in state-controlled forestland. Without modern tenurial rights, the Bodo peasantry remained economically impoverished when compared to the Bengali-Muslim cash crop producers. Finally, the Bodos also failed to escape the localised ecological crisis due to the restrictions imposed on them by the boundaries of the nation state. The previously fluid migrating communities are now trapped in a comparatively smaller geographical space, their areas fixed and their ability to adapt to change severely limited.

Flawed Institutions and Missing Links

Rural tensions in the western boundaries of the Brahmaputra Valley are, of course, symptomatic of deeper problems entrenched in structures of the social lives of the existing communities. Their social lives have been conditioned by a variety of settings but the three critical features outlined above have had a deep impact on them. Those who perceive all problems in narratives of either illegal migration or weaknesses of the institution of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) miss the complex landscape of western Assam. Because of the different land tenure systems and distinct relations with the market, the contest for land remained mostly localised except for common resources like grazing grounds. However, it did not take long to bring the two communities physically closer. Demographic pressure caused both by the natural increase in population and further migration exhausted available riverine tracts for the Muslim peasantry. This meant they needed to reclaim land in areas where the Bodo peasantry had traditional access. Most Muslim peasants did not

like to reclaim timber forests as such land could not be converted into ploughed fields immediately as the roots needed to be removed first to make such reclaimed plots suitable for the plough.

The July 2012 violence has many previous avatars. It began with sporadic rural conflicts in the early 20th century, metamorphosed into communal politics over the decades and now to ethnic polarisation. Localised rural conflicts have been restaged continuously. Though attempts have been made to keep these economic conflicts under control throughout the 20th century, most institutional efforts – beginning with the "Line System" (Guha 2006: 206-10) (which gave political legitimacy to a segregated pattern of geographical distribution by stipulating that Muslim and Assamese settlements would be clearly demarcated) in the early 20th century to the recent BTAD experiment – rarely addressed the complexities outlined in this article. The political-bureaucratic apparatus, which was responsible for crafting these institutions, rarely, if ever, drew its insights from this historical and ecological evolution of the region. Not surprisingly, these experiments failed to resolve the conflict.

The creation of BTAD in the 21st century gave fixed geographical forms and new cultural meanings to the Bodo community. The memory of a wider geographical distribution of this community will be lost in the future. These constitutional arrangements make promises of cultural security for the impoverished Bodo peasantry but have not been able to bring any fundamental change either to the agrarian economy or to the land tenure system. The BTAD has not implemented the Forest Rights Act, 2006 that would have reaffirmed the now-forgotten community rights of the Bodos (Saxena et al 2010). On the other hand, the establishment of the BTAD has helped in the distribution of some wealth through a few central government schemes. These resources have become a matter of intense competition for various communities including the economically stratified Muslim peasantry living within this emergent cultural-geographical space of the Bodo homeland.

NOTE

1 A detailed elaboration of my argument on the transition of the agrarian economy of Assam in the first half of the 20th century is to be found in Chapter 1 of my forthcoming book, *A Century of Protests: Peasants in Modern Assam*.

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