

## Reclaiming Khagrabari

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A detailed account from the ground of the attacks on Muslim villagers in western Assam by suspected Bodo militants, of its causes and of how efforts were put in place to quickly return the survivors to their villager to defeat the militants' intentions of ethnic cleansing.

It was a little after 6:00 pm on 1 May 2014 that we were informed that seven Bodo youth with rucksacks on their backs had been spotted coming out of the Guma Reserved Forest through the Hakma Forest Village in the Gossaigaon revenue circle of Kokrajhar District of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) of Assam. We immediately asked our contacts to discretely observe them and report their movements continuously. Once their movement was verified by our people on the ground and there was little doubt that they were Bodo militants, we informed the senior most official in charge of law and order in the state. Orders were issued by him almost immediately to the forces on the ground to intercept these militants.

There was certainly cause for concern, as the impending defeat of Bodo candidates in the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency at the hands of the common candidate put up by the major non-Bodo communities had created apprehension that "vengeance" will be meted out soon. Such threats had already been made in many remote villages in Gossaigaon subdivision of Kokrajhar district.

In spite of the clear instructions from the very top, the officer-in-charge of the Gossaigaon police station under whose jurisdiction the area fell did little to mount an operation to cordon off the area. The suspected militants were last seen in Padmapukhuri village and were heading east towards the villages of Bashbari and Barkhangbil. Our informants had reasons to believe that the suspected militants will halt in Langdanpara or Dolomakha, settlements within the villages just mentioned. All that the officer-in-charge of Gossaigaon police station did was to drive in to those villages with a police team in five vehicles. No cordon was set, no exits were sealed and no houses were searched. Even as we were hearing about this casual behavior of the local police news reached us that suspected Bodo militants had struck in Baksa district, about 250 km to the east of Gossaigaon.

## The Three Massacres

**Narsingbari massacre:** In Narsingbari, a village under the Gobardhana police station in Barnagar revenue circle of Baksa district of BTAD in Assam, four suspected Bodo militants shot at and killed three Muslim villagers while they were sitting in their courtyard at about 8:00 pm that evening. Among those killed was an elderly woman and a couple who were her next-door neighbours. Her three year old granddaughter, who was shot and critically wounded, miraculously survived. Taslima is now recovering in the Guwahati Medical College Hospital, her shattered left hand reconstructed through surgery. This was the first massacre by Bodo militants in recent years in Baksa district.

**Balapara massacre:** About four hours after the Narsingbari massacre, around midnight, Bodo militants struck again—this time in the same area where we had spotted the militants in Gossaigaon subdivision. A large group broke down doors of houses of three Muslim families in Balapara Part 1 village in Bhowraguri revenue circle of Gossaigaon subdivision. The village was under the jurisdiction of Tulsibil police outpost under the Gossaigaon police station. Eight Muslim villagers died in this carnage, among them pregnant women and little children.

Although this was not the first time an ethnic clash had taken place in Kokrajhar district, the Balapara massacre was disturbing for several reasons. Firstly, Balapara Part 1 village is barely 12-15 km to the east of where our contacts had tracked the suspected Bodo militants that evening. They could have comfortably walked along the Madati River from there to reach Balapara and commit this atrocity. That forces on the ground were not on alert is evident from the fact that there is a Border Security Force (BSF) camp within a kilometer of the site of the massacre in the adjacent village of Balapara Part 2. The questions which naturally arise are: could this massacre have been prevented if a cordon was laid around Bashbari and Barkhangbil to intercept and flush out the militants? Could they have been intercepted on their way to Balapara Part 1 if the forces on the ground towards the east, the direction they were last seen heading in, were alerted to watch out for such movement? Was it just negligence on the part of the police officials in Gossaigaon or something more disturbing?

We put on record our anguish and concern to the top government officials in the state and also forewarned them of the possibility of more such retaliatory massacres and the immediate need to secure vulnerable non-Bodo villages. The authorities did react promptly to our warnings about the threat of further attacks and deployed security personnel in many vulnerable areas.

The list of villages that we had sought deployment of security forces for were provided to the government. We would like to believe that this was perhaps one of the reasons why the violence could be contained and not a single such attack could be carried out in Chirang district.

Unfortunately, NC Khagrabari escaped our attention. We did not include its name in the list of vulnerable villages.

**NC Khagrabari:** On the afternoon of 2 May, another strike was carried out by Bodo militants in Baksa. What was worse, it occurred in the jurisdiction of the same Gobardhana police station where the Narsingbari massacre had taken place the previous evening. As more information poured in, it became clear that the massacre had occurred in a remote village adjacent to the Manas National Park, which could be reached only by taking a boat across the Beki River. The attack began at around 3:30 pm, and it took at least a couple of hours to arrange enough boats for the security personnel to cross over. By the time forces reached the village at dusk, many people were already dead; most of them women and little children, and the entire village had been burnt down to cinders.



**A home reduced to ashes in NC Khagrabari: Courtesy Smita Dutta, Strategic Research and Analysis Organisation**

That evening, the home secretary of Assam informed us that the army had been ordered to stage a flag march in Narayanguri. (Even though the actual massacre had taken place in NC Khagrabari, most started referring to it as the Narayanguri massacre; Narayanguri is actually a village on the other side of the Beki River, where the survivors had taken shelter after the carnage.)

In the violence which had ensued in BTAD in 2012, it had taken three days to deploy the army, and by that time hundreds of villages were burnt down and lakhs of Muslim villagers had been forced to flee. This time the army was deployed within hours. The response of both the state and the central government was qualitatively different, and this ensured that the violence was quickly contained.

We reached Narayanguri on 3 May 2014 and learnt how the massacre had occurred from survivors who had seen their own children being killed in front of their eyes. As the attack began on NC Khagrabari from the western side of the village, the villagers fled towards the Beki river on its east. Most of the menfolk of the village had gone to the market in Bhangarapara in Narayanguri across the river. Only the old, women and children were in the village when the attack took place. The Khagrabari Forest Beat office is located on the banks of the river on the eastern edge of the village. The villagers thought that the forest guards, who are Bodos, and former members of the now disbanded Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) who were posted there would protect them. They would soon realise how wrong they were.

As the villagers had fled towards the river and on to a *char* (river island) adjacent to it, the Bodo forest guards, surrendered BLT militants and some unidentified armed elements started shooting at the villagers turning the *char* into a killing field. Even those who had jumped into the river were shot at. It became clear to survivors even as they fled that forest guards whom they had known for years were also perpetrators of the massacre. In the more than thirty first information reports (FIRs) filed by the survivors, the perpetrators have all been named and many were arrested by 3 May.

The range officer of the Bashbari range of the Manas National Park whose arrest was also ordered by the Baksa deputy commissioner of police for firing on agitated villagers on the morning of 3 May and for suspected involvement in the massacre was, however, let off by the police under contentious circumstances. With the death toll at 38, the NC Khagrabari massacre is indisputably one of the worst massacres of a linguistic and religious minority in recent times in India.

Considering the indisputable evidence of the direct involvement of government forest guards employed by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) in the massacre, it was untenable that the investigation could be entrusted to the Assam police. We, along with others who were keeping a close watch on the situation, demanded that the investigations be handed over to the National Investigative Agency (NIA). The state government agreed to our demands and the NIA has been asked to take over the investigation of the massacres.

Even though there were accusations that the eyewitnesses and survivors had been pressurised by the police to not include names of perpetrators, this has been denied by the complainants. There was no such pressure and many of the perpetrators were arrested by 3

May 2014. This too was in marked contrast to earlier spates of violence against non-Bodos in BTAD where few perpetrators had ever been brought to justice.

## **Ethnic Cleansing: 1991-2001**

Any large scale violence against non-Bodos in BTAD had always been perpetrated with the underlying motives of dispossessing them of their land, to create an ethnically homogeneous Bodo homeland, to consolidate their political dominance and numerically strengthen their case for a separate Bodo state in an area where the Bodos barely constitute 33% of the population according to the 2011 Census of India. That systematic violence against non-Bodos to dispossess them of their land and ethnic cleansing carried out to render villages ethnically homogenous is indisputably established by the demographic transformation that was “engineered” by violence in the decade from 1991 to 2001 in the Kokrajhar part of the Sidli revenue circle alone.

During the above mentioned period, 20,005 Hindus fled this area and their population came down from 89.91% to 65.94% of the total. It goes without saying that the Hindus who had fled were not Bodos. As many as 8,638 Muslims fled the area during the same period, lowering their population from 16.45% to just 7.69%. In contrast, the population of Bodos in the area during this decade went up by 12,451, increasing their population from 52.17% to 59.36%.

The impact of ethnic cleansing between 1991 and 2001 is most telling in the 508 villages that comprise Chirang district which was formed when Bodoland Territorial Council was established in 2003. It is the only district in Assam in recent decades to have shown a negative decadal growth rate of population between 1991 and 2001. ([Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims in Assam, 13 October 2013 - Nilim Dutta](#)).

## **Immediate Cause of the Massacre**

The immediate cause of the massacre of the Muslim villagers was the impending defeat of the Bodo candidate of the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) in the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha Constituency in the 2014 elections. In spite of being a minority in BTAD, 75% of the seats in the BTC are reserved for the scheduled tribes, which by default means the Bodos. The BPF headed by Hagrama Mahilary has ensured a stranglehold on the BTC for over two decades now, liberally using violence to ensure their political dominance. In the current Lok Sabha elections, however, the Bodo political dominance was vigorously challenged by all other non-Bodo communities who closed ranks and put up a common “non-Bodo” scheduled tribe candidate.

Long before the votes were counted, it was evident that not only the BPF's candidate Chandan Brahma, but the other prominent Bodo candidate, U G Brahma too would lose.

Such audacity could not go unpunished. Even though the Koch-Rajbangshis and adivasis were also instrumental in undermining the Bodos electorally, they could not be readily made target of retaliatory massacres. The Koch-Rajbangshis are an indigenous ethnic community and adivasis have the numerical strength and the ability to strike back with vengeance if a massacre is unleashed on their community. Also, the presence of the six adivasi militant groups, even though they have agreed to a ceasefire, was another deterrent. The Muslims were, however, the most vulnerable community. Not only could the violence be unleashed on them, but they could also be immediately labeled as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and even blamed for the violence. This is exactly what happened.

The fact that the three massacres occurred in less than 24 hours, and the fact that in NC Khagrabari Bodo forest guards employed by the BTC were so openly involved, indicates how high the instructions must have come from. Also, it must not be overlooked that the massacres occurred at a time when anti-Muslim sentiments were emboldened with the rise of Hindutva politics and an impending change in the government in Delhi to be headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Narendra Modi.

These were crucial factors that informed the decisions regarding 'Reclaiming Khagrabari', both of the government and our own involvement in the process.

## **Rehabilitation of the Survivors**

Even though all the survivors of the Khagrabari massacre had fled the village to Bhangarpara in Narayanguri, the other side of the river where the temporary relief camps had been set up, a detachment of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) was deployed to secure the deserted NC Khagrabari village.

On 8 May 2014, the task of protecting the village was handed over to the Assam Police and a detachment of the Quick Reaction Team (QRT) of the 4 Assam Police Battalion took interim charge and the construction of the Khagrabari outpost began. On 9 May 2014, troops from the 24 Indian Reserve Battalion who were to finally take charge began arriving.

On 10 May, we informed the home secretary of Assam of the remaining difficulties in resettling the villagers. The very next day, the home secretary and the Baksa deputy commissioner, personally visited to inspect and ensure that all problems were addressed.



**IRBN troops arriving in NC Khagrabari: Courtesy Smita Dutta, Strategic Research and Analysis Organisation**

We assisted the civil administration wherever assistance was needed. As the troops arrived without rain gear and Wellington boots, we immediately provided those to the detachment. As it was impossible for the detachment to obtain rations and fresh vegetables, being deployed near a jungle and across a river, we set up a supply line to keep the detachment stocked with these essentials.



## **24 IRBN setting up camp in NC Khagrabari: Courtesy Smita Dutta, Strategic Research and Analysis Organisation**

On 9 May 2014, the first of the survivors of the Khagrabari massacre returned to the village. Temporary shelters were constructed for them to live in while their homes are being rebuilt. By 18 May, all the survivors of Khagrabari massacre returned to their village. The first battle had been won. I personally accompanied the survivors back to their village almost every alternate day, to instill confidence as well as to immediately resolve any problems they might face.



## **Survivors returning home: Courtesy Smita Dutta, Strategic Research and Analysis Organisation**

While lakhs of non-Bodo villagers who have been displaced over the years due to ethnic clashes continue to languish in squalid relief camps whose existence even the government tries to deny, survivors of Khagrabari massacre were enabled to return to their village in less than three weeks.

The malicious accusations that the victims of the Khagrabari massacre are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants who had encroached on forestland, precipitating the violence, too stands defeated. NC Khagrabari is a revenue village and not an illegal settlement on forestland. Its residents have “miyadi pattas” or land titles which go back decades. That the area had old Muslim settlements is evident from the Fatemabad Tea Estate, which is just a stone’s throw away from NC Khagrabari. The estate is now Wakf Property because its original owner had migrated to East Pakistan during the Partition in 1947. Migration of Muslim peasants into these areas occurred during colonial times.

It will be a long road to justice and peace, but the tide has turned.