

The Dimapur Lynching

A Fire That Will Continue to Simmer

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The 5 March public lynching of Syed Sarif Uddin Khan, an Assamese Muslim charged with rape in Dimapur, Nagaland has drawn attention to the simmering tensions in this commercial centre situated on the border of Nagaland and Assam. Accused falsely of being an illegal Bangladesh immigrant, Khan was one of thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims who have lived in Dimapur for decades. What mainstream India has failed to understand are the many complex and layered tensions that are at work in Dimapur that exploded in the 5 March lynching.

In Indira Gandhi's time, whenever a problem cropped up that the government found difficult to tackle, it blamed the "foreign hand". In North East today, the so-called "foreign hand" is the Bangladeshi issue. Whenever the state government in a North Eastern state is confronted with a formidable problem, it either blames it on Bangladeshi infiltration or on Jehadi activities. The only exception is perhaps Tripura where the state government means business and does not allow any outfit to stall the process of development.

Although Dimapur in Nagaland is a well-known business centre for North East India, its name is not familiar to people from mainland India unlike Guwahati or Shillong, cities that are well connected by various means of transport to the rest of the country. Last week, Dimapur made the news although for all the wrong reasons and caught the attention of people in India and around the world.

A Gruesome Murder

A young Assamese businessman, Syed Sarif Uddin Khan, who had lived in Dimapur for nearly two decades, was brutally killed by an irate mob on 5 March 2015. He was charged with having raped a young Naga woman. A frenzied mob stormed Dimapur Central Jail, dragged him out, undressed him, tied him with ropes to a vehicle and then dragged him on the road for a distance of over 7.5 km. By the time the crowd reached the Dimapur Clock Tower where they had intended to hang Khan, he was already dead after having bled profusely from the savage beatings he suffered en route. Photographs and videos of the gory scenes were circulated in India and beyond prompting many people to ask, "Can human

beings be so cruel and unkind to another fellow human being?" The crowd that lynched Khan consisted mostly of teenagers and youth. These young people were from Dimapur. They probably did not realise the damage they were doing to themselves and to the image of their state by participating in the gruesome act of 5 March.

Political Economy of Dimapur

Dimapur is not typical of the rest of Nagaland. Had something similar taken place elsewhere in the state, the outcome would not have been as savage and uncivilised as what we saw in Dimapur. What Mumbai is to India, Dimapur is to Nagaland. It is called the commercial capital of Nagaland. While Indians living outside Nagaland need an Inner Line Permit (ILP) to enter the state, this does not apply to Dimapur town. As a result, you have people from all over India living in Dimapur, something you do not see in the rest of the state. Non-Nagas constitute a substantial portion of the population of Dimapur.

What makes things worse is that Dimapur is also a safe haven for criminals of all kinds. A person who commits a crime in neighbouring Assam can easily escape into Dimapur and hide away from the clutches of the Assam police. Thus extortions, snatching, intoxicated brawls and even gun fights are common in Dimapur.

The administration in Dimapur is spineless and the rule of law is as good as nonexistent. Three splinter groups of the once outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), two others of the Naga National Council (NNC) and the state government run the show. However, the state government does not wield any real power nor does it want to get on the wrong side of the other five powerful groups on the scene.

Before I became a journalist, I served as an officer of State Bank of India (SBI), the country's largest public sector bank. During 1993-94, I was posted at the Dimapur regional office of SBI. One morning, a phone call came to the regional manager of the bank that asked him to pay up Rs one crore to the NSCN or face the consequences. The SBI decided not to bow down to extortion demands. As a result, the regional office and 35 branches of the SBI operating in Nagaland were shut down and remained that way for over a month. This is the kind of thing that can happen only in Nagaland.

In addition to the above mentioned militant groups, there are groups of hoodlums and mafia who are always in a hurry to earn a quick buck and are prepared to do anything to achieve their aim. The non-Naga population that lives and works in Dimapur always makes compromises with these elements and buys peace at any cost. Others who cannot cope with the ever-growing demands of the extortionists, leave Nagaland to search for new pastures. In recent times the extortionists have started asking for money even from well-off Naga traders and businessmen which they never did before. Some indigenous business groups have come out on the streets protesting this highhandedness of the extortionist outfits.

In the Outskirts of Dimapur

On the periphery of Dimapur there are flat lands most of which belong to the Sema tribe. Rice is cultivated on these lands. These days, the Nagas do not want to till the land themselves and thus look out for cheap labour. This labour comes from adjacent Morigaon and Nagaon Districts and also from the three districts of the Barak Valley, that is Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj in Assam. The labourers are almost entirely Bengali-speaking Muslims. They have established good relations with the Sema tribe but have a love-hate relationship with other Naga tribes such as Angami, Ao, Lotha, etc.

Over the years, many of these migrant farm workers have developed a bond with their employers and some of them have been adopted as foster sons and even permitted to marry Naga women from the village. Their offspring are called "Sumias" and this new breed are very enterprising both in agriculture as well as in business. The Semas treat them as Nagas while the other Naga tribes dislike them.

Khan, targeted by a brutal mob, was a Bengali-speaking Muslim who had lived in Dimapur for nearly two decades. He came from the Karimganj district of Barak Valley in Assam. He had married a Sema girl and had a daughter from her. He began with a pan-supari shop and then became a used car dealer a few years back. It is said that he had made enemies including some who envied his success in business and others who were after his money.

Labelling Illegal Immigrant

The Bangladeshi ghost comes handy all over the North East when you want to teach a lesson to a person who is a Bengali-speaking Muslim. This syndrome is akin to the Razakar syndrome in Bangladesh that was most noticeable during the late 1960s and early 70s, the years of the Bangladesh liberation war. The Razakars were those who colluded with the Pakistan Army in annihilating a large number of Mukti Juddhas or freedom fighters who put their life at stake for the freedom of Bangladesh. A person who had eyes on his neighbour's land would report to the Mukti Bahini that his neighbour was a Razakar. The neighbour would be invariably killed, often brutally. Then the land would be grabbed by the complainant.

Here in Nagaland, the trend is to label the Bengali-speaking Muslim as Illegal Bangladeshi Immigrant (IBI) and first threaten him to leave Nagaland. If he does not comply, he faces all kinds of harassment as a result of which he leaves his assets and business and moves on. These are then grabbed. The term IBI is used so often by the local newspapers and TV channels that it has assumed the status of official terminology today.

In the case of Khan, his late father Syed Hussain Khan was in the Indian Air Force (IAF) and retired from service while he was posted at the Air Force Station at Kumbhirgram near Silchar in Assam. Sarif's mother, Zubeda Khatun, is an IAF family pensioner. Sarif's three brothers work with the Indian Army. One of them, late Iman Uddin Khan, participated in the Kargil War of 1999 against Pakistan, was severely injured in the battle and died of the injury at a later period. His two other brothers, Jamal Uddin Khan and Kamal Uddin Khan are

serving with the Indian Army in the Assam regiment and are posted in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh respectively.

What hurts the vast majority of Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims of this region is that despite the impeccable credentials of the family, Sarif continues to be referred to as IBI not only by responsible Naga intelligentsia and media but also by many national news channels. If Sarif had been a Bangladeshi, his mortal remains would not have been flown from Nagaland by an IAF helicopter to his native place in Karimganj, Assam. The Bengali Muslim community sees a sinister design in this to destabilise and cripple their existence.

Economic Resurgence of Naga Youth

All said and done, the conflict is not just between Nagas and Bengali-speaking Muslims. Neither is it just a clash between Nagas and non-Nagas. These developments are the result of the economic re-emergence of Naga youth, many of whom are returning home after obtaining management and other professional degrees from outside the state. If the flourishing business and trade of the state is in the hands of "outsiders", where will the "sons of the soils" go? Nagaland does not have big industries nor any scope for major employment opportunities in the near future to absorb these educated youth. So this clash was inevitable. Sarif was just one victim. If the Government does not take proactive steps there could be many more "Sarifs" in the coming days.

Rift in the Government

There is a suspicion of one more angle in the episode. Currently there is a rift in the state government and dissidents have been working hard to destabilise the ministry led by the present chief minister TR Zeliang. In a similar situation in the state in 1980, dissidents had stage-managed a student agitation against the then chief minister SC Jamir. Two students were killed in police firing and Jamir had to resign. This time around, school and college students were at the forefront of the mob that snatched Sarif from the Dimapur Central Jail. Fortunately the police did not open fire on them. If even one student had been killed, it would have forced Zeliang to resign. However, the fire that has been lit in Dimapur this time will simmer in Nagaland for quite some time to come.