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Massacres, Protests and Impasses: Elections in India's Northeast

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The site of violence between Bodos and Muslims in Rangiya near Gauhati, in August, 2012.

Unresolved debates on autonomy, ethnic rights and identity have over time degenerated into appalling prospects of raging violence in India's Northeast, observes Kaustubh Deka, a Public Policy Scholar with the Hindu Centre, after a recent visit to some of those States.

Northeast India has become a sad battleground of ever changing ethnic coalitions between political groups who feed on the logic of ethnocentric political developments, changing their stakes as per the political exigency of the day. The state opting for the mere formalities and prosaic procedures has, in fact, tried to manipulate these very vacillations amongst social groups and communities, eventually leading to protests of various kinds and even generating some of the conditions for violence.

What has perturbed observers are the increasingly visible links of the nature and pattern of this violence to the multifaceted realities of the phenomenon of 'elections' in this part of the country. These observations make one

critically reflect on the crucial but often unnoticed gap that sometimes develops between formalities of democratic practices and the fulfilment of the democratic ideals.

The Woes of Gendamari: electing a 'homeland'

The killing of seven unsuspecting villagers by unidentified gunmen on the November 4 in Gendamari, a nondescript village in the Goalpara district of Assam, has shocked everyone. Gendamari is a village inhabited by the Rabha community, one of the nine Scheduled Tribes groups in the plains districts of Assam. The Rabhas are widely scattered but mostly concentrated on Goalpara, Kamrup, and Darrang districts of Assam. The killing, sadly has not come as a surprise to those who have been observing and trying to understand the developments in the region for some time now. The unfortunate incident has merely exposed the extreme vulnerability of life and property in the region by the perpetuation of an unimaginative, confused and, at times, manipulative politics to which everyone, including the Central government, the state government and the local non-state actors, have been parties to. The Gendamari village is located barely hundred metres from the Assam-Meghalaya border inhabited by some hundred mostly agrarian families. Most villagers belong to the Rabha community, one of the Scheduled Tribe communities living mostly in Southern Assam. However, rather than discussing the Gendamari massacre merely as killings of the Rabhas by militants from the 'other' communities, one would urge that these killings have to be meaningfully understood against the backdrop of the sad corpus of so many killings that have routinely been taking place in many ethnic flashpoints across the region. Just change the names of the place, the suspect organisations involved and the number of the victims and you have the same story of violence unleashed on hapless citizens targeted as members of a community by militants/gunman claiming to represent another ethnic group. Ethnicisation of violence is the story here over and over again. And what started this trend? The answer is a complex combination of the compulsions of electoral politics, half-hearted experiments of 'democratic' governance through ad hoc measures and short sighted measures of conflict resolution. Let's consider the Gendamari violence. Behind the cold murders of the Rabha villagers by suspected Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) militants one can perceive the contentious issue of ethnic homeland movements and an ongoing tug of war between certain organisations claiming to represent the Rabha and Garo communities over contiguous areas, both asserting it as their exclusive 'homeland'. Whereas for the Rabhas the matter of pending election to the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council had been a matter of intense political mobilisation, the Garo militant groups have read the announcement of the Council elections by the Assam government as a threat to their battle for an exclusive 'Garoland' in which Rabhas are seen as encroachers. The killings have been a warning signal meant as a show of muscle amidst contesting, jingoistic ethno-nationalistic claims.

Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was constituted with its headquarters at Dudhnai and the jurisdiction of this council extends up to Rani area of Kamrup district and embraces almost the entire district of Goalpara. While there are about 779 villages under the RHAC, non-Rabha communities claim that the Rabhas are a minority in at least 382 villages, and hence, these villages should be excluded from the list of RHAC. Tensions have been brewing in the area since last month, particularly due to the onset of elections to the RHAC. Opposition to the election from other tribes like the Garos and the Khasis as well as people coming under the banner of the 'non-tribals' has intensified the prospects of ethnic clashes and violence. Various acts of arson and damage to public property in the area were widely reported.

On November 13, for the first time since its inception in 1995, the council held an election. The first round of the three-phase poll, held under heavy security, registered over 70 per cent voter turnout and was largely peaceful. However, the Ajanajati Garo Sanmilita Sangram Samiti (AGSSS), a coordination body of non-tribal communities and the Garo tribe of RHAC areas, had boycotted the poll and had announced that its poll boycott call would

continue for the second and the third phases of polling as well. Prospects of disruption and electoral violence thus loomed large in the air.

Bringing the Land Question Back to the Identity Discourse

The crucial linkages between the issue of land rights of indigenous groups and the growing prominence of ethnic identity in the political discourse are something worth exploring. One must bear in mind that the Rabhas, among the major Scheduled Tribes of Assam, have the smallest land-holdings at their disposal. As per the 2011 Census, Rabhas are amongst the ST groups in Assam that have the highest numbers of landless labourers. Grievances over losing land soon translate to demands for protective measures that are couched as calls for 'ethnic homelands'.

Similarly, across the State border in Meghalaya, there has been a gradual strengthening of the discourse of "the outsider" and the "son of the soil" concomitant to the growing insecurity regarding land and property. In fact, the Rabha people, who had land titles for their landholdings, had mostly been the early targets of the ethnic violence, besides the mining labourers from Assam working in the East Garo Hills. The atmosphere of polarisation is being deliberately manipulated along ethnic and communal lines. All notions of land-owners and settlers are drowned in a wave of ethnicisation aimed at electoral gains.

Therefore, any effective policy measure aimed at checking the expanding ethnic polarisation of the people in regions like these has to give land reform policies a top priority by effectively addressing issues of ceiling, land distribution and other land-related reform measures that have far reaching effect on social fragmentations in these areas.

Tension in the Hills: Demands for Inner Line System in Shillong

I was in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, in the last week of November. The approaching cold in the bustling hill town was made redundant by the heat waves caused by intense debates over the demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) by certain socio-political organisations, prominent among them being the Khasi Students' Union (KSU). The bellicose attitude assumed by all sides on the matter has already sent out signals of a troubled time ahead. Few incidents of violence that took place targeting 'non-Khasi outsiders' has already been attributed to the agitation. Thus, unresolved debates on autonomy, ethnic rights and identity have over time degenerated into prospects of raging violence. Similar demands for a system for ILP to be introduced are already being echoed by the influential All Assam Students' Union in Assam. Once again, the government is at a loss due to the lack of a concrete policy position on the same. In fact, in a public meeting held on the ILP question in the North Eastern Hills University (NEHU) on November 27, senior KSU leader Robertjune K. Jahrin, in the presence of former home minister of the state, Mr. R.G.Lyngdoh, accused the Government of India of not being able to provide their organisation even a copy of the Act scrapping the regulations of the Bengal Frontier Act, 1873, that had included the Khasi Hills as excluded areas in the erstwhile Assam. On the other hand, critiques of the ILP demand emphasise electoral calculations being the prime mover of the agitation which is trying to create an atmosphere conducive to the 'regionalist' agenda in the coming parliamentary elections. After all, former KSU leader and three-time MLA, Paul Lyngdoh, is a rising star in the premier regional political party of Meghalaya, the United Democratic Party (UDP).

A Powder Keg of Violence

These acts of violence point to a larger reality. That the whole of Northeast India is sitting on a powder keg of violence. After the recent killings, once again the governments of Assam and Meghalaya have announced joint measures to tackle the menace of militancy and killing of the innocents, but unless the conditions of the enduring violence are not addressed these measures would at best remain fire fighting measures but not the ones that would prevent the flames of violence in the first place. The urgent need of the hour is to move well beyond knee-jerk reactions and ad hoc measures towards well defined, concrete policy formulations. Disasters like Gendamari, Garo Hills, Shillong and numerous other situations are programmed over a period of time, engineered by an election-centric approach that focuses on merely keeping up with the procedural aspects of the democratic system even at the cost of neglecting or jeopardising the substantive requirements of a democratic polity. Repeated upsets for Indian democracy in its north-eastern region is a constant reminder that in a better democracy the substantive promises must be met right alongside the procedural requirements.

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