

Hidden Truth of Ethnic Clash Between Boro Tribe and Santhals in Assam, India

Pralip Kumar Narzary

*Post Graduate Department of Population Studies, Fakir Mohan University,
Vyasa Vihar, Balasore 19, Orissa, India
E-mail: pknarzy@yahoo.com*

KEYWORDS Ethnic cleansing; tribal; tragic story; population displacement; movement

ABSTRACT Ethnic clash between Boro tribe – one of the largest tribe in Assam and in North East India and Santhals – descendants of indentured tea labors erupted in early 1996. This paper is a humble attempt to review and counter argue the existing literature and highlight the hidden truth of ethnic clash between these communities. Available literature on this ethnic clash says that Boros are trying to solve the demographic equation in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra to create separate state Bodoland through 'ethnic cleansing'! Superficially this idea holds very good but critical analysis of various facts disproves this view. This study found that infliction of the ethnic clash between these two highly inter dependent communities was the killing of three Boro ladies. Hidden truth of the ethnic clash is the banning of entry into the forest, which caused heavy blow to the economy of Santhals, besides conspiracy and upper hand of third party is not denied.

INTRODUCTION

Society in Assam has historically been multi racial, multi religious, multi ethnic, multi caste, multi class, multi lingual and multi nationals. Though Assam was a good ground for germinating close assimilation between various ethnic communities and rightly called as 'melting pot'; during post independence era of five decades, Assam has seen several ups and downs, like separation of various states, ethnic violence etc. and such problem arising in the state roots heavily to poor governance. To exacerbate the existing social diversity, Assam has experienced influx of partition refugees (from then East Pakistan current Bangladesh) during partition and is experiencing illegal immigrants from neighboring countries which ignites more fuel to the existing socio-political tensions. Assam have also been experiencing problem of internal displacement of population due to such ethnic clash since it entered into the postcolonial era and more so in last two decades. However, there is dearth of literature, which provides causes of ethnic clash between two specific communities, which is leading to internal displacement of population. The existing literature on the ethnic conflicts are mostly of unscientific nature, which are simply based on some pre conceived ideas, or based on media reports, which poses question of authenticity of such literature. However, those

literatures are highly referred, due to either scarcity of literature or because those literature provides people with expected way of views and ideas.

Boro Tribe and Santhals

Boro is the largest tribe in Assam and the entire north east India. Their population is somewhere between 12.21 lakhs (Census of India, 1991, Language table), about 52 percent of total plains tribal population to 52 lakhs (Brahma et al., 2002). They are distributed mostly in the northern bank of Brahmaputra and scattered in southern bank of Brahmaputra, adjoining states and found in few pockets in Nepal and Bangladesh. They speak Tibeto – Burman Boro language and recently this language have been recognized as one of the official languages and included in the eight schedule of the constitution of India. They follow mainly three religions – Bathow, Brahma and Christianity.

Santhals or Adivasi (though literal meaning of Adivasi is aboriginal or indigenous people, in Assam Adivasi means the descendants of indentured tea labours including all the communities within it, like Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Khamer etc.) are the descendants of indentured tea labour brought by the British India during nineteenth century. Though they were brought only to work in tea garden, in later course

of life, they started settling in and around the tea garden and slowly crept into far off places. Today their population is not exactly known, however some of the estimates show their population to be not less than 16 percent (between 27 - 30 lakhs) of Assam's population (Pullopillil, 1999; Phukan, 1984, p18; Harialka, 1975; Borgohai, 1970; Tanti, 1969). The ethnic clash was only with Santhals who are outside tea garden, and had nothing to do with Adivasis of tea garden who constitute almost the entire labor force of the tea garden till today.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is a humble attempt to critically review and counter argue the existing literature on causes of ethnic clash between the Boro tribe and Santhals in Assam and highlight some of the hidden causes of this ethnic clash, which led to mass internal displacement of population. For the present study, various literature relating to Boro – Santhal ethnic clash have been critically reviewed and arguments are forwarded and information have been collected from few eminent Boro people, politician, government officials working in relief branch and police officer through indepth interviews and focus group discussions by the researcher for doctoral study during the year 2003.

ETHNIC CONFLICT AND MASS POPULATION DISPLACEMENT

The conflict between two communities is one of the greatest tragedies in human civilization. It causes even the common men to take part in it as well as makes a victim. Displacement of population due to ethnic clash causes more havoc to the population than the displacement due to the developmental activities. As in the former case, people have to move for live without prior notice, whereas in the later case, people are well notified before they are to move. When an ethnic clash erupts, many a times people have to run for their live only with whatever is attached to their body, leaving behind everything. As one of the IDPs in Saraibilw relief camp said, *in one of the evenings when I was returning back from paddy field, suddenly I saw our villagers running towards other village, so I also followed them. Only in the next noon I could find my wife and children and till now I am staying in relief camp. So how can I improve my economic condition!* The Boro

– Santhal ethnic conflict displaced about 42,214 families consisting of about 2,02,684 persons from their homes. Further, second spell of this ethnic clash in 1998 displaced about 48,556 families consisting of about 3,14,342 persons from their home (Govt. of Assam). The first spell of this ethnic class made about one fourth of the district population an Internally Displaced Person and by the second spell about 40 percent of the district population was Internally Displaced. This figure however must be much more alarming, as some of the people fled their home because of fear, and returned back home within a week, two or a month! The official figure might be only of those people who remained in the relief camp at least upto the head counting operation of the relief officials. Besides, from some of the villages only the children and women fled, but the men folk guarded their village. Children and women took shelter in other village schools, or any other public building/house and returned within two-three days, but this exercise continued for many times. This type of displacement must have also not been accounted in the official figure, of course, which is definitely a very difficult task to keep record of such displaced persons.

Critical Review and Counter Arguments

The available literature pertaining to Internal Displacement in North East India and particularly in Assam, says that Boros are going for Ethnic Cleansing Process in order to solve the demographic equation in the northern Bank of Brahmaputra in Assam (Hussain, 2004, p.398; Bhaumik 2004, p. 407; Gopal, 2004, p. 20; Chaudhuri, 2003, p.48; Baruah, 2003; Chaudhuri, 2002; SAHRDC, 2001; Hussain 2000, p. 4521; Hussain (—); USCR, 2000); so that they could create long standing democratic demand – Bodoland state. However, knowingly or unknowingly, no literature talks of indepth causes which might have inflicted this ethnic clash. Further more, literatures pertaining to Boro – Santhal ethnic clash always favours Santhals without understanding and not knowing the indepth cause of such a violent ethnic clash between two highly inter dependent communities.

This forwarded idea seems to be true and holds good superficially especially for those who do not have adequate knowledge about Assam and particularly about the Boro tribe and Santhals. However, critical analysis of various facts indicates that, if this is the reason, ethnic clash

would have erupted and or spilled over to other districts of proposed Bodoland where other community (including Santals) constitutes large proportion of population and where Boros are proportionately lesser; not in the district where Boro population constitutes about 70 percent of the district population. Secondly, they would have targeted the rival ruling community, who are believed to be suppressing, oppressing and coercing Boros and other tribals through various ways. Third, they would have not restricted to a single community. They would have tried to clean/vanish other smaller non tribal migrant communities. Fourth, they would have tried to clean/vanish other communities, which are strongly opposing creation of Bodoland Territorial Council. Fifth, ethnic cleansing applies when a larger group tries to vanish the smaller group, but if we accept the Census of India figure of Boro population (12.7 lakhs about 5.5% of state population in 1991) and figure of Santals (about 30 lakhs that is 16% of state population of state population in 1970s) as put forward by various scholars, Boro is much smaller group than Santhal thus the question of ethnic cleansing does not arise. But still if we use the term ethnic cleansing, it would indirectly mean that Boro population given by Census of India which is widely used for political purpose in relation to Bodoland Movement is extremely underestimated and the population figure put forward by Boro people is indirectly nearly accurate. And this conclusion leads to the fact that people are using the different figures for Boro population according to their suitability.

The northern bank of Brahmaputra, where Boros are majority mostly falls under the tribal belt and block created immediately after independence. This tribal belt and blocks were created to safeguard the tribals from various ways of coercion from other advance communities (Under the provision of VI schedule and Article 19(5) of Indian Constitution). One of the most important provisions of the same is that in such demarcated belts and blocks, non-tribals cannot have immovable property. But today in most of this belts and blocks, non-tribals have occupied plenty of land and have legal documents of the same for which today tribals are becoming minority in the tribal belts and blocks itself (Assam; Hand Book of Govt. Circulation 1981-1990). Under such scenario, the idea put forwarded by the various scholars - Boros are

solving demographic equation through ethnic cleansing, in order to become majority and create separate Bodoland state within the Indian Territory holds good. But sad part is that very few scholars raises the issue why and how tribals are becoming minority in the tribal belts and blocks! How could non tribals hold landed property and become majority in tribal belts and blocks? In the absence of any strong legal authority to look after such a serious matter, it remained an unheard tragic story or hidden truth especially to the people outside the region and remains hard fact of life for tribals and especially for Boros. Then is it not the government itself responsible for leading to such ethnic clash! Is it not just like letting two people fight and later on say that these people are fighting and of course not forgetting to blame one of them.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, All Assam Students' Union (AASU) agitated against illegal immigrants. During the agitation, many Muslims illegal immigrants and or legal residents were massacred by assuming that they are illegal immigrants or encroachers. During those days too the similar situation, what happened between Boros and Santals happened between Assamese and Muslims. AASU agitation came to a halt on the agreement with central government with the formulation of Illegal Migrants (Determination and Tribunal) Act in 1983, popularly known as IMDT Act. This Act ensured to identify illegal immigrant and deport back. Now, if new legal Act can be formulated and implemented (although at present not very effective), why the already existing legal provision under the Indian Constitution cannot be implemented (safeguarding tribal land alienation)? Then how can one trust the state or central government? For which Boros are demanding for separate Bodoland State within Indian Territory and one of the Boro insurgent groups (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) even went to the extent of demanding sovereign state.

Other argument is that, superficially and from theoretical point of view it may be said that migrants are not well accepted by host community that is why the Boro and Santhal ethnic clash erupted. This idea however does not hold good at all in this context. Because, though Santals arrived in Assam in nineteenth century and crept into Bodo dominated areas in late nineteenth century only; Boros and Santals became highly assimilated, intertwined and dependent on each

other. Even some villages were / are Santhal – Boro mixed village. There was very close social and economic interaction. They had close friends from each other's community. Even many inter marriage between two communities were taking place despite both the communities having plenty of choice in the marriage market. They depended on each other in various matters. Many people from both the communities could speak each other's language very well. There were no instance of hostilities and no instance of communal violence between the two communities prior to 1996 ethnic clash. Under such coherent existence for about a century, how did the ethnic clash between two communities erupted is a serious matter and needs to be investigated deeply and should not simply say that one group went for ethnic cleansing.

Boros are peace loving tribe. However, they do not want to be ruled by others, on the other hand they do not want to rule others. It is also evident from the slogans of ABSU (All Bodo Students' Union) like 'Live and let live'. Indeed in the recent decades, Assamese community had ethnic clash with Muslim, recently with Hindi speaking people and also they tried to clean Boros from various parts of the state like Gohpur, Silafwthar, Nalbari etc during the Bodoland movement. During the wake of Bodoland Movement some of the Assamese youths used to accompany Assam Police Force to raid Boro village and loot rich Boro households. Beyond that they also used to kill innocent Boro people in various parts of the state. Not satisfied with such activities, in 1989 the Chauvinist Assamese and Assam Police Force massacred more than 500 Boro people and rendered about 60,000 Boro people homeless in Gohpur itself (The North East Sun, News Clippings in "Bodoland Movement 1986-2001, A Dream and Reality"). Although, plenty of Boro people were also killed and many villages burnt down here and there, during those days, no body said that Assamese community is going for ethnic cleansing; and though it was the clear sign of ethnic cleansing. Another testimony about Boro people's peace loving attitude is clearly apparent from the recent (2003) Assamese and Hindi Speaking clash in the state. During those days, except few minor incidences carried out by Assamese Chauvinist or miscreant, the Bodoland area was peaceful. In this clash Boro people killed no Hindi Speaking person, rather various Bodo organizations distributed leaflets

to keep the area peaceful and even warned against any unlawful activities; asking any Hindi Speaking people who are residing in Boro dominated areas can prove this fact.

Hidden Truth

Many eminent Boro people from Gossaigaon informed that, Santhals in lower Assam were silently preparing for chasing the Boros from Santhal localities since early 1980s, indeed Boro people from many localities and police officials also supported this fact. It is also informed that Santhals got inspiration for such plans from their brother Santhals from Jharkhand. One of the Member of Parliaments said that during 1980s, even some Santhals started taking back their land without paying back money, which were in mortgage with Boro people. But Boro people did not resist, thinking that it may effect or divert Bodoland movement to other destiny.

Boro mass movement - democratic movement under the provision of VI Schedule of the Indian Constitution, for the creation of separate Bodoland state led by ABSU, came to suspension in early 1990s for tri-party talks with Central govt., State govt. and ABSU. It came to complete halt with the Bodoland Autonomous Council Accord in 1993. Since then Boros paved the way for peace and harmony and stopped preparing hand made bombs, guns, bows-arrows etc, which ones were prepared for self defense and to fight against Assam government. Taking this opportunity, it was informed by many people that gradually Santhals started speaking openly that, that Mr. X Basumatary's land, that Mr. X Khakhleri's building, that Mr. X Hajwary's garden would be mine etc. They also started having frequent meetings in the night. The Santhal maid servants who were staying in Boro family would often go to their village for meetings. It was also heard that every body was instructed to prepare as many bows-arrows as they can. In the evening Santhals were seen collecting lots of small bamboo branches which is used for preparing arrows. In the night some sound of hitting iron were also heard, which might have been of preparing arrows or guns.

But Boros took it lightly; as Santhal population is small in the area and they were closely assimilated with Boros. But it came to limelight in 1996 March, when Santhals organized Birbantha Opera (live play under the closed curtains in the night). This Theatre party came

from Jharkhand (original homeland of Santhals where movement for creation of Jharkhand State was in its zenith). It was heard that they were discussing and carrying out plan for chasing Boros in the same Theatre. That was full prove that Santhals were preparing for chasing Boros, and it became an open secret. That was also a signal that Santhals were preparing for chasing Boros from their localities with full spirit. Hence Boros could evidently smell fishy and became aware of the latest development. In this context, one of the Boro eminent persons and ABSU worker told that, I had a close Santhal friend. I asked him to take me to the Theatre, but he plainly refused. If it were only a simple theatre, he would have definitely taken me there.

In 1996 April, three Boro ladies were killed and left in Satyapur under Gouma Forest, one of the Santhal locality of Gossaigaon sub-division. However, who killed those Boro ladies, why, how and where was (is) not known. Due to this incident, self conscious Boros got furious. Thousands of Boros, especially youths gathered to see the death bodies of those ladies. In the gathering some of the Boro youth got furious and started beating few Santhals in Gossaigaon town itself. Then in later few days, some villages from both communities were converted into ashes. So the Boro insurgent groups took this opportunity to show their patriotism towards Boros and started burning down Santhal villages with more ease, power and killed many Santhals. In retaliation half prepared Santhals fought back with bows and arrows, and burnt some of the Boro villages and killed few Boros. Today, as of 21.10.2003 (District relief camp Report), these ethnic clash affected people numbered about 1.23 lakhs (20% from Boro community and 80% from Santhal community), are still in 38 relief camps in hand to mouth condition, and whenever somebody talks of Santhal Boro ethnic clash effected IDPs, they mean mainly the Santhal IDPs. As per the information from the Gossaigaon people, even one of the International Organization - MSF is working only in Santhal relief camps. They simply ignore such a huge percentage of Boro IDPs who are also suffering the same agony of social pathology. Indeed, as many Boro people said, economically and socially Boros are the more sufferers, because Boros were richer and had better social set up. They also said that one rich Boro family's property would have been equivalent to property of one entire Santhal

village, though it may be little exaggeration.

Another empirical prove of the Santhals were preparing for chasing Boros was given by one of the police officials who have been working since its start says that Santhals fought against Boros with plenty of bows and arrows. He argues, if Santhals were not prepared, from where did these thousands and thousand of bows and arrows suddenly came! Similar views were given by many Boro people of the Gossaigaon locality. Yes, it is customary for Santhals to keep bows and arrows, but is it customary to keep thousands of bows and arrows normally! Certainly not. They never keep even tens in a family, they just keep few of them for hunting birds or small animals.

Information gathered from the various Boro people further says that, the possible hidden reason may be banning entry into the forests in the lower Assam by NDFB-one of the extremist groups of Boros. Santhals who are closely associated with the forest for their survival got frustrated at such activities of NDFB, which they could not show indeed directly to NDFB. On the other hand they started suspecting that NDFB allows Boros to enter the forests, but actually they were also banned. This led to internal hatred towards NDFB and Boros in general and started preparing for fighting against Boros and it was well harnessed by other anti social elements.

In one of the group discussions it also came out that government in some respect is also patron of this Ethnic clash, mainly to weaken the Boro Santhal unity, to divide and rule and also to defame the Boro community. From the group discussants, it also came out that to hide the real culprit of socio economic backwardness of Santhals -- obviously culprit is not Boros, because Boros never ruled Assam in post colonial era, Assam government played tricks. The government stroked the iron when it was hot, it took the advantage of Santhal's aspiration to chase Boro and it worked out well.

Another important issue is, it is not known who killed those three Boro ladies, which was the cause of sparking this Ethnic Clash. But as the dead bodies were found in the Santhal localities, it was taken into granted that Santhals have killed them and there was no second thought in that moment. This killing however, could be due to personnel motives, or conspiracy of some third party who knew about the germinating hatred of Santhals towards Boros. Proper investigation of that killing could really throw some light on the

actual start of the ethnic clash between Boros and Santhals.

CONCLUSION

Critical analysis of the various literature pertaining to Boro-Santhal ethnic clash shows that the forwarded views 'Boros are going for ethnic cleansing process to solve the demographic equation in the Boro dominated areas' is wrong and only superficial view. Main hidden reason for this ethnic clash may be the banning of entry into forest, which generated misunderstanding in the mindset of Santhals for which Santhals were already preparing for chasing Boros. As internally displaced persons are more prone to various social and economic problems than refugees due to the lack of access of international agencies, proper understanding of causes of internal displacement to stop further displacement is very essential. Plans and policy makers should deeply investigate the actual cause of such a bloody communal clash and bring out to light.

The forwarded view, Boros are going for 'Ethnic Cleansing Process' is creating misunderstanding even in the mindset of other community members and sending wrong signals. This again may form the germinating ground for another ethnic conflict and a small incidence may inflict and spark other ethnic clash. Thus, proper investigation of ethnic clash in the state and region is urgently felt. Also before discussing about any ethnic clash, it should be deeply analyzed and instead of ready-made notion and perception the actual fact should be highlighted.

This paper has no intention to target any paper published earlier nor has any intention to blame any community on any ground, rather it has just been tried to bring out the hidden truth, which has so far remained hidden for whatsoever reason. Further, researcher could not collect information from Santhal community, which might have thrown some more or and better light on the Ethnic Clash between these communities.

REFERENCES

Baruah, Sanjib. 2003. "Protective Discrimination and Crisis of Citizenship in North East India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 April 2003, pp 1624-1626.

- Bhaumik, Subir 2004. "Little Wars and Internal Displacement in North East India", (pp.405 - 417), in Omprakash Mishra (ed.) *Forced Migration in the South Asian Region, Displacement, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution*. Centre for Refugee Studies, Jadvpur University, Kolkata in Collaboration with Brookings Institution-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, Washington DC and Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Borgohai, Homen. 1970. "Editorial." *Saptahik Nilachal*, August 26, 1970.
- Brahma, Yamao Zwhwlae; Reo Reoa Narzihari, Urkhao Gwra Brahma, Uthrisar Khunggur Basumatary and Damasu Brahma (Compiled). 2001. *Bodoland Movement 1986-2001, A Dream and Reality*. Kokrajhar: All Bodo Students' Union.
- Cahudhuri, Kalyan. 2002. "Warning Signal." *Frontline*, Vol. 19, Issue 10, May 11-24, 2002.
- Cahudhuri, Kalyan. 2003. "Turning to Peace." *Frontline*, Vol. 20, Issue 5, March 14, 2003.
- Gopal, D 2004. "Role of Bangladesh in Insurgency in the North East (Excerpts from the keynote address delivered at the seminar)" (p. 20) in Dipankar Sengupta and Sudhir Kumar Singh (eds.) *Insurgency in North East India, The Role of Bangladesh*. Authors press in Association with SPANDAN.
- Govt. of Assam. 1998. "Action Plan for Rehabilitation of the Refugees, 1993, 1996 and 1998 Ethnic Violence". Kokrajhar.
- Harlalka, S.S. 1975. *Tea Garden Labor of Assam*. Dhubri, Assam: People's Publishing House.
- Husain, Monirul. 2004. "Postcolonial State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in Northeast India", (pp 392-404) in Omprakash Mishra (ed.) *Forced Migration in the South Asian Region, Displacement, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution*. Centre for Refugee Studies, Jadvpur University, Kolkata in Collaboration with Brookings Institution-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, Washington DC and Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Husain, Monirul. 2000. "State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in North-East." *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 16, 2000, pp 4519-4523.
- Husain, Monirul. "Displaced Identities and Displacing Identities in the North-East". http://www.safhr.org/contents3313_4.html
- Phukan, Umanand. 1984. *The Ex Tea Garden Population in Assam*. Delhi: BR Publishing Co-orporation.
- Pullopillil, Thomas .1999. "Identity of Adivasis in Assam", in Pullopillil, Thomas (ed.) *The Adivasis in Assam their Past, Present and Future*. Delhi: Indian Publishers Distributors.
- South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre. 2001. "No Refuge, the Plight of Conflict Induced Internally Displaced Persons in India." Human Rights Features, SAHRDC.
- United State Committee for Refugees (USCR). 2000. "North East India's Hidden Displacement." Washington DC.