

Impact of Ethnic Violence on Youth

A Study of
Tribal-Nontribal
Violence In Kokrajhar,
Assam



54162
Susheela Bhan

Institute of Peace Research and Action

The predicament of ethnic violence stands out as a daunting problem today, not only in the midst of collapsing states and empires but also in the most tolerant societies where the forces of integration are stronger. Consequently, specialists in search of theories, values and policies have come to realize that they need to find more creative and powerful ways to address the issues of justice among ethnic groups.

The Indian society is gripped in an ethnic crisis that threatens its very integrity. The overarching humanism, within which this pluralist society had flowered, appears to be giving way to the obscurantist trends marked by violent explosions of ethnic conflict. These trends need to be reversed before the country lapses into an anarchy.

The present volume makes a modest attempt to bring into focus the coercive, separatist values and policies that have displaced communities from the humanist consciousness underlying the diverse cultural forms and in effect exacerbated organized ethnic violence. Since, it is the educated youth that are leading the violent movements in the country today, the focus on the student community becomes a matter of priority. This assumption informed the indepth investigation reported here, on the perceptions, attitudes, aspirations, motivations and views of the student community of the Kokrajhar district of Assam where the Bodo agitation has led to endemic tribal - nontribal violence.

The book underlines the urgency of developing a Peace Education Movement in the country to mobilize and equip its youth towards an effective participation in the prevention, management and resolution of ethnic conflict and promotion of peace in general.

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Prof. Susheela Bhan, the former Executive Director, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, is the founder-Director of the Institute of Peace Research and Action (IPRA) at Delhi. A specialist in Education, she has written extensively in the area of Education and Development. Presently, Prof. Bhan is involved in developing a major research programme in the area of Peace Studies. The project on Ethnic Violence is an important input into this programme.

Among other research programmes, four projects completed by her merit a special mention. These are : (1) Peace Awareness Among Student Youth in India : A Status Study, (2) Impact of Ethnic Violence on Youth : A study of Hindu-Muslim Violence in the old city of Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh), (3) Family Violence Against Women, and (4) Evaluation of Curricula and Textbooks being used at the Higher Secondary Stage from the standpoint of Peace Promotion.

Prof. Bhan has many books to her credit, including 'Criminalization of Politics' (*Shipra*).

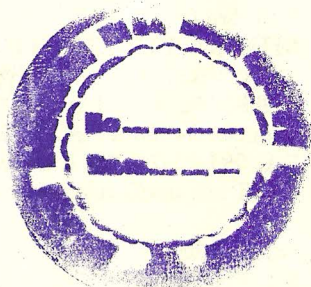
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in Kokrajhar, Assam)

Susheela Bhan



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Foreword

As I was intellectually gliding along the lucid write-up of Prof. Susheela Bhan, suddenly I discovered that emotionally my mind was playing truant to itself. My mind went back in time to an experience stamped on it more than half a century ago. But there are some experiences in life whose occurrence cannot be apprehended in quantitatively measured time; they are imbued with living eternalities.

Let me first present the occurrence. On 19 August 1947, a communal riot between the Hindus and the Muslims broke out in a village in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). In great frenzy the Muslim mobs, mainly consisting of the youth, attacked the Hindus they came across, severely injuring some and carrying on looting spree of the movable property of the Hindus. Whether there was an immediate provocation or not is not the issue. It was an act of release of pent up anger and bitterness against the Hindu landowners who had inflicted humiliation and extortion on them decade after decade.

A Hindu youth, who had been protesting for several years against the wrongs done to the Muslims even by his own family, enjoyed the affection and confidence of the Muslims. There were a few land-owners among the Muslims also. But they shared with their co-religionists social humiliation in various forms. Besides, the sprinkling of Muslim land-owners had kinship ties with Muslim landless labourers and sharecroppers. While the Muslims of the area constituted a ranked society, it is difficult to say that they constituted a stratified society. The Muslims as a whole were perceived as a status-class; their self-perception also was the same.

When the riot broke out the Hindu youth was staying in a nearby town. On hearing about the riot he rushed to the village and after meeting one or two Muslim friends straight went to the village mosque. He told the Muslims who had gathered there, that if their religion mandated the killing of persons not professing the same faith, they should kill him in the mosque itself. The Muslims were aghast when challenged thus. There was swell back of human

sanity. Some started weeping at what had happened. And then there was a tumultuous silence. Time became timeless.

Slowly a Muslim boy got up and accused his own father of a misdeed he had perpetrated. He had not only looted the property of a Hindu, but was going to kill him. This Hindu did not belong to the same village; he had married a girl of the village; he was a son-in-law of the village. The father desisted from killing the man when the man's wife pleaded that if he killed her husband, she will become a widow. The young boy narrated the incident, and said that as the would have been victim was a guest of the village, being a son-in-law, his father had violated the moral rule of the village community of being solacious to a guest, particularly to a son-in-law irrespective of religion or caste or any other ascribed status. The young mind was upset, at that moment of humanist resurrection, at the transgression of the ancient wisdom—the civilizational value of the land. The father meekly apologised to the village elders, who said in one voice "We must learn from our children". All looted properties were recovered; those who assailed a Hindu grievously took him to the hospital in the town, where he had to undergo treatment for more than six months, before recovery. The news spread like wild fire. Gory incidents which were taking place in the surrounding villages immediately came to a stop. There was a competition for the reinstallation of the civilizational values embedded in the land, like hidden hues of life.

It still rings in my ear "we must learn from our children". Prof. Bhan has presented on sound theoretical rationale, why in her study of the violent confrontation of the tribals and non-tribals, she has concentrated on the attitude-orientation, perception and prescription of the student youth to find a way out of the quandary. She has categorised her source for comprehending the meaning of the life situation at Kokrajhar—the place where the horrendous events had taken place, as tribal and non-tribal youth; as boys and girls. Tenets of sociology require it. But as her study shows, beyond a certain limit, youth is unbounded by such sociological categories. There is transcendence—not in any metaphysical sense, but in warm, luminous humanist sense. This transcendence—the normative surplus over the ordinary requirement of the society, is the hidden treasure in the day to day life of every collectivity (at otherwise no collectivity is sustainable) and through collectivity, of every individual. Prof. Bhan recognises the presence of this hidden treasure and intends to tap the same through educational intervention for ushering in the dawn of peace.

What Prof. Bhan has presented is not only the model of an action research for peace but also a formulation of action in substantive detail identified through discourse with a fairly representative sample of student youth of Kokrajhar.

It is not an easy task to carry out any meaningful discourse relating to any aspect of life. It is particularly difficult when the object of the discourse is quest for peace.

Peace is not a fixed flagstaff of life. It is a perpetual journey, through a fragile, dangerous terrain. It requires intensive preparation by drawing upon the insights and understanding available in various sources. In the first part of the book Prof. Bhan has chalked out a comprehensive overview of theoretical perspectives about the phenomenology of ethnic groups (as shifting constructs and very often as parallel constructs with reference to diverse parameters) and about the dynamics of interface, ethnic group as a social category and other institutions, particularly state, in congruent or in dialectical relationship, in the context of the character and historical ecological locus of the particular institution.

The theoretical overview is of immense value by itself. But it is functional otherwise also. As one goes through the elaborate questionnaire canvassed among the youth, one recognises that the same has been informed, in an eclectic manner, by the diverse perspectives Prof. Bhan has predicated in her overview. She has of course provided the rationale for an eclectic approach.

I have enjoyed the lucid presentation in the write-up and also I have felt deeply disturbed about the substantive information presented in it. I am sure that the interested readers will have the same feeling as I am having.

B.K. Roy Burman

Preface

One of the priority areas of research at the Institute of Peace Research & Action is Peace Education. An important objective of the research programme in this area is to develop innovative intervention strategies including models of Peace Education Curricula for the Indian student youth. Under the programme three major projects were taken up to generate data to provide the necessary inputs into the development of these strategies and models for a multi-cultural situation.

The first project completed since, was a status study on Peace Awareness among the student youth in India. The second project on the Impact of Ethnic Violence on Youth was undertaken in three phases dealing respectively with three dimensions of ethnic violence namely, tribal-nontribal violence, communal (Hindu-Muslim) violence and caste violence. While the studies on the first two have been completed, the third one on caste violence is in progress. The third project, which has also been completed, evaluated the Curricula and the Text-books in Languages and Social Sciences being used at the higher secondary stage (in eight violence prone States) from the point of view of peace promotion.

The present volume is the outcome of the study carried out during the first phase of the second project on tribal non-tribal violence in Kokrajhar town located in the Kokrajhar district of the State of Assam. Presented in two parts, the Volume carries a theoretical overview in the first Part and analyses the data generated through the empirical investigation conducted in the Higher Secondary Schools of the Kokrajhar town, in the second part.

We hope the data generated will provide substantial guidance to all concerned, in developing educational intervention models with reference to the prevailing ethnic conflict in the North-Eastern region in particular and the grim conflictual situation in other parts of the country, in general. Although the situation in the North-East has undergone a significant change in as much as the focus has shifted now to ethnic cleansing, the tacit premises that have informed this study remain valid as also the insights it has generated.

Since the study is the first of its kind in the country, it must, obviously, suffer both from theoretical and methodological limitations. The Institute would therefore, welcome critical comments and suggestions so that it can pursue the research explorations it is engaged in currently with greater clarity and rigour.

Susheela Bhan

Acknowledgements

In executing the present study, we have received help from numerous scholars and agencies. First and foremost is the debt we own to Dr. Tom Kissinger, the former Representative of the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, who gave us unfailing support and encouragement in developing the Peace Education research programme of this Institute. Fortunately for us, Dr. David Arnold, who succeeded him, continued to support this research programme in an equal measure. We are deeply grateful to both and to the Ford Foundation for providing us financial assistance for this Project.

Among others, we would specially like to mention Prof. J.B.P. Sinha of A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Sciences, Patna and Prof. Amar Kumar Singh, the then, Vice-Chancellor, Ranchi University. We are grateful to Prof. Sinha for valuable guidance in the preparation and finalisation of the tool for the study. Prof. Singh was equally generous in offering comments on the design of the study.

The research team would also like to express its gratitude to the educational and school authorities as well as the respondent students at the Centre of investigation. Without their cooperation it would have been impossible to conduct the field work.

Our thanks are due to Ms. Sheeja Jose and Ms. Girja Jailkhani who between them shared the entire burden of typing out the manuscript.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my debt to my colleagues Suresh Kulkarni, C. Rajyalakshmi, Bansi Lal Bindra, Jahangir Khan, Chand Mohan, Rajeshwar Tyagi and Ram Nath Tiku at the Institute who teamed up and brought the study to its completion.

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