

# **Collective Memory of Violence : Ethnicity and Opinion Formation in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley, 1979-1985**

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## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to focus on the process of boundary making among ethnic communities by analyzing characters of the memory on violent incidents in Assam from 1979 to 1985. During this period, there was a large-scale movement lead by the All Assam Students' Union (hereafter referred to as AASU) against a foreigners' illegal influx (mostly from East Pakistan and Bangladesh), and there were numerous violent incidents during the time. Some groups remember particular incidents well, while others forget, and instead remember some other incident. The difference is clearly connected to their ethnic identity, for example linguistic and religious identities. When violence occurred among ethnic communities, people redefined the boundaries through the interpretation of the incident. By stressing the incidents in which their community members became the victims, they define the offenders as an 'enemy,' and construct the boundary between the 'enemy' and their own ethnic group. It can be said that ethnic identities are represented in their memories on violence.

In the research conducted in Guwahati and Silchar in April and May 2002, I focused on the formation of collective memory in urban areas. It is a product of interaction between the impact of newspaper reporting and the network of intellectuals. In this paper, I am going to focus on the intellectuals' memories of the violent incidents at the time of the movement, which throws light on the complex process of the formation of collective memories and its impact on ethnic identities.

## **2. Research Method**

The subjects of my research were intellectuals in urban areas, the so-called urban middle class. I classified these intellectuals into two categories. The first are productive intellectuals, who produce the background theory and claims of the movement. In case of the anti-foreigners movement in Assam, they are the top student leaders and the leaders of the other organizations which led the movement (e.g., the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad). Moreover, the people who did not only encourage students leaders but also involved in the movement are included in this

category. They are the editors of newspaper which actively supported the movement, for example *Dainik Asom* and *The Assam Tribune*, or other individuals who wrote articles to support the movement and effect movement leaders. The second category is reproduction intellectuals, who interpret and intermediate the ideas and claims of the movement. They are the various supporters of the movement who engage in intellectual activities, for example, professors, college lecturers, school teachers. However, as I will explain later, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the two because the category changes according to the topic and places.

Because I wanted to focus on the differences among ethnic groups, I chose Guwahati and Silchar for my fieldwork, as well as some other towns in both the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys. It was conducted from 21<sup>st</sup> of April to 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2002. I picked up 10 interviewees in Guwahati and other towns in the Brahmaputra Valley, and another 10 interviewees from Silchar and other towns in the Barak Valley. I tried to include both productive and reproductive intellectuals. The interview was semi-structured and consisted of about 20 questions. No sampling was taken in this research, since it is considerably difficult to include productive intellectuals and reproductive intellectuals. Therefore I chose the interviewees by collecting information from those who knew well about the people in the locality. In each town, I tried to include both linguistic and religious minorities as well as supporters and opponents of the movement.

It has been pointed out that newspapers in Assam and West Bengal played an important role in the movement. The descriptions in articles on this issue were totally different between newspapers issued in Guwahati and Calcutta, and it has been believed that these biased reports evoked the emotional feelings of the Assamese and the Bengalis. I have already analyzed the reporting of the newspapers in Assam and in West Bengal, and found that the way they describe the violent incidents are totally different.<sup>1</sup> I tried to analyze the impact of newspaper reporting by asking interviewees how they came to know about the incident. These will be analyzed in the fourth section and in the Conclusion.

### **3. Definition of Foreigners: Difference between the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys**

Before I discuss the collective memory of different linguistic and religious groups, I would like to briefly explain the difference between the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys. The Brahmaputra Valley consists of seven

districts of Goalpara, Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, and in the Barak Valley there was only one district, Cachar at the time of 1981.<sup>2</sup> Though these are in the state of Assam, the character of the inhabitants differed considerably.

In the Brahmaputra Valley, the majority of the people are the Assamese speaking (71% in 1971 census) and the movement was very active throughout the area. In the Barak Valley, the majority are Bengali-speaking (77.76% in 1971 census) and people are indifferent or hostile to the movement. Thus, these two linguistic groups relatively the religious groups, the difference is not so apparent. The Muslims in Assam are scattered throughout the state, and the indigenous Assamese Muslims supported the movement enthusiastically in the first phase of the movement.

As languages spoken in the two valleys are different, the newspapers read in these areas are not same. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the Assamese papers such as *Dainik Asom* and *Janambhumi*, and the English paper published from Guwahati, *The Assam Tribune* are widely read. In case of the Barak Valley, people generally read papers from Calcutta, for example *Stateman*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Anand Bazar Patrika*, as well as some of the regional papers published from Silchar and Karimganj.

The most prominent difference between the valleys was the definition of "foreigners". In the Brahmaputra Valley, when asked who are the "foreigners," most people answered that people who came East Pakistan or Bangladesh after 1951/1971 were foreigners regardless of their religion. However, in the Barak Valley, people tended to define the Hindus as refugees, and the Muslims as foreigners.

#### 4. Collective Memory of Violence

As noted earlier, there were numerous violent incidents during the anti-foreigners movement, and people came to know about the incidents through newspaper reporting. Overall, newspapers classified violent incidents into three types: (1) harassments and attacks to peaceful picketers and movement leaders by army and police, (2) attacks on local people by the "foreigners" and (3) attacks on linguistic or religious "minorities" by regional "fanatics." Usually, (1) and (2) were often reported and referred to by the movement leaders and newspaper in Assam, while (3) was reported by newspapers published from West Bengal and opponents of the movement.<sup>3</sup>

Below, I will analyze characteristics of the collective memory of violent incidents of three ethnic groups – Bengalis in the Barak Valley, Assamese Muslims, and Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley.

#### **4-1. Bengalis in the Barak Valley: Murders of Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra**

Bengalis in the Barak Valley showed the most distinct character in their memory on violent incidents. Five out of eleven interviewees answered that they remember the deaths of Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra during the movement. Considering that there were numerous violent incidents, and more than 10,000 people died during the movement, it is remarkable that nearly half of the interviewees state they remember those two incidents apart from others.

Both of them, Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra, were Bengalis, and residing in the Brahmaputra Valley at the time of the incident, and died during the disturbance caused by the movement. Anjan Chakraborty was a student of Gauhati Medical College, and was originally from the Barak Valley. In the early period of the movement, there was a fight amongst students of a hostel of Gauhati Medical College in which he was killed.

As for Robi Mitra, he was a Bengalis engineer who was working at the Oil India Limited Company in Duliajan in Upper Assam. During the oil blockade by students and picketers, there was a police firing on the protesters. In the mob violence following the firing, Robi Mitra died. The incident was widely reported by newspapers, and especially emphasized by those from Calcutta.<sup>5</sup>

These two students are remembered as symbolic incidents in which innocent Bengalis were brutally murdered by the 'chauvinistic' and 'fanatic' movement leaders and supporters in the Brahmaputra Valley.

#### **4-2. Assamese Muslims: The Nellie Incident**

As for the Assamese Muslims, I could interview only one. The Assamese Muslims are not large in number and scattered throughout Assam, therefore it is difficult to assess their collective memory. However, the interviewee's narrative could be connected to the political move of the Assamese Muslim student leaders at the time, and is deeply related to his memory of violence.

In the interview, Mr. X, the Assamese Muslim interviewee, told me that he remembers the Nellie incident well among the violent incidents

which occurred during the movement. The Nellie incident is said to be one of the biggest violence in which 1600 people are said to have died. It occurred right after the election to the state legislative assembly in 1983, which was boycotted by the AASU. In this incident, local people, majority of them were the Tiwas, had attacked the Bengali Muslim immigrants in Nowgong district.

It should be noted here, Mr. X said that after the incident, he withdrew his support to the movement because of the anti-Muslim tone of the movement. Generally speaking, the Assamese Muslims, who are the descendents of earlier inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley, are distinguished from the immigrant Bengali Muslims or, so-called neo-Assamese Muslims, and in the beginning many of them participated in the movement.<sup>6</sup>

However, in the beginning of 1983, especially during election time numerous violent incidents towards Muslims occurred, and they became suspicious toward the movement. Actually, after the incident and the election, some prominent Assamese Muslim student leaders left the AASU. Therefore, the election was the turning point for the Assamese Muslims in terms of their attitude to the movement, and the Nellie massacre is remembered as a symbolic incident that proves the anti-Muslim tone of the movement.

It is also worth mentioning the Mr. X said the graveness of the incident was brought to his notice through the reports of *The Telegraph*, an English newspaper published from Calcutta. According to him, no regional newspaper in Assam reported about the incident, which triggered his distrust towards the movement leaders.

#### **4-3. Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley**

Among the Assamese people in the Brahmaputra Valley, the largest group in Assam and the main supporters of the movement, there is no prominent incident that they commonly remember. When they are asked which violent incident they remember well, many people said, "there were so many incidents, so I do not recollect the details of each incident". And when I referred to the Nellie incident, they said they remember it and such incidents should not take place again, but other than that they do not say much. It seemed that they wanted to forget the violence.

It was not the common memory on particular violence, but was the re-interpretation of the Nellie incident among certain people that attracted

my attention. Two out of ten interviewees told me that men from Muslim immigrant villages where the massacre occurred went out to attack local villages. Mr. Y told as follows. "From these villages, men went out to attack local villages across the Brahmaputra River. That is why most victims were women, children and seniors."<sup>7</sup> In their mind, the Nellie massacre is remembered as a different type of violence, the second type of the violence which I classified in the beginning of this section, while mostly people believe it to be third type of incident.

Moreover, it should also be noted that regarding the Nellie incident, some people are very critical towards pan-Indian media and Calcutta papers. Two interviewees told me that there were many violent incidents, but only those incidents in which migrants became victims were reported. These re-interpretations and criticism of the pan-Indian media are particularly evident in the statements of opinion leaders of the movement.

## 5. Conclusion

In the last section, I analyzed the difference in the collective memories of the three groups and its relation with the newspaper reporting. It is important to note here that the impact of the newspaper is significant, since most people came to know about the incidents through newspapers. And especially, in case of the Bengalis in Silchar and Assamese Muslims, their collective memories seem to have strong relation with the newspaper reporting. However, it does not mean that the newspapers have the power to be influenced by reporting, and it is very difficult to find a unified rule how newspapers affect people's perceptions and opinions. People do not merely accept the reporting, but sometimes they criticize or re-interpret the article according to their own view. It was especially clear in case of the productive intellectuals' reinterpretation of the Nellie incident and their critics to pan-Indian media.

From the reinterpretation of the Nellie incident by the Assamese intellectuals, we can find one more interesting thing. Whether the person is a productive intellectual or a reproductive intellectual is not fixed, and it could change according to the topic and the place. In case of the Assamese intellectuals they are reproductive in terms of the reporting of the Nellie incident in pan-Indian media. They do not have the power to influence the papers' reporting, through they have different views on the incident. However, they are productive intellectuals inside Assam, in the

way that they have the power to create their version of story on the Nellie incident and spread the idea to the people.

From the analysis of the collective memory of violence of intellectuals and to relation with newspaper reporting, it can be said that sometimes a violent incident strengthens the ethnic identity (ex. Bengalis in Silchar), while other times people start to feel that they are somewhat mistreated in the community and start to feel isolated in the society. In Assamese Muslims; case, first they identified themselves as 'Assamese' and supported the movement, but after the Nellie incident they started feeling that 'Muslims' are not treated properly in the movement. This change of emphasis is remarkable. Thus, by the violent incident and its interpretation, the power relations among ethnic communities became apparent at once, and then the boundaries among them reconstructed. Ethnicity is thus reinterpreted and reconstructed through the complex process of opinion formation and memory building among ethnic communities.

#### *Notes and References*

1. Makiko Kimura, 'Mass Media and Ethnic Group Formation: Comparative Analysis of Newspaper Reports on the Foreign Nationals Issued in Assam and West Bengal, 1979-1985', *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, No.13, (Tokyo, 2001), pp. 142-160. 'Role of the Media in Settling the Immigration Problem', in C. Joshua Thomas ed., *Dimensions of Displaced People in North-East India*, (New Delhi, 2002), pp. 364-382.
2. *Census of India*, 1981.
3. Makiko Kimura, *op. cit.*, 2001.
4. Interview with ex-student leader of Gauhati Medical College in Guwahati (43 years old, male ), 6<sup>th</sup> May 20002.
5. The difference of the reports in *The Assam Tribune* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* is analyzed in Makiko Kimura, *op. cit.*
6. Interview with Mr.X (78 years old, a retired professor) in Guwahati, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2002.
7. Interview with Mr. Y(55 years old, ex-lecturer in Jorhat) in Guwahati, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2002.