

Violence and Search for Peace in Karbi Anglong, Assam

Tom Mangattuthazhe



North Eastern Social Research Centre

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	
1. The Background of Karbi Anglong	1
2. The Background of the Conflicts	9
3. A Way out of the Conflicts	21
4. Participatory Rural Appraisal of Manja	31
5. Search for Peace with Justice	44
Appendix 1 : Chronology of Events after the Karbi-Dimasa Conflict Began	57
Appendix 2 : Statistics on Deaths and Relief Camps, October 9-November 8, 2005	62
Appendix 3 : Some Leading Questions Used for PRA	63
Appendix 4 : Data of Manja Area, Lumbajong Block	64
Appendix 5 : Rural Development through Reconciliation: Two Case Studies	65

Chapter 1: The Background of Karbi Anglong

The Northeast of India is known as a region of conflicts. Also the Karbi Anglong district of Assam has been experiencing a large number of conflicts. This booklet is an effort to understand the reasons of this violence, ethnic conflicts in particular, and their impact on the life of the people. Some suggestions are made in the booklet for precautionary measures to be taken to prevent conflicts. It also presents a plan of action for bringing peace if conflicts occur. In particular it points out the adverse impacts of the 2005 Dimasak-Karbi conflict with special reference to its social, political, cultural and economic effects.

Conflict is defined as a situation of two or more persons, groups or countries reacting to serious disagreements. Violence that results from it is a global phenomenon. In some western countries children may manifest an attitude of violence in ways such as bullying and through physical assaults. Of late this pattern of violent behaviour is spreading in the Indian society too. A more serious form it takes in India is communal violence obviously because religion forms part and parcel of the Indian psyche. Fundamentalist elements can easily exploit this multi-religious context to incite the masses of one religion against the members of other religions and whip up their emotions for their political and economic goals. The persons inciting others to communal violence may themselves be non-practising members but they use or abuse the religious emotions of the masses in a calculated and rational manner for their own vested interests.

Communal Violence

In the past communal violence was mostly between Hindus and Muslims. Today Christians are increasingly coming under attack from the Hindu fundamentalist forces who treat the minority religions as alien to India. So they systematically malign the cultures

of the minority communities and make false propaganda that they are de-nationalised, de-culturalised and even anti-national. Among others, incidents of anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002 and against Christians in Orissa in 2008 have shocked the conscience of peace loving people of all persuasions. These incidents show how people can be motivated to commit acts of violence in the name of religion by events such as the burning of the train at Godhra and killing of a Swami in Orissa. These incidents are condemnable but the violence that followed shows how cruelty and violence can be perpetrated in the name of religion. The facts and figures collected by the Citizens' Tribunal headed by Justice Shri V.R. Krishna Iyer are shocking. Justice Shri P. B. Savant, a former Judge of the Supreme Court who was a member of the team states that preparation for the Gujarat communal violence such as recruiting volunteers, training them in the use of arms, collection of information on the houses, shops and other establishments owned by Muslims, began at least six months before the Godhra train incident of February 27, 2002. The tribunal believed that at least 2,000 people were killed and 250 women were raped in the riots. The most disturbing aspect is that the police who were duty bound to maintain law and order and act as protectors of the victims either remained mute witnesses or participated in the crime. That can be called a sabotage of the due process of law.

The most fascinating feature of India's cultural heritage is unity in diversity. Through the ages intrinsic to the Indian cultural ethos has been utmost respect for and tolerance of all religions. That unity was the strength of India. The composite and synthetic culture emerged, developed and flourished out of this unity in diversity manifested itself in the art, architecture, paintings, music, languages and other forms. The Constitution mandated respect for this composite culture but the communal clashes are a big blow to this tradition. The greatest tragedy of institutionalised religion today is that some leaders hijack religion for their personal political and economic objectives by misguiding their adherents.

Religion advocates love and compassion, but in the hands of politicians, it has become a tool of hatred and division. In this context, it is imperative on the part of all the true religious people and pilgrims of dialogue to reach out to their own and other communities not only to give the message of love, tolerance and peace, but also to create in them an awareness of the dangers of these games.

The North East

North Eastern India, located at the junction of the vast trans-Asian landmass, is the natural gateway to Southeast Asia which was, in the British age connected by road to Assam and Bengal through Myanmar. Ancient Assam and other parts of the region had a long association with the South East Asian countries, especially South China and Myanmar. Therefore the Northeast shares many ethnic and cultural traditions with its eastern neighbours. The historic silk route from China to Central Asia that passes through Assam is a sign of this historical link.

Unfortunately, this ancient route and other trading corridors have fallen into disuse due to historical and political reasons but these links as well as cultural and trade relations are being revived. In November 2005 Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh brought the Northeast to the centrestage by flagging off at Guwahati the Indo-Asian car rally that ended at Batam in Indonesia. This link of the Northeast also brought to the fore the diversity of India which is a challenge that the region has to grapple with while trying to solve the problems of its economic backwardness, growing unemployment, militancy, recurring floods and immigration.

Assam, the biggest State in the Northeast is an ancient land of a rich cultural heritage, rituals, traditions, customs, beliefs, languages and legends. The state has been a meeting ground for people of diverse races, different cultures and civilisations. The fertile land, rich natural and forest resources, flora and fauna of Assam encouraged the wandering tribes and communities of people to settle down here. These communities with their diverse cultural

and racial backgrounds have contributed to the fusion of a new community. This history also makes most tribals of Assam different from those of mainland India. They have their roots in their own culture and civilisation and their laws of inheritance and marriage and other customs are not the same as those in the rest of India.

Box 1: Karbi Anglong at a Glance

Location: 24°54' North and 26°41' North latitude; 92°8' East and 95°53' East Longitude.

Area: 10434 sq km

Population: 812,320 (2001 census)

Civil sub-divisions: 3

Development blocks: 11

Revenue circles: 4

Rural areas: 103,97.01 sq km

Urban areas: 36, 99 sq km

Number of villages:

Inhabited – 2520

Uninhabited – 43

Total villages - 2563

Schedule cast population : 4.22 %

Schedule tribe population : 51.56%

Area under reserved forests - 185454.00 ha

Total cropped area -175785.00 ha

Total area cultivated more than once -52346.00 ha

Area under irrigation utilized:

For kharif season (Monsoon) -118,85.00 ha

For Rabi season (winter) -1085.00 ha

Ethnicity: Mongoloid: (Karbi, Dimasa, Rengma Naga, Bodo, Garo etc)

Topography: Karbi Anglong (Hills) are located at an average altitude of 740 meters above mean Sea Level (MSL) and Kopili, Jamuna and Dhansiri Valley at an average altitude of 200 meters above MSL. 6.

Natural/Economic Resource:- Forest, Limestone, Iron, coal, Tea Industry, Hydro Electric Generating Rivers, Wildlife, etc.

Political Institution: Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC)

Official language: English

(Source – Director of Economic and Statistics, Assam = 2002-2003)

The two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar (NC) Hills have worked in close cooperation for two decades. The Karbi tribe of Karbi Anglong has lived in peace with the Dimasa tribe of NC Hills. In fact, these two were a single district till the 1950s. Even after their division into two districts, Karbi Anglong remains the largest district of Assam and shares the distinction of being a melting pot of different cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic groups. It is bound by the Nagaon and Golaghat districts of Assam in the north and by the NC Hills district in the south. In the west, it is bound by the state of Meghalaya and in the east by the state of Nagaland.

The district is rich in natural and economic resources like forests, minerals such as limestone, coal, tea and wildlife which attract a number of tourists. The district headquarters is situated at Diphu which has a railway station, a good transport and communications network with the rest of the district, state and region. The district has three sub-divisions namely Diphu, Hamren and Bokajan. Its official language is English while Assamese, Karbi, Bengali and Hindi are some of the other languages commonly spoken here.

Most ethnic groups of Karbi Anglong belong to the Mongoloid stock. They include the Karbi, Dimasa, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Kuki and Rengma Naga tribes. Also people belonging to the Adivasi, Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, Bihari and other communities inhabit this district. This diversity only increases the charm of Karbi Anglong particularly since such diverse peoples have been living peacefully since the formation of the district in 1951. Till recently ethnic unrest did not affect the people of Karbi Anglong.

The economy of the district depends mainly on subsistence agriculture but it has not achieved the desired result of improving the socio-economic condition of a majority of its people. They remain poor and a large number of young persons from poor families are unemployed. All that they can do is to roam around with no work in this land which has a scope for raising innumerable crops.

A climate of Violence

Historically, the indigenous people of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills have been subjugated. The exploitation and subjugation perpetrated upon them led the hill people to violence. In this context dead bodies are merely the ciphers to send the message of terror between the State and the armed groups or warring armed groups which are fighting for their 'own freedom'. So the cycle of encounter killings, custodial deaths and rebel inflicted bomb attacks in public places like crowded markets and railway stations take place in a spiral. The victims are mostly innocent civilians who have nothing to do with the conflict.

Apart from the army-rebel standoff, the factional fights and ethnic violence in many parts of the Northeast add to the deaths, destruction and displacement that begin with the so-called counter-insurgency operations. Various armed groups too are involved in an organised network of extortion or 'an indigenous tax collection system' that sustains the militant governments, maintains their staff, security infrastructure and allied activities. The tribal people are compelled to part with a part of their income for this purpose. The nexus between politicians and militant groups is an open secret and is used to win democratic elections, settle business deals and fight political rivals. This symbiotic relationship is the biggest stumbling block to law and order which is the responsibility of a democratically elected **government**.

This encourages corruption and undermines the moral authority of the state. The common people lose confidence in the state which is constitutionally committed to protect their fundamental freedoms and human rights. Since the state fails in this task, people hardly react when some militants punish corrupt government officials or politicians through their own courts. The common people may not approve of this method but they feel satisfied that someone is bringing some justice to them, whatever its type.

The failure of the state also explains why a large number of people in Karbi Anglong and NC Hills believe that they can solve their problems if they have their own state. Since there has been no response from the Central or State Governments some groups have taken to armed struggle to achieve this goal. At such a critical juncture, many extremist groups representing different tribes have been formed.

Box 2: Some Ethnic Armed groups found in Karbi Anglong

United people's Democratic Solidarity Group (UPDS) formed on 21st May 1999 by Karbi People's Force (KPF) and Karbi National Volunteers (KNV)

Karbi Longri – NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF)

Dima Halam Daogah (DHD – J) which is still not amenable to peace talks & (DHD-D) which is having a ceasefire agreement with the Central government.

Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)

National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)

National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)

The Karbi-Dimasa Conflict

The Karbi-Dimasa conflict has to be situated in this context and of the tension that was built up during 2005. On many occasions during this year people resorted to violence imbued with the ideology of protecting their ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. However, many in Karbi Anglong believe that this violence resulted from a planned move to destabilise Karbi Anglong district through ethnic clashes. For example, in July 2005 there was violence between the Biharis and Adivasis who were living in the same village, doing the same type of cultivation and most of them had migrated to this area from the same place. In August 2005, the tension between the Karbis and Khasis over the border issue was blown out of proportion both in Assam and Meghalaya. The media in both the places published inflammatory articles and

controversial news reports in order to maintain an atmosphere of tension. In September 2005 a rumour was spread in the region that three persons belonging to the Kuki community were killed by suspected Karbi militants. This incident did not take place but the rumour rocked the district. (See the chronology of violence during the Karbi-Dimasa conflict in Appendix 1 and the number of victims in Appendix 2).

Because of this sudden spate of violence and other incidents many in Karbi Anglong believe that that the Karbi-Dimasa conflict was fabricated by the elements that wanted hatred between these two tribes. The plan was executed through the killing of three persons on 26th September, 2005. Three auto drivers from Manja, belonging to the Dimasa tribe were taken to the nearby forest and were brutally killed with sharp weapons. That resulted in the Karbi Dimasa ethnic conflict which destroyed the old bond between these two tribes. Many suspect that the conflict was meant to subvert the joint demand for an autonomous State. This conflict was even given a communal turn when on 1st October 2005, a church was burnt and looted. Many suspect that it was the handiwork of a national level communal organisation.

Conclusion

The background of Karbi Anglong given in this introductory chapter shows the climate of violence that has grown in the district. That has resulted in many conflicts during the last one decade. The next chapter will analyse some of their possible causes.