



Understanding the Historical Conflicts Behind Today's Violence in Assam

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Recent violence between the Bodo tribe and immigrant minorities in the northeastern Indian state of Assam has cost the lives of at least 96 people and caused more than 300,000 residents to flee their homes for refugee camps. The violence also led to mass panic among northeastern migrants across India, when text messages and videos circulated social media sites warning of attacks on northeastern migrants in southern Indian cities such as Bangalore and Pune in retaliation for the deaths of Muslim minorities in Assam.

The violence and resulting panic revealed a fragile peace in Assam and demonstrated the speed with which historical tensions can bubble over into larger confrontations that could roil the whole country. A lot of this tension could worsen with the confluence of climate change, migration patterns, and community security in Assam and India—a confluence that the Center for American Progress is examining in a series of papers and events on climate change, migration, and security. Before looking at those patterns in Assam, let's first take a look back at Assam's history to better understand today's conflicts.

Assam's troubled past

Assam is located in the northeastern part of India and shares a border with China, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. This underdeveloped region, which is connected to India politically by a small land bridge, is also known as the “Seven Sisters” and includes the states Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The surrounding countries' cultures have influenced Assam, creating a patchwork of ethnic, religious, and linguistic traditions that distinguish the Seven Sisters from the rest of India. The Bodos are one of the main indigenous tribes located in the western region of Assam. In the 2001 Census the Bodos made up around 5 percent of Assam's entire population.¹

The Bodo insurgents have been fighting for years for statehood in India. In 2003 they were granted special status through the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts in exchange for ceasing their insurgency. The total area of Bodoland is about 8,970 square kilometers—roughly the size of Cyprus—and includes

more than 3,000 villages.² The status allows the Bodoland Territorial Council to legislate on communal-level issues such as agriculture, education, and tourism.³ Though the Bodos govern the districts, the tribe only makes up one-third of the overall population therein.⁴ The remainder of the residents belong to other indigenous tribal groups or are native Assamese.

Muslims are the second-largest group in the region, and tensions have long simmered between Bodos and Muslim residents over land-ownership rights. The most recent incident before the current violence was in 2008, when fighting between the two groups resulted in 55 deaths, more than 100 injuries, and 200,000 people escaping to refugee camps.⁵ The main issue between the two groups is land, with Bodos claiming that undocumented Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh are taking land rightfully owned by Bodos.⁶ Muslim communities, however, view the accusation of illegal Muslim Bangladeshi settlement as a false campaign to restrict their rights and drive Muslims from the area.

Moreover, Bengali-speaking Muslims settled in the area long before the British Partition created the state of Bangladesh in 1947. This makes it difficult to determine who is a Bengali-speaking Muslim long-term resident versus an illegal Bangladeshi immigrant.

Before 1947 India and Bangladesh were unified and ruled as British India—thus the issue of illegal immigration did not exist. Following independence from Britain, present-day Bangladesh was East Pakistan until 1971, when East Pakistan fought for independence from West Pakistan. During that war, 10 million East Pakistanis (including many Bengali-speaking Muslims) fled to India. Given this history, it is difficult to distinguish between Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam who lived in the area before the Partition, those who moved during the 1971 war as refugees, and those who moved after the war, including the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants whom the Bodos distinguish.

The issue of illegal Bangladeshi immigration has therefore been a prominent political and social issue in Assam since the partition of India but has more acutely impacted local and regional politics in the past four decades. In 1979 a group called the All Assam Students' Union began a campaign against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam, who they believed were changing their state's demographics and gaining political influence. The All Assam Students' Union's main demand was that the names of illegal immigrants be taken off of the electoral rolls before the next election. The campaign led to violence across the states, with Bengali-speaking Muslims indiscriminately targeted as illegal Bangladeshis.

The violence peaked in the early '80s, after four years of the government refusing to meet the union's demands. The All Assam Students' Union mobilized against the election in 1983, demanding that all illegal immigrants or so-called infiltrators be deleted from elec-

Assam's location in the Seven Sisters region



toral rolls and deported immediately.⁷ Instead, the Indian central government went ahead with elections, inciting further conflict. Official government reports indicate that more than 4,000 people died during the lead up to the election, while nongovernment reports put the death toll at around 7,000.⁸ The violence also led to the burning of more than 1,600 bridges in attempts to prevent election officials from reaching constituencies.⁹

Then on February 18, 1983, fighting broke out in the district of Nellie between villagers and those seen as illegal immigrants, with estimates of 2,000 people—mostly Muslims—losing their lives.¹⁰ The massive death toll led to wide condemnation of the massacre and helped catapult the then-opposition Congress Party back into power in the state government of Assam. The Congress Party in Assam is part of the greater Indian National Congress Party. The National Congress Party was founded in 1885 and was a key player in the Indian movement for independence from Great Britain. The party has also formed the central Indian government for most time periods since independence. The Muslim League, a group active during independence and Partition, merged with the National Congress Party in those years, bringing with it the Muslim voting bloc. The Congress Party held power in Assam for the first two decades after independence and did not highlight the issue of illegal immigration in the way the All Assam Students' Union thought necessary. The forced 1983 elections and the contentious results led the All Assam Students' Union and likeminded groups to form a new political party, the Asom Gana Parishad, to counter the Congress Party in Assam. Two years of talks amid lingering conflict eventually led to the Assam Accord in 1985.

The Assam Accord laid out the following provisions to deal with the immigrant issue¹¹:

- Immigrants who arrived before January 1, 1966, are recognized as citizens.
- Immigrants who arrived between January 1966 and March 25, 1971, fall under the Foreigners Act (Indian national law), must register themselves in district offices, and will not be able to vote until 10 years after their registration.
- Immigrants who arrived after 1971 will be identified, removed from voting rolls, and deported.

The signing of the Assam Accord ultimately ended the All Assam Students' Union movement but the tension surrounding the issue of immigration lingers on. Implementation of the accord has been contentious, and outbreaks of violence over migration have continued on a small scale since 2003 and have escalated into the violence that is taking place presently.

Today's violence in Assam

The current situation in Assam between the Bodo tribe and immigrant minorities in the northeast started at the end of May, when a signboard was allegedly removed from a mosque by the Bodoland Territorial Council because it claimed that the mosque was illegally occupying forest land. In protest, a local Muslim youth group—the All Bodoland Minority Students' Union—called for the shutdown of the Kokrajhar district, but the Bodoland Territorial Council prevented the shutdown. The ensuing confrontations between the Student's Union and the police led to more than a dozen injuries.

Tensions rose between the Bodo and Muslim communities in Kokrajhar, and on July 6 four people shot one Muslim man and injured four others. Two weeks later two men killed Mohibul Islam, the founder and president of the All Bodoland Minority Students' Union, and Abdul Siddique Sheikh of the Muslim minority group, the All Assam Minority Students' Union.¹² This confrontation was followed by the death of four Bodo youths, allegedly killed in a Muslim-dominated area in Kokrajhar.¹³

Fighting spread to neighboring Dhubri district, with hundreds of homes torched, forcing more than 400,000 people to flee to relief camps in the area.¹⁴ The conditions in the refugee camps are dire; *The New York Times* reports that one camp has only 10 makeshift toilets for 4,300 people, while at another site more than 6,500 people have crammed into a high school.¹⁵

Then during the week of August 13, rumors of Muslim attacks on northeastern labor immigrants in southern Indian cities began circulating via social media sites and text messages, leading to a mass exodus from Bangalore and Chennai.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in Mumbai Muslim groups held a rally to protest the violence against Muslims in Assam and the attacks on the Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar that have been happening since June.¹⁷ The rally escalated into a riot and left two dead and many injured.¹⁸

The Indian central government—asserting that the messages and videos were designed to cause panic and sow fear among northeastern residents, rather than warn of any real security threat—blocked 250 web sites and social networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, and fundamentalist Pakistani websites, and also banned text messages sent to more than five people for two weeks.¹⁹ The BBC reports that India has offered to share the evidence with Pakistan that “the bulk of these messages, pictures, and videos had their origin in Pakistan,” specifically with the names of organizations in Pakistan.²⁰

Fresh violence ensued earlier this week in Kokrajhar, leaving one man dead and injuring five others. Meanwhile, hundreds are still living in relief camps.

Considering climate change

The current conflict reveals the underlying tensions stirring in the world's largest democracy—stresses that are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. It is difficult to determine whether illegal Bangladesh immigrants are, in fact, taking over Bodo lands, or whether the Indian Bengali-speaking Muslim population is simply growing. No accurate statistics or studies exist to understand the exact demographic and historical breakdown of the Bodoland territory.

Yet public perceptions, fear, and mass communication through social media uprooted an entire Indian state, creating mass havoc and killing dozens. This outcome was impossible to predict, but it will be important to understand the stresses that could lead to future misperceptions and panic. Contributing to this effort, the Center for American Progress's project on climate, migration, and security will soon release a report detailing how changing environmental conditions and migratory patterns could contribute to existing tensions in Assam and Bangladesh.

The paper will show how climate change and environmental degradation have the potential to displace large groups of people in both India and Bangladesh due to floods, increasing variations in rainfall, sea-level rise, and drought. The exact impacts of this displacement on international migration across India and Bangladesh's 4,095-mile border are not easy to quantify, but the problem is real. As became obvious this summer, even small shifts in cross-border migration have the potential to incite conflict and exacerbate existing tensions. Moreover, the mere perception that there might be an increase in the number of migrants could contribute to instability in the region.

South Asia will be one of the most climate vulnerable regions in the world and, as the United States pivots its interest toward Asia, understanding the long-term trends shaping the region will be crucial for U.S. defense, diplomacy, and development policies. The different dimensions of complex crisis scenarios, including religious and social factors, will have to be considered in planning for disaster relief and temporary resettlement in the face of more frequent storms and floods so as to avoid inciting or exacerbating conflicts. Assam's troubled history with migration serves as a case study for the complex intersection of climate change, migration, and security with which the world must grapple in the 21st century.

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Endnotes

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- 2 Monjib Mochahari, "Bodoland: The Paradise Unexplored," *Assam Times*, September 22, 2008, available at <http://www.assamtimes.org/blog/2087.html>.
- 3 South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Memorandum of Settlement on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)" (2003), available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/memorandum_feb02.htm. The other areas of legislative power granted to the Bodoland Territorial Council include: small, cottage, and rural industry; animal husbandry and veterinary; forest; agriculture; PWD; sericulture; education (primary education, higher secondary, including vocational training, adult education, college education, and general); cultural affairs; soil conservation; cooperation; fisheries; Panchayat and rural development; handloom and textile; health and family welfare; public health engineering; irrigation; social welfare; flood control; sports and youth welfare; weights and measures; library services; museum and archaeology; urban development and town and country planning; Tribal Research Institute; land and revenue; publicity/public relations; printing and stationery; tourism; transport; planning and development; municipal corporation, improvement trust, district boards, and other local authorities; welfare of plan tribes and backward classes; markets and fairs; lotteries, theatres, dramatic performance, and cinema; statistics; food and civil supply; intoxicating liquors, opium, and derivatives, etc.; labour and employment; relief and rehabilitation; and registration of births and deaths.
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