TRACING THE CONTINUITIES OF VIOLENCE IN BODOLAND

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INTRODUCTION

The Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD), renamed as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2020, was created in 2003 as an autonomous region within Assam in response to the long movement for Bodo autonomy. After decades of adopting peaceful means (with sporadic attacks on government property or staff), militant factions of the movement started targeting non-Bodo residents since the late 1980s. Over time, organizations and coalitions have emerged among non-Bodo communities – both recognized as indigenous or as marginalized immigrants such as Adivasis[1] and Bengali-speaking Muslims[2]. In a polarised milieu, sometimes particular incidents have been followed by widespread retaliatory violence between communities involving gun-wielding militants and rioting mobs.[3]

How is it that certain incidents were followed by widespread violence while others were not? Based on fieldwork in Kokrajhar and

Chirang districts along with secondary sources, I attempt to grapple with this question by focusing on incidents of sexual violence against women –where perpetrators and victims were identified as belonging to different ethnicities – and circulation of narratives around the incidents.[4] While not all episodes of rioting in BTR were 'triggered' by incidents of sexual violence framed in this manner, such incidents are potent sites to generate conflict between groups – and produce them as rivalled to each other – because of the 'metamorphosis' between a woman's body and the body of the group (Das 1996, 82-83). This metamorphosis enables retaliation by people identifying themselves with the victim's community against the community identified with the perpetrator, since what is at stake is not just seeking justice for the victim, but also taking action against an attack on the community itself.

I begin this essay by providing a broad background to militancy and political mobilisation in BTR, after which I discuss how rioting followed the discovery of dead bodies of women wearing the Bodo traditional dress in an Adivasi area in 1996. Subsequently, I develop two cases to provide a glimpse of actions aimed at avoiding further violence in the aftermath of incidents of sexual violence in 2014 which involved perpetrators identified as belonging to an ethnicity different from that of the victims. In doing so, I try to highlight narratives to make sense of such incidents. Unsurprisingly, such explanatory narratives avoided identification of perpetrators with any community or ethnic group. This suggests a pivotal role played by explanations of critical incidents and their circulation – in the form of rumour for example – in modulating the scale and nature of violence which may follow such incidents (Das 1998; Tambiah 1996).

While it is true that local efforts discussed in the two cases did manage to contain retaliatory violence in the immediate vicinity and aftermath of the incidents, such efforts are not failproof. These cannot be expected to contain rioting if militants and mobs come from outside the neighbourhoods and villages that attempt to avoid violence. Moreover, there is no guarantee that with changing context local strategies and efforts would not shift to ones that favour retaliation.

Finally, the possibility of such events being mobilised to serve further violence is neither time nor place bound, as research on communal violence in India has shown (Das 1998).

Regardless of effectiveness in keeping further violence contained, such narratives and actions are significant. This is because they suggest aspirations and strivings of people complicating the straightjacketed view of BTR as composed of reified and agonistic ethnic groups with the quality of a tinderbox which erupts in flames of conflict at even the slightest of sparks.

MILITANCY IN BTAD

The call for Bodo autonomy was raised by organisations such as the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in the face of 'the big brother attitude' and assimilationist policies of the Axomiya elite dominated state (U. Goswami 2014; cf. J. Sharma 2011).[5] Relatedly, anxieties around continued land alienation – raised by plains tribal leaders as early as the 1930s in the face of colonial population transfers (Pathak 2010) – was also another grievance behind this call.[6]

In the 1980s, actors within the Bodo movement started resorting to violence. For example, ABSU activists were accused of targeting government property and staff (George 1994). Furthermore, this was also the time when the Bodo Security Force and Bodo Volunteer Force emerged as actors distinct (albeit related) from ABSU and the umbrella body Bodo Peoples' Action Committee (BPAC). The turn to armed struggle was partly necessitated to deter police brutality and violent government repression as the movement picked up pace.[7] Furthermore, the Assam Police were accused of engaging in unlawful activities in Bodo areas including sexual assault of women (Gohain 1989). One such incident which received some publicity was the

Slogans like 'Bodoland is Bodos Birth Right; Divide Assam', covered electricity poles, walls and milestones all across BTR often along with slogans by other (rival) movements during visits to the region in 2016 and 2018.

gangrape of nine Bodo women in No. 12 Bhumka village in Kokrajhar in 1988 (Gohain 1989).

Taking up of arms was partly strategic as well since the 'Assam movement had brought home the lesson that the state does not listen to peaceful petition-making; noisy agitation was the only course of action if redress of grievances is to be sought' (U. Goswami 2014, 8; cf. U. Misra 1989). Thus, after the failure of the ninth round of negotiations between ABSU/BPAC and the Assam government in October 1992, two bomb blasts on a train running through an area with (alleged) active Bodo militancy killed 22 people and injured 50 (George 1994).

In February 1993, the Assam government and ABSU/BPAC came to a settlement whereby the former agreed to institute a Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) while the latter gave up on the demand for a separate state. The BAC would act as a legislative body with

the power to make by-laws, rules and orders regarding 38 subjects allocated to it for application within an area flanked by rivers Sankosh and Mazbat Pasnoi to the north of the Brahmaputra (George 1994). To demarcate precise boundaries of the area under BAC, ABSU/BPAC were to submit a list of villages to the Assam government having a 50 per cent or more Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (Bodo community is classified as a ST) share. For the sake of providing a contiguous area, villages that did not meet the majority criterion were to be included (regardless of ST majority) if they lay between the two rivers to the north of the Brahmaputra (Nath 2003).

By 1996, disagreements over the inclusion of 515 villages under the BAC and half-hearted devolution of power by the Assam government led ABSU/BPAC to abandon the BAC Accord and relaunch the movement for a separate Bodo state (Nath 2003). Around this time, Bodo Security Force refashioned itself as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and launched a new armed struggle for Bodo secession from India. Two years later, the Bodo Volunteer Force also renamed itself as the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLT) and launched an armed struggle in support of the movement for a separate Bodo state (South Asia Terrorism Portal).[8]

In 1999, BLT declared unilateral ceasefire and after years of negotiation, surrendered en masse with the signing of BTC Accord in 2003. This instituted BTAD by amending the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution that otherwise provided for limited autonomy within the Indian federal structure for hills tribes of Assam only (Baruah 2003). In the aftermath of this accord, while BLT leaders formed the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), a political party that has since then ruled BTR, the NDFB split into three factions.[9] After Telangana was granted statehood in 2009, Hagrama Mohilary, chief of the now-dissolved BLT and the elected head of BTAD, questioned why Bodoland should not be granted statehood as well (News18 2009). In 2010, ABSU declared that it will revive the movement for a separate Bodo state once again (Talukdar 2012).

ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE AND RIOTING

After ABSU/BPAC and the Assam government fell out over the inclusion of the 515 contentious villages in the proposed BAC area, militant attacks were reported in villages mainly inhabited by Bengali-speaking Muslims in May, July and October 1994 (George 1994; Hussain 2012). In 1996, mutilated bodies of women dressed in Bodo traditional wear were found in an Adivasi area, after which militants and mobs identified as Bodo by my interlocutors attacked Adivasi villages. [10] In 1998, the NDFB killed the general secretary of the Adivasi Sewa Samiti and his 4-year-old son, along with two other Samiti functionaries in broad daylight (Chaudhuri 1998). This time, militants – the Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam and the Birsa

A settlement of Adivasis in January 2016 near Gossaigaon whose houses were burnt in December 2014, Kokrajhar district.

Commando Force which were formed to protect the community after the 1996 riots (Borpujari 2015) – and mobs identifying with the Adivasi cause retaliated by burning Bodo villages, which was followed by further attacks on Adivasis. This episode left about 50 people dead, 500 houses charred and 70,000 displaced (Chaudhuri 1998).

Bodoland, though marked as the homeland for the Bodo tribe, is also a space where people from a variety of ethnic affiliations reside. While in recent years Bodo politicians have assured the resident non-Bodo population of their equal status in Bodoland, continued attacks by militants and episodic rioting, along with earlier experience of receiving 'quit notices' from ABSU activists in the late 1980s (Misra 1989), have fed the perception that resident non-Bodos are not welcome in it. Further, such attacks on non-Bodo communities – who hold a demographic majority in BTAD (Sarma and Motiram 2015) – were often interpreted by my interviewees as attempts to create a demographic share more favourable to the movement for Bodo autonomy. This is also reflected in the accusations of ethnic cleansing levelled against extremist actors by a number of scholarly and journalistic commentators (George 1994; Nath 2003; Johari, 2014; Abdi, 2014).[11]

In parallel with the political and militant mobilization around the Bodo identity, a number of socio-political organisations and militant groups have also come up around Adivasi, Bengali-speaking Muslim and Koch Rajbanshi ethnic causes. There has also been mobilisation around the composite category of 'Oboro' or the non-Bodo, whereby bodies such as Janagosthiya Oikyo Mancha (United Front of Communities), Oboro Suraksha Samiti (non-Bodo Protection Committee) and Oboro Oikyo Mancha (non-Bodo Unity Front) have come up to oppose the ongoing movement by Bodo actors for a separate Bodoland state.[12] This provides a polarised backdrop where incidents and attacks framed as violence between communities lead to escalation in the form of widespread rioting.

FACELESS BODIES

In September 2018, I was on my way to meet Mr and Mrs Murmu, a Santhal Adivasi couple, who run a small roadside eatery in Chirang along the highway to Gelephu in Bhutan. [13] Out on the road, four Army jawans (not an uncommon sight in this militarised region) kept peering longingly as we sipped our tea. Very soon one of them came and took back a carefully balanced tray of tea and biscuits. It seemed like a busy day in this otherwise sleepy joint.

A typical eatery along the highway to Bhutan in Chirang district.

Mr and Mrs Murmu said that in 1996 there was tension between Bodos and Adivasis in and around present-day BTR. In the wake of the violence, they had to leave their village and farmlands in Amteka and settle at their present location near the Bhutan border. Mr Murmu recalled that in 1996, the rioting began around May-June. He said, 'From where they [militants identified as Bodo] got the three girls! There were three girls … and it was clarified later that these were Nepali girls. [14] They were raped, and acid was poured … acid burnt their faces, and their bodies were kept under a bridge – *dokhona* [Bodo traditional women's wear] was given.' Mrs Murmu interjected, 'What he means is Bodo's *dokhona*! They [the three dead girls] were made to wear that,' while Mr Murmu continued:

> All hell was raised that Bodo people were being raped and killed by Adivasi people. That is why it [rioting] began elsewhere … But then in our village also they started burning our houses and killing people. Even in our place it [attacks] happened. That day there was no sign of the administration [security forces]. No sign of the government for one week while this happened. We were not given protection.

Mr Murmu got up to speak with an old woman who had just entered the eatery. Mrs Murmu took over and said:

> Our entire village came here and started living here. [pause] There was no prior warning. They attacked [pause] young men came with arms [guns] and demanded that we leave our houses. Someone was beaten up and died [because they had refused to leave]. They started burning houses then. People just started fleeing! We couldn't get anything, not even a sari.

Mrs Murmu went to serve the customer while Mr Murmu came back to describe how they had fled their village:

> We ran in a particular direction only to see that they were burning houses there as well! All the villagers gathered in one place and ran in another direction – even there, they were burning houses! (…) And they had guns but they did not fire upon us directly. They did

> blank firing. The people got really scared. In some places people were killed [by bullets], but not in our village.

Dead bodies of the women found in a culvert in an Adivasi area, which is said to have sparked rioting in 1996, are objects of speculation still: while some say that these were Bodo women, others (like Mr and Mrs Murmu) argue that the bodies belonged to Nepali women whose faces were disfigured with acid and who were dressed in the Bodo traditional dress. Nevertheless, rumours after the discovery of these bodies, weaving stories of Adivasi sexual aggression towards Bodo women, provided adequate provocation resulting in widespread retaliation against Adivasis as described by Mr and Mrs Murmu.

(UN)EASY PROXIMITIES

I met a group of middle-aged Bodo women in Phulbari, Chirang district, in another roadside eatery. The background score was a classic

Paddy fields close to a village in Kokrajhar.

song from *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (lit. [He] Who Wins is Alexander), a 1990s Bollywood hit, interspersed with the laughter of a group of men drinking beer in the background.

Rombha, whose Assamese was better than the other women, described the days following 23 December 2014. This was the day when militants identified as NDFB (Songbijit faction) opened fire on Adivasi villagers killing 37 people in neighbouring districts of Sonitpur, 25 in Kokrajhar and three in Chirang (The Assam Tribune 2014). This was followed by retaliatory attacks across BTR by militants and angry mobs identified as Adivasi who started burning houses belonging to Bodos in nearby areas.

Even if Bodos and Adivasis were attacking each other elsewhere in BTR, Rombha explained that the residents of Phulbari (almost entirely Bodo) hoped that there would be no rioting between their village and the nearby Adivasi settlement. At night during this period of uncertainty, Phulbari's women and children, along with the old and infirm, would gather around a designated house, while men (on protection duty) would spread along the village perimeter.

Towards the end of our discussion, Rombha started narrating a personal incident during the 2014 episode when her husband and a couple of other men had managed to get some work in Bhutan.[15] After another sleepless night keeping vigil with the other women, she decided to take an afternoon nap in her house. She woke up abruptly after she heard two girls eating Indian jujube freshly plucked from the thorny tree beside her house. In some time, she joined them as well when she saw an Adivasi man approach:

> This Sorai na [to the other women, who also knew this man]? I saw him coming. He had a machete and he wanted alcohol. I had never brewed alcohol at home even before – I told him, even you know that. Have I made it before? I asked him. Now when rioting is happening elsewhere, he wants to have [alcohol]! I said have *bogori* [jujube] instead! Have *bogori*! Will you eat *bogori*? I asked. Go and have – they are also having. See [referring to the girls]?

Sensing danger, the two girls walked away quickly. Rombha continued narrating, her expression showing fresh creases of worry:

> He was muttering something under his breath: 'Give me the *bogori* [jujube]!' He finally accepted but he wanted salt with his *bogori* now! He asked me to go and get it from my house. But I didn't as he had a machete … Maybe he would have slashed at me if I went inside? There were Roje's pigs playing around and I acted as if I was to take them away. Sorai became alert and shouted then 'If you don't have salt in your house then where do you keep your salt?' You enter the house yourself and have it, I said. But he didn't agree to that. He swore at me [pause] At night, I told Ronen [Phulbari's headman] about this incident. He [Sorai] shouldn't have acted this way. I didn't give salt and I didn't enter the house.

Someone mulled aloud that maybe he would have killed her, to which Rombha responded, 'He could have attacked, he was like a madman na! This was a bad time na?' alluding to how men may become violent towards anyone identified as the ethnic other during riots. Rombha fumed at how some men in Phulbari, despite being around, did not come when she called them:

> This Nilim, you know? I shouted oi Nilim come here, come here! But he wouldn't come! So, what if he was taking a bath? [Nilim's excuse was that he was washing himself]. An outsider [Adivasi man] has come [to the village] then he should come at least. I felt really bad at this. Rachan [another neighbour] saw but he didn't come as well.

Rombha did not have to say that she feared being assaulted by Sorai.[16] It was apparent that this was understood as expressions of the other women started hardening and side jokes became hushed whispers. She described how Sorai flew into a rage and tried to break open the door of a neighbour's house in search of salt before coming

to his senses and making a hasty exit from the village. There was a hint of a smile on her face – the tension dispelled – and everyone laughed at how Sorai finally lost it when he did not receive salt to eat his jujube with. As the laughter subsided, Rombha continued:

> Ronen had the Army's number and he called them [instead of the village men going to confront Sorai in the Adivasi hamlet]. They came sometime later. 'You say what the man did,' Ronen told me. I don't know Hindi eh! How will I let them know? The first thing the Army [the jawan] asked when they came to the village was, 'What are you doing with all these machetes and knives?' All these *ulta palta* [upside-down] things they ask na? He took all the machetes from us and loaded them in his jeep. Before the Army went back to the camp, he returned them to us though. He asked what happened? I said he [Sorai] came like this and did this and that. He caught Sorai. I thought what he [the jawan] will do to him later?

A drunk Adivasi man with a machete on his hip had traipsed into a Bodo village looking to get some home brewed alcohol during a time when militants and mobs from either community were attacking each other in BTR. The situation was even more potent because people remembered what had happened in 1996. The women chided that it was irresponsible of Sorai to have walked into Phulbari and act the way he did during these tensed times. They claimed that if he had met 'hot headed' men – who were quick to anger or people with militant connections – then maybe he would have been killed. This would have led to a retaliation from the Adivasi side, bringing conflict home to Phulbari in 2014.

Sorai was held in the Army camp for a day or two and then released when he 'came to his senses'. Rombha shared that when they see each other on market days sometimes, Sorai looks ashamed and averts his gaze.

TIT FOR TAT

Discussing her work in a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) on the emergency rehabilitation of people affected by rioting between Bodo and Bengali-speaking Muslims in July 2012, I met Afreen in September 2018. This episode was triggered when four 'Bodo youths' crossing Joypur village in Kokrajhar, with most of the residents being Bengali-speaking Muslims, were hacked to death on 21 July 2012 (The Assam Tribune 2012).[17] The next morning saw four incidents of a 'retaliatory attack' against Bengali-speaking Muslims in Kokrajhar (The Assam Tribune 2012). As the days went by, the death toll rose to 90 (mostly male and Muslim) and about 2,000 houses (mostly belonging to Muslims) were damaged or completely burnt down across BTAD (Sarma and Motiram 2015). By 25 July, an estimated 200,000 people had fled their houses (Asian Centre for Human Rights 2012).

A young forest near Rowmari in 2018, Chirang district.

Though I had met Afreen to speak about NGO efforts in the aftermath of rioting, the interview went in unexpected directions. She said that after working in Nathurbari in Chirang for about a year, she was asked to go to Basugaon, where the lay of the land – in her words – was such that, 'Muslims were in the middle, and on all four sides Bodo people lived.' Being a Bengali-speaking Muslim herself, she was really scared as she had to go alone and work in Basugaon. She recounted how her employers convinced her:

> The *baidews* [elder sister/madam] told me – and had to give me counselling only! 'If you feel scared, then how will you be able to remove fear from the minds of the people? You should not feel scared – you should have courage. If you are brave only then can you make others brave.' They tried to make me understand by telling me that I haven't done anyone harm. Only if I had harmed someone then they will do something to me.

Afreen's employers seemed oblivious to the fact that during such times, individuals are killed or their houses are burnt not because they are themselves guilty of any crime against the attackers. Instead, people may become targets of violence simply because they are identified as representatives of their ethnic groups regardless of personal beliefs or individual actions (Tambiah 1996).

Afreen sought to explain her fears of working in Basugaon which were made to seem irrational by her employers:

> I was so scared because when I was working in Nathurbari someone lost a cow in the forest. It was government land where way back Muslims used to live. Then there was conflict there [probably in 1994] so the people got up and left [resettled elsewhere]. There was a lot of land, so trees were planted by Bodo people – so there is a lot of forest there now. There people [Bengali-speaking Muslims and Bodos] leave cows to graze. It was night-time and a cow still hadn't been found. Now, if one has to buy a cow then it is at least 15-20 thousand rupees, so the owner went to find the cow.

'Woman?' I asked and Afreen continued:

> Yes, woman yes. She went in search of the cow but there were Bodo men there. She came close to them, face-to-face. She was killed [pause] She was killed. Killed in such a bad way that I can't even say. Her clothes, they undid everything. After undoing her saree, she was raped in a way that… the wilderness and forest … they put in her. Her mouth and neck were tied with cloth. Seeing that I felt very scared. That is why I cried.

Lost for words, I ended up stuttering, 'You... you saw this?' and Afreen continued, her voice wavering only slightly:

> Yes, I saw this. I was working there. At night, we were searching for her. We searched the forest too. We saw that she was killed this badly. She was kept in such a mutilated and naked state. (…) We went and got her. After getting her body, we showed the police and then medical [examination] was done.[18]

In March 2014, a few months before this incident, in Bijni sub-division of Chirang two Bodo girls had gone to the banks of Makra river for fishing in the morning when a group of men chased them, caught one and allegedly proceeded to rape her and slit her throat. The girl who managed to run away informed their village. NDFB (Songbijit faction) immediately took out a warning that it would take justice in its own hands if Assam Police failed to make suitable arrests (South Asia Terrorism Portal nd.). And indeed, Abdul Hakim from Bijni town – with the established guilt of simply being a Bengali-speaking Muslim from the vicinity – was killed within 12 hours on the same day (Singh nd.).

This, perhaps, was not enough as a brutal rape and murder of a woman in Nathurbari on 19 October 2014 was recorded by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP).[19] SATP reported that the '[b]ody of a woman, Pakhiran Nesa, was recovered at Nathurbari in Chirag [sic]. A source stated that they suspect the NDFB (not clearly mentioned which faction) which is involved in the business of illegal wood cutting and selling in the area might have killed her.' (South Asia Terrorism Portal nd.)

AVOIDING ESCALATION

Initial newspaper reports identified the men who raped and murdered the Bodo schoolgirl in March 2014 in Bijni as 'Bangladeshi migrants,' while subsequent reports (strategically and responsibly) avoided attributing any community to the rapists (Brahma Choudhury 2014). Dwimalo Basumatary, a Bodo resident from the area described how society was taut to a breaking point. He explained, '[s]he was a high school student. This was not really a small incident!' Yet, unlike in 1996, this incident did not lead to retaliatory rioting despite extremist actors such as NDFB carrying out targeted attacks on Bengali-speaking Muslims in the aftermath.

Dwimalo, who was involved in peace keeping in his neighbourhood in Bijni , argued that this incident 'did not lead to a flare up because we were able to convince [Bodos] that if you seek revenge then your houses will burn [because of retaliation]. Instead why not focus on catching the culprits? Why not help the police?' Dwimalo and others from the Bodo community convinced more 'hot headed' Bodos in his

A family next to a poster by ABSU denouncing violence in August 2015, Kokrajhar district.

neighbourhood to not retaliate by reframing the incident along the following lines:

> Will an ordinary [*xadharon*] person rape a young girl and kill her like this? It must be someone bad or criminal. This is not something that a normal person would do. That is why we [Bodos] should not be angry at ordinary people.

Needless to say, there could have been several factors which contributed to the avoidance of rioting in the immediate aftermath of this incident. This includes the quick imposition of curfew from six in the evening of the same day (The Telegraph 2014a) and the dwindling clout of the NDFB due to sustained anti-insurgency operations by the Indian security forces. A factor that I want to focus on is the distinction drawn in the excerpt above between an ordinary/common person who may be identified as part of a community or ethnic group versus 'someone bad' or 'criminal' without such social moorings. This is striking as it shows an alternative way of making the incident intelligible that does not enable the production of a section of people as guilty and as enemies of a particular community. How an incident is made intelligible – whether it is viewed as an attack on the community or as an isolated and localised incident – and the circulation of such reasoning have implications on bolstering participation in retaliatory violence and producing a sense of legitimacy around such retaliation (Das 1998; Tambiah 1996; McGovern 2017).

This distinction between an ordinary person versus 'someone bad' or 'criminal' was in sync with the narrative at play in statements and speeches made in demonstrations by politically powerful student organisations in the aftermath of this incident. Common protests were organised by ABSU and a number of other organisations representing interests of Bengali-speaking Muslims, Gorkhas, and other communities from BTR to express outrage and demand urgent action by the state. The ABSU president appealed to 'the people to maintain peace and harmony' (The Telegraph 2014a). Further, in view of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, this incident – and

the risk of circulating narratives framing it as an attack by Bengali-speaking Muslims on Bodos – was seen by ABSU as a 'political conspiracy' aimed at creating 'political and communal instability' (The Telegraph 2014b).

In the aftermath of rioting, however, blaming 'miscreants' or 'trouble mongers' for wide scale violence may be driven by an inability to come-to-terms with –or even represent wilful covering-up of – the widespread participation in violence, which is indeed the 'uniquely troubling' aspect of such forms of violence (Mamdani 2001, 8). Yet, such categories may also be usefully deployed to avoid holding an entire community accountable for the actions of a few.

In case of the incidents of December 2014 in Phulbari, the Bodo villagers seemed careful to avoid any confrontation with Sorai which could have been interpreted as an attack of Bodos against Adivasis in the locality. During politically charged times, especially during riots, interviewees highlighted that they stayed within their villages and avoided even face-to-face interaction with members of the 'enemy' community, let alone visit areas dominated by them. This was to avoid attacks by 'miscreants' which was driven by self-preservation. This strategy also included being cognizant of how such attacks would likely serve further escalation or spread of violence.

This gives another explanation as to why no one came when Rombha called despite shouting back to indicate that they had heard her. It was unlikely that the men who heard Rombha would have feared Sorai, as Rombha herself said, because they outnumbered him and Sorai seemed drunk. Due to men being 'hot headed' in such matters, there would have been physical violence if they did confront Sorai. In such a situation, Sorai would have suffered worse damage. Knowing themselves to be shaped by and shaping 'cultures of masculinity prone to violence' (Cockburn 2004, 18), not confronting Sorai directly even while responding to Rombha's calls with flimsy excuses –or otherwise indicating that they were around if the situation worsened in their subjective assessment – may have been a part of a complex game of avoiding a violent scuffle. Furthermore, after Sorai left Phulbari,

the village headman contacted the nearby Army camp instead of mobilising village men to go to the Adivasi hamlet in search of Sorai. This is noteworthy as seeing a group of Bodo men approaching their village (whether armed or not), Adivasis may have assumed that they had come to attack the village causing them to retaliate.

Sorai's actions did not seem to be understood by Rombha and others in Phulbari within the trope of Adivasi men sullying the honour of Bodo women. His actions were condemned regardless, as insensitive and callous, both because his behaviour towards Rombha was unacceptable and because it could have invited retaliatory violence in the locality. Sorai was variously identified as drunk or mad. This perhaps helped delink his actions from being influenced by any community-level planning or agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

Alternative narratives circulated to make violent incidents intelligible in ways which do not serve to legitimise backlash on a community and actions taken by people accordingly to avoid localised confrontations are important. However, rioting involves a variety of actors such as militants, political leaders, formal affiliates of non-militant organisations and state (in)action (Tambiah 1996; Mann 2005). The complicity of common folk –both in their own villages and outsiders– is also an ingredient in widespread rioting (Mann 2005). These ordinary or common people may be variously motivated, incentivised or compelled to participate and abet in violence regardless of whether they subscribe to revenge narratives (ibid.; Kimura 2013).

Given that the unstable and fluid category of the ordinary, normal or common person can only be considered as one actor amongst many involved in modulating the scale and nature of rioting, local efforts to avoid violence are not failproof. In light of this sobering knowledge, most interviewees were circumspect about the influence

of such efforts as those discussed in the previous section in keeping violence at bay. This includes scepticism around more formal attempts such as dialogue or mutual agreements by community leaders across neighbouring villages, or representatives of different communities within a village to keep violence at bay during tensed times. Such peace meetings are known to have limited influence when militants and mobs from other areas perpetrate violence or compel locals to aid and abet in rioting.

Consider the aftermath of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, when a politician supported by 23 non-Bodo organizations (under the Janagosthiyo Oikyo Mancho) won from Kokrajhar (S. Saikia 2015). In May 2014, a week after the elections, Bengali-speaking Muslims were attacked in Baksa and Kokrajhar by gunmen. Adivasis and Rajbanshis fled their villages assuming they would be attacked as well. The attacks were blamed on NDFB (Songbijit faction) by politicians in BTR who were, in turn, accused of rabble rousing by delivering incendiary speeches (Pandey 2014). In total, 45 people died and numerous houses were burnt to the ground in attacks and counter-attacks (Dutta 2016). In such a situation, even if there may have been a history of resisting conflict due to implicit or explicit agreements shared between neighbouring villages, trust is broken and new cycles of retaliation and bad blood are set into motion.

Thus, a key demand around containing violence during such times is the presence of security (armed forces and police presence) and decisive action by the state. This is broadly in line with findings from scholarly work on efficacy of government action (when taken) in stopping 'any riot or pogrom in its tracks' (Mann 2005, 482). In this case, peace meetings organised by political leaders or by student bodies representing different ethnic interests, are looked upon more favourably to the extent that they can influence quick deployment of security forces and enforcement of curfew.

Nevertheless, the common man also exercises some influence – however weak – on avoiding escalation or containing the spread of violence especially over their immediate vicinity during tensed times

as discussed in the previous section (McGovern 2017). The reasons behind attempts to ward off violence seem to be motivated primarily by self-preservation. Further, most interviewees – retrospectively at least – considered how rioting disproportionately affected the poor and the powerless regardless of ethnic identification. In addition to the trauma of living through such violence, militant attacks and mob-based rioting profoundly disrupted daily life by destroying productive and fixed assets. Further, such periods of instability meant that weeks, if not months, were lost in terms of working days. These are big setbacks for the affected populations who are predominantly poor farmers and daily wage labourers.

In recognition of such damage across communities, significant (even if fleeting and ad hoc) collaborations are fashioned cutting across ethnic divides. These are aided by – and contribute to – the narrative that episodes of conflict are due to criminal elements or miscreants serving political interests of the rich and powerful. Consider a newspaper report which argued that despite having 'fought like sworn enemies (…) two years down the line they [Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims; referring to rioting in July 2012] came together (…) demanding rehabilitation grant for those who had paid the price.' (The Telegraph 2014c). An elderly protestor, not identified by ethnicity, is quoted saying, 'Our problems are the same, as we have suffered equally. So, we have come together to raise our demands (…) the riots happened due to a section of troublemongers who exist in every society, every community and it was innocent people like us who were the sufferers.' (The Telegraph 2014c).

Another article ran a feel-good story about adjoining relief camps housing displaced Adivasi and Bodo households in December 2014 which set up a peace committee each (Talukdar 2014). Apparently, representatives of both committees met in a common marketplace and decided to maintain mutual amity 'at any cost' as incidents of violence were taking place elsewhere between the two communities (Talukdar 2014). The camp inhabitants 'maintained calm even after a Bodo (…) was killed on December 25 by miscreants.' As peace-keeping rationale

reduced with passing time, the committees merged to share relief materials (Talukdar 2014).

The experience of living through such episodes seem to have informed a sense of a 'threshold within which the scenes of ordinary life are [to be] lived' (Das 1996, 68): to the extent possible, further violence along ethnic lines should be avoided. Such discursive work and efforts suggest aspirations that complicate the view of BTR as a place peopled by bounded and reified ethnic groups, a tinderbox waiting to erupt in flames of conflict at even the slightest of sparks.

EPILOGUE

I met Mina and Rima, both recent grandmothers in their fifties in September 2018, in Chirang district. They joked about how they have stayed put at this location since 1983 despite being 'chased away' by militants, floods or eviction drives. They would leave for a year or two but come back again. Referring to the 1990s when militant groups fighting for Bodo autonomy first targeted non-Bodo communities of the region (Hussain 2012), they shared that if they saw any group of young Bodo men they would feel scared. They admitted, however, that despite the many years between them, they would not know how to distinguish a 'militant' or 'miscreant' from a 'local' ordinary man.

I was told that times seemed better presently as human relations between communities in the area had re-acquired familiarity and ease. Mina, the older of the two, said that the other day her son sent her off to get *shimolu alu*, a local variety of seasonal potatoes, from nearby Shantipur (a Bodo dominated area), and the shared van she was travelling in broke down on the way. Another van driven by a Bodo man, which passed by but was too full to pick them up right away, came back to help the stranded passengers.

The last big incident in the area which led to a resurgence of tensions between communities was in early 2016. Two Bodo men,

A Bodo woman stopping to get pakodas (fritters) in the evening fried by a Bengali-speaking Hindu couple in Bengtol town in September 2018, Chirang district.

allegedly NDFB (Songbijit faction) militants, were pursued by the Army through Mina and Rima's hamlet, home mostly to people who identify as Axomiya, and then shot dead in the riverbanks close by. The women recounted how one of the bodies fell into the river and floated downstream. Encounters like this made news almost every day during 2015 and 2016 as 'Operation All Out', which involved the mobilization of as many as 9,000 personnel from the Army, the Central Reserve Police Force and the Assam Police against NDFB (Songbijit faction), was on in full swing (S. Sharma 2016).[20]

Mina explained that the Bodo villagers from nearby stopped coming to their village assuming that Axomiya people had confirmed the identity of these men to the security forces resulting in their horrific public deaths. She said that in a month or two, some of the more 'hot-headed men' who had led these accusations walked in one afternoon to collect fresh leaves for the *endi poka*, *eri* silkworm, and then stayed to have some alcohol brewed by the women.

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ENDNOTES

1. Adivasis, recognized as an Other Backward Class in Assam, is an umbrella term used to refer to as many as 96 ethnic groups who came to Assam to work at tea gardens in the late 19th century from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh (U. Misra, 2007).
2. I use the term Bengali-speaking Muslims to refer to a community which immigrated from erstwhile East Bengal starting in the late 19th century speaking a variety of dialects/languages loosely classified (though not without contention) under Bengali. While my interviewees (in Bongaigaon, Chirang and Kokrajhar) from this community used the term 'Muslim' when referring to themselves (and were identified by others similarly), I only preserve this usage in interview excerpts. This is to avoid creating confusion that they are a group held together only by a common religion (Islam) and that they are the only community following Islam in BTAD.
3. When unqualified, the word violence in this essay is used to refer to physical harm. This could be physical harm on lively bodies along with other forms of physical harm inflicted on the ethnic other which includes burning of houses and farmlands.
4. I use ethnicity, interchangeably with community, to refer to the entanglement of common language, physical features and (to some extent) religion along with placement within the rubrics of governmental classification (such as Schedule Tribe status) and other coordinates (such as origin, being targets of political persecution, etc.).
5. I use the term Axomiya to refer to people who identify (and are identified) as having the Assamese language as their mother tongue. Individuals who may identify simultaneously as belonging to other ethnic groups (like Rajbanshis or Bengali-speaking Muslims in BTAD) may also identify as Axomiya.
6. Plains tribe was a category introduced by the British colonial administration based on the assumption that 'tribes' in the plains were closer to their caste Hindu (or Muslim) brethren as compared to the socio-cultural distance between plains' people and hill tribes (Baruah 2003). In colonial Assam, plains' tribes could participate in limited electoral politics allowed at the provincial level in the early 20th century as opposed to hill tribes who lived in minimally administered 'homelands' (Pathak 2010). Plains tribes in Assam consist of communities such as Bodos.
7. Even as early as 1974, during the protests by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha regarding which script to use for writing Bodo, 16 protestors lost their lives in clashes with security forces (Prabhakar 1974).

8. This was also a period of 'fratricidal violence' between NDFB and BLT as they fought over territory for monopoly over levying tax, recruiting cadres and the lucrative timber trade (S. Saikia 2015, 216; Dutta 2018). Skirmishes and attacks between the cadres of NDFB and BLT, continued to draw casualties well into 2008 when NDFB was maintaining a ceasefire and BLT was officially disbanded (The Telegraph 2008).
9. All factions of NDFB have surrendered and signed a new peace accord in January 2020 which also set up the Bodoland Territorial Region.
10. I use the term village to refer to settlements (which may be mixed in terms of ethnic groups, usually with clustering) considered as a *gaon* by my interlocutors which may or may not coincide with administrative categories such as a revenue village.
11. Such comments are a source of resentment to the extent that they equate the action of extremists with that of the entire Bodo community.
12. The translation of the names of these forums are my own. One key argument made is that a demographic minority was given power to rule over the majority (Nath 2003). The non-Bodo forums resent that in the 2003 Accord, around 65 per cent of the seats in BTC were to be reserved for ST candidates (of which Bodos are a majority) when STs composed less than 40 per cent of the population in BTAD (Sarma and Motiram 2015). While it is true that data from the Census have established that the ST population is in a minority within BTAD, historians have suggested that major changes in the demographic composition took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of population inflow of peasant cultivators from East Bengal (S. Misra 2011) and Adivasis from Central India (J. Sharma 2011).
13. Santhals are counted as one of the more numerous ethnic groups composing the Adivasi community who came to Assam to work on tea gardens in the late 19th century from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh (U. Misra 2007).
14. Composing about 2 per cent of Assam's population as per the 1991 Census, Assam has a Nepali speaking community which migrated over time from Nepal or Bhutan (Devi 2007).
15. Groups of men (and women to a lesser extent) go to Bhutan on a daily basis to work as manual labourers (and sometimes for better paid work like masonry) via contractors. During rioting or floods going to Bhutan becomes more difficult.
16. Following the World Health Organization's definition, sexual violence in this essay is taken to be as 'any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise

directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.' (Krug, et al. 2002).

17. As I continued with my fieldwork, origins of this episode were pushed further into the past bringing in longstanding contestations around land (cf. A. Saikia 2012; Pathak 2012) and continued intimidatory activities of surrendered militants as relevant dynamics.
18. In quoted text '…' represent pauses while '(…)' indicates that words or sentences have been omitted.
19. It is tough to draw a direct link to establish whether the rape on October 19 2014 was in response to the rape in March 2014. Yet, acts of violence have wide ranging consequences which beget further violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) in ways which are not time or even place bound.
20. Reports in newspapers or by think tanks on Operation All Out speak of its impact in terms of 18–48 'neutralized' militants, 549–766 'apprehended' individuals along with seized stashes of improvised explosive devices, hand grenades and assorted weapons (cf. The Economic Times 2018; S. Sharma 2016).

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