Beyond Conflict and Territory: Re-imagining Resilience in Displacement through Narratives of an Adivasi Village in Bodoland, Assam

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Abstract

Most ethnic conflicts in Northeast India are fallout of colonial era policies and contesting versions of indigeneity, but their lesser researched impact on the human realm of survivors hold important hints for the future. The paper as a contextual background theoretically explores the role of indigeneity and territory in producing political violence in Bodoland in Assam and re-produces narratives of resilience of a community of Adivasis who had been displaced in the regional militant led violence. The paper has tried to show how resilience is a complex quality that entail attributes like, among others, refusal to surrender, putting faith in prayers, holding onto identity cards with original address, ways of co-existence with the conflicting community through church based dialogues or anti-alcohol campaigns. These narratives of resilience point towards hopeful possibilities in the Northeast, a space popularly viewed through the optics of chaotic violence, when conflict is also characterised by survivors as external and a disruption of life worlds.

Introduction

The recent Bodo Accord signed in the month of January 2020 hasraised hopes of reaching an enduring peace, but it has alsore-kindled long lingering insecurities among the non-Bodo communities in the now officially re-named as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), geographically located in Western parts of the Northeast Indian state of Assam . It brought on board four factions of the militant National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), along with other important Bodo civil society stakeholders namely the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) and the United Bodo People's Organisation (UBPO). The Bodos, an indigenous community from Assam, have waged a long struggle for recognition of their cultural, linguistic and political rights. Their struggle was mostly directed against the Axomiya elite politically dominant in Assam. From the late 1980s, frustrated at unfulfilled promises and a general condescension from

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the rulers at Dispur, the Bodo movement for autonomy took a militant turn.

The first attempt at a resolution in 1993 failed to stem the political turmoil. A second accord in 2003 succeeded in putting a working arrangement in place, but many Bodo groups remained alienated. It was within such a context that the third accord was welcomed for bringing together groups that had hitherto remained away. However, it also rekindled fears of the non-Bodos in the region. Apart from the elucidated reasons such as greater legislative powers to the council and greater integration of non BTC Bodo majority areas running contiguous to the BTR, this fear has a contemporary basis as non-Bodo groups like the Adivasis and Bengali Muslims have faced ethnically motivated persecution and targeted violence at the hands of Bodo militias and militant outfits since the early and mid 1990s. The existing political arrangement in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is a "hegemonic peace" endowed by the Indian state to placate the Bodo community, as the territorial council's 30 seats amongst a total of 40 contestable ones are reserved for Scheduled Tribes, a category that generally only the Bodos fulfil at present in the region (Mahanta, 2013). One result of such a hegemonic peace has been the systematic violence by Bodo militants on groups perceived to be non-autochthonous, particularly the Adivasis and Bengali Muslims.

The present paper is an attempt at understanding one aspect of such a violent displacement suffered by an Adivasi village community. It looks at two different but related aspects of the incident. The first is a theoretical account of indigeneity and territory coming together to produce political violence that ultimately displaced the Adivasis. The second objective is in documenting the travails of the displaced village community, later re-settled in a different area, through the lens of resilience. Resilience was not only an aspect of the community during and after displacement, it was also implicit in co-existing with the Bodos, a group they had been in a conflictual relationship with.

Collecting Data, Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The present study came out of an engagement in taking remedial classes for children affected by displacement in one of the   villages in the Chirang district of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam. The author was part of a team of four engaged in teaching at a primary school where the Adivasis (Mostly from the Santhal community and a few from the Munda community; however since it's a diverse group, they will be referred to as Adivasis in the paper) had settled after leaving the relief camp where they had stayed since displacement. They were originally inhabitants of a group of villages, namely Mawpar, Aai Nodi Dhubri (Parts one, two and three), and Digholdong. These villages are located north of the village of their original habitation on the north-bank of the Aai River, a major river in the region flowing from Bhutan. These villages were affected during the violence of 1996, and again in 1998.

In the village under study the abysmal position of the Adivasi in Assam[2] was reflective. Literacy is low among the inhabitants and they primarily depend on daily wage labour. The dearth of an educated populace means a hierarchical society as a few community elders play the guiding role, their decisions being generally accepted in the community. Two such prominent elders- a village schoolmaster and a village pastor- were the primary respondents in the study.

The interviews with them spread over a total period of two months: twice in 2017 in the months of May and December, and once in 2018 in the month of February.

A total of seven respondents, including the two primary ones, were interviewed. The small sample size of the study did not allow generalisability, however it made possible a method of data collection through in-depth unstructured interviews over a length of time. A methodology of in-depth qualitative data collection was followed which limited sample size, but at the same time is sought from a broad group (O'Leary, 2011). "Speaking on behalf" is a justification for taking the village elders as prime respondents. Oral narratives of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) or refugees are emphatically acknowledged as a methodological approach and have a long tradition within the humanities and social sciences (Najafizadeh ,2013a).Thus, one part of the focus of the study, the other part being a theoretical exploration of the indigeneity issue and displacement related to the Adivasis in BTR, is on documenting oral narratives and locating resilience in the same narratives. Because of an oral narrative approach, the study is descriptive in nature. Comparative analyses of displacement narratives and experiences are not a priority here.

The free flowing interviews moved from the generic to the specific because of the sensitive nature of the subject. Most of the respondents were polyglots- due to the multi-ethnic nature of the society they lived in, they could speak Santhali and Bodo, coupled with a fair amount of Axomiya, Hindi and Nepali. However, all communications were in the Axomiya language with the author, and a few sentences have been produced verbatim in the narratives to give essence to the speaker. The author was politely requested to keep the interactions limited to the literate few or "people who knew things". Although it seemed like enforcing a hierarchy in the beginning, their concern was at an attempt on outlining their story in the best of words and gestures. The power a researcher un-consciously wielded in the field, it may be recalled here, makes the "embarrassment" at re-producing facts or fluency of language an undesirable issue best avoided. In other words, such a request was aimed at making the researcher's task easier (language fluency) as well as a better representation of the community's narratives (literacy and leadership). It was an emphatic portrayal of the anxieties of political fallout of a violently displaced and dispossessed community. However,

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[2] Human development of Adivasis in Assam, traditionally called "tea-tribes" and "tea communities", in health, education and financial status is very low. Land alienation and deprivation, human trafficking, low wage labour, and the added socio-political disadvantage of non-ST status are important factors for the extremely low level of development and empowerment.

that meant an obvious limitation-interaction with the women of the community was out of bounds. The author's perceived identity as an English educated, urban, ethnic Assamese male was an important factor. The requests were respected and adhered to by the author.

Since the volatility of the conflict is still fluid, data was not collected in audio or video formats as that might have meant self-censure as well as anxieties on part of the community. Narratives were written down within a span of five hours of the interaction. Again, due to probable volatility, real names of persons have not been used in the narratives.

Before arriving at an understanding of resilience in narratives of the Adivasis, a brief theoretical exploration on the production of political violence in the Bodoland region that ultimately displaced the Adivasis now staying at the village under study is necessary for a context to the narratives of displacement and resilience.

Indigeneity, Past and Friction: Agents of Displacement ?

In the 20th century, the political consciousness of the Bodos developed in a backdrop of relative deprivation and unequal power relations with the ethnic Assamese (Baruah, 1999). Attempts at assimilation into the ethnic Assamese fold alienated them. One early instance at assimilation of Bodos was the, otherwise foresighted, Bordoloi sub-committee that was tasked with formulating a policy for the geographically located indigenous communities in the Northeast. The Bodos were understood as a part of the larger Assamese society. It reflected the British colonial era policies that did not put the plains dwelling Bodos at par with the hill dwelling communities of the Northeast like the Nagas and Mizos. Their homeland in the Western part of Assam was never classified as Backward Tracts (1919) or Partially Excluded and Excluded Areas (1935): categories reflecting a policy of segregation and apparent protection of the hill dwelling communities in undivided colonial Assam. Moreover the colonial state induced migration of East Bengali Muslim peasants to settle on and bring under cultivation what they termed as "wastelands", a colonial episteme of viewing lands, which included tribal commons and grazing pastures. Although, the Bodos were not alone to suffer dispossession as a result of these colonial era policies, the political dominance of the Assamese ruling class in the post-colonial period further gave an impetus to Bodo anxieties. The official language movement of 1960-61, medium of instruction language agitation of 1972, perceived betrayal of political and material aspirations after an early participation in the anti-foreigner Assam Agitation, and the failure of a consensus on territoriality through the first Bodo Accord of 1993 were important moments in the development of the Bodo political consciousness in post-colonial Assam.

To view theoretically, assertions of indigeneity by communities in Assam were influenced by three historical practices viz. the hills-plain divide, protection of tribal

belts and blocks, and creation of autonomous homelands. The first two policies originally devised by the colonial ethnographer state in undivided Assam found a continuity in the form of the Sixth Schedule, which led to a reification of ethno-botanical links of tribe and land (Vandekerckhove, 2009a). The result of such a link between the two, according to Sanjib Baruah, was twofold. While a genuine concern for indigenous cultures being swamped under the non-tribal Indian state behemoth was addressed, however the grant of ethnic homelands meant insecurity for other ethnic communities that shared the same living space. Assigning areas as natural habitats to specific communities meant the emergence of an "exclusive homeland consciousness" (Baruah, 2007). The solidification of ethnic identities in other colonial regimes, such as in Africa, a place where "tribalism" was deployed by the colonial anthropologists essentially to subdue the local peoples, later led to frictions between diverse communities (Oucho, 1997). As a consequence, cautions against the "costly mirage" of exclusively constituted ethnic homelands create a Balkanisation hypothesis in the Northeast (Bhaumik, 2009). Interestingly, Vandekerckhove also observes that such a "sons of the soil" narrative is different from other similar narratives that locate globalisation and decentralisation as the real instigators of ethnic conflict (Vandekerckhove, 2009b). The Bodo homeland demand movement fits the former narrative because other communities are in contestation and claim an indigeneity as genuine as the Bodos themselves. For instance, the Koch-Rajbongshis demand a separate state that overlaps in area with the region identified as homeland by the Bodos[3].

The enclosing of land for extractive purposes like tea plantations and reserve forests for timber was another enduring feature of the colonial state apart from its ethnographer approach. Unlike the pre-colonial times, this led to a "tribal entrapment" that systematically denied the communities traditional rights to forest and other natural resources (Vandekerckhove and Suykens, 2008). Ensnared in between tea-estates and forests that were increasingly becoming out of bounds, the Bodos lost huge tracts of land which were traditionally used for cultivation or as grazing grounds for their cattle. However, the Bodos, like the Ahoms and other pre-colonial era communities, even at the cost of dispossession of land, refused to cooperate as workers in the tea plantations.

The problem of labour in the tea plantations was solved by forcefully securing indentured labourers of various Adivasi communities from Central and Eastern India. Their dignity of life and labour was crushed under the scheming tactics of recruiters who served the Raj. They were crowded inside steamboats and railway coaches in unhygienic and suffocating conditions, and the ones who survived the ordeal were made to settle in racially structured lines inside the tea-estates. Called "coolie lines", a pejorative term now, these were ghettoised structures guarded from any freedom of

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[3] The Koch-Rajbongshi community of Assam, a group indigenous to other post-colonial spaces like Northern areas of West Bengal, Meghalaya, Nepal and Bangladesh, has been waging a long struggle for a separate state within the Indian Union. In September 2020, a new bill granting the Koch-Rajbongshis an autonomous council was passed in the state legislative assembly. The naming of the council as "Kamatapur", and not Koch or Koch-Rajbongshi, however invited criticisms from various quarters.

movement. Their working and housing conditions have been compared to the Trans-Atlantic Slave system (Hazarika, 1994).They were discouraged to develop any relations with their local counterparts and consequently this meant social servility, political unawareness and a relative outsider status (Fernandes, 2003a). The legacy of such historical exploitations has made the Adivasi in Assam socio-politically worse off than her counterparts in other states of India like West Bengal and Jharkhand. Firstly, the Adivasis in Assam are not scheduled as tribals in the constitution, which puts them at a disadvantage regarding affirmative action in employment and education; secondly, an effective socio-religious reformation among the Adivasi society in Assam never took off, unlike in North Bengal (Fernandes, 2003b).

It might be useful to think of the precarious position of the Adivasis and their friction with the Bodo demand for an ethnic homeland through the notion of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "pastness", essentially a claim of a common history, culture and region- factors that evolve and consolidate identities. A "real past" gives way to a "social past". The historian can at best only interpret the "real past" which is "inscribed in stone", whereas the "social past" changes according to political exigencies and hence is "moulded in clay". A notion of "pastness" enables social groups to claim real nationality, real citizenship or real indigeneity (Wallerstein and Balibar, 1991)

However Wallerstein's notion of "pastness" as producing a construct is not without its problems in the context of Northeast India, a region where assertions of indigeneity are a response to structural and oppressive power relations as well, embedded in real social and economic events. The notion is however useful in problematising political projects for exclusive ethnic homelands as certain communities are divested of autochthony to the land. An idea similar to Wallerstein's was advanced by Satish Deshpande in his theorisation of political Hindutva, where an abstract space is linked to a concrete space to produce the approximation of a utopia. The space mediates between the ideological subjects who engage in ideological labour to move towards the utopia: a resulting ideological space. The ideological labour is necessary to thrust a cultural meaning and a political identity on a place, over and above natural factors like geography and history which are necessary raw materials for such projects, but not sufficient (Deshpande, 1995). The campaign for Bodoland, like numerous others in the Northeast, in its extreme and exclusionary manifestation of armed political violence by militias, runs the danger of such an abstraction. Indigenous assertions on land, in extreme exclusionary imaginations, tend to create "essentialist ideologies of culture and identity" (Kuper, 2003).

It is also useful to mention Derrida's idea of hospitality while understanding political violence and indigenous assertions. Unconditional hospitality is the unrestricted reception of a guest by the host, whereas conditional hospitality tempers the unconditional through terms and conditions (Kakoliris, 2015). There is an anxiety of the host and guest changing places, and this anxiety, real or perceived, is true and substantial of many communities of the Northeast, especially against foreigners

entering through extra legal methods. Ironically, the Indian state revolving between ambivalence and suppression as a response to such indigenous assertions also displays a conditional hospitality titled "calculated kindness" when it comes to the absence of a concrete refugee policy in India (Samaddar, 2003). Similarly, an essence of "calculated kindness" can also be seen in the opposition to accord Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Adivasi in Assam by other ST communities of the state.

The Adivasi claim for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe is strongly contested by other socio-political groups articulating indigeneity in Assam, but they have been in India for as long as the earliest communities that made Assam and the Northeast their home (Xaxa, 1999). How to delimit the space where indigeneity is claimed? How does it fare for a community that had suffered forced, involuntary migration, social deprivation and economic exploitation? These are pertinent questions beyond the scope of this paper that need to be weighed in a manner not entirely conducive to immediate political claims and counter-claims. What is less nebulous is the fact that political violence is produced from an extreme articulation of territorialisation and essentialisation of identity, and in that, the Adivasi, as well as other communities like Bengali Muslims have suffered tragic violence and displacement. These episodic but violent fallouts have far reaching consequences on the affected people who are forced to develop specific forms of resilience for survival.

On Resilience in Displacement

Narratives of resilience are a defining feature of the millions of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) surviving in relief camps and foreign lands. Displaced persons and groups also co-exist with persons and groups they have been in a conflict with. Displacement necessitates a complex form of resilience that is difficult to define comprehensively, as resilience is a multidimensional concept and hence lacks a common definition. In fact, it could be all of these: moving forward, bouncing back or learning to adapt (Kaczmarek, 2017).The UK Department of International Development describes disaster resilience as "the ability of countries, communities, to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shock or stress" (Majidi and Hennion, 2014). A disaster, like displacement, can lead to innovative survival tactics by the displaced. IDPs and refugees are, thus, not only victims or survivors, but also agents of change (Lund, 2004). The ability to adapt and change is crucial, especially during protracted conflicts that necessitate protracted resilience. Resilience is thus not only the ability to bounce back from disruptive life challenges , but also the capacity to go on to live and love fully (Walsh, 2003). To go on loving fully is not always the case, and as the following narratives of the displaced Adivasis from the village under study would show, the absence of a complete return to the past or the absence of love fully has its roots in a desire for justice and not necessarily in bitterness.

Displacement could mean a redistribution of resources, particularly of land, as one group could benefit at the cost of another (Wood, 2003). Such losses impair a group's

ability to recover their socio-economic position (Justino, 2012a). Moreover, it could mean a reification of social relations because the lines between ordinary people and militants actually taking part in ethnic cleansings often get blurred. Orchestration of violence is usually directed by militants inducing common people to join in, motivated by self- interest and greed (Collier and Hoeffle, 2004). Sometimes the non participation of civilians with armed groups becomes costlier than participation. Affiliation with armed groups also means security for family and protection from rival armed groups (Justino, 2012b).Affiliation could mean refuge from indiscriminate violence and recourse to resources like information and skills that are important during crisis situations. Identity also constrains choice, thereby disallowing an end to violence as acts could be perpetrated based on identity, looked upon as violent by the other group (Kreidie and Monroe, 2002). The Bodo-Adivasi conflict witnessed the blurring of lines between armed groups or militias and common people.

A return to the past as the place of origin and former livelihoods is a popular discourse that unfortunately is not always conducive (Fagen, 2011a). For a community that is unable to make such a return, it could mean an unsuccessful integration into the new socio-political setting. The longing for home can keep a displaced community from establishing deep roots in the new space (Najafizadeh, 2013b). Such situations could potentially become intractable as communities isolated from the host society might harbour retributive impulses against the other, becoming easy recruits for armed groups partaking in political violence. Further, a transformation from victims or survivors to perpetrators could take place (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011a). When a community displaced through violence does not become any of these potential formations, it could be a case of successful and happy integration or developing a complex layer of resilience in their relations with the other group. As the narratives would show, the Adivasis of the village under study lean towards the latter.

Resilience in the Relief Camp and Settlement

Chandan Murmu still remembered in 2017 about the night his village was vacated. He taught at the old school and continued to teach in the new one after re-settling. Facing targeted attacks carried by militants, he fled with others from his village at Aai Nodi Dhubri Number 2 in May 1996. Until then, said Chandan Murmu, they had no reason to suspect any violence and the threats to vacate their homes came unanticipated. He explained:

> *We were hearing about the violence. There were a lot of news all around through word of mouth, but we had faith that we would not be harmed....The people we had lived together with for so many years , suddenly came to us, telling us how much they did not want to harm us physically. They warned us to leave before they were forced to change their minds. Before that we were asking our neighbours of other ethnicities to not leave...Pisot tu aamie jabo logia hol(But we were the next to leave)*

The Adivasis did not expect that their fellow neighbours and old acquaintances would ask them to leave. As decades old ties broke down, it showed how indigeneity claims tend to re-classify perceived relative insiders as different and dangerous, leading to pre-emptive strikes against a social group (Li, 2002). In a sense, the land has to be purged of non-autochthons (Vandekerckhove, 2009c).These assertions are clearly a threat to different but non discrete communities in the Northeast, testified by numerous ethnic clashes over the years, apart from human rights violations by the state backed security forces.

After being asked to leave, Chandan Murmu, who knew the militants in person, tried and failed in persuading them. The young men of his village crossed the flooded Aai river that lay to the south and assisted the children and the old. A pregnant lady conceived a baby in the river. Terrified and tired, they found shelter in the field of a veterinary college, later converted into a relief camp, at about five kilometres of distance from the river bank. The field sheltered about ninety families from the cluster of villages beyond the river, including Chandan Murmu's village. A police station, college and a few schools were situated nearby the veterinary ground, giving a sense of security. Although the camp was located at only a few kilometres distance from their uprooted homes, it was a case of forced displacement, because as noted by Ulrich Oslender, displacement is not only characterised over long distances as forced movement across villages even along the same river falls in the category of displacement (Oslender, 2007a). It is important to emphasise the unique nature of these kinds of displacement because in popular discourse, displacement commonly produces the imagery of long distance, which is an exception for many of the displacements that take place in the Northeast ranging from village level to intra-district level.

The relief camp inmates were cramped in unhygienic and unhealthy conditions. Many new born babies and elderly people died of disease and shortage of medicines. A substantial amount of male inmates took to alcoholism, and consequently, the community ran out of elders. The loss was profound because patriarchal communities rely on men of age and experience for leadership. That is especially true during times of crises. The ravages of alcoholism would have major bearings on the community, an aspect that would be discussed later in the paper. A young woman, Sugi Hansda, recounted their experience in the relief camp:

> *I don't remember exactly when we fled from our homes. I was a very young child then and have only faint memories. What I do remember clearly was the hardship. Life was very hard there. My father died in the camp. The people living near the camp thought us to be dirty as the camp was a squalid place. Ghrina koresil ama k(They detested us). Passers-by would block their nostrils.*

The hardships went on and in 2010, after more than a decade's stay at the relief camp, they were asked to leave. Each family was given a token amount of INR 50,000 and asked to vacate at short notice, a period that was later changed to one month after

repeated requests by the camp inmates. Kusal Murmu, the village pastor, explained the ordeal. Each family was given a cheque of Rs.50,000 and asked to leave within few days of receiving the cheque. He narrated:

> *Kukuror dore amar logot bebohar koresil (We were treated like dogs). Where could we go? We were not animals that could live under an open sky? We begged for a month's time. Fortunately, our request was accepted. Grace of God brought news that a Nepali person was looking to sell off his land nearby.*

As the amount was inadequate to buy an individual plot for each family, Murmu explained that they paired up with another family to pool the resources of the two families together and procure land for homestead. The attempt at recreating a village settlement was done to safeguard security of life. The process was reflective of a "community effort hypothesis", which meant that survivors of ethnic cleansings tend to stay close together and in regular contact with people of the earlier social settlement, enabling the contemplation of a joint return, bringing safety in numbers and thereby heightening the chances of a collective return (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011b).

Houses were constructed on the new plot after clearing it of vegetation. Mostly bamboo was used for construction in the beginning, and it was only later that mud and clay houses were built.

Incomplete Surrender as Resilience

Along with their homes, the Adivasis had to leave behind crop fields and cattle. Prior to the displacement, each family had sufficient land for self sustenance. Kusal Murmu explained that his family had to buy only mustard oil back then. The land was fertile and anything could be grown on it. The poor did not have to wander from door to door in search of work as they were compelled to do in present circumstances and none had to starve. However, with time and situation, subsistence farmers and the less well off were reduced to wage labourers searching for work on a daily wage basis.

Resettlement did not mean the disappearance in the desire to go back. The memory of their fields, homes and trees constantly troubled and reminded them of what was lost. For Kusal Murmu, the thought was unbearable at times. He narrated an attempt at reclamation of some part of their lost land as late as 2013. About forty men together decided to plant rubber saplings in a plot near their original village. They worked on the patch for about a week without disturbance. But one day, two young men showed up. They carried arms. They asked the group of forty men to leave immediately. However, Murmu and his group instead of retreating confronted the two young men as they were more in numbers. An altercation ensued. Murmu and his men noticed few more young men at a distance observing them, they were all armed. The group decided to retreat. More than an attempt at returning, the incident was a kind of symbolic resistance. They regarded the act of planting saplings near the old village as an act of resistance.

Defiance became an essential part of life and refusal to surrender an aspect of their resilience. It could be located in the context of the typical encouragement given to returnees of displacement to determine for themselves the potential risks, relying on their own wisdom (Fagen, 2011b). The school teacher, Chandan Murmu, explained their resolve:

> *We resist in every possible way. We resist whenever we can. Unfortunately, that is not the case with all communities (like the Bengali Muslims) who have also been at the receiving end.*

Another instance of the resistance is the annual payment of *khajana* (land tax) on the dispossessed lands. The act of paying land tax is symbolic of the true claimants, a way of asserting their rights over the land. However, it is not financially possible for everyone in the community to continuously pay tax on land that was de facto no longer under their occupation. Chandan Murmu is amongst the few who could still afford to pay an annual tax. His official documents like ration card and voter's identity card still carried his old village address. He did not intend to change the old address.

These periodic and consistent acts of resistance are exercised within the context of violence being an unpredictable aspect of life with fear as a constant company. It has crept deep into the psyche, as Chandan Murmu recounted how they could sense trouble at the first glance and how spontaneous violence could be and a small incident was sufficient to trigger violence. They had to be on their vigil for self defence. He recounted how they had spent sleepless days since the doomed night of 1996 when they fled from their home. An unknown fear of violence engulfs them especially during the Council elections.

During the election to the Territorial Council in 2014, the Adivasis were targeted by insurgents in different places. There were about a hundred deaths including infants. Chandan Murmu recounted an incident that occurred in his village during that time:

> *It was night time. The miscreants had reached very near the school….They had guns but we chased them away. Our numbers must have scared them. We did not have guns, but bows and arrows.*

The Adivasis drew on their traditional experience in tackling vulnerable situations. One way of doing that was of re-grouping the men and boys around the perimeter of the village in small groups. The women and children are kept at one place as the men stand guard. Chandan Murmu explained that all night vigil was their only security. The community has introduced rules to ensure security. They have made it compulsory for able bodied male above the age of fourteen to offer their services on rotational basis in guarding the village[4].

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[4] Chandan Murmu stated: *In December 2014, I stood guard with my eldest son at one end of the village. We cannot afford any healthy male staying aloof as it's a matter of life and death. Young boys go to school and sit for exams in the mornings after night long vigils.*

The Adivasi's traditionally carry with them knowledge of archery. Young boys are taught to be expert archers. The author had the privilege of seeing young boys practicing archery on tree barks. Everyone in the village is encouraged to learn archery, as the value of such an enterprise is exhibited during the village archery competition held annually. Defensive skills are kept sharp as a collective effort. Although they had crossed a very difficult period in the camps after displacement, they stand prepared ready to face any recurrence of violence. Collective involvement during night vigils, knowledge and use of traditional weaponry and refusal to give up claims on the land is a crucial aspect of their resilience and refusal to surrender.

Role of Prayers and Co-Religionists in Building Resilience

Religious piety helped tide through the hardships in the relief camp because prayers performed in a collective were seen as empowering. Kusal Murmu, the pastor, credited "divine grace" for providing a place for settlement, after being asked to leave at an extremely short notice. We may allude to the work of Rachel Kashena, who in her monograph on narratives of people who had lost their spouses in the Naga-Kuki conflict of Manipur in the early 1990s, had observed the importance of prayers for survivors of ethnic violence. Prayers helped in surrendering difficulties unto God, and as prayers got answered, survivor's belief in them also increased (Kashena, 2017a). Recounting an incident in the camp [5], Kusal Mumu attributed his community's survival to prayers:

> *It was in 2004. The militants had set up a bomb launcher or something similar right next to us in the camp across the wall of the veterinary hospital. They wanted to kill us even in such a condition. The plan failed because the instrument malfunctioned. We were lucky.*

He continued and credited their earnest prayers to God for protection when the launcher failed to create any harm and casualty among his tribe while a similar attack onto the security forces was successful. He was emphatic that prayers to God were their only saving grace. These narratives corroborated the utility of unsuspecting belief for a people during an adversity. The village church constructed post settlement, doubling up as a small community centre for social events, also functioned as a channel for dialogue. During the violence, the Adivasis had to abandon their newly built church after converting to Protestant Christianity from the traditional *Sarna* faith. Another church was thus constructed on a priority basis after resettlement in the new plot of land. It is a neat small structure made of clay and wood; it has a pulpit, wooden table, chair and a speaker. The attendees sit on mats in the floor. Apart from regularly held praying sessions, it came to play an important role in intra village community life. A special mention could be made of the congregation held on the first day of every

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[5] The killings of relief camp inmates are not without precedent in the state of Assam. Monirul Hussain cited an incident at Banhbari, Barpeta district in 1994 when militants not only targeted Na-Asamiya Muslim peasants in "their homes, fields forests, and villages, they even did not spare those who took shelter at the Banhbari relief camp run by the state" (Hussain, 2000).

New Year. Paran Tudu, a surrendered cadre of an armed Adivasi underground group, narrated that everyone is called upon to confess any ill feelings and grudge one may hold towards another…Everything held inside is let out. The implication being that such an exchange on New Year's Day kept the community united by paving the way for strained relations to repair.

Moreover, Bodos, including leaders and elders, visit the Church upon invitation on special occasions. Partaking in jointly held prayers, the Bodo visitors are co-religionists from neighbouring villages. It allows for social interactions and opportunities for both communities to bring out crucial questions and issues. Thereby a space is created for questions that have perturbed the Adivasis since the displacement and its attendant violence.

Chandan Murmu explained the backdrop of that peculiar relationship:

> *We visit their churches and they visit ours. We pray together. They also come here to sell pork and other food stuffs on the festive seasons such as Christmas…On the surface, our relations are so cordial. It is then difficult to face the reality... It is difficult for a guest here to notice that a lot is present than meets the eye.*

He further explained:

> *I invoke the Lord. He died for all of humanity. Christianity preaches love and compassion for the neighbour. So, I ask them why we can't go back to our own, rightful land. I tell them it was your people who took it all away. I do not say this as a personal accusation. But I ask them, why can't you intervene on behalf of us?*[6]

These questions, however, do not have easy answers and sometimes lead to uncomfortable situations when it is accused that "politics" is being brought up amidst their relations. The Adivasis, on their part, feel the Bodos hesitate to take any steps to change the status quo, conveniently using religion to show shallow solidarities. Kishor Hembrom, a young pastor of the village church, explained the predicament that they are often told such incidents are works of third party. He wondered and once asked if the third party had a surname and identity of its own?

The Adivasis put onus on moral responsibility as they saw it. Their co-religionists are also a part of the ethnic group that had violently displaced them. Owning moral responsibility is different from the question of causal responsibility. In her work on responsibility of groups in ethnic conflicts, Virginia Held examined owning responsibility as an important component for reconciliation. While it is true that varying degrees of moral responsibility exist and not everyone could be held responsible merely for sharing the same ethnic identity, the real power of moral responsibility and its utility

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[6] Paran Tudu and Chandan Murmu noted that when congregations are held in the church, the message of peace and solidarity notwithstanding, answers are sought and grievances of the Adivasis expressed.

lies in putting constraints on the unjustifiable actions of co-ethnicities (Held, 2002)

The narratives point towards three aspects that might pave the way for reconciliation in the future at best or maintain a tenuous but enduring peace at the worst. First, social interaction takes place between the two communities in various spheres, including the church pointing at a significant role played by religion. The Adivasis realise the importance of keeping meaningful lines of communication open, and the Bodos also reciprocate to that. Second, the discussions do not reach their desired ends but that does not hinder their occurrence. Third, in spite of uncomfortable silences accompanying searching questions, the construction of an *Other* is tempered by such interactions. The third aspect will be described below in more details. The Adivasis realise that, despite their precarious past, allowing for a reification of social relations would not be in their interest.

Resilience and Inter-Community Relations in Taming Potential Violence

Social interaction between the two communities is not limited to the Church. Being daily wage labourers dependent heavily on the availability of work, the Adivasis go for work in Bodo households. Keeping an in-group/out-group mentality, something that often accompanies an identity based conflict, would not sit well in the daily search for employment (Millar, 2012).

Taking note of the otherwise amicable relations, Chandan Murmu observed that the Bodos have been the best of friends and neighbours with the Adivasis. The Bodos are easy going people but trouble begins when politics starts elsewhere and the impact carries forward. He was emphatic in saying; *Baheror pora hawa aahi gondogul kori diye* (It is the winds from the outside that create chaos). Similarly Biren Kisku, a wage labourer, observed that Bodos are a fair group of people and the Adivasis went for wage work as *hazira* (labourers) to Bodo areas and wage rates were paid as agreed.

Social interactions, especially in the site of the village market, also exist with the Bodos who came to own the Adivasi's homes and fields. Conversations during such encounters veer from normal small talk to jokes on how one had come to kill or chase away the other in the past. Chandan Murmu explained further that those who had taken over their lands and homes are common people induced by the militants in exchange of support. The Bodos have settled for good and even if the issue of land and ownership is broached for discussion they turn away. Thus, a complete breakdown of social relations is thus averted, despite the fact that past grievances and demands for reclamation produce uncomfortable situations and bring conversations to an end.

An important factor that often gets overlooked in prevailing literature on ethnic conflict in the Northeast is intra village inter ethnic amity. At the local level in villages in multi-ethnic places like Assam, people usually have intimate relations cutting across ethnicities, for instance, by virtue of shared work in the agricultural fields, social

intercourses like marriages and fairs, economic relations like markets and other cultural festivities. Hence, the outbreak of violence based on identity is not easily spontaneous. A Bodo family would not suddenly attack an Adivasi or Muslim family, and the same is true the other way round, just because news had reached them of one attacking the other at a different place. When the families in question are neighbours or members of the same village, attacking each other is more improbable. It is the influence of "outside" agents, often external to the village, like militants or radical political activists, who coax and coerce the locals into violent action and reaction. Chandan Murmu termed this phenomenon, in a metaphorical sense, as "winds from the outside". Dwizen Islary, a Bodo inhabitant of a village neighbouring the Adivasis, narrated the experience usually faced during such times:

> *During the disturbance, we were asked by people from outside the area to destroy burn and occupy the lands and houses of our neighbours…How could we do that? They were like family, known to us for a very long time since the time of our ancestors. I think harming them would be a great sin.*

As he explained further, ties and bonds do go beyond immediate kinship where a village is like a family and villagers are known to each other. There is external pressure to break the friendly peaceful relation among the communities living in the village and the trouble brews from such external intrusion. There are accusations of betraying one's own people suffering elsewhere if villagers did not respond to such external reporting and engage in inter community animosity.

Communities have worked their own system and ways to preserve the peace that pre-exists. At the local level, in the Adivasi village, whenever tensions flared up, including minor incidents, the matter is taken up with local leaders and organisations. During the author's fieldwork, an incident of altercation followed by threatening with sharp weapons occurred between a young Bodo man and an Adivasi man. The case was taken up by the Adivasis with the local All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) activists, and the matter was resolved without violence. In fact, the practice is of taking up such matters with "the other" people, to the detriment of unilateral decisions. The "parent" community is expected to render justice on its erring member and not on a member of any "other community". Chandan Murmu recollected an incident that illustrated the particular understanding that had developed between the two communities when two young men created trouble a few years back and villagers apprehended these people. None was assaulted or beaten but kept tied to a post near the school and elders from their community were called to and the young men were handed over to the elders who had come. Reprimanding the youths for their fault was the responsibility of the community elders. This step has helped in building good faith and maintains the calmness. The simple rules keep minor incidents from magnifying and potentially turning violent. A cautious approach is followed by the Adivasis and individual instantaneous reaction is discouraged.

Apart from the narrative of interactions mentioned above, the two community's relations interestingly revolve around the issue of locally brewed alcohol. Due to the far reaching influence of Protestant Christianity, many villages around the Adivasi village have a Spartan attitude towards any form of intoxication. The sentiment of alcohol as a social evil runs across communities, Bodo and Adivasi, who are Protestants by faith. Chandan Murmu explained the reason behind the opposition to any form of intoxication:

> *We are at the bottom rung of society. How can we risk our trifle well being by drinking, even if it's for enjoyment? When someone earns Rs 200 for a day's labour and spends almost all of that money on alcohol, how can he survive? No one will go to work, families will get ruptured. We are a community who have fought ethnic persecution, state apathy and historical marginalisation. We have to be vigilant regarding these destructive habits. Many families and lives have been already destroyed infront of my eyes because of alcohol.*

He problematised drinking among the Adivasi community in general and argued that for a long time, drinking has been a bane for the community. The stereotypical image of the Adivasi after a hard day's toil finally spending his hard earned money on drinks in the evening is but a sad reality. Ages of servitude have left the Adivasi people ill equipped to to spend and invest their hard earned money wisely. Entrepreneurial capacity is found wanting among the Adivasis. One is happy to be working under a *master* remain contented at the prospect of a little money. For people surviving on wage income with no guarantee of two square meals a day, therefore can ill afford to waste their money on drinks. Children and family tend to be vulnerable in such conditions.

Because of these concerns, the Adivasis have campaigned against alcoholism at the local level. The memory of losing many men to alcohol addiction in the relief camp was also important in these anti-alcoholism drives.

The drives against alcohol become complicated when it comes to Bodo households selling alcohol in the neighbourhood. In a village very near to that of the Adivasis, a few Hindu Bodo families brew alcohol and sell it for a living. The Adivasis for all practical purposes cannot ask them to stop brewing and selling their traditional beverage. Their attempts are instead directed at their own community. They ask, and sometimes coerce as the needs arise, their community people to stay away from alcohol and alcohol selling households. On one occasion, when an Adivasi household started brewing alcohol, the community elders immediately forced a shutdown of that business. As far as livelihood is concerned, the essence is that one family's livelihood should not become the cause of destruction of six other families. A particular concern however arises when an Adivasi drinks at an alcohol selling Bodo household. The Adivasis do not want any chances at risking, for instance, a drunken brawl, because such incidents have the potential to deteriorate into bigger tensions and even violence.

The campaign against alcohol is also pertinent because often it is the women of the household who brew and serve alcohol to the customers. This is true of both the communities. The customers are mostly men who sit in groups and drink at the seller's house itself. The community elders are apprehensive of crimes of a sexual nature taking place in such settings. Gendered notions of honour and vulnerability also influence the hard-line approach. Any form of conflict arising from a trivial drunken brawl or serious accusations of molestations is apparently prevented by these campaigns.

The Adivasis, by engaging in a social interaction with the Bodos through the church, have added to resilience because it prevents the further solidifying of social relations and keeps the minimum lines of communication open. Co-existence with the Bodos is made smoother despite mutual insecurities and suspicions. Similarly, the self-driven campaigns against alcoholism are another instance of a subtle resilience as inter-ethnic tensions are sought to be prevented before occurrence, even from an incident of drunken rage. The financial and health concerns of the Adivasis are also safeguarded from further deterioration brought about by alcoholism.

Concluding Remarks

The short sighted policies of the post-colonial state along with the failure of the Assamese ruling class to take the Bodo assertions in confidence made the Bodo agitation take a violent turn in the late 1980s and the following decade, and as identity increasingly became tied to an exclusive idea of territorial indigeneity, the fall-out of political violence was on communities like the Adivasis and Bengal origin Muslims (also termed Na-Asamiya/Neo-Assamese, and more recently Miya, reclamation of a term that carried pejorative connotations). The Third Peace Accord of 27th January 2020 has put the question of a separate Bodo homeland in the backburner for the time being, but it had also elicited new fears among communities that are relatively politically marginalised.

Most narratives that the paper had documented were self-explanatory. The author did not or could not feel the need to minutely deconstruct or theorise the Adivasis lived experience, as that would have obstructed the objective of exploring the human face of resilience in displacement. The study does not claim that resilience is a character of all displaced groups fleeing ethnic violence, but is an attempt at reaching out to varied experiences of IDPs and refugees, without an essentialisation and generalisation of their experiences. The Adivasis after displacement evoked resilience in both symbolic and material ways. Faith in their prayers, possession of the original address in their identity cards, night vigils and anti-alcohol campaigns, to cite a few instances, have kept them afloat in the most difficult times. Resilience of a subtler nature, for instance, co-existing with the Bodo community through church dialogues and taming potential violence and thereby avoiding the likelihood of petty quarrels turning into greater frictions or conflicts, are both prudential and foresighted.

Although the study had focused on the experience of a displaced Adivasi community among many others in the region, the repercussions of violence are felt by multiple communities. During the author's fieldwork, a Bodo man recounted about the time when his household ran out of food essentials during the violence and had to survive only on pulses for a month. He recounted the time when he lived in fear at the thought of his young high school going son being recruited by militants. In fact, in the aftermath of violence, "spaces of terror" are created (Oslender, 2007b). An instance of hysteria generated by a rumour during the author's fieldwork would perhaps illustrate the point. A targeted vaccination drive in schools by the state government was resisted as it was feared to be a ploy to inject students of non-Bodo communities with fatal diseases. Scared parents rushed to the schools reaching for their wards and confronted teachers, principals and even security forces who were brought for law and order purposes. The author and his fellow colleagues were asked by curious and scared people who pointed their hands at laptop bags and asked whether those were meant for keeping things used for inoculation. Upon approaching a school teacher, he remarked that the teachers were helpless in the attempt to dispel the fear mongering, as that would amount to taking sides and risks in the unlikely but probable event of any child falling sick due to other reasons.

Sanjib Barua (2005) theorises that Northeast as a space is characterised as manifesting "durable disorder" through various low intensity and sustained conflicts involving both state and non state agents, where one finds co-existence, resilience and sometimes, selective forgetting by survivors of political (e.g. ethnic) violence, as a powerful way of not only moving towards a resolution, but also reconciliation. Studies on tragedies like the massacre near Nellie in Assam (1983) and the Naga-Kuki clashes (1992-93) for example have taken a constructive approach as to not only visualise what had been lost, but also at the same time, to bridge over their intractable nature (Kashena, 2017b; Kimura, 2013).

However the volatility accompanied by contested political developments make reconciliation a challenging prospect in the BTR. The Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) model which goes beyond the realm of conflict resolution is ideally suited for protracted violence based on a racial, communal or ethnic nature. However, it does not have a precedent in India officially, and the necessary groundwork of confidence building is weak in the BTR, an important reason being the under-representation of the Adivasis (and other non-Bodo groups)in the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC). A positive aspect, however, is the exteriority of the violence that the Adivasis and Bodos ascribed to. The understanding of violence as "having arrived here" helps in the repairing of social relations post the worst phase(s). Locating problems outside the socio-political boundaries of villages has been a defining factor in the success of the TRC of Peru that dealt with the aftermath of an armed insurgency and state repression of the 1980s and 1990s (Theidon, 2006). Chandan Murmu's "winds from outside" metaphor and Dwizen Islary's bewilderment at the pressure to engage in violence with his neighbour could in the future provide a way that would lead to a genuine rapprochement between the two communities and transcend the politically motivated violence.

Acknowledgement

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