

**Centre For Policy Analysis**

***A Daylight Massacre***

**Report of the fact- finding team into the violence in Baska  
District, BTAD, Assam  
May 1, 2014**



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# **REPORT OF FACT-FINDING TEAM INTO VIOLENCE IN BAKSA DISTRICT, ASSAM ON MAY 1 AND 2, 2014**

On 1 May 2014, violence broke out in the Narayanguri village in Baksa district of the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) of Assam. This violence has claimed at least 45 lives, as officially confirmed so far. At least 10 more people are reported missing. Most of those killed were women and children. Of the 72 households, 70 were completely burned down with nothing left in the village for the impoverished families who managed to survive the carnage.

A fact-finding team organized by the Centre for Policy Analysis, Delhi visited the affected villages and the main camp in Baska where the people directly affected by the violence reside, on 10 and 11 May 2014. The members of the team included Seema Mustafa, Anand Sahay and Satish Jacob, all senior journalists, Anuradha Chenoy, senior academic and political activist, and Harsh Mander, social worker and writer. The team spoke to affected people and many eye-witnesses in the camp, local officials (including the DC Vinod Seshan who could only be contacted by telephone) and local security personnel who were deployed in the affected area, members of the National Commission of Minorities who were also in the area at the same time, and a range of civil society representatives who met the team in Guwahati. This is the report of the fact-finding team<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This report also contains inputs from young activists Abdul Kalam Azad, Aldrin Majumder and Saba Sharma

## Investigating the Massacre

The car from Guwahati to Baksa district in Bodoland turned out to be a time machine, transporting the fact finding team within four hours into another era of violence, bloodshed, in an inaccessible terrain crossed only in ancient boats, walking through rocky water beds, wading through high currents in full leg deep water for almost two hours at a stretch to get to Narayanguri and Khagrabari villages.

A tiny muddy road after getting off a second boat takes one into a land that civilisation has not reached. On the one side is the Beki river, deep and with high current, on the other is a thick forest that stretches on for over 25 kilometres to the Bhutan border, and for at least another 12 kilometres after. On the other side are the two villages, if these can be called that, hamlets really with no electricity, no water, no dispensary, nestling against the deep forest, in deep poverty. The villagers too have to take this long, tedious and dangerous route when River Beki displays her nastier side, for their day to day needs, for medical help, for work, for studies, for life. Development has not touched them, and poverty has never released them.

The villages which suffered the violence, are literally the last habitations before the Bhutan border begins, separated from them by the buffer of a thick forest in which still armed militants are believed to enjoy an untroubled haven.

The residents are all Bengali speaking Muslims and as the events of May 1 sadly demonstrate, such has become the environment in Bodoland and in other parts of Assam as well, that to be a Muslim or to speak in Bengali has become a crime.

On May 1, the menfolk had gone to seek work, or buy necessities - as is their regular routine - and mostly women, children and a few aged and disabled men were in the villages at about 4 pm. Suddenly they heard the sound of machine gun fire, and at least 30-40 fully armed men, led by forest personnel that many recognised, emerged from the forests and started firing on the women and children. Terrified they started running to the other side of the village, but within minutes they were blocked again by the armed men. The bullets felled women, and children, and the terrified mothers were left with no recourse but to grab their babies and jump into the turbulent waters of River Beki.

The armed men started shooting at the villagers in the waters. Mothers died and their children were taken to certain death by the waters. Babies were wrenched from their mother's arms by the currents, and by the time the attack ended 45 persons, mostly women and children were dead, and at the time of writing this ten are still missing. As a last message to the poor, helpless, villagers who have been left at the very end of civilisation to eke a living, the attackers set the village on fire. Of the 72 houses, 70 were completely gutted. A baby left behind was picked up and smashed on a machine, many others were shot as they ran and their bodies were found later in the forests. Tiny children hid behind trees, trembling with fear, as they saw their mothers and siblings die in front of their eyes.

Many of them spoke of their experience later, and were clearly in need of counselling and gentle therapy. A girl of nine years, spoke of her mother trying desperately to escape by jumping into the Beki River with a baby of four months in one hand and her brother of three years in the other. She saw her and her brother

shot and the little baby swept away by the currents. She survived by swimming underwater even as the bullets rained. Another boy her age spoke to us about his mother and younger sister being killed in their home, whereas he miraculously escaped to the forest, and watched as the militants shot the women and children even as they jumped into the river, and the attackers systematically set their homes on fire. Many hours later, when the security personnel finally arrived at the village, an announcement was made from the loud-speaker in the village mosque, and they emerged from their hiding places.

It is remarkable that all the children who we spoke to mentioned the names of local forest guards who they recognised including one Rajan Boro, as leading the attackers. We learnt that surrendered militants had been appointed by the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) as forest guards and armed, and located in the village. The local security personnel also confirmed that some of the bullets in the bodies were from official forest rifles, and others from automatic weapons.

The armed men vanished as suddenly as they had emerged. As stated, the villagers including children recognised many as forest personnel of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD). FIRs were filed with the police naming many of those who had fired and killed innocent children and women, timing the attack to coincide with the men being away, but many of those who did so were told to change or obliterate the names of the accused. No action has been taken to identify and arrest the perpetrators of the heinous crime. The Assam government has, as always, announced a decision to hold a judicial enquiry into the incident that in this part of the world carries the real and present

danger of certain closure of the case even before it has been heard (please see the next section on the History of Impunity).

The terrified villagers are living in a camp across the river now. They have flimsy and low plastic sheets serving as tents into which they can enter only if they crouch, with no sanitary or other facilities. The tents are no defence against the rains, and the camp itself is in low-lying areas which would be quickly submerged in any rainfall. The children are traumatised, every family has lost a loved one and more, and no one present could say what their future would be. A pregnant woman swam to safety but delivered her baby as soon as she came ashore. She is currently in hospital. A father, eyes brimming with tears, had lost his wife and two children in the attack. A little girl speaks of seeing her mother die in front of her eyes. The stories were endless, each more depressing and traumatic than the other.

The camps provide no refuge from the torrential rain. And certainly no refuge from more such attacks. Villagers point to a spot of land, less than half a kilometre away from this camp, where another camp had been set up in similar circumstances exactly 20 years back, in 1994, in the first of what would prove to be a series of attacks on Bengali Muslims and what are called the 'tea-tribes', descendants of Santhals who were brought in to labour in the tea gardens around 200 years ago. The attackers had come back and set the relief camp on fire again, and again nearly 50 people were killed, once again many of them women and children. This fear stalks the people in the camp, although now they are under pressure from the authorities to go back to their village. Some effort is being made by the district authorities to rebuild the tenements, but as the villagers point out, "at the end of the day we will be alone, until the next time we are attacked."

The attack was clearly planned and while the Tarun Gogoi government in Assam insists that the perpetrators of the violence were from the banned militant outfit National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) the local people who have been hit deny this. They recognised the killers as the surrendered militants who have been employed subsequently by the BTAD forest department, with some of them on duty in the village, and known to every child there. One of these persons has reportedly been arrested although this could not be independently confirmed by the team, just as reports that he had been released within a couple of days because of connections in the local government could not be verified. The state authorities have been quoted in the local media as saying that 26 persons have been arrested, but again there was no independent confirmation of this. The survivors denied that any of the perpetrators of the violence had been arrested.

The men were heavily armed as mentioned earlier. They had come to kill, not just threaten. They came without warning, or without earlier threats. It is being perceived by even the victims as election related violence, a message sent out to the Bengali Muslims in this case to vote for the Bodo supported candidate, and not as for a non Bodo, surrendered ULFA militant.

These poor, helpless villagers have borne the brunt of existence for decades now. This time they were mowed down because of their voting preferences. Earlier in 1994 when they were first attacked, they were killed because of being illegal migrants, which they are not. The perpetrators of the first and subsequent attacks have not been punished. This of course still determines their non-status in BTAD. They bear the cross of the worst kind of

manipulative politics that has placed them on the fringe, literally out of the scope of planning and development and security. There are nearly 500 persons in the camp, all too scared to return, and bewildered as to why they are being asked to go back to a village where they do not even have a makeshift, miserable tent to cower under.

## **Culpability for the Violence**

### **1. A History of Impunity**

This current episode of targeted brutal killing of children and women in Assam is the only latest in a series of several storms of violence which have convulsed the state over the last three decades. Each wave of blood-letting has further deepened fractures between various religious and ethnic groups.

The foundations of ferocious ethnic and religious hostility in the state were laid in the anti-‘foreigners’ agitation which racked the state from 1979 to 1985. The demand of the agitators was for the state to detect and deport ‘foreigners’, or Bangladeshi immigrants. Migrations from Bangladesh occurred from the early twentieth century, partly the result of conscious colonial state policy, mainly of peasants and landless workers, drawn to Assam by land hunger and unemployment.

The Tewary Commission appointed by the state government to enquire into the violence during the agitation reports that in every district in Assam except Cachar and North Cachar Hills,



diverse groups attacking each other. Baruah in his definitive account of the agitation recounts that violent attacks against Bengali Muslim settlers in Assam, regardless of their vintage, rose after 1979. The most gruesome communal violence in those years, and indeed since Independence anywhere in India, occurred in fourteen villages of Nellie.

‘On the morning of 18th February 1983, thousands of people surrounded the Nellie area and attacked Bengali Muslim residents... The attackers were armed with machetes and other weapons. They systematically set fire to people’s huts. As residents fled their burning homes, they were hacked to death. Roads to the Nellie area were blocked and the Muslim villages surrounded, so people could not go to Jagiroad police station while violence was unfolding. Unofficial estimates say that the massacre orphaned 371 children and left over 2000 people dead’<sup>2</sup>.

One remarkable feature of this massacre is that *not a single* person responsible for the violence has been prosecuted or punished. The Assam accord signed between the Indian government and the leaders of the movement in 1985 included a clause to review criminal offences, except heinous offences. But ‘In practice, what the accord was interpreted to mandate was a full amnesty to all persons charged with crimes, even of murder and rape, during the mass communal violence...Only one, fairly junior police person faced disciplinary measures. Survivors received minimal compensation.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Centre for Equity Studies Report (unpublished)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

This laid a dangerous precedent in Assam of state-sanctioned, officially brokered immunity for people charged with heinous hate mass crimes. This was further nurtured by a policy of enabling, even incentivising ethnic cleaning. The militant agitation of indigenous Bodo tribal people from 1987 was originally not targeted against the East Bengali Muslims: it saw them as allies in a fight against the dominant caste-Hindu Asamiya people. The situation changed drastically in 1993 when the government signed the Bodo accord, which created an autonomous Bodoland within Assam, but laid down that only settlements with populations of more than 50 percent Bodo people would be included in Bodoland. The die was thus cast by state policy itself for violent ethnic cleansing.

Former militants organised themselves to drive out the settlers. In 1993 itself, Bengali Muslims were killed and their homes looted and burnt. The terrified survivors fled into camps that were to be their homes for years. Attacks were then mounted against the Santhal descendants of tea garden workers in 1996, and at its peak around 3 lakh people were displaced by the violence. In 1997, some returned, but were freshly evicted after new clashes in 1997. In 2000, the Muslims were forced to vacate the official camps, but again were subject to attacks. They set up their own camps by encroaching on government or private land, where they continue until today.

These 'nowhere people' have lived for more than a generation in relief camps in the Bodo heartland of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon, and the state has done nothing to assist them to return to their homelands. Up to 2007, we found them surviving on erratic supplies of rice rations for registered camp dwellers for ten days a month, without child-care centres, health centres or schools,

unable to return to their lands and homes, boycotted from seeking work, and attacked if they stray back to indigenous habitations. The Assam government indifferently said it can do nothing for the people in camps, who must return to their homes from where they were expelled. The displaced people plead that to return is to only live daily in the shadow of fear of the assured next attack, by a people determined to reclaim their “homeland” from the settlers, spurred by the Bodo accord which recklessly incentivised such “cleansing”.

That next attacks occurred in the monsoon of 2012, when a series of local skirmishes and murders grew into a raging inferno, which rapidly engulfed several districts of Lower Assam: Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Chirang. The homes and fields of Bengali Muslims who lived in enclaves surrounded by Bodo majority settlements were torched and their livestock and belongings looted. In areas where Bodos were in a minority, they faced identical arson and looting by the majority Bengali Muslim population. Fear swept both populations, and terrified people fled their homes, desperately traversing flooded rivers and kilometres of forests to reach areas where their respective communities were in majority. Both fugitive populations took refuge in the grounds of schools and colleges, and at the peak, five lakh more people were exiled to camps.

The state government disbanded the camps in a few months, forcing people to return to their homes. But the hatred and fear did not abate substantially, and in many villages, people lived in makeshift camps outside their villages, still finding safety in numbers. The situation was aggravated by the open call for economic boycott of Bengali Muslims, and posters came up announcing a fine for Bodo people who employed them. This

unofficial boycott is still in force in many areas, and deepens further the fractures between the two communities.

As noted, in 1994, it is remarkable that in the same village in which this new bout of brutal violence occurred, 50 people had been killed, again including many children and women. No one was punished for these crimes, although the perpetrators were well known. In this way, the cauldron of ethnic and religious hatred continues to boil, spurred by a bitterly divided people, and state policies which assure official immunity to perpetrators of mass violence, and incentives for ethnic cleansing. Assam has near-fatally imploded with the politics of competing persecutions, as oppressed groups arm and organise themselves to violently drive away other wretched and deprived people, in pursuit of dangerous, impossible (and unconstitutional) aspirations of ethnically cleansed homelands. Their plight is aggravated by bankrupt and opportunistic politics and state policy, and equivocal rationalisations by civilian observers.

## **2. Muddled Accords**

The movement for a separate state of Bodoland began in 1987, and involved the usual features of insurgent groups: shooting, bombing etc. But since 1994, the features of violence underwent a change- these became targeted against non-Bodos, mainly Bengali-speaking Muslims and the former 'tea-tribes' or tribes which were brought in by colonial rulers from central and east India as labour for the tea gardens. The reasons for this change lie in the nature of the accords reached by the state and central governments with the Bodo militants.

The Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed in 1993 as the outcome of an agreement between Assam Government and the All Bodo Students Union and Bodo People's Committee. This was *not* under Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The BAC converted into the Bodoland Tribal Council (BTC) after less than a decade of BAC. This was the result of an agreement signed with the militant group, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), the state government and the union government.

It is important to note that this BTC enjoys protections under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule. But the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule had originally been intended for the "hill tribes" of Assam and Bodos are not a hill tribe. The idea of the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule itself comes through the Cabinet Mission proposals of 1946- translated through the Constituent Assembly. In colonial area, composite Assam had "excluded" and "partially excluded" areas over which the Governor- not the Assam government- had jurisdiction. As such these areas were not covered by normal government schemes and laws etc. The 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule was conceived to integrate these areas and people living in them with the rest of the development and administrative apparatus.

The BTC has 46 members. 30 reserved for Bodos, only five for non-Bodos, five are open seats, 6 to be nominated by governor (at least two women). This gives Bodos unfettered political power over the region, although they constitute less than a third of the population. Under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule District Councils control land rights, water courses, tax over shops etc., plus some judicial powers to ensure the tribal way of life.

But the BTC- under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule- cannot give non-Bodos respite from violence and from unequal development

opportunities, as well as political marginalisation. What should replace the present arrangement? Scrapping it is a popular demand with non-Bodos of the area, but it is now unlikely that history can be reversed without outbreaks of fresh violence. However, the non-Bodo populations need to be given a fair share in the political arrangements, as well as in village and district councils.

### **3. Immediate Trigger of Elections**

The immediate cause of the violence appears to be the elections. Many observers and commentators have been speculating that the incident on polling day and the recent round of violence against Bengali Muslims is linked, and that the violence itself is linked to the elections.

It is simplistic to blame violence of the magnitude and intensity as seen in the Barpeta and Baska districts of BTAD to administrative failure. The history outlined above provides the backdrop of continuing fissures that trigger off episodes on the flimsiest and as in this case, the most undemocratic of issues. It is not difficult for those trying to consolidate constituencies and gain strength through violence to use the decades of injustice and discrimination based entirely on false and created perceptions to mobilise mobs to kill and maim the 'other' with impunity.

This time the elections were the trigger, with the 30 per cent Bodo population that had till now been virtually winning uncontested elections running into resistance from the 70 per cent non Bodos with a four cornered contest in these Lok Sabha polls. Earlier land

had been the issue for violent conflagration between the Bodos and the Advasis in 1996 and 1998, and between the Bodos and the Muslims in 1953, 1993, and 1994. This is the first time that politics became the direct issue for violence, in which Bodos then attacked the Muslims for seeking to vote differently.

Kokrajhar, a constituency that has, for the last ten years, been politically dominated by the ruling party, the Bodoland Political Front, was suddenly facing a potential upheaval. Minority non-Bodo communities, alarmed by the increasingly vigorous calls for a separate Bodoland, decided to field their own, 'non-Bodo' candidate in the elections. Bodos themselves, disgusted by what they see as the poor performance of the BPF over the last decade, fielded a 'rival' Bodo candidate to the BPF's own, thus potentially splitting the Bodo vote as well. Reports were heard, in the run up to the election, of the panic caused within the BPF at the prospect of a loss, for the first time since they came into power. The BPF itself is a political party that emerged after the Bodo Accord of 2003, signed between the central government and the militant Bodoland Liberation Tigers. Many, if not most politicians in the BPF, are ex-militants.

In the run up to the elections, about a month before polling was to take place, a young Bodo girl was gangraped and murdered in Chirang, allegedly by a group of seven Muslim men. Four of these men were caught, while three remain missing. In the immediate aftermath of the rape, Chirang froze into a panic, expecting retaliatory attacks, and a repeat of the sort of horrific violence they had seen less than two years ago. The body of a Muslim trader was found a few days later, and although it could

not be confirmed if it was related, it nonetheless had the effect of fuelling further panic<sup>4</sup>.

Obodo Suraksha Samiti, a BTAD organisation that has been protesting against the creation of Bodoland, set up a former ULFA militant Heera Sarania as a candidate. Word spread, rightly or wrongly, that the Muslims (already under fire for being Muslim and Bengali speaking) had voted for Sarania. The other two candidates were RS Mooshary, a former governor of Meghalaya set up by the Trinamool Congress, and an independent candidate Urkhao Gwra Brahma being backed by the militant National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Progressive) along with other organising including the All Bodo Students Union. The Bodoland Peoples Front that has usually bulldozed the opposition to have its way, had fielded transport minister Chandan Brahma, dropping the sitting parliamentarian, and resentment spread when it became clear that other sections were exercising their own choice.

Anger was further fuelled by former minister Parmila Rani Brahma who declared openly that the Muslims had not voted for Brahma. Her words are being cited in the relief camps and outside as immediate provocation for the attack. Reports suggest that the Songbijit faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland instigated the massacre of the Bengali speaking Muslims.

The political emergence of the non-Bodos, always in an overwhelming majority in BTAD, as an independent force is seen as a majorly threatening factor by the Bodos who have always

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<sup>4</sup> Saba Sharma <http://kafila.org/2014/05/04/the-carnage-in-kokrajhar-saba-sharma/>



been conscious of their minority status in the autonomous entity carved out for them by the political leaders of both Assam and Delhi. The BTAD had through alliances with the state government, in this case the Congress government under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, had managed to remain in political power not just in the Bodo Autonomous Council, but also the state government. Local people alleged that the Chief Minister was unwilling to disarm and arrest the former Bodo militants for this and earlier incidents of violence, because the survival of his government depended on their support.

Although the incident in Narayanguri in Baksa District described here was the most brutal, there were many simmering acts of violence in the build-up to this major episode of violence, related to the elections. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2014, polling took place in the Kokrajhar constituency, covering all the districts of the BTAD including Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. In the Harbhanga poll booth, a policeman was killed and another seriously injured as a mob tried to capture a booth, near Harbhanga and Balapara villages. A report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) describes how a day after the elections, police began to beat and physically assault villagers in the area. The report also states that girls have been raped and hundreds of houses set on fire. People of the village were reluctant to file an FIR, fearing the police, but at the insistence of activists in the area, have filed the FIR.

On the next day, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, CSJ reports that the first attack was on a journalist, who sustained injuries, while the second attack the same evening killed three persons. Both these incidents took place in Baksa district. The next day the attack on Narayangura village was mounted.

The state and district administrations, including Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, are blaming the militant group NDFB(S), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit), a banned outfit for the attacks. The NDFB(S) has denied its involvement in the attacks, and claimed that a third party must be responsible. Siddique Ahmed, Assam minister for Border Areas Development has blamed the ruling BPF, which has been denied by the chief Hagrama Mohilary.

Police have picked up several people for questioning (including some forest guards), and two Bodo militants allegedly involved with the violence have been killed on Sunday, 4<sup>th</sup> May, but no clarity has emerged in the situation so far.

#### **4. Hate Speeches Stirring Ethnic Divisions**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2014, six days after polling took place, Pramila Rani Brahma, an MLA from the ruling Bodoland Political Front (BPF) party, and a former Agriculture Minister of Assam, made a statement that the BPF would find it hard to win in these Lok Sabha elections, as the Muslims of BTAD had not voted for their candidate. For her part, she has denied this and stated to the Telegraph that she was misinterpreted, and said there should be a CBI probe in the incident.

Even more gravely, the BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi addressing an election rally in Dhemaji, Assam, alleged a conspiracy to eliminate the endangered rhinoceros in Assam to make way for Bangladeshi settlers. According to a report on NDTV, he accused 'people sitting in the government.' Assam is

ruled by the rival Congress. He was quoted by Press Trust of India as saying, 'Aren't rhinos the pride of Assam? These days there is a conspiracy to kill it. I am making the allegation very seriously. People sitting in the government...to save Bangladeshis... they are doing this conspiracy to kill rhinos so that the area becomes empty and Bangladeshis can be settled there.' He was addressing an election rally in Dhemaji, a remote district on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. He further warned, 'Those who are conspiring to finish off rhinos, they should listen to this carefully. After May 16, they will be taken to task one by one (*chun chun ke hisab liya jayega*).' He continued, 'We have to save the future of Assam. It is our responsibility to save it from forces which are looting the state.' He also deplored what he called 'intrusions' from people in Bangladesh who he alleged were taking up jobs in India. He said it was time that these 'intrusions' stopped<sup>5</sup>.

## **The Silver Lining**

While violence has struck Muslim residents of Baksa and Kokrajhar in a targeted fashion, ordinary Bodos and Muslims both have suffered the repercussions. In Kokrajhar district, many Bodos living in Muslim-majority areas, as well as Muslims living in Bodo-majority areas fled their homes, or decided to keep guard at night in fear of more attacks, or retaliatory violence. It should be acknowledged, however, that these attacks never came. Both ordinary Bodos and Muslims have seen this for what it is –

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<sup>5</sup> From NDTV Updates, March 31, 2014

targeted, brutal violence which is politically motivated, and have not been swept up in its wake. They have been restrained, avoided treating it as a communal incident, and no mobs have taken to the streets. In villages like Alurbui in the Chakrashila area, the Bodo and Muslim village leaders sat together, trying to pacify people, telling them there was no need to flee or be afraid.

What needs to also be acknowledged is the role of Bodo leadership like the All Boso Students Union, which has immense popular support in the Bodo community. ABSU has condemned the violence, and staged dharnas and 'peace protests' in both Guwahati and Kokrajhar, protesting the violence and demanding justice for the victims. Reports came in from Korkajhar of local ABSU units assuring Muslims in their villages that they had nothing to fear, and no reason to run away. In Udalguri, a district in the BTAD neighbouring Baksa and Kokrajhar, TOI reports that they joined with the All Assam Minority Students Union to help to dispel rumours, and kept the district *entirely* free of violence (Udalguri also saw no violence in the 2012 riots). They have also renewed their call for seizure of illegal arms in the BTAD, a demand that they have been voicing for several years now.

It may be recalled that the last episode of major ethnic violence in the region in 2012 led to at its peak the exodus of half a million people, the largest displacement after India's Partition. Earlier episodes from 1994 onwards have led to people being displaced and living in camps for more than a generation. The fact that this was averted this time was the result mainly of moderate and responsible Bodo student leaders, and their Bengali Muslim counterparts, who ensured that the situation did not escalate, who opposed the targeted violence publicly, and who ensured that people did not panic. A few thousand people, both Bodo and

Muslims, did leave their homes briefly as a precautionary measure, but returned shortly after.

However, the situation remains extremely sensitive. Hate-mongering and fresh violence could still lead to another exodus.

The camp residents spoke highly of the local District Magistrate Vinod Seshan “who is helping us all the time.” The only external humanitarian agency we found on the spot was of Oxfam, which was ensuring that basic needs of the camp residents were being met.

The fact-finding committee was also touched by the outpouring of support by local people, many of them impoverished, to the affected people. The support was pouring in, as villagers arrived in a steady stream to embrace those who had survived the terrible attack by armed Bodos on the two villages in Baksa. As deprived and poor as those who had been forced to flee Narayanguri and Khagrabari villages, thousands came in a steady stream with food, clothes and tons of empathy for those who had undergone what they all live in fear of every minute of the day and night: violence.

They walked the miles to reach the ghost village and see the results of the attack themselves. The mood was sombre, as they went through the gutted villages, finding and handing over anything that had survived the fires. There was no looting, and the couple of utensils, a few cows tethered to the now cold heaps of rubble, await the return of the terrified owners.

## **Recommendations**

1. Standards of services in the camps should be improved. The residents may not feel secure to return before the rains, therefore the site needs to be on a higher plain, and the tents rain-proof.
2. All efforts should to create a safe environment for people to be able to return home, but under no circumstances should they be forced to return against their will.
3. The children must be given urgent, special and intensive psycho-social care, in special child protection units
4. Adults - both women and men - need psycho-social care as well.
5. Statements of all survivors and eyewitnesses should be recorded before magistrates under Section 164 Cr PC. The children's statements should be recorded in the camp itself by specially trained magistrates.
6. All persons mentioned in the statements should be arrested without delay.
7. There must be a time-bound program to confiscate all illegal weapons in the entire area. For overall peace, government with Centre's help must commence the process of disarming and taking away all unlicensed weapons. This should be part of a security-grid reform for this frontier area. The proliferation of small arms leads to, smuggling and terrorism as well, besides fuelling communal attacks based on religion or language and perceived ethnicity. Above all, weapons should be taken out of private hands (it is completely wrong-headed to give guns to the Muslim Bengalis now as announced by the Chief Minister- this can only further fuel the discourse we seek to challenge, besides providing greater scope for lethal violence in a benighted area).

8. The Bodoland Accord needs to be re-visited as it has become a divisive instrument generating violence. Local institutions must be reformed to be more representative of other residents of the region, even as these remain sensitive to the legitimate concerns of indigenous Bodo people to preserve their lands, forests and culture.

9. The state government must seize the opportunity and display the political will to initiate peace and reconciliation talks without delay, and try to heal and bridge ethnic divisions and suspicions.. Much time has already been wasted Civil society organisations should be associated with this task. In this it should involve all student and youth groups, political parties, artists and intellectuals.

10. There should be a special commission appointed to look at school education institutional arrangements, textbooks, and teachers' training, to promote greater understanding, tolerance and respect between various ethnic groups in Assam.

11. A Judicial Commission appointed to look into this episode of violence, and the history and causes of this violence, and ways in which this can be prevented. The Judicial Commission to probe what's happened should have a short time period in which to come out with its report- about four months. Among its terms of reference should be to go into repeated occurrence of a familiar pattern of violence and the culture of impunity that has been generated with no one being punished.

12. The state government must set up a Special Commission with representatives from all communities, to ensure that all people who still live in camps, sometimes for more than a generation, are

given all facilities which are mandated by international instruments for all internally displaced people, and to ensure that they are assisted to return to their own, or alternate settled homelands, based on their aspirations.