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THE NELLIE MASSACRE OF 1983: AN UNDERSTANDING OF ITS CONTESTING NARRATIVES

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18th February 2022 marks 39 years of the Nellie massacre, which occurred in 1983 during the most extremist year of the anti-foreigner movement (1979-1985). Despite the large-scale killings in a span of few hours, indicating a high degree of organization (Begum & Patrick, n.d.), and having socio-political significance, the massacre received very little attention in academic and journalistic discussion. While the anti-foreigner movement has been documented well, the massacre has not been memorized or documented well. Many saw the incident as an act of self-defense. For many, the massacre resulted because of the historical loss of tribal lands to immigrant Muslims, the victims of the massacre (Hazarika, 2000, p. 45). A few saw it as a result of the culmination of politics, ethnic agendas, and grave violations of human rights (Uddin, 2015). The existing literatures on the massacre provide diverse interpretations, producing divergent meanings. Among all these contesting interpretations or narratives of the massacre, however, the 'land alienation' of the tribals by the victims of the massacre is the dominant one that received acceptability in Assamese society. In this paper, an attempt is made to analyze the contesting narratives of the massacre to find out how far they are based on empirical reality. To analyze the contesting narratives of the massacre, I have employed the theory of the Institutionalized Riot System (IRS) developed by Paul R. Brass. In this theory Brass mentioned three phases of riots: preparation, activation and explanation.

Brass discussed how in India people interpret riots after their occurrence. He argued that people in India try to construct the meaning of riot in a way that suits their interests the most. Acceptance of a particular narrative of a riot by the society determines the human relation and the power structure of the society (Brass, 2003, p. 10).

The first part of the paper provides the context of the Nellie massacre- the socio-political situation in which the incident occurred. The second part discusses the narratives of the massacre developed in academic and journalistic writings. This part also analyzed how some of the narratives

or interpretations are very dominant in Assamese society and how they subtly justify the massacre. In the last part, an attempt has been made to discuss how acceptance of a particular narrative of the massacre determined the power relations in the society and politics of the state in the post-movement period.

Anti-foreigner Movement and the Nellie Massacre:

The context in which the Nellie massacre took place was not very peaceful. Assam was undergoing an agitation known as the anti-foreigner movement based on the claim that indigenous people of the state were on the verge of losing their existence due to a good deal of foreigners living illegally in the state. Movement leaders claimed that these illegal foreigners had already legalized their stay by enlisting their names in the voter's list of different constituencies of the state, and no election could be organized in the state without deleting the names of foreigners from the electoral rolls. They demanded that the central government should deport all the people who entered the state after 1951 to protect the culture and identity of the indigenous people of the state. Leftist, however, argued that the anti-foreigner movement was a political scheme launched by upper caste Assamese who formed the state's middle class to regain their position of power in the politics of the state. The Assamese upper caste was dissatisfied with the populist agenda of Congress and the success of the left parties in the state (Hussain, 1993, pp. 96-101), and to contain the left parties in the state, they took the help of 'chauvinism,' targeted the immigrants who were responsible for the success of the left parties in the state (Gohain, 2007, p. 24).

Whatever the reason behind the origin of the anti-foreigner movement, there was a considerable gap between its ideology and the empirical reality. Though the movement was launched against the foreigners living illegally in the state, it turned out to be a movement directed against those who migrated to the state in the colonial period from East Bengal. The first two years of the movement were marked by several rounds of failed talks between the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) – the organizations leading the movement and the central government. The election in 1980 could not be organized in the state due to the movement. However, in 1983, the central government decided to organize the election without revising the electoral rolls. The state was under the president's rule since March 19, 1982, and the government said that it had a constitutional obligation to organize an election for the state before the end of the president's rule in March 1983. The very fact that constitutional

obligation exists and it is what government makes unpardonable. The government was aware that a fresh election was needed to be organized in the state before March 1983 since the date of declaration of the president's rule in the state. Therefore, the Election Commission of India had enough time to revise the electoral rolls of the state. The election faced a massive boycott in the state. Government imposed the election to challenge the authority of the movement. Rajesh Pilot, former MP of the Congress, told Shekhar Gupta that the election is necessary to finish the agitators politically. The election was like a referendum for organizations leading the movement. If the majority boycotts it, then the agitators are the winner. Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, the then general secretary of AASU, in an interview with Shekhar Gupta in Guwahati, said, 'If five percent people come out and vote, it would mean that ninety-five are with the movement' (Gupta S., 1984, p. 38).

The differences in opinion on holding elections in February 1983 between the government of India and the leadership of the movement, various parties, and social groups associated with the movement and those who opposed the movement resulted in episodes of violence in the state. In many places, the election-related violence turned into group or communal clashes, and the Nellie massacre of 18th February 1983 was the biggest of all such incidents. The massacre occurred in a rural area of the then Nagaon district of Assam. In the massacre, Muslim villages of Nellie were attacked by people from the neighbouring villages who mostly belonged to caste Hindu Assamese, Tiwa, Koch community, and some low-caste Assamese Hindus. Victims of the massacre decided to participate in the election, which most of the people of the state boycotted. They chose to participate in the election as they wanted the movement to end. The movement's ideology challenged their citizenship, and in such a situation, they had no other option but to support Congress with the hope that the newly formed government after the election would protect them from the wrath of the movement. The attack stopped when CRPF arrived at the scene. All the cases registered in relation to the massacre were summarily closed after signing of the Assam Accord by the newly formed Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government. The survivors did not even receive social acknowledgment of the wrong that happened to them. Apart from the denial of legal justice, the survivors were also blamed for whatever happened to them. This impunity for the perpetrators and the blaming of the victims left severe implications for the society and politics of the state. These implications will be discussed later in this paper. In the next section, an attempt will be made to understand contesting narratives or interpretations of the massacre. Most interpretations of the massacre portray it as unfortunate,

which should not have happened, but subtly justifies the massacre as a result of historical wrongs or provocation by the victims.

Narratives of Violence: An Understanding of Nellie

Narratives can be defined as spoken or written accounts of an event or a story. Narratives and storytelling are found in all cultures, and people, irrespective of their level of education, understand them very well. The stories and narratives are a mixture of fiction and reality and ‘treads the borderline between fiction and non-fiction and create a ‘fictionality of reality’ which is difficult to decode or separate’ (Rasheed, 2021). In social sciences, narratives are not simply considered as storytelling. Political science emphasizes how ‘storytelling can shape fact and impact the understanding of reality’ (Shenhav, 2006). Narratives are political as they are constructed to represent ‘reality’ which may benefit someone over another. Powerful narratives create myths and heroes, and help people develop collective identities (Rasheed, 2021). Highly developed political narratives can create an ‘organizing framework of action’ (cited in Rasheed, 2021). Powerful political narratives try to represent the reality, and acceptance of such realities by society has many implications.

In India, many scholars have attempted to study the narratives of the large-scale violence witnessed by the country. Paul R. Brass is one among them. The country has seen many cases of mass violence where many people lost their lives, people got displaced, which changed human relationships and left traumas for the people. Scholarships have questioned the categorization of some incidents of mass violence as riots where people from a particular group are targeted the most. This categorization of mass violence itself is a political process. Brass questions why in India, the incidents of violence where mostly Muslims have lost their lives are categorized as ‘riots’ but not as ‘pogroms’. This categorization is a part of what he calls the construction of narratives of violence (Brass, 2003, p. 10). Pogroms are not just riots. They are much more than riots. Ashotosh Varshney, in his book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*(2002)’ writes that pogroms require two conditions-(a) the state looking on while the target group is attacked, and (b) the state ideologically condoning violence. He categorizes the 2002 Gujarat violence as a ‘purer’ form of a pogrom because the government, even after witnessing large-scale killings of Muslims in the state, adopted an anti-Muslim ideology(Krishnankutty, 2020).

The 1983 violence in Nellie was categorized differently by different scholars. However, the incident is popularly known as the Nellie massacre

of 1983. Jabeen Yashemeen argues that the incident should be called the Nellie genocide of 1983 instead of the Nellie massacre of 1983 due to the assailants’ intention to wipe out a specific community(Yashmeen, 2020, p. 4). Similarly, Suraj Gogoi argues that ‘the hatred with which over 2300 people were killed on the fateful day of 18 February 1983 fits every detail of a genocide’(Gogoi, 2022). Harsh Mander calls it a brutal and one-sided killing(Bhat, 2020, p. 161).

As the categorization of violence is a political process, so is the interpretation of it. These interpretations are not always based on facts, but they try to represent the ‘reality’ to shape the power relations of society. Therefore, it is essential to question the validity of an interpretation before accepting it. In the following section, some of the contesting narratives or interpretations of the Nellie massacre of 1983 have been discussed to analyze whether these are based on facts or not.

‘Land’ as the cause

This narrative considers the ‘land alienation’ of the perpetrators of the Nellie massacre by the victims as the most dominant and historical cause of the massacre. This narrative has been supported by renowned scholar Sanjoy Hazarika (Hazarika, 2000, pp. 45-46) and the Tiwary commission report also made an observation that land alienation was an important cause of hatred and rivalry among various groups during the election of 1983(Pisharoty, 2019, p. 92). This is the master narrative of the massacre, which has been accepted widely by Assamese society without question. To understand the narrative and why it has been accepted by Assamese society so easily, we have to go back to the colonial history of Assam. The victims of the massacre belonged to the Bengali Muslim community who migrated to the state at the beginning of the 19th century from certain overpopulated districts of the then East Bengal. During that time, land was abundant in Assam, and the state witnessed depopulation due to diseases like black fever, malaria, etc. To combat this, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, an Assamese intellectual partner of the British Empire, advised the colonial masters to bring people from ‘some badly provided parts of Bengal’ (Jana, 2009, p. 35). The colonial government also showed interest in bringing people from East Bengal to Assam to generate more land revenue.

The newly migrated Bengali Muslims were first settled in char areas that were flood-prone, erosion-prone, and unsuitable for living. This made them expand towards other areas of the state. A section of Assamese people

showed concern over the migration of new people and settlement in Assam's land. The colonial rulers, who patronized the migration of people from East Bengal, used this situation to create a division between Assamese people and newly migrated Bengali Muslims. The commissioner of the 1911 census asserted the danger of migration by stating '...a peaceful invasion of Assam by the advancing hordes of Mymensinghia army' (Nath, 2020, p. 36). The colonial administration devised a new policy known as the 'Line-System' to prevent the newly migrated people to expand to the areas inhabited by the indigenous people. The 'Line -System' was first implemented in the Nagaon district and Barpeta sub-division of the Kamrup district of the state to prevent the migrants from acquiring lands (Nath, 2020, p. 34). However, the policy was only marginally effective, and the newly migrated people continued acquiring lands protected for the indigenous people. In 1924, the then-colonial administrator of Nagaon started using the word 'immigrants' for Bengali Muslims, transforming them into 'foreigners' (Saikia, 2021, p. 12). Since then, the Bengali Muslim people of the state have been described as 'Muslims of immigrant origin' or 'immigrant Muslims' in academic and political discussions. In 1928, the colonial administration adopted another scheme named 'Colonization Scheme.' Under this scheme, a family was required to be provided with about 20 bighas of land on payment of premium. This scheme and loosely implemented 'Line System' resulted in the growth of land revenue and the state's Muslim population. Up to March 1933, 47,636 acres of land in the Nagaon district alone was allotted to 1619 Muslims and 441 Hindu immigrant families (Nath, 2020, p. 34).

C.S Mullan, the census superintendent of the 1931 census, remarked the migration of Bengali Muslims as an 'invasion' and prophesied that the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization was in danger because of the 'invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali Muslims' (Nath, 2020, p. 56). Guha argues that the intention behind 'such irresponsible and unfounded utterings of Mullan was clear, he wanted the Assamese and the immigrants to be set against each other' (Guha, 1974, p. 350). Thus, the colonial administration continued showing concerns over the issue of migration of people, and their settlement in the lands of indigenous people on the one hand, and they continued encouraging the migration of people and their settlement in the state on the other.

Meanwhile, the colonial government invited Sir Sadullah to form the first coalition Ministry in the state without caring to consult with Congress. Sir Sadullah initially tried to prevent the violation of the 'Line System' (Jana,

2009, p. 37) but later openly patronized the migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal under the 'Grow more food' campaign.

The fear of Muslim 'invasion' intensified among the Congress leaders on the eve of the independence of the country as the Muslim population increased to 1.8 million, or 34 percent, just 4 percent less than the Hindu population (Saikia, 2021, p. 14). However, this fear declined when the Muslim majority Sylhet went to east Pakistan making the Assamese Hindus majority in the state for the first time. However, by that time, the immigrants had already acquired a huge amount of land in the state, which did not always result from the forceful transfer. On many occasions due to the leniency of the district administration, and needs of the both 'immigrants' and 'indigenous', lines became irrelevant in many areas (Jana, 2009, p. 37). In many places the tribals willingly sold their lands to the immigrants to earn easy money (Kalita, 2020, pp. 203-231).

It was during the anti-foreigner movement that the issue of 'land alienation' of locals by 'foreigners' was highlighted, and when the leaders and supporters of the movement failed to identify the 'foreigners', and also failed to come to a conclusion on the number of foreigners living illegally in the state in order to determine the extent of 'foreign invasion', they targeted those who has already settled in the state in the colonial period itself. It was not difficult for the movement leaders to bring up the issue of 'land' as it was in the colonial period that migration of the people from East- Bengal created divisive politics in the state. The movement leaders used the comment of C.S Mullan as a sacred thread to gain public support. There were also intellectual developments where the indigenous people of the state were asked to settle in the 'char' areas, traditionally inhabited by immigrant Muslims (Jana, 2001, p. 171). An image of lungi cladded, bearded 'Bangladeshi image' was constructed (Sharma C. K., 2009, p. 30), and the immigrant Muslims who shared the same ethnic and racial origin as the Bangladeshi people were targeted. The community was recognized as an existential threat to the people of Assam. Though the movement leaders claimed the movement as non-violent but when a community was recognized as an existential threat, it automatically gave people the license to exceed what was considered as non-violent (Begum & Patrick, n.d.).

The forceful election of 1983 was a curse for the minority people of the state. When they decided to participate in the election at the call of Congress, it became easier for the people to inflict harm on them. The Nellie

massacre occurred in such a situation when the repercussion of attacking the immigrant Muslims was non-existent. However, after the massacre, the movement leaders claimed that land alienation of the locals by the Muslims caused the massacre (Kimura, 2013, pp. 124-126). They also referred to some immediate causes of the massacre such as the abduction and rape of Tiwa girls by Muslims, etc. (Hazarika, 2000, p. 45). However, there was no formal record of such incidents in the form of any police complaint or FIR (Begum & Patrick, n.d.). Even the attackers held the circumstances leading to the election of 1983 responsible for the massacre. They did not mention land alienation as the cause of the massacre (Kimura, 2013, p. 97).

The site of the Nellie massacre was a part of the erstwhile undivided Nagaon district of Assam. With the reorganization of the district in 1989, the area came under the newly constituted Morigaon district of the state. The villages under attack during the massacre came into existence in the 1940s under Sadullah's 'Grow more Food' campaign (Kimura, 2013, p. 93). Sadullah and his associates advocated for the abolishment of the 'Line System' and opened up Professional Grazing Reserves (PGRs) to settle the immigrant Muslims. Under the Colonization scheme, as many as 59 grazing forests and village reserves were opened in Nagaon to settle the immigrants (Guha, 1977, p. 209). The villages attacked in the Nellie massacre were part of the Alichinga Grazing Reserve (cited in Kimura, 2013, p. 93), and according to the report of the Land Revenue Department of Assam, the reserve forest was partially opened for the immigrants in 1944 (Department: Revenue(1944-1955), p. 63). When the 'Line System' proved ineffective, the colonial authorities created 'Tribal Blocks' and 'Belts' in 1946 to prevent non-tribals from acquiring lands within the tribal area. The area in the north of the Alichinga Grazing Reserve in Tetelia Mauza was declared a 'tribal block' immediately after independence due to the large tribal concentration in the area. The

¹Under the 'Line System', the colonial government classified lands into the following three categories -

- (a) lands where only the 'immigrants' from East- Bengal could settle.
- (b) lands where 'immigrants' from East Bengal could not settle.
- (c) lands where both the 'immigrants' and the 'indigenous' people could settle with a line between two sides.

²According to Oxford Dictionary 'immigrants' are the people who comes to live permanently in a foreign country. Jyotirmoy Jana in his article 'Line System and the Socio-Economic Segregation of the 'Immigrant' Muslim Peasantry in Assam' questions the use of the word 'immigrants' for the people who migrated to Assam from East Bengal during the colonial period as the word 'immigrant' signifies a foreigner and the migration of people from East Bengal to Assam during the colonial period was an interstate migration.

existing laws made it illegal for the non-tribals to obtain land in the tribal block, but there was no strict application of laws, and the non-tribals continued acquiring land. In many cases, locals sold or mortgaged their lands to the non-tribals. According to the report of the 'Line System Committee,' the allegation of Muslims harassing the local population to grab their land was often exaggerated. Even in the 1980s, Tiwas used to sell their lands due to their indebtedness to the moneylenders who usually belonged to the immigrant communities (Kimura, 2013, pp. 93-96).

Although the transfer of lands from the locals to the immigrant Muslims was true, it did not necessarily constitute the motivating factor of the Nellie massacre. There was no evidence but only claims that such transfer of land took place by using force or threat. According to the report of the 'Line System Committee', the price of lands within the indigenous line was very low, and within the immigrants line it was very high. The immigrants wanted lands for settlement and the locals used the situation to earn easy money (Jana, 2009, pp. 34-39). Even a field study conducted in Juria, Nagaon by Pulin Kalita revealed how locals migrated to other places after selling all their lands to immigrants at a premium price (Kalita, 2020, pp. 220-221). Thus, the villages inhabited by the Assamese and tribal people became the village of immigrants. However, this willing transfer of land to earn money was categorized as a 'forceful' transfer during the anti-foreigner movement. The movement established the immigrants as the encroacher of the lands of indigenous people, and thus causing economic backwardness of the indigenous people of Assam. Therefore, all the attacks on them during the movement period were justified attacks resulting from the historical loss of lands. Interestingly, in her field study, Kimura found people saying that if Muslims could be killed, others would be able to capture their lands. Kimura mentioned a village called Gorjan, where the Tiwas fought against the Muslims a few days before the Nellie massacre and regained their 'lost land' (Kimura, 2013, p. 103). Thus, the 'land' might be a motivating factor in the attack but it does not necessarily mean that the immigrant Muslims encroached on the lands of the locals, and the massacre was an act of revenge by the locals for their 'historical loss'. In my field investigation, the Tiwas did not mention 'land alienation' as the cause of the massacre. Instead, they held the situation of 1983 responsible for the violence.

In the Nellie area, the villages of Muslims were mostly constituted near the river Kopili and were prone to frequent floods. Some of the inhabitants of the area came from the northern parts of the erstwhile Nagaon district, as

the north part was more prone to flood, and several villages were washed away in the erosion of the river Brahmaputra. One of the respondents I interviewed revealed that his family came from Kampur to Nellie in the 1960s. He bought lands there and settled. When the Line System became almost irrelevant, it became easier for everyone to buy and sell land. Thus, the Muslim population of Nellie was growing, but the threat of the Muslims was not felt in the area until the genesis of the movement (Kaushik, 2017, p. 152). However, in Nellie, the Muslims are still the minority in the population, and the Tiwas and other Assamese communities constitute the majority in the area.

Alankar Kaushik, in his Ph.D. thesis '*Violence and Assamese Print Media: A Study of Nellie Violence in 1983* (2017)' argues that the 'land alienation' as the cause of the massacre holds less substance because of two reasons: first, 'the tribal land is protected and non-tribals cannot own the land'. By this, Kaushik tries to establish that without the help of the tribals, the non-tribals, including the immigrants, cannot purchase/snatch their land as the laws prevent them from doing so. Thus, the allegations of forceful transfer of lands are nothing but a mere exaggeration. Secondly, Kaushik argues that 'land alienation' occurred 'not as agricultural land as such but in terms of so-called Bangladeshis moving to south Nagaon and other districts because of large-scale erosion caused by Brahmaputra River'. The people who have lost their land and habitat encroached upon also did not sit idle; they, too, occupied unoccupied lands within the tribal territory. 'It is a continuing phenomenon,' Kaushik argues, as still encroachment of the land because of recurring floods, and land erosion is happening in different parts of the state, including in the Kaziranga National Park (Kaushik, 2017, p. 152)

Surprisingly, clause six of the Assam Accord talks about constitutional measure to protect Assamese identity, but there was no mention of indigenous and tribal identity. Moreover, under clause 10 of the Accord, which is related to the protection of government land, the Accord puts indigenous people of the state at risk of being evicted from their forest homes (The Assam Accord, 1985, p. 3). Thus, in the post-movement period, it became clear to the tribals that the movement leaders merely utilized the issue of 'land alienation' of tribals to mobilize them in support of the movement. However, the 'land alienation' as the narrative of the massacre remained dominant in the Assamese society. People, without analysing how land was actually transferred from the hands of the locals to the immigrants accepted that land was grabbed and encroached by the immigrants illegally. And these atrocities of immigrants

forced the locals to take the matter in their hand. The movement leaders popularised the 'land -hungry' image of the immigrant Muslims developed by C.S. Mulan, the census superintendent of 1931, and tried to make the movement relevant to the people. The movement ended, but the erroneous practice of blaming the immigrant Muslims for the loss of land of the indigenous people did not change.

Presence of Foreign Hand

As against the claim that 'land alienation' of the locals by the immigrant Muslims caused the Nellie massacre, some scholars claim that the massacre was plotted by some organizations directly or indirectly associated with the anti-foreigner movement. They believe that these organizations manipulated the locals to launch the attack. Monirul Hussain argues that the attackers were like hangmen; powerful forces from behind plotted the massacre (Hussain, 1993, p. 142). Arun Shourie and Swagata Sen also stated that AASU was believed to play a very active role in the massacre (Shourie & Sen, 2006). Similarly, Diganta Sharma holds the AASU responsible for the massacre (Sharma, pp. 28-29). A few scholars believe that the RSS, who tried to communally influence the movement, had a big hand in the Nellie massacre(Uddin, 2015).

Some scholars have refuted such claims on the involvement of foreign hands in the Nellie massacre. Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty argues that the leaders of the AASU cannot be held responsible for the massacre as most of them were behind bars when the massacre occurred (Pisharoty, 2019, p. 95). On the other hand, Makiko Kimura claims that the decision to attack the Muslims was a result of a discussion between local leaders of AASU and the attackers (Kimura, 2013, pp. 101-102).

To solve this contestation on the presence of the foreign hand in the Nellie massacre, we can take the help of Raheel Dhattiwala's claim that the decision making before an attack is always strategic. The perpetrators of an attack are not robots. They are aware of protecting themselves from any counter-attack from their targets. They are not puppets of emotion. They behave in a very calculative way. At the same time, they do not attack without a structural environment (Dhattiwala, 2019, pp. 90-95).

The perpetrators of the Nellie massacre were not puppets of any organization associated with the movement. That is why some people decided not to participate in the attack, and some even warned the Muslims to stay

careful (Mazumder, 2019). Moreover, the geography of the Muslim villages attacked in the massacre also made the massacre possible. The Muslim villages were surrounded by the villages of Tiwas and other Assamese people, and the river Kopili in the North was also a natural barrier. This made it easy for the attackers to launch the attack and flee the area easily after finishing their task. However, their decision to attack the Muslims were influenced by the then socio-political environment of the state. During the movement period, there was a political mandate espousing violence against immigrant Muslims. The structural framework of the Nellie massacre was the anti-foreigner movement. The leadership and the members of the AASU might not have directly participated in the killings of the Muslims but they definitely had a big hand in creating a situation where violence became a way to show patriotism. Beginning with the North-Kamrup pogrom, the first case of violence of civilians against civilian, the organization always avoided discussion on secular lines. They did not condemn the attack as the attacked were religious and linguistic minorities. The killers of the North Kamrup went unpunished. This encouraged people to 'go on for a greater offensive at a later stage, as they were successful in their first attempt' (Hussain, 1993, p. 120). The state can also be held responsible for the massacre. Without the enabling role of the state violence cannot go beyond an initial level (Bhat, 2020, pp. 167-168). The state after forcefully imposing the election ignored the security of the common people and engaged all the security personnel for the protection of the polling booths.

Apart from these two above mentioned narratives of the Nellie massacre, there are some other narratives of the massacre found in different literatures. Some scholars argue that the massacre was an act of self-defense (Kimura, 2013, p. 106). According to this narrative the perpetrators were provoked by the victims to take the decision to attack. However, this narrative too seems to be unacceptable as during that time it was the immigrant Muslims community that was in trouble because of the anti-foreigner movement. Their failure to retaliate or defend themselves proves that they were not preparing for any attack. The geography of the Nellie area also makes it highly unlikely for the Muslims villagers to launch an attack on their Assamese neighbours. Moreover, Muslims are a minority in that area. Therefore, it is doubtful that the Muslims were a threat to the Assamese.

Four months after the massacre, the Lalung Darbar – a traditional organization of the Tiwas having the power of social control (Kimura, 2013, p. 113), submitted a six-page memorandum to the Prime Minister of India. The memorandum included a 'note' about the Nellie massacre that 'a group

clash took place near Nellie in Morigaon circle for which several hundred people had to lose their lives'. The Darbar considered the incident unfortunate but restrained from identifying the miscreants. Most importantly, in the memorandum, Darbar mentioned the 'illegal Bangladeshis' taking the lands of tribals away. It mentioned several incidents of atrocities and killings of Lalung (Tiwa) by the 'Illegal Bangladeshi' in several circles of the Nagaon district (Narayan, 2008). Thus, through this memorandum, Darbar wanted to establish that if any tribal was involved in any attack on the 'Bangladeshi,' it was indeed for self-defense. Thus, Darbar was in 'denial' of the crimes committed by the perpetrators. In 1996, Prof. Gregory Stanton proposed a formula to identify different elements which can lead to genocide. In his ten-stage formula, the genocide is not the final stage, but the 'denial' of genocide is. 'Denial of the crime by the perpetrators by taking active steps to cover the act or through their words' (Ochab, 2019). The blame on the victims for whatever happened is a form of 'denial'. Thus, in the case of the Nellie massacre, the 'self-defense' as the cause of the incident is a form of 'denial' of the crime committed.

The implications

'The correct answer will never be known – not atleast in our lifetime' - this is what Tribhuvan Prasad Tiwary, who headed the official commission of inquiry into Assam's disturbances during the election period of 1983, said, when he was asked by a journalist, about the 'truth' of the Nellie massacre (Begum & Patrick, n.d.). What caused the Nellie massacre is debatable. But as discussed above, 'land alienation' of locals by the immigrant Muslims as the cause of the massacre holds less substance. The victims and the perpetrators of the violence mostly referred to the situation of the state during the election of 1983 responsible for the massacre. Thus, the narrative of 'land alienation' does not represent the voices of those who directly participated or those who were directly affected by the massacre. However, since the issue of 'land alienation' fits into the existing discourse about East Bengal origin Muslims or immigrant Muslims, Assamese society accepted it without questioning its objectivity. The 'land hungry' image of the immigrant Muslims which was a colonial construct, deepened in the psyche of Assamese people during the anti-foreigner movement. The 'land-hungry' image of the immigrant Muslims made them 'other' in Assamese society, so much so that the massacre did not even receive a social acknowledgement. The AGP government granted wholesale impunity to the perpetrators of Nellie massacre, and it became possible because the social and political values of

Assamese society and the ‘mass sentiment’ that supported it. The wholesale impunity could not create any outrage in the society because the majority of the society considered the massacre an act of revenge by the indigenous people on the immigrants who encroached on their lands. The impunity to the perpetrators of Nellie massacre was an example of state sanctioned, officially brooked impunity for the people committing heinous mass crime against the state’s immigrant Muslim community. Anjuman Ara Begum and Patrick Hoening argue that ‘rather than being portrayed as an accident or beat on the history of communal harmony in Assam, Nellie needs to be referred to as a symbol of impunity for the persecution of those who have come to be identified as the ‘other’ in Assamese society’ (Begum & Patrick, n.d.). The state failed to do anything when immigrant Muslims were killed again in 2012 and 2014 in Kokrajhar (Ahmed, 2020, p. 230). After the 2012 Kokrajhar riot, people claimed that the attack was perpetrated by the illegal Bangladeshi Muslims. However, state investigation could not find evidence supporting such claim (Johari, 2014). The perpetrators, who commit any crime against the immigrant Muslim community, are not always unaware of the citizenship of the members of the community. The perpetrators of the Nellie massacre were also aware that the victims were not Bangladeshi nationals, in fact they knew that the people they decided to attack migrated to the state during the colonial period, much before the creation of Bangladesh. However, the concretization of the immigrant Muslim community as ‘Bangladeshi’, the ‘common enemy’ of Assamese and the tribal groups of the state set the ground for the massacre.

In the present-day Assamese society, the immigrant Muslim community holds the position of the important ‘other’. Every time there is a heightened emotion on ‘illegal immigrants’ the immigrant Muslim community face the public wrath. The Gorukhuti incident is an example of this. In the incident Bijay Shankar Baniya, a photographer employed to capture the images of Gorukhuti eviction drive jumped on the motionless body of an immigrant Muslim named Moinul Hoque lying on the ground. He was accompanied by a group of policemen with arms in their hands. Although the sequence of the incident is not yet known, in the first part of the video, Hoque was seen rushing toward a group of policemen with a stick in his hand and the police shot him dead (Chakravarty, 2021).

The Gorukhuti incident is not an isolated one (Chakravarty, 2021), incidents of the such kind occur at a regular interval. This wrath towards the immigrant Muslim community is rooted in the colonial scheme of divide and rule, which still has an impact in the society and politics of the state.

Concluding remark

In this article an attempt is made to see the Nellie massacre through the lenses of its contesting narratives. It is very difficult to specify the cause/ causes of the massacre as it is very difficult to know what was going on the minds of the perpetrators when they took the decision to attack. However, we can argue that without the Assam movement no Nellie massacre would have happened. It happened during the movement. One must also see the role of the state in that context. After forcefully imposing the election, the state diverted the security forces to protect the polling booths. Common people’s security was not a concern of the state. Thus, we can say that Nellie massacre was a result of interplay between multiplicity of factors. The contesting narratives of the massacre however do not represent this reality. This paper also shows that violence is not spontaneous, it happens when certain conditions are met. Massacre like Nellie happens when existing socio-political environment supports such crimes.

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