

Who will end the Assam nightmare?

Even after the elections are over, violence still continues in this north-eastern state. The army has been called out to restore peace, while the agitationists have refused to recognise the Congress(I) government as legitimate and have been demanding a return to President's Rule till the foreigners' issue is resolved. Will the government led by Hiteswar Saikia be able to bring peace to this strife-torn state, where communal riots and senseless carnage have become a way of life? SUBIR ROY, reporting from Gauhati, says that a tough task lies ahead of the Congress(I) government, which came to power through a non-election. Photographs by ALOKE MITRA.

A picture of despair: a man sits beside the body of his dead son



The Nellie massacre

The elections in Lahorighat and Marigaon constituencies of Nowgong district on 14 February had a meaning of their own: that they were actually conducted by Delhi meant that a challenge had been thrown. The leaders of the Assam agitation had been slighted and there was seething anger. The area had a mixed population of immigrant Muslims, Lalung and Boro Kachari tribals and indigenous Assamese. All the ingredients of a terrible concoction were there; what was needed was a spark. The first ominous sign came on 16 February when five dead bodies of Lalung children were found. It was just the sort of ghastly and senseless act that could send a docile people like the Lalungs running for their arms, their spirits hungry for revenge. The next day in Lahorighat eight bodies were found, five of Lalung tribals and three of Muslims. There had also been widespread arson. The orchestration was perfect.

Then on Friday 18 February the people living in 15 villages around the small town of Nellie in the Jagiroad police station area had to pay dearly for their right to vote. And it

was a dearer price than anyone had had to pay in independent India for a similar right. For a few brief hours around midday of that black Friday the area saw a carnage unparalleled in the history of the Indian republic. Well over 600 people were butchered, making the massacre even more horrific than the one that had occurred at Mandai in Tripura in mid-1980.

How did it happen? A large well organised and well armed mob of several thousand—consisting largely of Lalungs, Boros and a few Assamese—first started from Amsui on the other side of the road to Nowgong and approached Dimal Bil, a small rivulet, burning houses and killing on the way. The Dimal soon became a great divide, with the attackers on one side and the villagers on the other gathered together with mainly bows and arrows to provide whatever resistance they could. But their resolve to fight and defend themselves soon withered when another large mob of attackers trapped the villagers from the other side. A few bullets were fired and the villagers, largely without firearms, knew they were no match. Then they began to run blindly into the fields. The able bodied men ran faster and it was mainly the women, children and old people who were caught and slain in the fields.

The Nellie massacre is also quite unique in the sense that journalists saw it happen in bits and pieces almost right from the beginning. A group which had gone to the Jagiroad area on Friday afternoon saw the attackers at their work near the highway to Nowgong. They had no idea of the extent of the killings that would take place. They came back to report a gory little incident. For several hours the police were nowhere in sight and eventually a small CRP force came there and found themselves totally unmatched for the job. The next day, Saturday, journalists again went to the area to discover a horrific sight. Houses, or what remained of them, were still smouldering. A relief camp of sorts had been set up at a school in Nellie where the grievously wounded lay unattended. There were even children with their intestines coming out of their punctured stomachs who had not yet died. And there was no medical help available. The small CRP force was at its wits' end trying to cater to the wounded. In the fields the dead still lay where they had met their end. In one heap the journalists counted 136 dead bodies.

On Sunday, 20 February, the scene was only slightly better. At Nellie relief camp there were now buses to carry the wounded to Nowgong town where the college had been turned

CRP personnel interrogate villagers in one of the Assam villages





Victims of the communal riots that broke out in Chamariya, Boko

into a temporary hospital. The wounded were being carried to the buses by others who had the strength to do so. An old woman just stood and cried as her daughter was painfully lifted into the bus. Another woman with a bullet injury and running high fever could not sit up when she was carried and put on the ground before the bus. Her husband made a pathetic attempt to cover her with her meagre sari so as to preserve whatever little modesty had been spared to her by fate. An attempt to talk to the hapless only ended in loud wailing and incoherence. The camp buildings could not accommodate the over 2,000 victims who had taken shelter there. On the grounds outside a new life was already beginning; some were busy cutting bamboos to construct some sort of shelter for themselves.

Out in the fields near the Dimal Bil the picture was only a little better than the previous day's. Police and doctors were taking a roll call of the dead. A few able bodied men were carrying bodies from the fields and surviving fellow villagers were identifying them for the records. Some were digging a mass grave. Rows of dead waited for a quick ritual, a meagre covering of white cloth and quick obliteration from the pages of history. Even then, two days after the killings when the government had already admitted a death toll of 250, in a stretch of less than two kilometres we could count over 80 dead bodies. Some survivors were scouting the fields to try and discover their relatives. Ever so often somebody would find a dead relative and burst into tears. Abdul Mannan had lost all of his seven family members. Abdul Hai had lost both his parents and a sister. Alimuddin's wife and three other relatives were

gone. Abdul Reza had found one dead relative and three were still missing.

As far as the eye could see not a single house was left standing. Among the ruins was a folding reading stand with what looked like a half burnt religious text still open on it. An untethered cow kept standing amidst what must have been once its owner's house, mooing and with the marks of tears beneath her eyes. Two half burnt diesel pumping sets beside Dimal Bil bore testimony to the enterprise of the cultivators of the area. The fields were green with short young paddy crops that grow well in the low lying areas after the monsoon waters have receded. A half finished pucca irrigation canal to bring water to the field from the rivulet would perhaps never be completed.

Villagers await relief



Carnage at Mangaldoi

While the election battle was being fought with such deadly earnest at Marigaon and Lahorighat constituencies, across the river in Mangaldoi subdivision of Darrang district a different battle was raging; trouble between pro- and anti-election forces began there from as early as 2 February at Sipajhar. Intermittent clashes continued with a good deal of police firing in which several died. Intermittent clashes and firings continued to ravage the area. Doctors at Mangaldoi civil hospital said that they had done as many as 16 post mortems in a week, of which 12 were of Assamese and two indigenous Muslims. Here the situation was different from that across the river in that the Bengali Muslims were returning in equal measure what they were getting and occasionally taking action on their own.

There was reprisal of sorts in the nearby Chawlkhoa area on Monday, 14 February in which twelve Muslims and four Assamese were killed. Then on 17 February came the big Muslim onslaught at the other side of Mangaldoi town in the three villages of Dhula, Hirapara and Thekrabari, all more or less along the north trunk road and within a couple of kilometres of each other. Large frenzied mobs raising battle cries came to the villages at around midday armed with spears, *daos*, bows and arrows and also guns. The villagers at Dhula first offered some token resistance. They gathered in a house and had one gun to protect themselves. But they could not hold out for more than an hour when the attackers took over. The police came, when the depredation had been nearly completed, and opened fire. The death toll was 12—ten in the violence and two in police firing. The total toll in the three villages in that day's attacks was 41 of which six were accounted for by police firing.

In Mangaldoi no poll was held as the lone candidate was returned unopposed and in Sipajhar constituency the government had to postpone the elections. Thus in these places the Assamese have succeeded in making the elections a mockery but have had to pay for it dearly.

In the poll violence, in Assam over 2,500 people have died and the pattern of killings is largely similar to what happened in Nellie and Mangaldoi. Shortly after his arrest, the All Assam Students' Union general secretary, Mr Brighu Phukan, said that he was hearing a lot about people preparing for violence, though their own agitation remained a peaceful one. The government on its part had carried out several exercises and categorised constituencies according to the difficulty with which elections could be held there.

The hardliners in the government felt that elections could be held in 105 constituencies while the softliners were sure about only 40 to 41. Intelligence reports said that large-scale communal violence could not be ruled out. Three likely effects of holding the elections were: 1) making the Assam problem more intractable 2) further alienating the Assamese to the extent that the gap between them and others would become unbridgeable and 3) communal and inter-regional violence. Despite such forecasts from at least one intelligence source, the government decided to go ahead with the elections.

A house divided

What is the feeling within the administration in Assam now? Those who wanted the poll and saw it through feel triumphant. Those who made dire forecasts are being dubbed the prophets of doom. Even the hardliners now admit that they did not expect violence on this scale. It seems that the whole law and order machinery was geared to protecting

A body fished out of the river is being taken for a burial in Nellie



A woman retrieving whatever has been spared by the carnage in Gohpur

Can Mr Saikia bring peace?

“Assam is burning,” said Mr Hiteswar Saikia, who was elected to the Assembly from the Nazira constituency, shortly after being made the leader of the Assam Congress(I) legislature party. In fact, the immediate task of the new chief minister, who has been an education minister in the Anowara Taimur ministry, is to restore peace in a state torn by communal strife. But Mr Saikia’s task, is undoubtedly an unenviable one: though the Congress(I) has won an absolute majority in the elections (winning 90 out of 108 seats; the elections to the remaining 18 seats have been countermanded), it has done so through an election which is considered farcical. The agitationists have refused to recognise the government as a “legitimate” one and have announced a programme of non-cooperation. Even as Mr Saikia was making the formal moves to-

wards the installation of his government, people throughout the state were dying of communal and racist violence.

Mr Saikia’s election as the CLP(I) leader followed a keen contest between him, Harendranath Talukdar, Assam Pradesh Congress(I) Committee chief, who won the elections from Chaygaon, and Keshub Chandra Gogoi, a former chief minister. The central leadership of the party had left the decision to the newly elected members of the party and had hoped for a consensus candidate. But there was no response to the appeal. A closed door meeting of the senior faction leaders followed which also failed in deciding on a leader. Finally on the night of 25 February the announcement of his election as CLP(I) leader was made by the central AICC(I) observer, Mr Bhisma Narain Singh.



Decomposed bodies lie scattered in the fields of Nellie

candidates, poll personnel and polling stations. In this the government has met with a remarkable degree of success. Only one candidate has been killed, one candidate's agent and another's supporter have been killed and three polling personnel injured. But in the process the extent of force deployment that was necessary to prevent communal clashes in far flung areas with no easy access was not possible. In Gohpur, Mangaldoi, Nowgong and several other areas the administration simply broke down. Police help did not come hours after the violence had started and when it did arrive the damage was largely done.

The movement and the Congress(I) are blaming each other for fomenting the violence but the one fact writ large all over Assam is that it is a house divided. Next door neighbours, not to speak of localities and villages, do not trust each other any more. The process of Assamisation that had been going on for over half a century has been seriously reversed. Very few indigenous Assamese Muslims will ever be able to identify with the movement again. The immigrant Muslim will never retain Assamese as his mother tongue in any coming census. Tea garden labourers, all from outside the state, feel thoroughly alienated from the movement as a result of all the killings that have struck their brethren. Most important of all, the plains tribals are a house divided, a good number of them in deadly opposition to the movement.

Mr Hiteswar Saikia, in whose

hands the destiny of Assam will remain in the immediate future, has an unenviable task ahead of him. He may be the best possible man for the job but that may not be good enough. The sections of the administration

who felt, till the elections were announced, that they had broken the back of the agitation should not make another mistake by imagining that only a shoring-up operation remains to be done.

Opposition's views on Assam



Samar Mukherjee: 'Security and safety first'

SAMAR MUKHERJEE (CPI-M)
"The immediate necessity is to guarantee security and safety of the

minorities and other sections of the people who are now threatened by attacks from hostile groups. More security forces should be deputed, including the military. Then an atmosphere of dialogue should be initiated at the national level and the state level. All sections should be involved in this dialogue. After peace and normalcy have been restored, the question of foreign nationals can be discussed in a peaceful atmosphere and a solution must be found on the basis of the Constitution, existing laws and international agreements."

JASWANT SINGH (BJP, Rajya Sabha MP): "The first thing that is required in Assam is solace and it cannot be provided by those whose hands are covered with blood. What needs to be done immediately is to dismiss the Governor and his advisers and to suspend the Assembly since it has no legitimacy. Then it would be proper to release all those who have been arrested without trial under the National Security Act and withdraw the CRPF. Protection should be provided by the Assam