

ASSAM

# The Nellie Nightmare

*Blood will have blood.*

—*Macbeth*, William Shakespeare



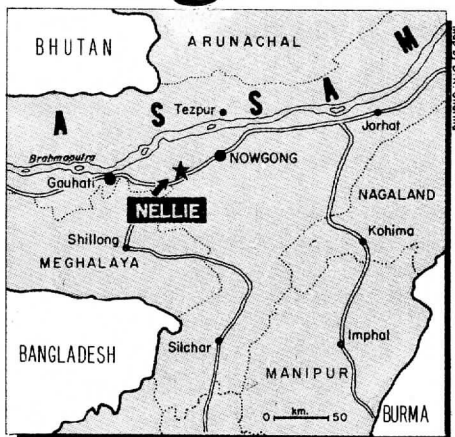
ON THAT fateful Friday, the thought of death hovered over Nellie and the surrounding villages like a vulture. Ever since the poll announcement lit the fires under the ethnic and communal cauldron that is Assam, the 15,000-odd Muslims living in a cluster of a dozen villages between Jagi Road and Moregaon in Nowgong district, on the lush *char* areas on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, 45 km from Gauhati, knew that for the next month they would be living on a knife's edge.

Almost all were Bengali Muslims who had crossed over from Mymensingh, now in Bangladesh, which made them prime targets for the Assamese. Further, they had made it clear that they would not respond to the poll boycott and would participate in the elections. What is more, raider gangs from the villages had been making forays across the river into the Mangaldoi areas of Darrang district to clash with Assamese there.

The stage was set for one of the most gruesome massacres in Indian history. The polls opened in Nellie on February 14, and immediately afterwards Assamese in the villages surrounding the Muslim pocket held meetings and announced that pro-election Muslims must be socially ostracised and anybody trading with them would be fined Rs 500.

**Bloody Clashes:** Meanwhile, news came of the slaughter at Gohpur, 133 km from Tezpur, the headquarters of Darrang district. There, the Boro tribals, supporters of the pro-poll Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA), were enraged because of intimidation from the Assamese. Together with the volatile tea garden labour in the Tezpur sub-division, they resented having had vital bridges destroyed.

Nobody in Gohpur—or even Gauhati—is very clear



how the Gohpur killing began on February 14. The rumour quickly spread that more than 17 Assamese villages had been burnt down by tribal hordes and more than 1,000 people killed. Three days later, when police parties finally began to scour the area, it was known that the Assamese had also hit out: 27 Boro villages attacked and at least 30 Boros killed by torch-wielding Assamese. The death toll on both sides did not add up to more than 100.

**Preliminary Killings:** Gohpur, as it turned out, was only the prelude to a grisly theme. Nellie and the surrounding villages were tense with fear and hate on February 16 after five Lalung children were found

dead in the Lahorigate area near Nellie. The Lalung tribals are anti-poll and anti-PTCA: they felt that the Muslim immigrants—most of them came to Assam in the '50s and '60s—had occupied prime land once tilled by the Lalungs.

Matters were not helped when three Muslim children were found dead on the place where the tribals' bodies had been found. On the same day—February 17—the Muslims of Dharamtuli village, one of the Nellie cluster, were forcibly prevented from voting in the second phase of the poll. At the same time, there were reports of Muslim attacks on the Assamese-Hindu villages of Dakchuki, Menapara and Dhula in the Mangaldoi area across the river.

**Howling Mob:** Friday, February 18. At around eight in the morning, a huge mob had surrounded the village, armed with guns, spears, swords, 'daos', glinting in the morning sun. Cries of "*Jai ai ahom!*", the rallying slogan of the anti-foreigner agitation that means "Long Live Mother Assam", rent the air. Nuruddin, a Nellie resident, relates what happened next: "We were all standing in

A young victim of the slaughter (left), Assamese militants up in arms (top) and three of the hundreds of corpses that littered the paddies near Nellie



PICTURES BY BHAWAN SINGH











Massacred children laid out for a mass burial at Nellie









front of our house, watching the mob gathering in the distance and wondering what we should do. Suddenly we found the mob running towards us and as we started fleeing I fell down and felt the running feet around me. Then there was fire and smoke and I do not know how long I lay there."

Nuruddin was fortunate; he escaped the murderous frenzy of the mob, which was composed mostly of Lalung tribals, though there were some Mikir and Boro tribals as well. Intelligence sources later said that the mob included some Assamese Hindus and Nepalis. It seemed as if all the decades of hate and frustration were being concentrated in the bloody 24 hours that the killings went on. The slaughter and arson occurred mainly in a tiny delta between the small rivers Kopili, Killing and Demal. The land is very marshy and the fleeing villagers had no chance.

The reason why, as it was later estimated, 80 per cent of the dead were women and children was that the men ran faster. As the daos rose and fell with monotonous precision, the women and children tumbled in heaps in the rice paddies. Mothers were still clutching their babies—both slashed and chopped about like hunks of meat on a butcher's slab.

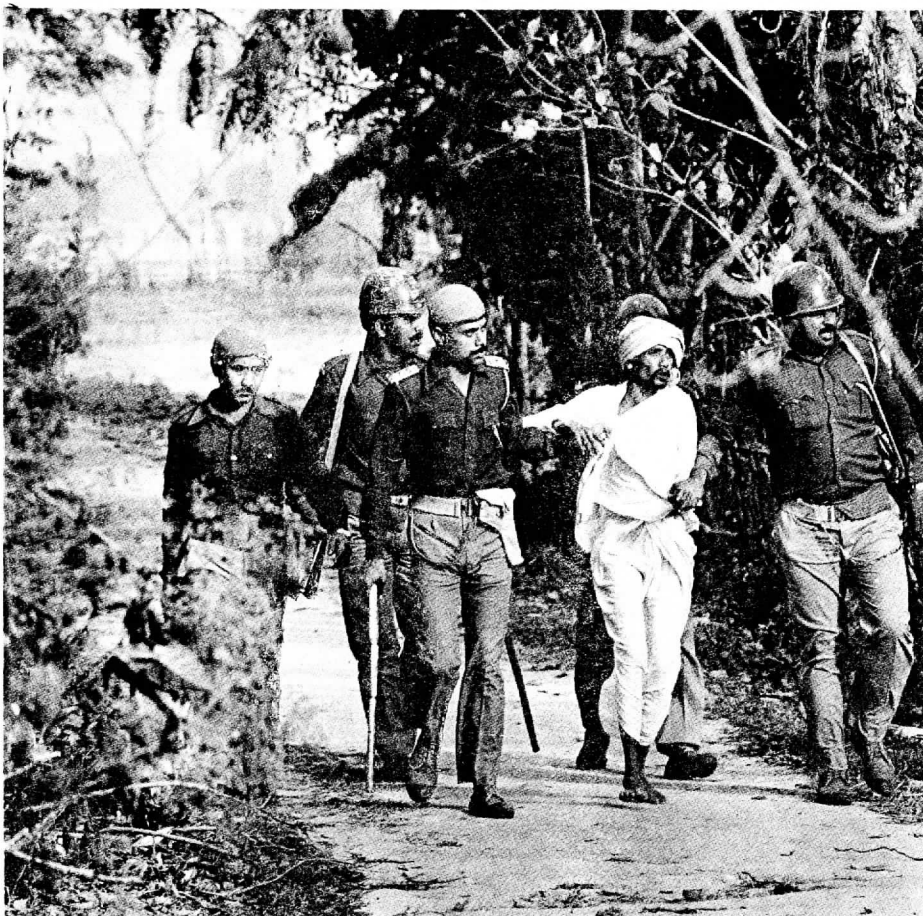
**Macabre Ploy:** The Muslim villages in the area huddle together as in a ghetto. Soon, the others—Demal, Matiparbat, Borburi and Dharamtuli among them—were engulfed in the blood-lust. The Muslims started retreating towards the Demal Bil, a huge stretch of water, and many succeeded in crossing over to the other side and burning the bamboo bridge in the hope that this would keep the attackers at bay. However, the macabre cunning of the attackers became immediately evident—the fugitives were pounced upon by dao-wielding Lalungs from the rear and the killings redoubled in fury.

Later, the survivors said



Mrs Gandhi's effigy hangs from a tree (far left), the funeral of three Hindus killed in the violence and (above) CRPF men keep vigil over victims of the Nellie holocaust





CRPF men lead a suspect away for questioning



Assamese women mourning their dead

that they could not organise themselves as the attack had been too swift and sudden. However, it appeared that most of the men were away and there seemed to be some truth in the report that they had crossed the river to Mangaldoi to attack Assamese settlements there. In fact, the army cordoned off the Muslims returning across the river on February 18, because they feared reprisals—but this may have prevented many Muslims from reaching their villages when the slaughter was going on.

Villagers from Nellie and the other settlements, however, see a sinister design in the fact that women and children bore the brunt of the attack. Says Tahermuddin Thakur: "It looks as if the attackers wanted to make sure of getting rid of the entire new generation and also to ensure that no new births took place."

**Ruthless Attackers:** The stories of the survivors are similar in evoking the stark brutality of February 18. Nurul, 16, fled with his parents to the Demal Bil; the killers caught up with the running family and Nurul saw first his mother falling and then his father, who was decapitated by one of the hundreds of daos flashing efficiently on that morning, afternoon and evening. Nurul fell





unconscious and that was probably why he was spared the attackers' wrath.

Saifuddin, who had married barely a year ago, says: "We were running with the others when we got separated in the mêlée. I jumped into a pond along with some others and that is how we were saved." Nuruddin lay low while the killings went on and then when the attackers lost their momentum a bit, "I got up and ran towards some bushes and hid there all night".

Anwar Huq was away when the attackers struck and when he returned the village had been reduced to ashes. Says Huq: "I went about like a madman searching for my relatives. And suddenly under a tree I saw my sister lying dead. Her neck had been slashed. I later found that all 20 of my relatives had been killed. I am the only member of my family left alive."

**Refugee Camp:** All of that Friday, the killings and arson went on, and carried on into the morning of Saturday. The paramilitary forces that were deployed throughout Assam—Nowgong had been identified as one of the districts where there would be trouble if elections were held—were nowhere in sight. Two days after the massacre, the authorities managed to set up an open air

camp for the survivors in which 2,000 people huddled. Quite a few of them had managed to salvage, of all things, squawking chickens which were one source of food in the refugee camps. Said Manik Mia: "These birds were the only things we had and we just picked them up and ran for shelter."

Talking to the refugees, it appeared that the attack had been planned for quite some time. They said that "people from other places" were frequently seen coming to Assamese villages—Mukuria, Palaguri, Silbhetta—and holding closed door meetings with AASU leaders. According to Abdul Hai of Demai village, many of the attackers were unknown faces but were led by known AASU boys who led them on shouting "*Jai ai ahom*" and "*Death to the mias*".

Even as three army columns moved into Nowgong district, the authorities began to count the dead. Conservative estimates were 600, but intelligence sources say that it will be at least 1,000. In addition, 10,000 were injured or left homeless. Camp inmates felt that many more have died besides those lying in the fields. Said Robi: "I have seen bodies being thrown into the Kopili river on the night after the raid." However, he could not identify the people tossing the corpses into

the water. Curiously, when Mrs Gandhi visited the site on February 21, there was not a single body to be seen in the areas she visited.

**Numbed Survivors:** The refugees display a despairing resolve not to leave the region. Says Rajab Ali, who lost his mother and brother: "Where can we go?" Others are numbed by the inferno into which they were plunged last fortnight. Says Akram Chowdhury, one of those who emigrated to India from Mymensingh a long time ago: "We had been living in peace all these years. Now we are attacked by our neighbours who were friends only the other day."

Today, Nellie is a graveyard, with all the attendant sights, smells and sounds of death: the ghastly hulks of gutted houses, the stench of rotting flesh, the sound of relatives mourning their mutilated dead. For the survivors huddling over their meagre meals in the camps, protected by armed guards from the madness that prowls the valley, the past is a blood-stained nightmare, the present a daze, the future only uncertainty. Perhaps the only one to be sure of what the future will bring is the vulture. It knows how to wait; it is a patient bird. —JAGANNATH

DUBASHI with SUMANTA SEN in Nellie



The mass cremation of the massacred dead



ASSAM

# A State Ravaged



IT WAS beyond the ken of a civilised society, a blood-spattered vindication of a heartless government's sudden constitutional piety. The carnage began with a few deaths on February 2; during the next three weeks, it rose every day with dreadful ferocity: a dozen at Chamaria on the 12th, a hundred at Gohpur on the 14th, and then at least a thousand at Nellie on the 18th.

Amid the stench of rotting corpses wafting down the Brahmaputra valley, the Congress(I) in Assam won an overwhelming majority in the new Assembly. But the victory was Pyrrhic, and every legislator's path to his seat was trailed by a thickening stream of blood. Not since the passions of Partition had the nation seen such senseless death.

As the election week ground cruelly toward its finish, every community in Assam turned upon every other community. The Assamese, the tribals, and the immigrant Bengalis figured as both attackers and victims. The toll exacted would forever stain the election results—vast stretches of countryside mutilated by arson and violence, hund-

reds of villages ravaged by fire and turned into silent graveyards, a total of at least 1,500 people killed, and the firm flowering of hatred and blood-lust from the compost heap of botched history.

**Virulent Hatred:** Above all, Assam's image as a multi-cultural and secular state now lay shattered; there could be no solace for the lakhs of panic-stricken villagers who had fled their homes with whatever belongings they could collect. Worst of all, the state now seemed to be poised for a cathartic breakup along communal lines.

The carnage also changed—possibly forever—the very nature of the Assam problem. Until the elections the Assamese had been agitating against the existence of large numbers of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in their midst. Now, the Assamese, the Bengalis and the tribals were all separated by chasms of anger and virulent hatred. Overnight, a movement that had remained largely non-violent and secular for more than three years had been transformed by the elections into one of history's bloodiest confrontations—and the foreigners' issue was swept aside by the tide of blood that engulfed the state.

The results were clear. From a passive line of civil disobedience and non-cooperation, the agitation was now irrevocably transformed into a violent movement that would not abjure direct and brutal action. Such intransigence immediately polarised the attitudes of the Bengalis and the majority of the tribals, who had been resolutely opposed to the agitation from the beginning. Every side of this bitter triangle now toed a hard line in which reason and logic would play no part.

**Hawkish Stand:** It was clear also that the moderates in Assam had been pushed to the sidelines. The entire pre-election strategy of the agitation was decided by avowed hawks within the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). Most ominous of all, however, was the sudden awakening to ferocity of sections that had earlier lain dormant, chiefly the tribal population.

Until now, the tribals had been on the periphery of Assam's problem; but the agitation, and their own increasing isolation within the rapidly polarising society around them had forced them into a new militancy. The agitation itself had succeeded in



Mrs Gandhi at Nellie: reaping a whirlwind



Suddenly, therefore, the bone of contention was no longer the illegal immigrant, not even the growing enmity between the Assamese and the Bengali. The tribal outrages at Gohpur and Nellie introduced a new and volatile element, and the resulting chemical reaction could not but have led to a cataclysmic explosion.

[illegible]

Where the Government miscalculated the most was in assuming that three years of the agitation had drained support for the movement, in assuming that prolonged negotiations would ultimately wear out the militancy of the students. Another mistake was to believe that the agitation was restricted to the urban Assamese elite. Said AASU's acting president Nurul Hussain: "The violence has been created by government agents. Now the agitation has become a peo-

Added Satananda Deka, member of the Mangaldoi District Students Union: "Study the violence closely and you will see how it erupted after Mrs Gandhi's visit to the state. By inciting ethnic clashes, the Government wanted to divert our attention from our resolve to thwart the elections. It is wrong to say that the movement has turned communal. There are Hindus and Muslims in both the Assamese and Bangladeshi ranks. The Government also thought that we had no reach in the countryside, that the villagers could be bought with promises. The success of the anti-election movement shows how strong our hold is in the countryside, and if the Government thinks it knows exactly how we think, let me tell you we know much more intimately how the Government thinks and works, and we can swiftly and effectively counteract its plans."





R.K. TRIVEDI

# "There Was No Option"

*RAM KRISHNA Trivedi, 62, took over as the chief election commissioner in June 1982. He has attracted nation-wide criticism for having decided to go ahead with the Assam elections. In an exclusive hour-long interview with INDIA TODAY's CHAITANYA KALBAG in his office at Nirvachan Sadan on February 23, Trivedi explained his fateful decision. Excerpts:*

**On avoiding the elections:** There was no option but to hold the elections under the existing provisions of the Constitution. The only alternatives could have been if an amendment had been passed to Article 356 to extend President's rule, or an emergency had been declared in Assam under Article 356(5). Even in case emergency had been declared, Parliament would have had to approve of it, and the Election Commission would have had to certify that the continuance of President's rule was necessary.

**On constitutional deadlines:** I had four compelling deadlines before me—on January 6 the Central Government sent a communication to the commission saying it proposed to revoke President's rule by February 28, thereby implying that the commission should take steps to hold elections before that date; constitutionally, one year of President's rule expired on March 18, after which there would have been a crisis; under Article 172(1), the life of an assembly, from the day it is first convened, cannot extend beyond five years, and this five-year period in Assam's case expired on March 21; finally, beyond March 31, if there was no elected government in Assam, the state or Central Government could not have authorised any expenditure from the Consolidated Fund of the State.

**On the Garhwal precedent:** A lot of criticism has been levelled, saying that the commission had earlier countermanded the Garhwal Lok Sabha by-election because of induction of outside police and voter intimidation. But people have not understood the nuances. Garhwal was a by-election to the Lok Sabha, and the life of the Lok Sabha extends until January 8, 1985. If I had similar leeway in Assam I would have had no hesitation in postponing the elections. The commission has repeatedly stressed that conditions in Assam were not ideal for elections.

**On revision of the 1979 electoral rolls:** The assumption is that by revising

the electoral rolls the Election Commission would have solved the foreigners problem. I will respectfully submit that this is not correct. Revision of rolls is carried out by electoral registration officers (ERO) whose rank is equivalent to that of a naib tehsildar. The ERO cannot decide who a foreigner is—that question has to be decided by the appropriate tribunals or authorities under the Indian Citizenship Act 1955, or the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act 1950, or the Indian Passport Act 1920. Secondly, the commission had only seven weeks between January 6 and February 28 in



Trivedi: difficult conditions

which to hold elections; for an intensive revision of electoral rolls at least six to eight months are needed; even a summary revision takes at least six weeks. In Assam even a summary revision would have taken three or four months. But this does not mean that normal revision should not have taken place. In fact, with February 28 looming over me, I ordered that all polling would have to end, even if repolling in some places was required, latest by February 21 to enable constituting the Assembly by February 28.

**On existing laws:** I think the crux in Assam is that the agitators do not merely want an enumeration of the foreigners—they want a redefinition of the term 'citizen'. In addition, with regard to a situation like that in the state during the elections, nowhere else in the last 35 years has such a crisis arisen. Many things are left unsaid; there should be provision for such emergencies. If necessary later, therefore, the commission will press for a reference from the President to the Supreme Court under Article 143 of the Constitution on these issues.

total alienation of the Bengalis, too, from the Assamese mainstream. In 1980, the Bengali area of Cachar was the only in Assam to vote in the Lok Sabha elections. This time too, the overwhelming turnout of Bengali voters (as high as 80 per cent in Cachar) showed how determined the Bengalis were to protect their own interests politically.

Obviously, they are interests no government can ignore, but there was another significant development. Traditionally, Bengali Muslim voters had preferred the Congress(I), while Bengali Hindu voters tended to favour the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). This time around, the Bengalis congregated along purely lingual lines and voted Congress(I), leading to a communist wipe-out. Yet another explanation was offered for this twist by a Bengali voter in Gauhati who had been unable to exercise his franchise on February 20. "Already we are the targets of Assamese attacks," he said, "and if we had voted for the Marxists then we would also have been victims of Congress(I) hostility. It is better to vote for the party that is ruling at the Centre—our interests can be better looked after by the Congress(I)."

**Hollow Victory:** In the end, the Congress(I) won as many as 88 of the 108 seats for which polling could be completed. But the victory was morally and legally hollow. The elections had been held on the basis of electoral rolls as on January 1, 1979, which had not been revised since; no earnest attempt was made by the Government to find ways out of the constitutional impasse it kept holding up as an excuse. The state's Assamese population opposed the elections tooth and nail, and three major national parties boycotted the polls.

In every way the elections had been thrust down the state's throat—with every government employee in Assam refusing to cooperate, massive help had to be rushed in from outside, buttressed by a huge paramilitary force, and a variety of authoritarian laws had to be brought into play in order to keep up a semblance of discipline. As election week progressed, the state's communications network suffered grievous breakdowns.

So busy was the Government in seeing that the elections took place that it blithely ignored the rising tide of violence and death that swept the state. Too late, as the administration began to disengage from the imperatives of conducting a "free and fair poll" and turned its attention to the corpses littering this grim arena, the travesty of the elections' legitimacy shone through. Polling state-wide was claimed to be at least 20 per cent, but this was only because Bengali and immigrant pockets had turned out in large numbers.

Inevitably, in the end, polling in 18



assembly constituencies had to be "indefinitely postponed"; seven of the 12 Lok Sabha constituencies needed repolling, and so did 11 assembly segments and 351 booths. In 12 constituencies polling was below 5 per cent, and in 10 Upper Assam constituencies below 3 per cent. In Dharmapur constituency in Kamrup district, for instance, only 267 of the 67,341 voters exercised their franchise. One vote was found invalid, and the others all went to independent candidate Dr Bhumidhar Barman. In some constituencies like Sipajhar in Darrang district, the administration was forced to send out "mobile polling booths" in order to try to woo voters.

As late as on February 17, after two

**M**EANWHILE, for 18 days from February 5, a state-wide non-cooperation movement crippled all public services, shut down banks and offices, and led to hundreds of arrests under the National Security Act (NSA), the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) and the Assam Executive Magistrates (Special Powers) Act. Union Home Minister P.C. Sethi told the Lok Sabha on February 22 that 425 government employees in Assam had either been dismissed or suspended because of refusal to perform election duty. Hundreds of others successfully evaded arrest warrants.

Pre-poll violence occurred mainly when mobs of militant Assamese burnt bridges and government buildings throughout the

police or paramilitary aid to areas ravaged by violence and killing because important road bridges had earlier been destroyed by the anti-election agitators. Rumour and panic therefore gripped the Brahmaputra valley, and coupled with crippled communications, they set off even more savage ethnic conflagrations.

What shocked the nation all the more was the fact that the Government could have avoided the bloodshed if it had let humanitarianism override political ambition. Even as late as on February 11, the leaders of non-communist opposition parties in Parliament met the chief election commissioner to beg for a postponement, and promised cooperation if the Government wanted to pass an amendment to the Constitution to extend President's Rule. Their pleas were ignored.

During election week itself, the election commissioner could have used his constitutional authority to call a halt to the elections and the carnage, even if it meant forcing the Government to search for legal solutions in a very short period. Legal experts pointed out that as a last resort, the Government could even have declared an emergency in Assam by presidential proclamation, thus buying valuable time and extending the constitutional deadline of March 18 when President's Rule was due to end. But, gripped by an astonishing indifference, the Government barrelled on towards the inevitably bloody conclusion of its "inescapable constitutional obligation".

**Partisan Campaign:** The very nature of the Congress(I) campaign in Assam had laid the foundation for the holocaust. Union Railway Minister A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury was sent in specifically to reassure the immigrant Muslim voters who constituted the party's largest vote bank. Party General Secretary Rajendra Kumari Bajpayee who has charge of the North-eastern states and has played pivotal roles in foisting Congress(I) governments in Assam; Manipur and Nagaland; was assisted by Member of Parliament Rajesh Pilot; who comes from Rajasthan and was posted in Assam mainly in order to obtain the financial support of the powerful Marwari traders who dominate commerce in the state.

And Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, at her election speeches in immigrant or Bengali constituencies, repeatedly stressed her government's commitment to protect the interests of the "minorities". Intelligence sources say her speeches could easily have been construed as inflammatory.

In fact, intelligence reports on Assam had consistently warned against the elections, and as the scale of violence escalated, Mrs Gandhi and her advisers were told that continuing with the elections would mean unprecedented violence and deaths. But all



Victims of the Nellie carnage

observers he had sent to Assam returned to report on the worsening situation. Chief Election Commissioner R.K. Trivedi asked the Assam Government if it wanted to go ahead with polling on the final day, February 20. Even then, with more violence clearly predictable, the Government said that the situation was all right.

Indeed Chief Secretary Ramesh Chandra's daily 5 p.m. press briefings at Dispur acquired the derisive label "five o'clock follies"—after US military press briefings in the Vietnam War when the generals insisted all was well. The refrain became wearisomely familiar—polling was progressing apace, violence was "sporadic and minimal", and all was well. On February 14, even as booths in the Dispur constituency registered less than 1 per cent polling, All India Radio said in its news bulletin that polling had been "brisk to moderate".

state and attacked police outposts and stations. Beginning with the Mangaldoi area on February 2, such anti-election violence had claimed almost 100 lives by February 12.

That day, when thousands of immigrant attackers crossed the Marakalahi river near Boko in Kamrup district and fell upon the Assamese village of Chamaria, the violence took on a new and uglier form—senseless and bloody clashes between different communities. In the days following, hundreds of such inter-community clashes broke out throughout the valley, and such violence further ensured that turn-out on polling days would be close to zero.

**Delayed Aid:** Hundreds of thousands of people from every Assamese community began to flee their homes during election week, to seek shelter in hastily set up relief camps in government schools or colleges. Tragically, there were fatal delays in rushing



## THE COMMUNITIES

# Threatened Identities

**N**OWHERE else in India have such sharp divisions along ethnic and linguistic lines occurred since 1947 as in Assam. In the Assamese-Bengali schism, for instance, what struck observers was the fact that both sides included Hindus and Muslims. The 'native' Assamese are estimated to number 48 lakh now—the Draft 5th Five Year Plan calculated that the total population in the state would rise to 210 lakh in 1983, up from 146 lakh in 1971—and are dominated by the upper-caste *kalita* Hindus. The Bengalis, on the other hand, are estimated to number 120 lakh now. Such facts have increased the Assamese feeling that their identity is being submerged in a Bengali deluge.

Traditionally, the Assamese, who dominate in the Kamrup, Darrang, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and North Lakhimpur districts, are land-owning agriculturists. As population has leap-frogged and available land has shrunk, the Assamese have developed a strong anti-Bengali xenophobia. Most of the

Bengalis in Assam are immigrants from the Mymensingh and Sylhet districts of the pre-1947 East Bengal and later Bangladesh, and they have settled on prime land along the banks of the Brahmaputra, the *char* areas.

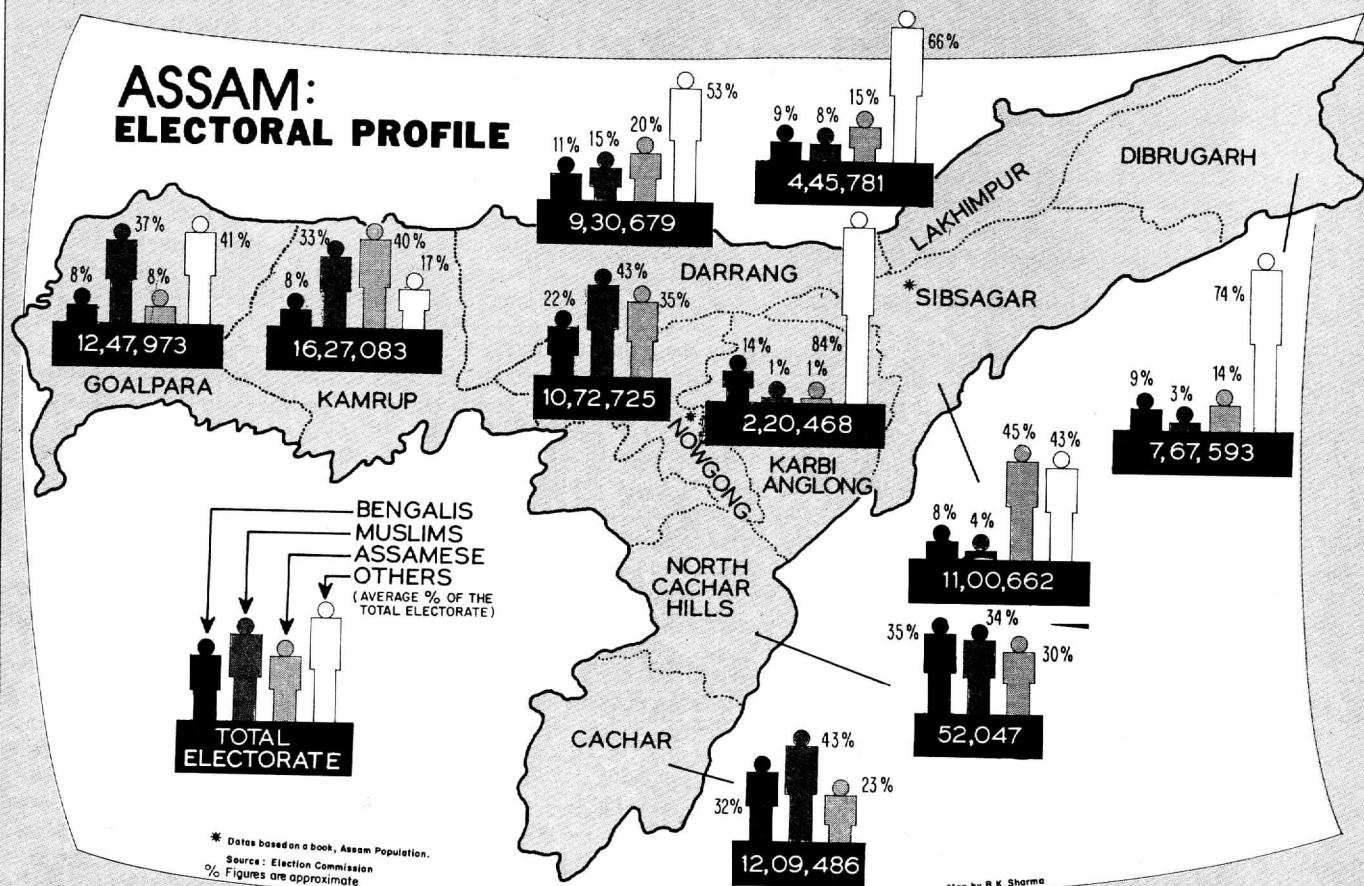
**Rising Resentment:** Assamese animosity towards the Bengalis has historical roots. The British brought in large numbers of Bengalis to man their colonial administration, and the better-educated Bengalis have over the years consolidated their hold over the white-collar jobs. In the countryside, the industrious immigrants grow more lucrative cash crops like chilli, jute and mustard, while the Assamese tend to stick to rice cultivation.

Even today the Assamese derisively repeat a 60-year-old adage: "Wherever there is a carcass, there vultures will gather; where there is waste land, thither flock the Mymensinghians." Today, the immigrant Bengalis completely dominate the populous Cachar district, and parts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts. Constantly opposed to the anti-

foreigners agitation, the Bengalis have now been pushed into a far more militant anti-Assamese posture by the elections.

But the electoral violence threw up a new factor—the latent frustration of the plains tribals. The total tribal population in Assam today is roughly 23 lakh, and almost 40 per cent of them are Boros who dominate Karbi Anglong district, the Kokrajhar subdivision of Goalpara district, the Gauhati subdivision of Kamrup district, the Mangaldoi subdivision of Darrang district, and the Dhemajai subdivision of Lakhimpur district; the other tribes are the Rabhas, the Lalungs, the Dimachas, the Kukis, the Garos, the Hmars, and the Mechs. Tribal literacy in Assam has been averaging only 20 per cent against the state-wide average of 28 per cent.

**Tribal Displacement:** Over the years, the tribals have suffered serious shrinkages in their land-holdings, and since most of them depend on the *jhum* or slash-and-burn system of cultivation, dwindling land productivity has added to their economic problems. Says anthropologist Dr B.K. Roy Burman: "The tribals are losing their control over resources at varying rates, but compensatory functions in the production system are not





coming up for them at the same rates."

Tribal unrest has been articulated most by the Boros, who attacked anti-election Assamese villagers near Gohpur in Darrang district. The Boros owe allegiance to the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) which has been clamouring for a separate tribal state called Udayachal—an area which would take in Karbi Anglong district and the northern portions of Kamrup, Darrang and Lakhimpur.

Although agitation leaders in AASU persuaded the Karbi Anglong People's Conference to join hands with the movement—the Conference even participated in the last session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha at Diphu in January—the PTCA has successfully harped upon the Assamese penchant for suppressing tribal ambitions. The Boros' festering anger exploded at Gohpur on February 14, when thousands of armed Boros clashed with Assamese villagers, leading to at least 50 villages on both sides burnt down and nearly 100 people killed.

**Systematic Slaughter:** Not all the tribals support the PTCA, however, and this was made brutally clear when the permutation of slaughter and ethnic hatred changed dramatically at Nellie in Nowgong district on February 18. Thousands of anti-election Lalung tribals embarked on a systematic slaughter of immigrant Bengali villagers living along the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Overnight, the toll at Nellie (*see story, page 8*) took the total throughout Assam to more than 1,500.

Pressure and distrust between the various ethnic groups in Assam have increased also because of growing economic adversity. Almost three-quarters of the state's estimated population of 200 lakh is engaged in agriculture; but only 23 lakh hectares out of a total area of 78 lakh hectares are cultivated. The average size of a land-holding in Assam is only 3.88 acres, against an all-India average of 6.57 acres. While the agricultural labour population has shot up by more than 15 lakh, the net area sown increased between 1971 and 1976 by only 2.79 per cent.

Land pressure—and the passions aroused by the elections—could easily lead to a permanent state of hostility between the Assamese, the Bengalis and the tribals. There would almost certainly be retributions for the thousands of deaths, and revenge would spark off even more violence and bloodshed. All these grim portents were the result of the Congress(I)'s determination to wrest a steamroller mandate from its only vote bank, the immigrants.

the warnings were ignored, and every time a massacre occurred, the administration pleaded that it had been unable to rush aid either because bridges were burnt or because the police had been too busy protecting polling stations.

In fact, on February 15 as the death-toll began to shoot up alarmingly, a senior intelligence officer in Delhi sent his subordinate in Gauhati a poignant message. "Your Cass-andra voice had been drowned in a chorus of optimism and confidence in Delhi," it said, "but now the Government has realised that you were only too correct. But it is too late, and there is no end to the foolishness of governments when they become intransigent."

**Callous Attitude:** Ignoring the harsh fact of almost 2 lakh armed paramilitary troops stationed in Assam to ensure a fair poll, Mrs Gandhi told the Lok Sabha on February 22 that any "normal person" would have thought ten times before casting his vote under the circumstances. "The elections were not held at gun-point," she said. "The guns were in the hands of those who opposed the elections." Home Minister Sethi, in the midst of the shock and grief that swept through Parliament, congratulated the "people of Assam" for exercising their franchise "undaunted by the odds facing them".

And C.M. Stephen summed up the utter callousness of the ruling party when he said that the life and property of millions of minorities and tribals would have been in danger "if elections had not been held". The nation was reeling from the news of the Nellie massacre, but Stephen said: "Instead of the recent disturbances, there would have been a veritable carnage."

Janata Party leader Madhu Dandavate made an impassioned speech in the Lok Sabha, saying that he would quit politics if Mrs Gandhi could prove that the Opposition had refused to cooperate in getting an amendment to Article 356 of the Constitution passed so as to extend President's Rule in Assam. This was a point harped upon by the Government; but the truth lay elsewhere. The non-communist Opposition in Parliament had refused to go along with an amendment in the winter session last November, on the grounds that the final round of talks with the Assam agitation leaders—scheduled then itself for January 4 this year—would first have to be gone through.

**Fruitless Exercise:** In mid-December itself, however, the Congress(I) in Assam set up a 15-member election committee headed by the state unit chief Harendra Nath

Talukdar. It was clear, therefore, that the January 4 talks were never intended by the Government to be fruitful, and that elections had been decided upon. On January 6, when elections were announced, Chief Election Commissioner Trivedi was informed that President's Rule in the state would be lifted by February 28—thus making sure that the entire exercise would have to be rushed through in seven weeks, although the constitutional deadline for President's Rule ran out only on March 18.

Constitutional propriety had not weighed with the Congress(I) earlier in Assam. Six days before President's Rule ran out on December 12, 1980, the party engineered 38 defections to its ranks, raised its strength to only 46 in the 108-member house (18 seats

were unfilled in the last Assembly) and foisted the minority government of Anwara Taimur. Days before the Assembly met in April 1981, the then Governor L.P. Singh signed an Appropriations Ordinance that circumvented the necessity of getting the state budget passed for 1981-82. But Taimur's ministry faced certain collapse, and so President's Rule was imposed again on June 30, 1981—to be lifted on January 13, 1982 when yet another minority Congress(I) government led by Keshub Chandra Gogoi

was sworn in. Gogoi, too, never faced the Assembly and finally quit on March 18 last year—and Governor Prakash Mehrotra, instead of giving the 62-member opposition Left and Democratic Alliance (LDA) a chance to form a ministry, dissolved the Assembly. All through the turbulence of the last three years, therefore, the Government's endeavour had been to keep a Congress(I) ministry in power at Dispur.

**Bankrupt Parties:** While the elections brought the Congress(I) the predictably farcical landslide victory, they also exposed the utter bankruptcy of the opposition LDA. In April 1981, the LDA's major constituents—the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI)—had abstained from a no-confidence motion tabled against the Anwara Taimur ministry because, as CPI-M leaders confessed, they felt safer under a Congress(I) ministry than under President's Rule.

This time, too, the communist parties had hoped that their support from the Bengali population in Assam would have expanded as a result of the anti-foreigner agitation, and so actively supported the elections.



New Chief Minister  
Saikia; hollow victory





An anxious Muslim refugee family: enforced exodus

## REFUGEES

# Spillover Tension

**T**HE INEVITABLE backlash of the Assam violence has started. Within days of the massacres in Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts thousands of refugees fleeing their devastated homes poured into neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal. Arunachal Pradesh's Balasori and Torajan districts received 11,000 refugees while West Bengal's Alipurduar area in Jalpaiguri district had 5,000. The influx of the refugees is sure to strain the slender resources of both states and anxiety about this had already surfaced in West Bengal when Chief Minister Jyoti Basu told the Assembly: "On humanitarian grounds we cannot stop these helpless people from coming in. But the Centre must realise that we just do not have the money required to arrange for their relief and it must come to our aid."

Basu's anxiety is not unfounded. While the numbers in West Bengal are as yet relatively small, the tide of refugees is expected to swell in the next few days. And for most of them there will be no going back. In fact, refugees who crowded into three Alipurduar town schools all

had one common story—they had been warned by the agitators not to attempt a return. Most of them had arrived on the Arunachal Express which runs along the northern banks of the Brahmaputra though a sizeable number had arrived on foot, their journeys made more hazardous by the fear of ambush.

Though there were many Bengali Muslims among the refugees, the fact that a majority of them were Bengali and Bihari Hindus was a direct proof that the targets of the agitators were not Bangladeshi immigrants alone. Most of them said that they had been living in Assam for generations—making a lie of the student leaders' claims that, "We have nothing against the Bengalis living in Assam for generations."

**Sorry Plight:** The plight of refugees from earlier bouts of violence in Assam, is far from encouraging. Most of the 15,000 Bengali Hindus and Muslims who fled to Jasodanga and Dangi in Alipurduar are still there, living on government aid as they are too afraid to go back. These refugees, it is feared, are in even worse condition with many of them injured and 20

suffering from bullet wounds.

This time round though the pleas of the Left Front Government for aid may fall on more receptive ears. Not only has the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) found favour with the Centre for supporting elections in Assam but Jyoti Basu drove the point home while saying: "Elections in Assam were a constitutional necessity. While people have every right to boycott elections they had no right to forcibly prevent others from voting. Yet this is what has happened in Assam." Such faithful reiteration of the ruling party's line is sure to bring its own rewards.

If the Assam elections have brought the state Government closer with the Centre its bloody aftermath has had a unifying effect within the state. A resolution condemning the massacres in Assam was adopted unanimously by the legislative Assembly and plans are afoot to organise multi-party peace conferences. The reason for this unity is the growing fear that the communal riots in Assam may have repercussions in West Bengal which has so far steered clear of this. And the move is particularly welcome as the state again readies itself to act as a refuge for the fleeing victims of communal carnage.

—SUMANTA SEN



The results exposed the LDA's total miscalculation—it bagged only five seats, and alliance chief Sarat Chandra Sinha, a former chief minister and president of the state Congress(S), was himself defeated in the Bilasipara East constituency.

The Marxist had won 11 seats in the last Assembly, but managed only one this time. Asked to explain this crushing debacle, state party leader Nandeswar Talukdar said: "The large-scale violence helped the Congress(I) as the voters were generally unable to come out of their homes." But even in the Bengali district of Cachar, the CPI-M lost all the four seats it had bagged five years ago. It was evident that even in areas where there had not been too much tension, the Bengalis had decided to cast their lot with the Congress(I) in the hope that the ruling party would be better able to protect them.

**Polarisation:** Observers also pointed out that two of the three national parties that had boycotted the elections—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Lok Dal—did not have any representatives in the outgoing Assembly, and the Janata Party had suffered serious erosion in its support. The BJP, however, has carved out substantial support among the Assamese Hindu anti-election agitationists, and party President Atal Behari Vajpayee frequently visited the state during the strife-torn electoral period to address enthusiastic anti-poll crowds.

Political loyalties have therefore polarised sharply in Assam, with the Congress(I) emerging clearly as the party of the immigrants, the BJP garnering support from the Assamese, and the PTCA girding for a struggle for the creation of a separate tribal territory.

**M**UCH worse is in store for Assam in the days ahead. Late last week, with the army fanning out into more and more violence-torn areas in the state, Assam was teetering on the brink of another precipice. The Congress(I) Ministry that was to administer this bloodied prize was itself going through the throes of factionalism as the deadline of February 28 neared. Since the electoral victory had been largely due to the support the party got from the Muslims, former chief minister Anwara Taimur was, backed by Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, putting in a strong bid for the top post.

But Taimur was facing spirited opposition from Keshub Gogoi, her old rival, and also from Ahom politician Hiteswar Saikia. At fortnight's end, it was Saikia, former education minister, who was chosen leader of the legislature party. In a show of solidarity, Taimur and Gogoi both seconded Saikia's name, and the new party leader made tracks for Shillong to meet Governor Prakash Mehrotra and stake a claim for government formation.

If the new ministry carried little credibility it was because the elections which have thrown up these personalities carry no moral weight. Even if their legality is finally upheld, an election so spattered with blood will convince nobody, certainly not the vast majority of the electorate which boycotted it. It is also clear that if a government formed from MLA's thus elected to the Assembly attempts to play a role in the Assam negotiations the impasse will only be strengthened.

The agitation leaders have already demonstrated that they can cripple the state with their non-cooperation orders, and AASU

Acting President Nurul Hussain, speaking in his hide-out in the Chenikuthi area in Gauhati on February 18, said: "We will never recognise this so-called government, elected by the Bangladeshis. It is not a people's government, it is a police-CRPF government."

The Government's line has hardened gradually. Beyond token talk of healing touches Home Minister P.C. Sethi told Parliament's consultative committee on February 10 that the foreigners issue could even be "unilaterally settled" by the Government. Less than two weeks later he was telling the Lok Sabha that future talks would include the minorities and the tribals who had so far been kept at bay by the agitation leaders.

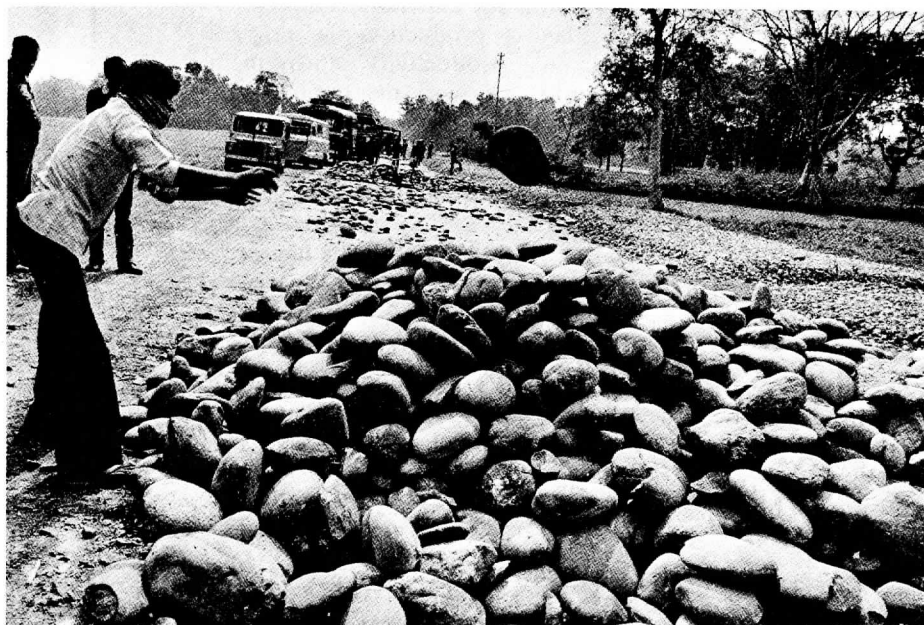
**Sharp Divisions:** Sethi's confused words are meaningless after the carnage. Last fortnight, as the magnitude of Assam's tragedy dawned, sources close to the agitation leaders, who were released on February 22 by the Gauhati High Court, from their NSA detention, said that they had decided not to participate in any further negotiations with the Centre. Their decision may be of the moment, but with the state so sharply divided into embittered segments, the problem has grown far beyond talks on foreigners, and the most pressing question is to calm tempers, and repair a torn social fabric.

The Centre is obviously toying with the idea of a partition of the state. Sethi told the Lok Sabha on February 22 that the continuance of Assam's "composite character" was in serious doubt, and Mrs Gandhi confirmed the possibility when she said that the plains tribals had been meeting her "for the last two years", pleading to be separated from Assam and given "a separate state or union territory" because they had been pushed out to the hills and remote areas.

Highly placed sources confirm that exercises are currently being carried out to determine how exactly Assam can be split up into more "manageable" units. INDIA TODAY has learnt that the division would involve a new tribal Union territory taking in the whole of Karbi Anglong and parts of Darrang, North Lakhimpur and North Cachar; a Bengali Union territory comprising Cachar and parts of North Cachar; a Rajbangshi-dominated 'Kamata Rajya' enclave carved out of the western portion of Goalpara district and parts of Cooch Behar district in West Bengal; and Assam would consist almost entirely of the Brahmaputra valley.

Whether or not such a partition takes place, it is ironical that so badly mauled a state should be ruled by a puppet government that will have to be heavily guarded and protected from a hostile populace. The Congress(I) in Assam has increased its representation in the Assembly tenfold since the 1978 elections. But it has succeeded in giving democracy a new and grisly definition.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG in Gauhati



A roadblock at Gohpur being cleared for a police convoy