

NIGHTMARES OF NELLIE

33 years after a blood-soaked vote, Assam still holds its breath during poll season

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📷 Fragile calm. (Reuters/Utpal Baruah)

The only blood that sub-inspector Kabir Singh Limboo has seen spilled in the Nellie area has been in very bad road accidents on National Highway 37 as traffic whizzes past. Limboo has been in charge of the tin-roofed Nellie police outpost for a year-and-a-half. During monsoons, Limboo says, parts of the highway linking Assam's Goalpara to Arunachal Pradesh go under ankle-deep water, and there are many accidents as cars and trucks skid, turn turtle or crash. "There were eight crashes on one day," he says.

The traffic mayhem is a good way from February 18, 1983, when sleepy Nellie hit the world's headlines. Tiwa (or Lalung, as they are also called) tribespeople descended in hordes on 14 villages inhabited by Muslim immigrants, and slaughtered men, women and children with machetes and spears. The government put the number of dead at 2,191, but locals say it was much higher. Nellie saw the worst eruption of communal frenzy during the blood-drenched 1983 Assam elections; there were other massacres too, at places like Chamaria and Gohpur. Indira Gandhi's Congress (I) party won a Pyrrhic

victory, with ethnic Assamese, immigrant Bengalis, and the state's tribal population at each other's throats. The election did not still the deep fear and resentment coursing through the Brahmaputra Valley about illegal immigrants grabbing land, jobs, and the future.

I wrote extensively on the Assam agitation and its crescendo in the bloody 1983 election, first in New Delhi magazine and then in a series of cover stories for [India Today](#). Earlier this month, I travelled again in Assam.

How traumatised is Nellie, 33 years after that horrific day?

Life seems placid and mundane in the group of villages straddling the highway. At the government dispensary and the Rural Family Welfare Centre, BN Bezbaruah has his hands full with a long queue of patients. Nearby, 75-year-old Rachindra Lal Shyam, once a civil contractor and now a social worker, is anxious to argue that the [Nellie pogrom](#) was not communal but triggered by local animosities.

After the massacre, the Assam government set up peace committees everywhere to cool tensions. The two men currently heading the Nellie Peace Committee represent the two sides of the ethnic divide in this part of Assam. Narayan Rado Kakati, the committee chairman, says he is on alert for the elections next month but does not anticipate any trouble. The committee has been holding meetings with villagers, asking them to vote peacefully on April 11, the second of the two polling dates for the Assam state assembly. Kakati is a founder of the Tiwa Autonomous Council and says there are about 50,000 Tiwas living in about 40 villages in this area, "and we are very peace-loving."

Blurred nationalities

Kakati's deputy Abdul Khaliq, a gravelly voiced farmer, says he escaped death in 1983 by hiding along a river's bank; but he appears to harbour no ill-feeling. Khaliq is preoccupied with distributing subsidised rice and kerosene in 10 Muslim villages of the area. Fourteen members of Khaliq's family died in the massacre. He has two wives and 10 children, and he farms 30 *bighas* of land. "I was born in Assam," he says. "My family is in the NRC of 1951."

Sub-inspector Limboo, whose family migrated to nearby Morigaon from Nepal in the middle of the last century, is also at pains to tell me that his father's name was in the NRC, or the National Register of Citizens.

The fact that both Khaliq and Limboo make a point of proclaiming their Indian citizenship underlines the wretched question of who exactly is a foreigner in Assam. The truth is that a huge proportion of Assamese are technically immigrants. The state's hills, and the two major river valleys, Brahmaputra and Barak, are home to about 80 ethnic groups. The Ahom kings who ruled Assam from the 13th century came in from Burma. Their legendary general Lachit Barphukan repulsed repeated Mughal attacks in the 18th century. But in 1817, the Ahom kingdom itself was invaded by the Burmese. The East India Company, which came to the Ahoms' aid and drove the Burmese back to their border, gained control of Assam's plains through the 1826 Treaty of Yandaboo.

Over the next 120 years the British encouraged waves of immigration by other ethnic groups like the Nepalis, and the Bengalis from what later became East Pakistan. Post-independence Assam was a large state, but parts of it dominated by hill tribes like the Nagas, the Mizos and the Khasis and Jaintias were lopped off one by one to form the smaller states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya.

Settler conundrum

Nationalist Assamese deeply resent the fact that these tribal states bar any outside settlers, while the mostly-Hindu Assam plains were laid open to unchecked settlement by mostly Muslim Bengalis, especially between 1937 and 1945 when Sir Muhammad Saadulla's Muslim League government opened the floodgates to push a "grow more food" campaign during World War Two.

Ironically, Assam's 262-km border with Bangladesh is among the shortest stretches of the 4,096-km India-Bangladesh border, which also runs past West Bengal, Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Assam's border with Bangladesh is fenced with barbed wire, with a road for patrolling alongside, but 95 kilometres are riverine, and those riverine stretches are dotted by *char* lands or shifting sand islands that rise and fall each time the Brahmaputra floods and recedes. So a third of the border is porous and prone to easy infiltration.

At the time of Partition, hundreds of thousands of refugees from East Bengal streamed into the areas that presently constitute Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and Bihar. Until 1971, the central government's implicit policy was to give shelter to all Hindu refugees and to deport all Muslim infiltrators from East Pakistan. After March 25, 1971, when the West Pakistanis unleashed the military campaign in East Pakistan that eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh, the government of India and the new government in Bangladesh agreed that all further migration into India would be treated as infiltration and all such infiltrators, whether Hindu or Muslim, would be deported.

Uneasy peace

Back in Nellie, sub-inspector Limboo tells me crime is quite low in his jurisdiction. He leafs through a bulky register and says abductions of girls by boys are a bother. But, he hastens to add, these are not Muslim boys abducting Hindu or Tiwa girls, or vice versa. These are usually elopements within communities that are labelled abductions by angry parents. "I had five last year and there have already been three so far this year," Limboo says. "We sort out most of them pretty quickly."

There is one problem though—Tiwa villages are off-bounds to Limboo's force of 20 men and 15 home guards after dark. "The tribals drink a homemade rice liquor," the inspector says, "and they can get pretty nasty when they're drunk, so we leave them alone."

Who is not leaving the Tiwas alone is Assam's politician. Tiwa Oikya Mancha, the tribe's representative body, has been given one seat to contest by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which leads a coalition in the upcoming election. Campaigning is on in full swing, and over the next few days a lot of liquor is probably going to flow.

Limboo, Kakati and Khaliq must be praying that it will be just rice brew, not blood.

This is the first in a series of reports on the political and social scene in Assam, which goes to polls in April.

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