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Between Hope and Fear

Migrant “Illegality” and Camp Life in Assam, India

Salah Punathil

Introduction

On August 31, 2019, 1.9 million people in northeast India’s state of Assam were identified as illegal migrants from Bangladesh after government officials published the National Register of Citizens (NRC).¹ Although the exact religious demographics of this population are not yet officially available, Bengali-speaking Muslims constitute a significant number. On December 11, 2019, a few months after the NRC’s publication, the Indian Parliament passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), which guarantees citizenship to illegal migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who are persecuted on religious grounds. This includes Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, and Christian minorities, but not Muslims. Soon after, protests erupted across the country.² The central government’s plan to expand the NRC nationwide and the implementation of the CAA are seen as part of a common agenda that will heavily disadvantage the Muslim minority in India. It is evident from Assam, where the NRC is already being implemented, that the future of the Muslim population, who constitute a substantial number of those excluded from the NRC list, is going to be worse than that of the Hindus. Detention, the threat of deportation, and other human rights violations are looming for a large section of the Muslims in Assam. This chapter goes beyond the immediate humanitarian question of the “stateless” populations in the wake of these amplified state interventions—including threat of detention and deportation of Muslims—to examine the longer history of violence against migrant Muslims, with a special emphasis on camps and camp life in Assam.

While refugees are seen as “unwanted” and regarded as “stateless” in most societies today, the experience of migrants varies, depending on the sociopolitical and economic conditions of the particular territories where they find refuge. Due to the “refugee crisis” in the West over the past few years, there is widespread attention to this in the literature on migration. The academic discussions in such Western-centric scholarship mostly revolve around the questions of accommodation, assimilation and potential policies to tackle the “crises” of migration (e.g., Morris 2000; Waters and Jimenez 2005; De Genova 2017). There is also considerable attention to the suffering of refugees, as discrimination, stereotyping, and various forms of violence are increasing in their lives in the West (Fassin 2007; Ticktin 2011). The camp life of migrants is increasingly visible today as they are pushed into enclosed spatial settings in hostile circumstances. The emergent scholarships on camps offer interesting insights into how these spaces assume the norms of modern nation-states (Malkki 1996; Khalili 2004; Petee 2005; Sanyal 2010). By taking the case of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, this chapter analyzes the camp life and violence against migrants in a South Asian context.

The Context

Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam are migrants or descendants of migrants from what is now Bangladesh.³ Though the history of this migration stretches back to the early colonial period, large-scale influxes of migrants in the latter half of the twentieth century led to intense conflicts. Bengali-speaking Muslims have suffered militant attacks and massacres at the hands of various ethnic groups since the late 1970s. Initially, they were the target of a “subnationalist” movement. The most heinous of all the violence against them was the Nellie Massacre of 1983, which left more than 2,000 Muslims dead and a large but uncounted number homeless, who moved to different parts of the state to find refuge (Kimura 2013). Fifty-three camps were set up for them across the state, and many refused to go back to their home villages (Kimura 2008). Since the 1990s, the Bodo tribe’s movement for a separate state within Assam has accentuated the crisis, targeting Muslims with attacks and killings until very recently.⁴ In response, camps were set up as Muslims were displaced from their lands on a massive scale, especially in areas where they constituted a minority. Assam’s Bodo Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) now has several camps for Muslims, both old and new. They are isolated places with overcrowded shelters

and limited infrastructure. While all of them were originally set up as relief camps by the state, the state no longer protects them, and the inhabitants have been left to fend on their own. These camps were established as relief efforts for a temporary purpose, but life inside them and their durability as spatially segregated units raise pertinent questions about the specificity of such camps in a South Asian context.⁵

The Idea of Camps and the South Asian Reality

In the Western context, camps represent the most significant sites of segregation, violence, and social suffering. Agamben (1998: 15) traces the paradox of sovereignty in the modern nation-state by examining the concentration camps and extermination camps set up for Jews by the Nazi regime as the extreme expression of the camp. While Agamben's theory is highly influenced by Foucault's (1990) notion of "biopolitics," the politics of governing and regulating an entire population, he proposes the more critical view of "thanatopolitics"—how the politics of a sovereign power leads it to kill people, and to explain how systematic state machinery tortures and murders human beings in camp-like situations (Agamben 1998: 121). The violent articulation of migrant "illegality" is one of the major ways in which camps have once again gained significance. To understand the horrific experiences of migrants now, we must frame "migrant illegality" as a more serious concern than the fact of illegal migration (De Genova 2002, 2013). The "illegality" of a population constructed through various discursive forms in today's world leads to overpowering denunciations, humiliation, and the "rightslessness" of such "unwanted" groups. While acknowledging the universality of confining migrants in camps, we must see camps and life inside them from a historical and contextual viewpoint, for a more nuanced understanding of the politics of violence and suffering.

Sovereign power, the camp life of migrants, and violence are increasingly significant in the present time. However, Agamben's idea of the camp, clearly a response to the Nazi extermination camps, has limits in the South Asian context. This chapter thus moves beyond Agamben to examine specificities of camp life characterized by the conditions in postcolonial South Asia. The camp's multivalent potential as an analytical category is reflected in prominent works of the past. Apart from Agamben, Foucault (1990) and Hannah Arendt (1958) have been influential in envisioning camps in modern nation-states from the perspectives of "biopolitics" (Gupta 2012) and "humanitarianism"

(Fassin 2007). Didier Fassin, in his study of migrants in France, demonstrates the need to move beyond Agamben's view. He argues (Fassin 2007: 367) that even under a discriminatory regime not all migrants are reduced to "bare life" or *zoë*, the fact of merely being alive, in opposition to *bios*, or full life including political rights, as Agamben (1998: 15) claims. For example, someone with biological defects or a severe illness such as AIDS can be given French citizenship on humanitarian grounds. Here illness offers a possibility for migrants to claim political life. Fassin argues that France's new immigration policies prove exactly the opposite of what Agamben says, as they not only break the distinction between *zoë* and *bios* but also show the increasing confusion of migrant life, in which one's status can transform from one to the other or even to something more complex, contingent, on political circumstances. This confusion and dynamism inform the camp life I describe in this chapter too. Miriam Ticktin, in her study on "sans-papiers" (2011), migrants "without papers" in France, perceives camps in a completely different way, identifying temporary settings such as waiting centers, holding centers, and prisons for illegal migrants as new manifestations of the camp, where the sovereign power inflicts suffering upon migrants. From its original, singular form, the camp has become multifarious. Ilana Feldman's (2015) work on Palestinian refugee camps provides interesting insights on different forms of camps, characterized by their social, material, geographical, and political conditions and varying degrees of legitimacy in the official discourse on refugee status. She also questions the view of camps as mere humanitarian spaces removed from political articulations.

Achille Mbembe (2003), though drawing heavily on Agamben, provides again different examples of camps and violence. While Agamben locates sovereign power and violence in the Nazi concentration camp, Mbembe draws attention to the camp in the form of plantations, slavery, penal settlements, and the whole array of colonial economic structures that rested upon the sovereign violence of the colonizer in African societies. As he writes, "The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 2003: 11). What makes Mbembe's work significant in the present-day South Asian context is his emphasis on the militant ethnic groups that have assumed sovereign power and inflict deadly violence on their enemies in the turbulent postcolonial era.⁶ In Assam's postcolonial context, too, it is not the state, which has always inflicted direct physical violence, but rather ethnic groups that are waging war on the weak in the pursuit of sovereign power.

Throughout South Asian history, populations have always moved across regions. However, the creation of national borders, as is the case everywhere in the world, gave birth to the category of “illegal migrants,” even if their movements and relations across those borders predated the formation of nation-states. Anthropologists have thoroughly critiqued statist analyses of migration, which are largely based on demographic surveys and view migrant populations as objects of policymaking and surveillance (Malkki 1996; De Genova 2013). Several ethnographic studies have also challenged the positivist model that reaffirms the territorial and judicial boundaries of nation-states, by exploring the lived experiences of migrants, especially in the recent context of increasing numbers of forced migrants, stateless people, and refugees (Schendel and Abraham 2005; Samaddar 2016).

It is clear, in both the Western and the non-Western context, that the image of the camp has shifted, from a simple spatial unit to a model of modern life (Petee 2005; Vajpeyi 2007; Sanyal 2010; Datta 2016). For Ananya Vajpeyi, to properly understand political life in contemporary India, “we [must] devote as much attention to the camp as we do to the nation, to the refugee as we do to the citizen and to the state of exception as we do to the rule of law” (2007: 6). The pertinent question here is what makes the South Asian experience of camps distinctive. The approach toward camps in South Asia must rely on descriptions of migrant lives within them (Datta 2016). Again, camps in South Asian contexts are complex and varied; riots, displacement, and forced migration have given rise to relief camps, refugee camps, and rehabilitation camps. The persons confined to these sites experience the paradoxical situation of relief and suffering, inclusion, and exclusion, hope of life and fear of death. The notion of the camp as a space of exception can be pushed when we look at the complex ways in which the camp has operated in the South Asian context (Vajpeyi 2007; Datta 2016). Hence, the task of this chapter is to extend (and modify) Agamben’s theory of the camp against the horizon of camps in South Asia.

Historicizing Migration in Assam’s Colonial Context

Colonial history and the history of partition are crucial to understanding the plight of Muslims in Assam today, as the nationality of those who speak Bengali is highly contested. Assam’s west, including the present-day Kokrajhar and Goalpara districts, was part of Bengal until 1774 and was annexed by the British much before the rest of the state. During the colonial period, feudalism

and poverty severely affected what is now Bangladesh (Hussain 1993). Overpopulation, a poor natural resource base, frequent floods, and a nondiverse economy (due to overreliance on jute and rice) have also historically plagued this region (Hussain 1993). The resulting instability has led to large-scale migrations into neighboring areas. Assam was the preferred destination, just across the Brahmaputra river from Eastern Bengal and with similar geography. After the British annexed Assam in 1826, they encouraged this migration as part of plans to plunder and exploit the new territory (Hussain 1993; Baruah 2007). Significantly, the Eastern Bengal migrants mostly settled in geographically vulnerable places, like low-lying, flood-prone plains (Baruah 2007), but the frequent erosion of riverbanks in these areas forced them to seek new homes elsewhere in India. In their new local communities, this large population of internal migrants is today seen as “Bangladeshis,” despite belonging to or descending from a group that had settled in Assam in the colonial period. Again between 1920 and 1940, migration contributed to a substantial increase of the Muslim population in the state (Hussain 1993).

While increasing Muslim population led to intense political debates and occasional violence, Bengali Hindus have also faced ethnic tensions since the colonial period (Weiner 1983; Guha 2014). Since modern education came later to Assam than to Bengal, Bengali Hindus, who were generally well educated, dominated its administrative, bureaucratic, and economic spheres and thus enjoyed higher status. Moreover, the British perception of the Assamese language as a dialect of Bengali and Bengali cultural hegemony had serious repercussions after independence (Hussain 1993; Baruah 2007).

The Postcolonial Situation

Homeland movements by various tribes and other ethnic groups have prompted the Indian government to carve several states out of Assam for them, yet the most striking and continuing crisis in Assam derives from its ethnic tension and violence, especially directed against the Muslims who came from what was then East Bengal. Assam witnessed more anti-immigration and subnationalist politics in the 1970s and 1980s, manifested most extremely in the United Liberation Front of Assam’s separatist militancy, and in the 1990s, when the Bodo tribes sought separate statehood.

In the 1960s, Bengali Hindus and Marwaris, an ethnic group that migrated from North Indian regions and constitutes a successful business community,

were the prime targets of what is called the Assam agitation or the Assam movement. The Assamese middle classes were struggling against the Bengali Hindus because the latter still dominated them not merely economically and politically but culturally too. For example, the official language of Assam continued to be “Bengali” even after independence. This led to a language movement and subsequently to the Assam movement, initiated by the All Assam Students’ Union. The Assam agitation initially did not target Muslims, because they were largely poor peasants and did not pose any threat to the state’s economy or culture. Indeed, they were sympathetic to the Assamese language movement, learning the language and trying to assimilate to Assamese culture to a great extent (Hussain 1993; Goswami 2008). However, the situation changed after Bangladesh declared its independence. At that time, the movement began to claim that a large number of migrants from there, especially Bengali-speaking Muslims, had come to India after 1971.

The Saga of Ethnic Assertions and Violence

The most devastating outcome of the Assam movement was the Nellie Massacre of 1983, which took place in Assam’s Nagaon district at the height of the agitation. The immediate background was an Assam state assembly election that a vast section of the population boycotted in protest of the unresolved “Bangladesh migration” crisis—the specific claim being that “foreigners” were included in the election rolls. In this incident, more than 2,000 Muslim peasants were killed in several villages on a single day by the local Tiwa tribes with the help of Assamese Hindus. Unofficial figures suggest that the number of deaths are far higher than this. Although this massacre is often read as a culmination of long-term hatred directed at “immigrant encroachers” in Assam, scholars have demonstrated the significant role of Hindu religious organizations’ in inciting it (Dasgupta and Guha 1985; Guhain 1985). Targeted violence against Muslims across Assam has thus been a product of both Assamese subnationalism and Hindu religious nationalism. The most shocking aspect of the Nellie Massacre is the impunity of those responsible: not a single person was ever punished for it.

There has been a shift in the perpetrators of violence, although Assamese subnationalist assertion continues to be a major source of threat to Muslim life. The militant outfits of Bodo plain tribes in the BTAD have been committing large-scale atrocities against Muslims since the 1990s, along with major attacks against Adivasis such as Santhals and occasional violence against Hindu

Assamese. The larger context is the violent turn of marginalized Bodo tribes' long-term movement for a separate state. The Bodos are an indigenous tribal group, one of the earliest to settle in Assam. They practice shifting cultivation, so the East Bengal migrants who settled on the Brahmaputra's north bank in Assam's western-most district in the colonial period and took up commercial agriculture came into conflict with them (Goswami 2008). Although the Bodos were in this region first, prominent Muslim leaders in colonial Assam and organizational support for Muslims in the political sphere helped the East Bengal migrants to settle there.

The Bodo movement started as a response to discrimination and negligence at the hands of caste Assamese. Although Bodos joined the Assam movement and shared the political platform of fighting against "immigrants," more and more felt increasingly marginalized from the Assamese Hindu society. Their movement intensified in the early 1990s with the realization that the state offered no protection for their lands, livelihoods, or cultural diversity. They have also been politically underrepresented and vulnerable to economic exploitation. Peaceful protests were ignored by the government and soon gave way to militant assertion. Though Bodo militants targeted the state and Assamese Hindus and Koch Rajbongshis⁷ in the beginning, they later turned against the BTAD's Muslim population.⁸ The Bodos' first ethnic cleansing campaign began after the signing of the Bodo Accord of 1993, between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, the All Bodo Students' Union, and the Bodo Peoples' Action Committee, which created the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) to administer contiguous villages with more than 50 percent Bodo population. Because many villages that were claimed as eligible for the BAC area did not have an adequate Bodo percentage, Muslims who were already tagged as illegal migrants became easy targets for militants. Over the past three decades, Bodo organizations have participated in a series of negotiations with the state to reformulate the policies on Bodo autonomy, but violence has continued to erupt.

The violent experiences of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam perfectly illustrate Mbembe's (2003) observation that the politics of killing is no longer confined to sovereign powers; instead, armed ethnic groups are increasingly involved in the elimination of "threat populations," acting for or with the state. As Von Holdt notes in his study on collective violence in postcolonial South Africa (2013), because the state does not have a monopoly on symbolic or physical violence, that of ethnic groups can become legitimate, especially when their enemies are "unwanted" populations produced by the sovereign power. Likewise, in India it is not always the state but rather ethnic projects of power and

control over territories that inflict massive violence on these groups' perceived enemies.

The existing discourse of migrant "illegality" gave rise to a consensus among Bodos that Muslims had encroached upon their land and were now a hindrance to their political goals. Migrant "illegality" also promises impunity for assailants, a clear lesson of the Nellie Massacre. In the more recent violent episodes of 2012 and 2014, Muslims again suffered massive militant attacks and displacement, but these times Bodos in some BTAD villages were targeted too. The Khagrabari Massacre of 2014, when militants killed thirty-eight Muslims on a single day, stands as the most heinous of the more recent attacks. Significantly, even though this violence was not a consequence of communalized ethnic hatred, migrants' religious identity as Muslims was a convenient justification for its production and legitimization.

Old Muslim Camps in Assam and the Chain of Violence

After various attacks on Muslims from the early 1990s to the recent past, camps were established for them in Assam. These camps persist to the present day, revealing a normalization of violence and suffering in Muslim life. The first ones were set up following a massive attack by Bodo militants from October 7 to 11, 1993, throughout Bodo-dominated districts such as Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, and Chirang, which affected 3,658 families, a total of 18,000 people (Goswami 2008). This assault encompassed mass killings, injuries and destruction of houses and provoked large-scale flight, even to places very far away. The camps, such as Sanlartari, Nagalbhangra, Bengtal, Bangaldoba, Hapachara, Sidalsati, Tapatari, Salabila, and Goroimari, to name a few, are still in use.

Hapachara, in Bongaigaon's Bijni subdivision, is one such camp, where inhabitants have lived for almost thirty years. Shockingly, there are around 1,118 families still there (Azad 2015: 47). The camp was first established in a different place, but after Bodo militants killed two inhabitants just outside the camp in 1994, it was relocated to the present area. This was not an isolated incident: also in 1994, Bodo militants attacked a Muslim relief camp in Bashbari, then in Barpeta (and now in Baksa) district, killing nearly 100 inmates (Azad 2015: 49). Relief camps set up by the state to provide basic security and protect the fundamental right to live have obviously miserably failed to protect Muslims. Many have informed me during my fieldwork that the government provided gratuitous relief (GR), mostly in the form of rice, lentils, and oil, regularly for

a few years. However, this was a temporary arrangement which was gradually discontinued, and now the state offers neither rehabilitation nor proper support and care. Thus, the camp has become a permanent settlement, whose inhabitants must develop their own autonomous means of survival and struggle. The camp dwellers narrate the story of their misery: they suffer from poverty and disease, and their children have no access to proper education. Once ethnic militancy has enacted physical violence against Muslims, the state confines them to camps, exposing them to structural violence.

Salabila is another camp, located in Assam's Chirang district. Its inhabitants are also victims of the widespread Bodo attacks of 1993. They have been displaced several times. When a flood eroded the soil of their original camp, they built a temporary camp near a highway and finally moved to the current location in 2007. During my fieldwork, I have learned that private individuals own the land where some camps have been set up to replace government-established camps that had to be evacuated for security reasons. In such instances, the inhabitants pay a sum of money to the landowner every month. This is another distinctive feature of camp life in Assam: private individuals supplant the state in controlling the grounds and those confined to them. This somewhat reflects the situation in Palestine: as Feldman's (2015) study illustrates, camps there have become permanent settlements, which leads to their having autonomous characters; she mentions how houses are rebuilt, altered, and even sold as a regularized part of camp life.

Protest and the State's Passive Response

Camp dwellers protest against discrimination by the state in a number of ways. Inmates have told me of their involvement in organized protests in the state capital, Guwahati, and the national capital, Delhi, for compensation and rehabilitation. Muslim political organizations such as the All India United Democratic Front have supported these protests by inhabitants of Hapachara, Bordubi, Garogaon, Salabila, Bangaldoba, and other camps; the government reacted by visiting camps to look into possible interventions. However, inhabitants dismissed this attention as very passive and ineffective. They say that the officials arrived to make a survey with no advance warning, so many people who were working in different parts of the country as migrant laborers were excluded and hence deprived of the monthly ration of free rice and money. Inmates also told me that the officials asked those who received a financial grant from the government to leave the camp, as the state assumes that they can sustain themselves with this

money. In reality, it is hardly enough to buy land on which to settle in another place. Interestingly, I found the inmates who received this compensation living in a slightly better-off camp in the same area. There is not much difference between the two, and this kind of “rehabilitation” does not mean movement or real mobility for this population.

Inmates from Salabila told me that they too had gone to protest in Delhi, while living in the camp near a highway, where they did not feel secure. In response, the government agreed to resettle them, but they resisted the proposed plan because they anticipated land erosion in the locality to which they were supposed to move. Later, however, officials forcefully pushed the camp dwellers from the highway to that place, where they still live.

The Sense of Home inside the Camp

What is the image of home among camp dwellers and how do they picture their future? For many, the camp has become a permanent home. Multiple factors prevent them from returning to their villages, despite their desire to escape such a miserable life. In some cases, floods have destroyed their homes. Most Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants settled on flood-prone river islands, locally known as *chars*. In Assam, these are distributed along the Brahmaputra’s entire course, from Sadiya in the east to Dhubri in the west, in twenty-three subdivisions across fourteen districts. The majority of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam live in char areas, where they suffer from poverty, illiteracy, ill health, and poor infrastructure. State development policies systematically exclude and neglect this population, rendering it the most vulnerable in the region. Moreover, the prejudice against Muslims as “illegal migrants” reduces—if not demolishes—char dwellers’ socio-spatial mobility, but the possibility of flood and erosion is naturally higher in the areas where they live than on Assam’s plains, and the government never resettles them after floods and land erosion even in normal cases. Thus, many refugee camp inhabitants have lost their land to flooding and are unable to imagine a home to return to. For many others, fear of militant attacks in their villages keeps them in the camps: many people told me that Bodos have now occupied their land and there is no option of going back. Finally, many inmates lost their land records, burned along with their houses during the violence. Some were living on government-owned land and now cannot legally reclaim their habitats (Figure 11.1).

The lack of proper documents led to further crisis when the state initiated the massive detention of “illegal migrants” in the form of the NRC’s bureaucratic



Figure 11.1 Muslims who live in the Char areas of Assam; photo by Salah Punathil.

procedure. In my last visit to Assam, in December 2019, a few months after the NRC's final list was published, I found that it did not include many camp inhabitants: the required documents are not available to them or the documents they have shown have been deemed invalid. Many of them had great difficulty in providing all of the many necessary documents during the whole bureaucratic procedure of the NRC. The prejudice, arbitrariness, and contradictions in the bureaucratic process and state enactment of "migrant illegality" through the NRC in Assam are widely discussed. The NRC's procedural requirements often forced inmates who migrated for a better livelihood to return to their camps. Even before the NRC, Assam had created the category of D voters (doubtful voters), who live in fear of detention.⁹ In addition to the previous misery of life in the relief camps, now there is the threat of being sent to "detention camps," which the Indian government is already constructing in Assam and across the country. In fact, there are already a few temporary detention centers housed in the jails of Assam where suspected migrants are detained for years.

Movement and Mobility in the Camps

Camps are not always static spaces, as we see in Agamben's formulation. Movement and mobility away from them are possible. Inmate narratives reveal

that a few affluent people among those affected by violence left the camps long ago and settled in other places. Most camp dwellers work in construction in nearby areas, and some are migrant laborers who live elsewhere in Assam or in other states to meet their economic needs. A few have moved to India's southernmost states, like Kerala. Among them are manual laborers; some have even been able to move with their families, but they occasionally go back to visit the camp. Many people wish to retain their identity as camp dwellers, even if they can leave their camp, because they believe that someday the government will compensate the inmates with land or money. As Feldman (2015) illustrates, camps are also emotional spaces, and people have connections to the ones where they have stayed over a long period, even if they have found a new residence elsewhere.

When I revealed during my fieldwork that I am from Kerala of South India, a camp inhabitant phoned his younger brother, who had migrated to that state few years back, and made me talk to him; I was astonished that he spoke Malayalam, Kerala's regional language. This offers an interesting insight on how migration from a camp to elsewhere in the country, at least for a few, becomes a way to rid themselves of the suffering and humiliation they have experienced in Assam: their narratives reveal how this shift affords not only better economic prospects but also the opportunity to lead a dignified life. Even if the economic prospects are not so great, in cities and other places distant from Assam, they do not frequently encounter the label of "Bangladeshi" or other such everyday humiliations. While the segregated settlement of Bengali Muslims in some cities and fast-growing "Bangladeshi migration threat" propaganda across the country occasionally reproduce their experiences back in the camp, states like Kerala are still far better places for those migrants from the camps.

The Khagrabari Massacre of 2014 and New Camp

Khagrabari is a small locality in Assam's Baksa district, lying between the deep forest of Manas National Park and the Beki River. The river isolates this small site where Muslims live from the nearby villages. In the first week of May 2014, Bodo militants inflicted carnage on Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and other parts of Assam's BTAD, in a meticulously planned attack that killed forty-one people and left Khagrabari ablaze. Strikingly, most of the victims were women and children. Khagrabari, which is now officially the site of a camp, had all the features of a camp even before this violence. After losing their homes to flooding

and erosion, a few Bengali-speaking Muslims moved into this place, which was then government land without any inhabitants. It is significant that such pushes into isolated spaces are a response to the suspicion and stereotyping of Muslims as “Bangladeshi illegal migrants.” When the Beki River washed away their land and their livelihood of commercial agriculture, they ventured into an alternative means of subsistence, collecting both floating wood from the river and cotton scattered in the forest. This place is a perfect example of the camp-like spaces¹⁰ where migrant Muslims in Assam live, plagued by poverty, health crises, illiteracy, and lack of proper shelter and completely excluded from state protection and welfare schemes for the poor. Some Muslim families here had experienced violence at the hands of Bodos in their home village and found refuge in this isolated place in their helpless situation (Figure 11.2).

The militant attack on May 2, 2014, made the camp-like space of Khagrabari become a real camp, protected by army security personnel. Some families lost more than one member in the massacre, bullets injured many people, and most of the houses were burned down. Now this camp has temporary shelters and day-to-day life goes on with help from the government’s gracious relief and from

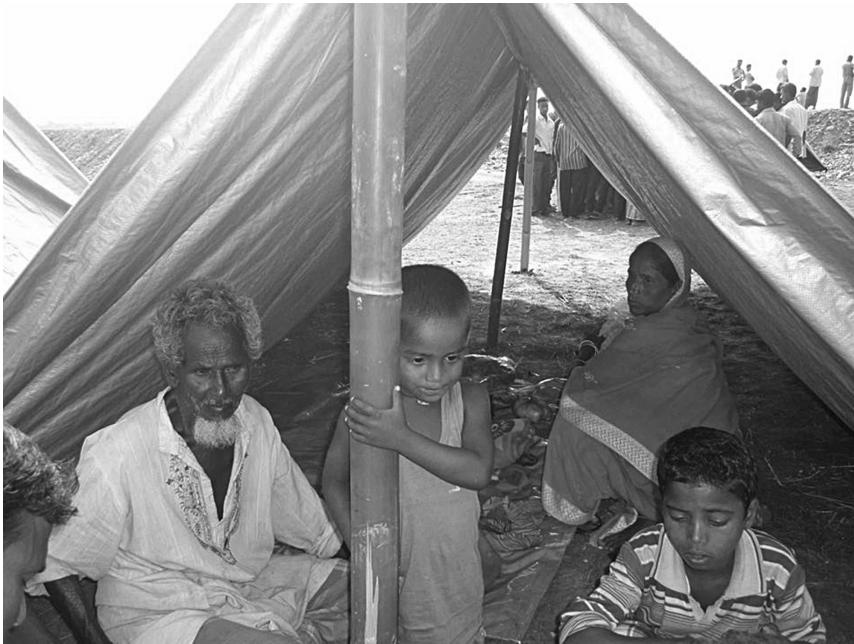


Figure 11.2 Muslims living in the temporary camp in Khagrabari after the violence in 2014; photo by Salah Punathil.

NGOs. While narrating this violent incident, camp dwellers told me that around forty people whose faces were covered with black cloths had entered the village and started firing at people and that the perpetrators included forest guards from the national park who are part of the Bodo community. The villagers said that these guards were known quite well to them and often used to interact with them in a friendly manner. They were shocked to see the forest guards joining with the militants and brutally attacking them in an afternoon. It was a special market day, and most of the men were not at home. Notably, among the thirty-eight dead, twenty were children. When the shooting started, villagers ran toward the river and jumped into it to save themselves from attack; however, they couldn't swim and were shot in the water instead. Asjiran Nercha, a woman survivor in the camp, recalled:

When I was plucking leaves in front of my house, there was shooting from the forest. Then again, I heard shooting so near and wondered why it was happening so nearby. Then I went to the riverbank looking for my son. I saw from the riverbank that people were swimming across the river towards the other side and a few gunmen were standing and firing at the people who were swimming across the river.¹¹

An elderly survivor told me that he had lived through Bodo attacks twice in two decades: "I was injured in the 1994 attack of Bodo militants," he said, indicating a mark on his shoulder. "While I lost my mother in the 1994 attack, I lost my sister in the Khagrabari Massacre."¹² The stories inside the camp reveal that women are the most traumatized of all. Many women whose children were killed right in front of them have a strong sense of guilt and remorse at having failed to save them. A sense of helplessness permeates their life today, as they are not able to find meaning in it.

Organizational Inventions among Muslims

Camp life in Khagrabari tells the story of how NGOs play an important role in helping inhabitants overcome the trauma of violence and get back to a normal life, offering facilities and immediate material support. Uddipana Goswami, in her work on internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Assam (2008), argues that NGOs often neglect Muslim camps for religious and political reasons. While this has long been the case, the NGO involvement among Muslims in this instance shows a shift in the situation. Unlike in the 1990s, in 2012 and 2014 many

relief camps were closed within a few months of the attacks, as the post-violent condition of Muslims had clearly changed. This must be read in the context of a new political awareness and assertions being made within the population of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam. They pressured the state to rehabilitate the victims to their villages and played a key role in ensuring security and support for them.

In an interview, Abdul Razzak (pseudonym), member of a Guwahati-based NGO, explained the interventions that this organization, which works among Muslims in Assam, has made in the Khagrabari camp.¹³ NGO associates offered special psychosocial support programs for children to overcome their trauma. Razzak said that many sports programs and games they led for the children of victims were crucial in bringing them back to normal life after the extremely shocking experience of violence. Similarly, NGOs and other organizations provided food and other basic amenities on the days when the attacks occurred. They also acted as mediators between state agencies and camp inhabitants in demanding and establishing relief facilities. But, perhaps more important, the Guwahati-based NGO's wing has helped the victims to follow court procedures to obtain justice. They pressured the administration and wrote letters urging Assam's chief minister not to delay the legal proceedings. They also offered guidance to victims before their court appearances to give testimony, as seen in the motto "Sach bolo, saaf bolo" (Speak truth, speak clearly), which the legal wing circulated among the victims. Ahmed (pseudonym), a lawyer and activist, claims that it was because of pressure from the Jhai Foundation that the National Investigation Agency filed a charge sheet on the ninth day of the incident and began a trial.¹⁴ It was also lawyers and activists who brought eyewitnesses to Guwahati, Assam's largest city, where the trial took place. Interviews with these victims reveal the significance of such efforts. One woman victim, who lost her son, described her horrible experiences in the attack and then in court:

My son was killed at close range. He had been hiding in the water, but for some reason he came back to the shore. One of the forest guards involved in the attack shot my son at close range. I saw my son pleading with the killer to spare him, as he was known to my son. The forest guard used to come to the village for tea or betel nuts. I was watching the incident from behind some bushes. I broke down in court while I was narrating the incident. At that moment, the lawyer who was defending the criminals accused me of lying. But I stayed firm and asked the lawyer whether he was present at the incident to be able to say that I was lying.¹⁵

Another woman described a similar experience of testifying in court about the violence she had endured:

I jumped into the water with my baby to save myself. While one person kept shooting bullets towards me, I kept diving in the water and occasionally coming up to breathe. In the process, my baby died. The lawyer who defended the accused asked me a weird question about how many bullets were fired. I asked him whether I should have saved my life or counted the bullets.¹⁶

The Khagrabari case is still ongoing. Victims told me that they occasionally travel to the Guwahati High Court to participate in the process in order to obtain justice.

Although organizational interventions have had some impact on the lives of Muslims affected by violence, the case of Khagrabari shows that camps may persist as long as the state is reluctant to intervene in the crisis of violence-affected Muslims. When I first visited Khagrabari, in July 2016, security police were staying very close to the camp, in temporarily arranged tents and small cottages. But during my visit in December 2019, the government called these officers back, and only three or four police were seen staying there. Camp dwellers have said that this move by the state has only increased their fear and insecurity. In addition, I did not see any substantial changes in their living conditions. If the histories of older camps are any indication, there will not be any security police at this camp in the near future.

Conclusion

The experience of violence and camp life by Muslims in Assam cannot be comprehended adequately if we reduce the issue to a question of their identity as either Muslims or migrants. The notion that Bengali-speaking Muslims are predominantly “Bangladeshis” is a construction deeply embedded in both the long-term otherness of Muslims ingrained in India’s religious nationalism (Van der Veer 2005) and the discourse of migrant “illegality” (De Genova 2002) in Assam. In most of the recent situations of ethnic assertion and attacks in which Muslims have been killed, the violent events were immediately framed as communal (religious) conflicts. Thus, it is impossible to decouple the Muslim identity of “migrants” from the “migrant” identity of Muslims when they become an experiment in violent political strategy to challenge the state and society. Camps represent the epitome of Muslims’ experience of violence and

marginalization. The history of Muslims' perpetual violent experiences and the reality of their being invariably marginalized after each attack make the camps in Assam important sites for analysis.

The empirical evidence in this chapter allows us a more nuanced understanding of the camp in the present than what Agamben proposed. The status of migrant Muslims in camps in India is paradoxical and complex. It is not the state that is directly responsible for the violence in Assam's history, as Agamben's formulation for the Western context proposes; rather, ethnic groups assume sovereign power to kill migrant populations, as posited by Mbembe (2003), and the state is complicit in the perpetuation of this violence. In this context, the government establishes camps as spaces of relief. However, they acquire the character of permanent sites of suffering as victims of violence continue to inhabit them for decades and are unable to lead normal lives. Camps also become easy targets of further violence by militant ethnic groups as the state refrains from protecting them. Symbolic violence thus permeates their life, as there is always the possibility of further physical attack: one ethnographic insight from the camps is the fear that seizes inhabitants whenever ethnic tensions and political crisis intensify in the region. Camps symbolize the space of "illegal migrants," and hence their inhabitants are subjected to everyday humiliation. Camps are also sites of structural violence: poverty, disease, illiteracy, unemployment, exclusion from state policies, and alienation from the mainstream expose the inmates to endless suffering. The biopolitics of camps—the governing of a violence-afflicted population by confining it to a space of relief—normalizes both structural and everyday violence and suffering. This suffering is reinforced through systematic exclusion, experienced in both lack of attention from the state and discriminatory practices. In other words, the distinction between thanatopolitics and biopolitics is blurred in this instance.

It is also clear that camps are not necessarily static spaces, nor reducible to mere biological life in a concentrated space under sovereign power, as in Agamben's (1998: 15, 87) formulation: his neat distinction between *zoë* (biological life) and *bios* (political life) is unsettled here, as the condition of migrants and other "unwanted" populations is more complex and confusing today (Fassin 2007; Feldman 2015). Fassin (2007) has challenged the static notion of the "bare life" of migrant populations in the contemporary world, demonstrating how some migrants acquire political recognition in changing sociopolitical circumstances and with new state policies and interventions. Ayse Parla's (2019) recent work has shown the potential of the idea of "hope" and social transformation even while analyzing precarious social conditions. Insights from camps in Assam

reveal the socio-spatial mobility of individuals, as some have managed to move to metropolitan cities and places such as India's southernmost state, Kerala, for better livelihoods, and some have managed to leave camp life forever. In this context, life in camp is not completely enclosed and immobile, even if a large section of inhabitants continues to live in the same space. Similarly, camp dwellers have begun to articulate political rights over time, using different platforms. The involvement of various organizations, especially NGOs, in the recent past has brought some changes to the camp life of Muslims in Assam. Their new calls for justice show the community's emergent political voice and its conscious attempts to register resentment in the larger political sphere. While these are instances of hope and possibilities for positive changes in the lives of migrants, especially those in camps, a reverse scenario could also come true: migrants' political rights could also diminish in new political circumstances. For example, the recent publication of the NRC and passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act demands attention to an increasingly confusing and complex situation, in which Muslims are being pushed further to the margins of the nation-state. To sum up, camps are important sites of ethnographic analysis in the context of heightened migrant regime and a crisis of violence; it is such descriptive projects that will allow us to expand the horizon of the idea of a camp.

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