

**Book Review of**  
**Makiko Kimura, *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters (Sage Studies on India's North East)*.**  
**New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013. XV+168pp.**  
**Tables, maps, notes, references, index. (Hardback).**  
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On the Morning wee hours of February 18, 1983 over 2000 plus Muslim villagers of East Bengal origin were massacred in a sleepy town of Nellie at Assam's Nagaon district. The ghastly incident hit the national headlines for all the wrong reasons. Journalist, policy-makers, law-makers and activists roamed the post-killing fields flooded with dead bodies. Mainstream media reported - Tiwa and Koch communities slaughtered the Bengali Muslims living in a cluster of villages in the Nellie area in Assam's Nowgong district, about 70km from the capital Guwahati. The massacre was carried out in a single day (during a spate of six hours). That was a pure moment of madness in Northeast India's post-independent era.

Nellie Massacre of 1983 happened during the ongoing anti-foreigner movement led by AASU (All Assam Students Union). Hundreds of cases were filed against the attackers composed of indigenous Tiwa and Koch communities. TP Tewary commission was set up to probe the massacre. Nothing came out of the litigations and Commission; because, who got penalized? The attackers and the attacked began living side by side, yet again.

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Three decades later, Japanese academic Makiko Kimura attempts to search for clues from the narratives of the attackers and the survivors of the carnage. The book is the result of Makiko's doctoral research at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. After her research, she feels, the usual image of the riot participants are a "barbaric mob", "savages" or "urban poor controlled by goondas". The people she came across in Nellie were "simple and ordinary villagers in peaceful rural areas." Makiko Kimura's "The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioter", is an important addition to Northeast India studies.

### **Role of the then Government:**

Kimura claimed that without the election, the killing would not have taken place. The Congress-led Government of India preferred election to the 126-member Assam Legislative Assembly and the 12 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state. The leader of the agitation, All Assam Students Union, (AASU) and All Assam *Gana Sangam Parishad* (AAGSP) decided to boycott the election; unless the electoral roll was first revised as per their demand. They launched agitation to press for their demand.

On January 6, 1983, the Assam government arrested the movement leaders, including Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Bhrigu Phukan, president and general secretary respectively of the AASU. The state went ahead with the election with polling in three phases, i.e. February 14, 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. The Nellie massacre happened immediately in its wake, on February 18, with just one phase of the polling left to be concluded.

In the Tewary Commission Report, it was stated - Assam Police, especially the low-ranking officers, did not take enough measures to prevent attacks in some areas, as they were sympathetic to the movement. It was particular in the Nellie incident, in which local police did not take any action despite

knowing that the attack was taking place. The CRPF and other armed police battalions brought in from other states were mainly posted in polling booths, to provide security for election candidates. The law-enforcement agencies went defunct in Assam during the carnage.

Kimura reminds the readers not to dissociate the gathering storm of street agitation and violence in opposition on the eve of election that engulfed Brahmaputra valley from the Nellie carnage. She urges readers not to dismiss any independent agency of the rioters in the gruesome bloodletting.

The days preceding the massacre were marked by extreme tensions. The agitators coerced candidates either not to file nominations. If they had file so, the agitators urged to withdraw them. According to the Tewari Commission, Kimura quotes, during the disturbances there were 545 attacks on roads and bridges, 140 kidnappings, 193 attacks on election staff and candidates, their relatives and party workers, 274 bomb explosions or recoveries or explosives and so on.

The book sketches the carnage between the movement leaders of the anti-foreigner movement and the direct perpetrators of the crime in the Nellie area. To the author's horror, the government did not point to any organization for the massacre and everybody in the end was allowed to go scot-free.

**Insights on Migration Studies:** The book scans the history of cross border immigration in Assam. Infiltration is a vexed issue and arguably is the root of Assam's most endemic problems. The book focuses on the various complexions, shades, nuances and frictions of demography of Assam. For instance, the book analyses the relationship between two major linguistic groups - the Assamese and the Bengali.

Cross border migration is a phenomenon of much deeper antiquity, Kimura traces British colonial policy behind the systematic Bengali exodus to Assam. The colonial administrators needed population exposed to Western education. Demands for administrative mechanisms to run the local government - Bengali middle class from Sylhet, Dhaka and Mymensingh districts of the then undivided Bengal were their natural choice. In later years, when tea plantations began flourishing, the administration brought in tribes from Orissa and Bihar as tea laborers.

During 1930s, the colonial administrators encouraged large-scale immigration of Muslim peasants from rural Bengal to reclaim land in Assam for agriculture. The Government of India as part of the British war effort, introduced the policy of “Grow More Food” simply to collect more tax revenues. During mid 1930s, to prevent friction between the Muslim immigrants and resident Hindus, a line system had been introduced to demarcate a point beyond which Muslim immigrants were not permitted to settle. This cemented in making hard boundaries between populations on religious lines, which lingers till today.

Colonial immigration policies set the stage for the birth of modern Assamese linguistic nationalism and multi-faceted lines of conflict, plaguing the Assamese society at present. The author points out how Assamese nationalism evolved as a reaction to Bengali cultural and linguistic hegemony in the state. In its nascent stage, the target was the middle class Bengali Hindus, because of their dominance in the administration.

During Partition of India, major shifts in demography took place in Assam. First, the Bengali dominated district of Sylhet was separated from Assam and awarded to Pakistan. With Sylhet gone, Assamese-speaking population became majority in Assam. Second, the Partition resulted in refugee movements across the

border. The 1951 census revealed that there were 275,455 Bengali Hindus who crossed the border into India, mostly from Sylhet. Third - inception of politics of categorization of immigrants into foreigners and refugees.

Muslim Bengali peasants who settled in Assam identify themselves as Assamese, but not the Bengali Hindus belonging to the educated middle class. They retained their separate Bengali linguistic identity, thereby setting the stage for confrontation with the Assamese. During 1960s Assamese and Bengali communities started logging heads. When the Assam Official Language Bill was passed in the Assam Assembly on October 24, 1960, Bengali and tribal communities put up a strong opposition. Violence broke out in Silchar resulting with death of eight agitators on May 19, 1961. The bill was amended to accommodate the demands of the Bengalis of Assam.

**Larger Questions of the Text:** Is linguistic nationalism between the Assamese and Bengalis, shared by the tribal communities of Assam? Can the Nellie massacre incident be treated as purely an extension of this friction or did the Tiwa and other perpetrators of the massacre have other reasons for their act? These are some of the interesting questions Kimura poses and probes further. She answers these questions through extensive interviews she conducts with the communities responsible for the attacks as well as their victims.

**The Land (Matti in Assamese) Alienation:** Tiwas of Nellie perceived the immigrant settlers as aggressive land encroachers, kidnappers of girls, petty thieves etc. They labelled the immigrants as '*Miyas*', an ethnic category signifying the land hungry Muslim peasants from Mymensingh.

Kimura points out a significant factor in the text. The systematic loosing of land (*Matti* in Assamese), whereby the Tiwas and Koch

lands have been continuously taken over by *Miyas* through buying and selling as the ignition point of ‘Mayhem of Nellie’.

Kimura’s text reveals the issue of violence, and its relationship to individual and collective memory. She revisits to Nellie to speak with the victims of the massacre and the attackers. It was all about bringing out the memory of the event. The author recollected the cynicism from victims who had waited in vain for justice. Kimura brings out narratives of the victim, who were driven out of their villages by a mob that was armed with country guns and machetes. Their fields were destroyed, and their homes were razed to the ground. Those who died that day were mostly - women, children and the elderly who could not run fast enough to save their lives. Yet, despite the scale of violence that it resulted in, the Nellie Massacre has been all but erased from public memory, existing only in the minds of victims, for whom the past is something he lives with everyday.

The Nellie Massacre contains within it the history of dozen of villages that were attacked simultaneously—Alisingha, Khulapathar, Basundhari, Bugduba Beel, Bugduba Habi, Borjola, Butuni, Indurmari, Mati Parbat, Mati Parbat No. 8, Muladhari, Silbheta, Borbori and Nellie. Places that exist even today, each wrapped in its own tale of violence, loss and memory.

The survivors of the massacre lived in a makeshift refugee camp in a government school in Nellie. Later shifted to refugee camps across different villages, where they stayed for four months to a year. Indira Gandhi, who was the prime minister at the time, and Zail Singh, then president of India, visited the refugee camps within a couple of weeks. They announced compensation and an investigation into the violence. The victims eventually got compensation of Rs 5000 for deceased next of kin, Rs 3000 for those who were injured, and two bundles of tin sheets to

rebuild their burnt homes. This compensation reached the victims two months after the massacre.

The police filed charge sheets in only 299 of the 688 First Information Reports (FIRs) registered. None of those charge-sheeted had been prosecuted. Popular narrative has it that the Assam Accord, signed in 1985 by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, leader of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). On the contrary, the accord stated that the central government and the state government was to review detention cases, as well as cases against persons charged with criminal offences in connection with the agitation, except those charged with commission of heinous offences.

**Weak Spots of the Text:** Ethnography studies and fieldwork have limitations. Narratives, collective memories from the victims and opening the past wounds have delimitations. An ethnographer has to crosscheck all these narratives, which are sensitive memories. It is a challenging task for the ethnographer to streamline in an academic manner. Any reader of this book can find such memories in the text. Kimura's faces such challenges, which a reader can observe in the text.

Another issue with Kimura's text is the imbalance narratives from the *Miyas* and the *Tiwas*. If more views from the *Koch* and *Tiwas* were incorporated, the text would reveal more insights.