

India's 1983 Nellie communal massacre in historical perspective

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Forty-one years ago, on February 18, 1983, a barbaric slaughter targeting innocent Bengali-speaking Muslims took place in the hamlet of Nellie and fourteen neighbouring villages in the north-east Indian state of Assam. This communal atrocity—in which India's now governing party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, played a major role—was the outcome of a campaign of communal incitement targeting “illegal foreigners,” that is highly impoverished refugees and migrants from Bangladesh.

Communal killings started on February 2, 1983 and continued over the next two weeks, reaching their gory heights in Nellie on February 18. The official estimate of the number killed in what has come to be known as the Nellie Massacre is 2,191. Unofficial estimates place the death toll as high as 10,000. A further 300,000 Muslim, Hindu and Christian peasant and rural working families became internal refugees as a result of the communal bloodletting. These unfortunates were housed in dilapidated camps, with many forced to endure further suffering due to inadequate supplies of food and fresh water.

The 1947 Communal Partition of South Asia and the Nellie massacre

The Nellie Massacre can only be understood as ultimately emanating from the communal division of the subcontinent into a nominally secular India and the “Islamic Republic” of Pakistan in 1947. During the first half of the twentieth century, South Asia was convulsed by a mass anti-imperialist movement. But fearful of the growing rebelliousness of the working class and peasant masses, the bourgeois Indian National Congress of “Mahatma” Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru betrayed its own secular democratic program and struck a deal with India's departing British colonial overlords and the right-wing communalist Muslim League for a quick “transfer of power” and the creation of two communally defined states. Even as the twin states of India and Pakistan were officially born on Aug. 14 and 15, 1947, millions were forced to uproot themselves and flee an eruption of mass communal violence fomented by Muslim League, Congress, Hindu Mahasabha and Sikh Akali Dal politicians, with Muslims fleeing north India for Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs Pakistan for India.

Partition was an historic crime that defied economic and historical logic, divided multiple ethno-linguistic groups, gave rise to a reactionary geopolitical rivalry that today threatens the people of South Asia with a nuclear holocaust, and has served as a means for imperialism to maintain its domination over a region that is home to one quarter of the world's population.

Pakistan was at birth a grotesque and unviable political entity. The Punjabi-dominated elite of the country's western half monopolized political and economic power to the detriment of the far more

impoverished Bengali-populated East Pakistan, from which it was separated by 2,200 kilometres (1,365 miles) of Indian territory. After a quarter-century of failed attempts to reform Pakistan's political institutions and in the face of increasingly brutal repression, the masses of East Pakistan revolted leading to the creation of Bangladesh after a bloody civil war in 1971.

Post-independence, the Congress Party rejected calls from the political precursors of the BJP in the Hindu Mahasabha, Jana Sangh and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for India to be proclaimed a Hindu *Rashtra* or state. But just as they had connived with the advocates of *Hindutva* in implementing the partition of India, so the Congress Party continued to adapt to and connive with the Hindu right. As social discontent grew in the decades after 1947, as the failure of independent capitalist rule to resolve any of the burning social and democratic problems confronting the masses became manifest, the Congress and its bourgeois masters increasingly resorted to communal “divide and rule” politics to derail a challenge from the working class.

Within this context, and under conditions where the Stalinist Communist Parties had politically subordinated the working class to the parties of the bourgeois establishment, the Hindu supremacist right, organized since 1980 in the BJP, was able to grow, as did various forms of ethno-chauvinist and exclusivist politics.

A monstrous crime

The Nellie killings were the largest massacre of Muslims since Partition. They were fomented by Assamese ethno-chauvinists, BJP leaders and activists, and the RSS—the Hindu supremacist “cultural revival” organization that founded the BJP and which continues to supply much of its leading cadre. India's current prime minister and would-be Hindu strongman Narendra Modi, who first came to national prominence due to his role when Gujarat chief minister in instigating and presiding over the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, is a lifelong RSS member.

During the Nellie massacre, local Hindu-Assamese villagers armed with country guns (crude shotguns) and machetes encircled and then attacked Bengali-Muslim villages, indiscriminately killing everyone they fell upon. Even though the local government and police bureaucracy had been forewarned that a slaughter of this kind would occur, they took no action to stop it.

Also involved in the massacre were Tiwa tribal people who live in impoverished conditions and who had lost much of their traditional lands due to debt or being forced to sell under duress by the government to facilitate urbanization. They had been incited against the people of Nellie and the surrounding villages through the spreading of rumours that Bengali Muslim men had kidnapped and raped four young Tiwa women.

Members of a second former tribal group, the Koch, a majority of whom have converted to Hinduism, also took part in the massacre. For decades, the RSS and the Hindu right as a whole have invested considerable energy in inducting tribal peoples into various Hindu castes (*jatis*) as part of their communalist agenda.

Those killed in the Nellie massacre included people who had lived in Assam for generations. Also, such was the indiscriminate communal fury unleashed that some non-Muslim Bengalis were slaughtered.

It needs special emphasis that Bengalis had long lived in the state of Assam and that the people of Bangladesh share the same language and culture as the people of West Bengal, India's fourth most populous state, and Assam's western neighbour.

Ethno-national exclusivism and communalism in the "anti-foreigner" agitation

Assam has long been home to numerous ethnic groups who speak various languages. In 1826, after Burma (Myanmar) lost the first Anglo-Burmese war, the British seized Assam from Burma.

At that time, it was included in the Bengal Presidency, which was later renamed a province. Over time, the British colonialists manned the local government administration with educated Bengalis, mainly Hindus. The Assamese elite coveted these administrative jobs.

Following the establishment of extensive tea plantations in upper Assam by British planters beginning in 1835, indentured labourers from heavily populated regions in the Central Provinces, United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh), and Madras Presidency were actively encouraged to migrate to Assam in order to work as virtual slaves in these tea gardens.

Following the late 19th century discovery of coal and petroleum in upper Assam, British colonialists encouraged more labourers from Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and a few other states to immigrate by providing train fares.

As a result, Assam eventually became home to a very diverse mosaic of ethnic and cultural groupings. At this time there were no serious conflicts between the plains and forests' indigenous people and the migrant indentured workers employed by the tea estates. In fact, a majority of them even adopted Assamese language and culture.

Beginning in the early 20th century, the "Assamese identity" movement began to blame Bengalis for their lack of economic opportunities and political exclusion since the educated Bengali Hindus dominated the government bureaucracy.

At this time and even after the partition, the Assamese elite had some success in wooing the support of Bengali Muslim cultivators against their Bengali-Hindu upper class rivals.

In the 1970s as today, there was indeed a tremendous dearth of economic opportunities for the Assamese middle classes because of the state's economic backwardness, the legacy of colonial rule and India's belated capitalist development. Despite being rich in natural resources, the Indian government has hardly initiated any sustained industrial development thus leaving the state mired in poverty and deprivation. In contemporary Assam, only 4.4 million reside in urban areas whereas the rural population is 27 million.

The BJP and the "Assam movement"

With the influx of Bengali refugees fleeing Pakistani military terror and

the subsequent upheavals in Bangladesh, the AASU and AAGSP-led "Assam Movement" made them the principal target of its agitation. They demanded that these "illegal foreigners" be stricken from electoral roles and be expelled back to Bangladesh.

Although Bangladesh's population was overwhelmingly Muslim, Hindus made up a disproportionate part of the refugees that fled into India to escape the Pakistani military's atrocities. This is because the Pakistani authorities specifically targeted them with the aim of whipping up Muslim communalist reaction to counter the Bangladesh liberation struggle and mobilize Islamic fundamentalist forces, including the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The "Assam movement" agitation reached a fever pitch in early 1983 when widespread road and rail blockages resulted in shortages of food. These agitations were to oppose the Congress Party's determination, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, to hold state legislative elections starting from February 14 to 21 in 1983.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP itself mounted a specifically anti-Muslim agitation in the already poisonous atmosphere created by the AASU and AAGSP against "foreigners." The RSS infiltrated the AASU which subsequently led to a split within the organization.

The Hindu right's contribution was to give the ethno-chauvinist Assamese agitation an increasingly pronounced anti-Muslim communal character.

A government assessment report prepared at this time observed that the "link-up of RSS elements and the agitation at many places indicate a strong possibility of much communal disturbances in sensitive pockets just prior to the election or immediately after the election."

The leader of the BJP at that time, Atal Behari Vajpayee, who briefly served as India's Prime Minister in 1996 and from 1998-2004, made a murderous speech during a campaign rally just prior to the Nellie massacre. This arch-reactionary, who was later touted in the 1990s and 2000s by the Indian corporate media as a "moderate," even a "liberal," said during that speech:

"Foreigners have come here, and the Government does nothing. What if they had come into Punjab instead, **people would have chopped them into pieces and thrown them away.**" [Emphasis added]

Subsequent investigations by various journalists have revealed that the collusion between the BJP, the RSS and the AASU played a central role in fomenting the Nellie Massacre.

The seeds of anti-Muslim communalism began to incubate within Indian bourgeois politics especially after this period.

As has been the case in numerous communal atrocities in India, including to name only the most notorious, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid, and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, none of those principally responsible for inciting and organizing the Nellie massacre have ever been convicted for their crimes.

The Congress Party, which had dominated Indian politics until the mid-1970s, subsequently went into a slow political decline both nationally and in Assam, with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's resort to dictatorial "Emergency Rule" from 1975 to 1977 after an eruption of working class, peasant and student opposition, marking a turning point.

The 1985 Assam Accord

The Congress won the 1983 Assam elections, but the AASU and the AAGSP, which boycotted the polls, emerged politically strengthened.

Subsequently, the Congress Party national government led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who had succeeded to the post after Indira Gandhi's assassination in October 1984, signed the reactionary "Assam

Accord” with the Assam government, the AASU and AAGSP.

Under this accord, which gave into the xenophobic campaign of the AASU and AAGSP, the Indian government agreed to summarily identify and deport all refugees and migrants who had entered India after March 24, 1971, that is two days before Bangladesh declared its independence. The accord also specified that the names of all persons who came to Assam after January 1, 1966 (inclusive) and up to March 24, 1971 (midnight) would be removed from the electoral roll for 10 years (that is until 1995) but would otherwise have citizenship rights.

Under the Assam Accord, the Government of India agreed to secure the international border, which in many places was not conclusively defined, against “infiltration” by the “erection of physical barriers like walls, barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places.”

In December 1985, that is some four months after the accord’s adoption, new state elections were held and the Asom Gana Parishad (Assam People’s Council), which had been formed by the leaders of the “Assam movement,” came to power with Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the former AASU president, as chief minister.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) gave their whole hearted support to the chauvinistic and reactionary Assam Accord.

The Assam Accord was followed by the sinister National Registry of Citizens (NRC) introduced in 2003 by the Vajpayee BJP government. Under it, every person in India has to “prove” their citizenship, barring which they will be treated as an “illegal immigrant.” In 2013-14, Assam’s then Congress Party-led state government became the first and only government in India to initiate such a registry, but the BJP, as part of its ongoing agitation against “illegal” Muslim immigrants, has repeatedly vowed to do so nationally.

For the past four years, this has been tied to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), explicitly anti-Muslim legislation adopted by the Modi government in December 2019, which for the first time made religion a criterion for granting Indian citizenship. Under the CAA, all migrants who entered India prior to 2015, except Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, are to be granted citizenship.

Meanwhile in Assam, the state’s current BJP government working in tandem with New Delhi has moved to fully implement the NRC. As a consequence close to 2 million persons have been rendered stateless. These millions could not “prove” their citizenship despite many being born in Assam itself or even British colonial India. The overwhelming majority of them are Bengali-speaking Muslims and are impoverished agricultural workers eking out a living. The Modi government has thrown these helpless victims into a number of newly built internment camps. Over a hundred of those detained in these camps have reportedly perished either due to lack of healthcare or from suicide.

However, there have been complaints from the Assamese ethno-chauvinists that not enough Bengali-speakers are targeted for expulsion.

The Nellie massacre and the ongoing ethno-communal strife in Assam are—like the now 10-month-long bloodletting in the northeastern state of Manipur, where over 200 innocent persons have been killed and tens of thousands driven from their homes—testament to the reactionary character of the Indian bourgeoisie, which has perpetuated and further institutionalized the “divide and rule” policies of British imperialism.

This finds its consummate expression in the BJP’s drive to transform India into a Hindu-supremacist state, which was publicly blessed by corporate India and cowardly accommodated to by all the “secular” opposition parties when Modi inaugurated a Hindu nationalist temple at the site of the razed Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya last January.

The working class of India can only secure its basic democratic and social rights by developing a unified movement of all the toilers of South Asia. In opposition to all the national, communal, ethno-linguistic and caste divisions incited by the ruling class, such a movement would have as

its strategic goal the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the United Socialist States of South Asia. It would have to be oriented to the world working class with the aim of destroying imperialism and the outmoded system of rival nation-states in which capitalism is historically rooted.



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