

CONSEQUENCES OF ETHNIC  
CONFLICT IN DIMA HASAO  
DISTRICT

## **Chapter-V**

### **Consequences of Ethnic Conflict in Dima Hasao District**

Considering the consequences of ethnic conflict in Dima Hasao district, this chapter based itself on the political and economic outcome of ethnic conflicts, analyzing through the prospect and retrospect of ethnic conflicts. As already mentioned, Northeast India and specifically Assam is the homeland of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures speaking different languages and dialects is considered the melting pot of diverse races, castes, religions, languages and cultures. Inter-ethnic conflicts and struggle for identity among the ethnic groups too are not new but a frequently occurring phenomenon. However, such conflicts have become more common and all pervading at present.

Ethnic Conflict generally considered as an interaction between interdependent social groups, can perceive incompatible goals and expect interferences from the other parties if they attempt to achieve their goal. It could be perceived as something which can really happen in the ground by involving opposite individuals, families, groups, etc. Contrary to this, however, the wider sources of the underlying conflicting situations, which include the actual or perceived incompatibility of goals, is generated from a mismatch between social values, on the one hand, and the social structure on the other hand.

A conflict structure without conflict attitude or behaviour is nothing but a structural one. As a conflict dynamics develops, it becomes a manifest of conflict formation. Conflicting parties could then organize themselves around this structure, to pursue their unlimited interests.

Ethnic conflicts often involve serious costs and consequences. Many analysts fear that ethnic conflict is contagious under certain circumstances; and can produce ethnic dissimilation within one country by drawing in neighbours and outside opportunists, which in turn can heighten the role of ethnicity in successive extent, inevitably destabilizing the whole region. Displacement of people is basically the outcome of ethnic conflict leading to insecurity and instability. Economic factors can weaken the political institutions that uphold the social contracts that provide social stability and this is mostly seen aftermath conflicts. It can also weaken the institutions which repressed those cultural groups with political grievances.

Economic crisis and change always cause social disruption and radical dislocation of communities. When secular economic trends lead to low growth, debt crises, rising unemployment, and rising rates of immigration, and when the resulting hardships and benefits are disproportionately allocated among various cultural groups, existing political cleavages based on cultural difference are exacerbated and new ones are created.

Ethnic conflict leads, among other things, to the breakdown of law and order, disruption of economic activities, humanitarian crises and a state of insecurity which discourage long run investment and development stability. Violent ethnic conflict leads to an extraordinary migration of people including vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the old as well as the disabled who are often seriously affected by unexpected violent conflict that leads to displacement. Therefore, it is worthwhile to give due concern to interethnic relations and manage it cautiously and systematically.

Unwise handling of conflict results to widespread of misunderstanding and misconception. If conflicts occur, it must be handled at its early stages because if it is allowed to rise, it would change into violence that cannot be easily remedied. By and large, ethnic conflict is an outcome of a number of interrelated factors. And it is necessary to study the different impact of ethnic conflict so that steps can be laid down for further prevention of conflict.

### **5.1 Social Impact of Ethnic Conflict**

Whenever violent conflicts occur, groups, communities and individuals are affected in various ways. The social consequences of the violence that is caused by ethnic conflict cannot be quantified. Research findings revealed that in many cases, affected populations devised survival strategies to cope with conflict situations. The social consequences of ethnic conflict can be analysed through various factors.

**Deaths:** The most obvious outcome of ethnic conflicts in this area has been deaths directly resulting from injuries sustained during attacks. In the villages where the research was done, 24 out of the 120 respondents had lost a family member in the conflict, especially in 2003. Some of the respondents had lost their close relatives, neighbors and friends.<sup>96</sup>

Many recounted the scenes very vividly and the impact of such experiences was evident in the tone of their voice. It was not within the scope of this study to interrogate the emotional impact of such cruel incidents on the surviving family members. However, the impact cannot be underestimated. Most of the deaths were as a

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<sup>96</sup>Sources from field notes.

result of ordinary citizens attacking others on the basis of their ethnic background.

There were specific examples of such deaths as some of the deceased were parents or close relatives of the respondents. The experience of violence, that demands rapid and unexpected movements, sometimes even at night have impacted heavily on the elderly. Many of them could not comprehend what was happening.

The burning of houses, including those of the aged during the violence has created a very disturbing sense of misery among them, having to witness all the hard labour of their lives come to ruin. It is therefore not difficult to appreciate the theory that some elderly victims of the violence succumbed to early death and people who lose property during conflicts become disturbed because of grief and shock. Young people have not escaped the despair resulting from the violence.

During data collection, it has been noted that in some homesteads, there were division of family members while fleeing from the conflict situation. The point here is that due to the violence, young people have been left on their own, without moral support in times of personal and economic problems. Having been displaced severally and their property looted or destroyed, many young men feel humiliated.

Besides death, some victims suffered physical injuries during violence. It is found out that the commonest traumatic events associated with ethnic violence were the sudden death of a loved one, and witnessing the killing or serious injury of another person. There were other cases where those who moved to areas with a different climate developed some health challenges.

The preceding discussion has highlighted some of the economic impacts of ethnic violence in the study area and it appears that conflict arose out of the perceptions that indigenous groups felt overtaken economically by the majority communities. A critical analysis of ethnic conflict reveals that the inter-ethnic violence opened up a myriad of other conflicts at individual and family levels. In addition to it the increasing effects of conflict seems to have affected the mental well being of a number of victims.

**Impact on Education:** Ethnic conflict also has a great impact on the educational system of the students. The drop out of school among many children has been another social consequence of ethnic violence. In the homes visited, there was a case of one or more children who stopped schooling after the ethnic violence. Many families were evicted from their homes and consequently, many pupils could no longer access their schools due to financial problems.

During ethnic conflict many victims have fled their villages and sought refuge at different villages some as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and under such circumstances many school going children also dropped from school because some schools were burned or looted in the course of the violence. Although some schools were reopened again but the turnout of students was not proper just after the end of violence.

Some primary and secondary schools were closed down as they were converted into refugee camps during the ethnic conflict and under such conditions, many students have dropout from school and started earning because of their family's financial crisis that they were facing because of the conflict. This affected the transition of students from the primary to the secondary level.

Moreover, some students had their academic certificates lost or burnt during the conflict, thus making it hard for them to pursue higher education. The clashes have also prevented many primary and high school graduates from pursuing higher education because of financial constraints. Some schools were reconstructed and other could not be inhabited again as the people of the villages have not resettled again. This undoubtedly compromised the quality of education in Government and private aided schools.

Some children dropped out from school because it became difficult for the parents to discipline their children, for that is best done in the privacy of the home. Consequently, parents lost hold of their children as some of them has involved themselves as volunteers for protecting their communities and most of them became truants. This was especially common in situations where families sought refuge in a different place away from the village that they reside.

The sheer necessity and desperation to survive have radically modified parental attitudes to children. Respondents argued that forced transfer of schools, sometimes in the middle of the year, a feeling of insecurity, change of teachers, and lack of a place to call them home and trauma as a result of violence were some of the challenges that de-motivated the students.

Thus, the impacts of violence on children's education confirm that pupils exposed to disturbing events suffer from academic struggles and adjustment.

### **Impact on Women and children:**

Women and children were greatly affected by ethnic conflict as some were left widowed as their husbands were killed in the ethnic violence. Children have become orphans as their parents were

killed in conflict. Most of the women along with their children had to flee from their villages leaving behind their husband who had stayed back to protect their villages. Women and children had suffered great mental agony during the ethnic conflict and had not recovered much from the incident.

## **5.2 Economic Impact of Ethnic Conflict**

The study of the economic consequences of ethnic conflict is not surprising bearing in mind that these two ethnic groups namely the Hmars and the Dimasas have had a relatively longer history of conflict. Ethnic violence has led to destruction of property, increased land grabbing, petty agricultural theft and general crime. The Research also reveals that there has been loss of income for many individuals and families, changed the pattern of land ownership and created dependency among many victims.

Seen from economic angle, ethnic conflict destroys the very bases of development: environmental resources, economic infrastructure, and the social and civic ties that permit and sustain development. The overall disintegration of the district's infrastructure and other economic resources in Dima Hasao can be taken as good examples. When there is violent conflict in a district resources that otherwise could have been invested for development activities, would be shifted to cover the expense of the conflict.

The productive labour force will be drained to the conflict and hence production and productivity decline in the district engaged in the war. In a region where there is violent conflict trade and other social and civil institutions either completely or partially ceases there services as a result of which life become costly and terrible. Conflict also reported to be among the major factors of vulnerability

that destroy people's social and private property and trigger unemployment in the area.

Ethnic conflict leads, among other things, to the breakdown of law and order, the disruption of economic activities, humanitarian crises and a state of uncertainty which prevent long run investment and development efforts and stability. Violent ethnic conflict leads to exceptional migration of people including minority groups, women, children, the old as well as the disabled who are often seriously affected by unexpected violent conflict that leads to displacement. Therefore, it is worthwhile to give due concern to interethnic relations and manage it cautiously and systematically. It is necessary to analyze the economic consequences of ethnic conflict to clarify the understanding of the economic process.

**Loss of income:** The information on land grabbing and acquired land that had been set aside for resettlement of the internally displaced people by well-known personalities was explained by many respondents. In the resettlement exercise, genuine victims were allocated land in the interior of the former forests while the wealthy and politically connected allocated themselves land close to urban areas. Many young men also lost the means of earning an income. Previously, they would engage in agricultural cultivation and farming such as vegetables, rice and timber which they would later sell in the markets.

With the destruction of forests, they had to go too far into the forests to find such materials, which exposed them to attacks by rival ethnic groups or ordinary criminals. There were several incidents of such attacks which at times results to death. Without any income, some turned to criminal behavior such as stealing of agricultural product. The fact that some of the youth have lost the

means of earning an income made them exposed to manipulation by politicians in the area.

Disruption of agricultural activities led to poor yields and consequently results into low income to a majority of villagers. Mention may be made that in the areas where ethnic violence had occurred, there was a decline in production as many farmers had ran away due to insecurity. The impact of violence on agriculture was noted as one of the most vulnerable disruption that the people have faced.

**Unemployment:** Mention be made that, unemployment among the youth is one of the causes for the increase of violence in the Dima Hasao district of Assam. Loss of income compelled many victims to depend on other family members and well wishers for support. Dependency was high among those who moved from the villages that were burnt down. Consequently, they were forced to rely on other family members in formal employment for basic needs, medical care and other amenities.

Subsequently, some of the clashes-prone areas experienced massive unemployment with the entire attendant, as social and economic consequences of farming, industrial and distributive trade sectors were forced to lay off workers. Having been displaced from rural areas, most of the refugees did not have any other skills besides farming and cultivation to make them cope in the areas they sought refuge. Those who had no land but depend a living from business prior to the eviction seemed to have been affected more; without land, as the government did not give them much financial support during the resettlement exercise.

Some individuals have profited from the violence, especially by acquiring land left by fleeing victims. Cases of strangers moving in to occupy or harvest food crops and increase the livestock of

victims were common. Violence disrupted the local economy, which depend on inter-ethnic cooperation for market access, labour, and transportation services.

The displacement of farmers, and business people worsened the prospects for local economic recovery. The financial and the economic crisis in Dima Hasao district has exacerbated conflicts over the distribution of means of livelihood and privileges such as state allocation of money for infrastructure, and jobs.

**Loss of Property:** With the exception of respondents, all the other informants indicated that they had lost much property and cultivable land in the period 2003. With every new wave of ethnic conflict, victims of violence were forced to begin all over again as to build new houses, to re-stock their animals and to buy house hold items such as utensils and furniture.

Many of those who had invested in business in the rural areas suffered heavy losses as most of the production such as paddy and timbers were burnt down during the violence. The ruins of some of the destroyed buildings are still visible, while others were totally destroyed. A number of respondents also lost personal and household possessions such as academic certificates, title deeds, birth certificates, photo albums, bicycles, radio sets, television sets, utensils and clothing etc. The sudden and unexpected attacks during violence meant that those with cattle were unable to move with them. In the ensuing confusion of violence, they were compelled to abandon them.

One of the long term economic repercussions of the violence was that land that was previously used for farming and dairy keeping was abandoned by the owners because of insecurity. Most of the owners relocated or reconstruct villages to other places. In time, some of the abandoned land and cultivable farms were

bought for the construction of National highway and Rail tracks by the Railway department.

The discussion in this Research shows that an illegitimate process of transfer of property such as land and livestock went hand in hand with ethnic violence. The land clashes has also played a big role in the current state of poverty by creating tension, insecurity, forced migration and time wastage which would have been otherwise directed towards productive activities. The cultivation of crops, vegetables and fruits in several Hmar villages of Dima Hasao was also affected by the violence.

The total economic impact of the clashes in the affected areas is literally not easy to quantify. There was gigantic waste of human and economic resources during the Hmar Dimasa conflict in the year 2003.

**Displacement:** The Hmar-Dimasa conflict in Dima Hasao district has not only spread terror in and around North Cachar and Cachar district, but resulted in thousands of Dimasas and Hmars being displaced from their gutted down villages, to take shelter in about 25 relief centres.

Almost a quarter of the population of the district got displaced during the conflict. People belonging to both the communities fled to villages where their respective communities command the majority. Among the people of Dima Hasao district, internal displacement has been quite high. Almost twenty five percent of Hmar population were displaced during the conflict. Most of the families have permanently resided in some parts of Mizoram, worked as labourers, vegetables vendors, and shopkeepers thereby finding a better way of living.

The villagers who cannot re-establish their villages again were given land by the community leaders with the help of government and Non-Governmental Organisation. Yet, the worst consequences were still faced by the people, as the lands that were given to them were not fertile which ultimately results to economic slowdown. As such production was not enough to meet their daily ends which in turn make the condition of the people more deplorable. The economic condition of the people was greatly affected due to poor rate of production. This in turn caused considerable hardships to the villagers of essential goods.

### **5.3 Overview of Socio-Economic Consequences**

One overall observation that emerges from the study of the clashes in Dima Hasao district is the fact that the economic consequences go far beyond the available information. Generally, the clashes allowed some groups and individuals to take advantage of the insecurity over land.

According to this study, one of the long term economic consequences of the clashes was the fact that land ownership patterns have been permanently distorted. There was a general decline in economic production as many of the potential farmers ran away due to insecurity created by the violence.

In an insecure situation, as was the case in the study areas, agricultural activities were disrupted. In some Hmar villages of Hmartlangmawi, Tlangsang, Arda, Simtuiluong of Dima Hasao district work on agricultural land has stopped as they could not inhabit their land again<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup>Sources from field note.

There were other subsequent socio-economic problems related to the clashes such as food insecurity, labour disruption on farms, destruction of property, land grabbing, commercial disruption, breakdown in transport and communication, resource diversion, misallocation and unexpected expenditure, infrastructural disruption, price rises and fluctuation of prices and environmental destruction among others.

As a result of food shortages, many clashes victims experienced famine and this necessitated the appeal for local and the state government for food aid and relief. This study revealed that many of the victims doubted the seriousness of the Government's participation in food relief and whenever it was distributed, there were instances of shortage of materials and food products.

Conflict produces new and distinct and particularly vulnerable groups in the society consisting of a) internally displaced people and refugees who are in need of assistance in form of food, shelter, and health care; (b) single- and female-headed households, which are more widespread in post-conflict areas because of the loss of the male head of the household during the conflict, are especially helpless, and find it more difficult to find employment and very often receive lower salaries.

#### **5.4 Political consequences of Ethnic Conflict**

As already mentioned ethnic conflicts have caused massive human suffering across space and time, proving to be one of the most destructive consequences of ethnic tension. While the human cost involved with ethnic riots is in itself worthy of attention, the political impact of ethnic conflict has even more distressing long-term consequences.

In order to maintain and administer the Dima Hasao district, the Government of India's Act 1935, had make a division of the Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas under the Sixth Schedule. And to ensure the participation of the ethnic groups in decision making and management of the affairs in safeguarding their interests, the government appointed a Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly – the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee – under the Chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief Minister of Assam.<sup>98</sup> The Bordoloi Committee made a study of the demands and aspirations of the hill tribes and submitted its recommendations for a simple and inexpensive set-up (District Councils) of the tribal areas, which was later accepted and incorporated into the Article 244 (2) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.<sup>99</sup>

The Bordoloi Committee also made provision for Regional Council for the tribes other than the main tribe, so that the tribal people could preserve their traditional way of life, and safeguard their customs, and cultures. The North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council renamed as Dima Hasao Autonomous Council may be described as a “State in miniature” having all the components of a Government like Legislative, Executive and Judiciary. It has full autonomy to legislate and administer the subjects like land, revenue, primary education, customary laws etc. assigned to it under Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. But mention be made that in spite of the institutional arrangement made by the Government an existing political problems are still assumed. Right after the inception of the Autonomous council, the administration was in a proper shape but with the growth of population and development changes and problems started taking place. Prior to

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<sup>98</sup>Prasad. R.N, Sixth Schedule and Working of the District Councils in North-Eastern States, *Dialogue*, Volume 6 No. 2, October-December, 2004.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

the ethnic conflict in Dima Hasao, instability in the political system was analysed with the delimitation of seats in the Autonomous Council.

After the inception of the Autonomous Council twelve seats were created where six seats were for the majority tribe comprising of the Dimasas and other six seats for the other minority tribes. This delimitation of seats continued for the third Council election, but from the fourth election the seats were increased from twelve to twenty, where seven seats were added for the Dimasa and one seat for the Non Dimasas. Time and again in the next election it was increased to twenty four where sixteen seats were given to the Dimasa and eight seats to the Non Dimasa. Ever since the minority ethnic groups were feeling a sense of deprivation against their counter tribe.<sup>100</sup> This feeling of uneasiness and deprivation has created the majority minority syndrome in the district since time immemorial.

Mention be made that this deprivation in the political administration has a created an identity consciousness among the marginalized but this has never resulted into an ethnic conflict for fear of mismanaging their age old relationship. The ethnic conflict that was witnessed among the Dimasa and the Hmars was nothing political but it had great political consequences in the district.

The Autonomous Council which was established to administer the ethnic groups was also under contravention. The conflict has let loose the system of administration in the district and this has also resulted to a large scale political instability. Respondents have stated that aftermath conflict there were various problems related with the electoral politics. For instance, even at relatively lower

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<sup>100</sup>Thiek .H, *History of the Hmars in North East India, with special reference to Assam*, Bhabani, Guwahati, 2013, p.254.

rates of casualties, the destructive capacity of ethnic violence often results in massive destruction.

Different mechanisms through decentralisation may produce support for political communities, both for the state and for the region associated with ethnic groups enjoying limited self-rule. It focuses on different prevailing variables such as socialisation, grievances, and perceptions of interests, which also depend on regional and demographic composition. But this mechanism sometimes does not result in a favourable outcome.

Those people who were unable to resettle at their villages have to change their electoral registration from the areas they have fled to the new areas they have inhabited. The Internally displaced Persons were the worst affected, as they do not have proper official documents, as some got lost or burned during the ethnic violence. During interview, the respondents have explained that as they have resettled in a different village they hard time transferring their electoral registration without a proper official documents.

The other political consequences of the ethnic conflict were the land right violation, and individual rights violation faced by the victims of the conflict. Political consequences has brought forth problems challenging the political life which are many in number, some of them are cultural in the sense that they are related to cherished practices inherited from indigenous cultures. The worst political consequences of ethnic conflict was analysed with the change of nomenclature of North Cachar Hills district to Dima Hasao (meaning: the land of the Dimasa) in 2011.

The challenge of integrating ethnic identities in the processes of political integration and democratization is closely related to the problematic concepts of the change of nomenclature of the district. This has invariably lead to the formation of a political body known

as the Indigenous People's Forum in 2008 consisting of the marginalised ethnic groups of the Non Dimasa Community of Dima Hasao district. The IPF has demand for bifurcation under Article 244(2) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution for the Dimasa and the Non Dimasas in the district. Along with the Indigenous People's Forum (IPF), the Indigenous Women's Forum (IWF), the Indigenous Students Forum (ISF) has also been formed to function along with the IPF in meeting their demand of bifurcation of Dima Hasao district.<sup>101</sup> The demand for the bifurcation of Dima Hasao is analysed as the worst consequences that has affected the lives of the marginalised communities. But as such no concrete solution for bifurcation has been made till date.

This is the worst political consequence that has been faced in Dima Hasao district of Assam. A conflict situation resulting in political problems can get out of hand more easily, because social ethnic conflict is more likely to take place. For instance, people not receiving proper care are more prone to demonstrate in an emotionally heated post-conflict environment.

As stated above, Dima Hasao is a multi ethnic society and many communities have lived in harmony for many years but in recent years however the dominant ethnic groups have been on the forefront in fighting for political power. Although peace has been restored in the district after the conflict there is an atmosphere of fear and suspicion of one tribe against the other, which not much in common, as each of these tribes has a separate demand.

Ethnic conflict has also sustained political instability and mismanagement in which the issue is integral to one particular ethnic group. It seems possible that some long-standing disputes

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<sup>101</sup>Sources from field notes.

are enough to exemplify the unstable system of political administration.

If ethnic division causes conflict, conflict sharpens ethnic division. Therefore a clean one way causal chain from ethnicity to a range of consequences cannot be easily established, because these consequences in turn determine the nature of ethnicity and ethnic divisions.

Resurgence of ethnic identity and persistence of ethnicised politics does not indicate denial of the political state. Their concern for variously perceived threats to their distinct ethnic identities and their anxiety for preservation of culture and language and their demand of autonomy cannot be seen as dysfunctional for a healthy civil society. Their aspirations should be seen rather as prerequisites for distributive justice, to which no nation state can neglect. Indian path of institutional adjustments aimed at winning over and changing the opinion of hostile ethnic groups and extending special safeguards to hill States have helped solve ethnic problems to a great extent. These need to be endured.

Research findings have indicated that the high level of political effect of the ethnic conflict in the district makes it difficult to carry out political and economic reforms in the societies and ethnic grievances in Dima Hasao has also loosen the political stability of the system of administration. The findings will be indicated in the next concluding chapter.