

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE AND ETHNIC RIOTS: CHALLENGES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN GOALPARA DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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Abstract : Can multilevel governing institutions accommodate heterogeneous groups and ensure rural development? Multilevel local governing institutions in India's federal structure led to the creation of horizontal levels of governing institutions, (a) panchayati raj bodies and (b) autonomous bodies giving representation to cultural identities. Direct election to these local bodies is a way of giving representation to aggrieved groups in ethnically heterogeneous region within India's federal structure. Elections to these local bodies have been accompanied by group riots. This paper will try to understand the conditions under which elections to local bodies are accompanied by riots. The paper will also analyze how riots affect socio-economic development in the rural areas particularly in the context of Goalpara district in Assam that witnessed inter-groups riots on the day of election to the panchayati raj bodies in February 2013. The paper will draw from the established literature on ethnic riots. The paper argues that ethnic riots and electoral competition to multilevel governing institutions are interrelated, which in turn, impacts socio-economic development in rural areas.

IndexTerms - **Electoral incentives, Self-governance, Violence, Ethnicity, Rural development**

I. INTRODUCTION

Can multilevel governing institutions accommodate heterogeneous groups and ensure rural development? Multilevel local governing institutions in India's federal structure led to the creation of horizontal levels of governing institutions, (a) panchayati raj bodies and (b) autonomous bodies giving representation to cultural identities. We should understand about the concepts for understanding the relation between multilevel governing institutions and rural development.

II. MULTILEVEL GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS

Multilevel governance denotes a diverse set of arrangements, a system of coordination and negotiation between two functionally independent entities that have a complex relation to one another, but keeps redefining the interrelation through coordination and negotiation. It includes portentous issues such as structuring of the political space and dividing the task for proper governance (Piattoni, 2009). The claim is that, multilevel governing structure should bring efficiency and development by dividing development work among the multilevel governing institutions. In this structure, two parallel level governing institutions run to see after the development process in a definite territory. But, from theoretical point of view, it is not clear whether multilevel governance refers to situations, strategies or structures. It is confusing theoretically but in practice there are multilevel governing institutions running for development (ibid).

III. RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural development means the socio-economic development of the rural areas by means of aids and different distribution policies. It also includes infrastructural development and reducing poverty and unemployment. Chambers termed the rural development process as 'putting the last first', where last means the poor people from the rural areas (Chambers, 1983). Rural development schemes try to eradicate poverty and develop the socio-economic status of rural poor people.

IV. POLITICAL COMPETITION AND ETHNIC RIOTS

Relationship between political competition and ethnic riot remained a topic of concern for both the instrumentalists and constructivists. Political competition can lead to peace as well as violence depending on the place and dominant political parties. Ethnic riot and violence has often been portrayed as the outcome of rational choice of the political elites for their incentives (Wilkinson, 2004). Moreover, political reservation and electoral conditions are also responsible for emergence of riots on ethnic lines. Some politicians gains heavily from the outbreak of such motivational ethnic violence. Elites mobilize the masses for their material

gains. This kind of explanation is referred to as instrumentalism. The key proposition of instrumentalism rests on the purely instrumental use of ethnic identity for political or economic purposes by elites.¹ Elites use old animosities and differences (primordial attachment) to motivate a group according to their wishes.

Outcome of creating a strong group identity can be well witnessed in the time of elections. Politicians try to influence voters announcing different developmental plans, but voters vote only the candidate who can fulfill their needs. Before election, the parties use to criticize the opposition to have more votes on their favor. The competition increases among different groups and small parties. Based on the interest of the voters and polarizing events promoted by elites, different identities are formulated. Once politicians have decided which ethnic or non-ethnic identity to invoke, they face the challenge of how to make this identity the most politically salient identity among their target voters. In a heterogeneous decentralized area, elections bring more hatred between majority and minority group. Local political elites take advantages of existing differences between the groups for their electoral incentives. They spread more words of hatred against the group to which the leaders think that support from the other group to him is not authentic. Pre-notion of violence remains that leaders can show their sympathy to the groups and he/she can win the votes. In some other cases, riots occurred because elections have other motives behind it. The group or political elites want dominance of the group in the structure of decentralized area.

V. MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE AND ETHNIC RIOTS

Modern decentralized structure is also very much prone to inter-groups riots when there are parallel levels of decentralization with the panchayati raj institutions and the autonomous councils accommodating most of the population in the decentralized structure of a federation. Political reservation in terms of accommodating the leaders by granting autonomy to the marginalized section has become a part of decentralized structure. But, imposing panchayati raj institutions and autonomous bodies show multilevel governance in the federal structure of India. The creation of multilevel bodies in definite areas creates more political competition between different groups and may lead to riots. Is it always because of the political incentives of local elites which erupt into inter-group riots or is it also because of historical and ethnic variation between two different groups? This paper draws from the inter-group violence that took place in Goalpara district of Assam, on the day of panchayat election, which was on February 12, 2013. It seeks to analyse the factors that are responsible for the outbreak of inter-group violence. It is seen that, the riot that occurred in Goalpara district which have a parallel level of de-centralized institutions, is because of electoral incentives of two different groups.

In a democracy, an election campaign is supposed to be peaceful. In Africa, elections are struggle over the access to the resources controlled by the state, which are the biggest prize of the society. To attain the access, politicians resort to a variety of means both fair and foul to attain public office. The campaigns are mainly moments for politician to engage in mass mobilization and manipulation of electoral rules (Bratton, 2008).

Electoral violence monitoring has been a key tool for violence prevention and mitigation. New media is used for monitoring activities that can lead to election related violence. At the same way, new forms of electronic media are used for more promotion of electoral violence by means of mobilizing the common masses. Facebook, Twitter, and other means of internet media as well as SMS techniques are also used to advocate more violence in the tensed areas. Thus, it has been observed that the main purpose behind electoral violence; be it ethnic violence or vote buying through fraudulent measures is to win elections. The reason for failure of most elections in Nigeria is because of illegitimate strategies to victory. Use of violence to intimidate voters is a very common technology to target the known opponents by a hired gang (Collier & Vicente, 2008). The opportunity to translate all votes to the politician by any means is an important feature of electoral incentives initiated by the leaders (Lizzeri & Persico, 2002). The intimidation made by the political elites lead to hatred towards other groups residing in a same area. Rumor spread by the mongers also acts as the tool which ignites riots between various groups.

VI. CHALLENGES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Electoral incentives affect the performance of major decentralized institution by promoting violence and riots between groups. It affects in the day to day life as well as in the structure of the institutions like schools, hospitals etc (Janvry, Finan, & Sadoulet, 2010). Depending upon the number of votes, politicians try to control the violence in the area concerned. Dominant political party or leaders hardly give importance in violence affected areas. We can see the difference of attitude towards the violence of 2002 Hindu-Muslim violence by Chief Ministers of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in India. Whereas Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh and Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh were successful in preventing riots in their states, Narendra Modi of Gujarat was 'weak' in responding to large scale of anti-Muslim violence in his state. The difference in outcome and attitude of the political leaders is because of their electoral incentives and personal political interests. Supporting a group may help the leader for future election and making a reliable vote bank (Wilkinson, 2004). So, we can draw a relation between the electoral incentives and group riots by help of the above discussions. Violence that has occurred in autonomous regions in Assam has shown the characteristics of political incentives of elites which are responsible for the riots. This paper analyses such causes and consequences of electoral violence in the Goalpara area of Assam. Violence/riot has affected the rural development of the region by creating mistrust and not proper implementation of many government schemes.

¹ See Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslim in India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002): p. 27.

VII. METHODOLOGY

The study employs the qualitative methods. For the study data from both primary and secondary sources are taken into concern. Data are gathered from newspapers and interviews of elites and individuals from different groups. Along with that journal articles, relevant books and memoranda are used to understand the process of violence and rural development. Goalpara is selected several reasons. First, the place is diverse and culturally heterogeneous, which faced group riot recently in February 2013. Second, Goalpara district consists of parallel level of governing institutions- panchayati raj institution and autonomous council. Third, the group riot that occurred in Goalpara erupted on the day of panchayat election. Fourth, though there is parallel level governance, there is no rural development as such.

VIII. UNDERSTANDING THE RIOT OF GOALPARA

Goalpara, a district of Assam is inhabited by many indigenous tribes. Rabhas are also one of the indigenous tribes of Assam who are mainly concentrated in Goalpara district. According to 1991 Census Report of Assam, Rabha speakers are estimated 1,12,424. Linguistically the Rabhas belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages (Basumatary, 2010). Rabhas have a language and culture to identify them as a distinct tribe. Traditionally, Rabhas have no script of its own. When the written tradition was initiated in the 20th century, most of the writers used Roman or Bengali script for writing.

The Rabhas were one of the earliest settlers in the region. Based on some characteristics, such as early period of inhabitation, relative isolation, low level of techno-economic development, the government of India included the Rabhas among the specified 427 communities in the scheduled list of tribes (Rabha & Singha, 2008). The tribes of India have been brought under two schedules of Indian Constitution, i.e. Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Mainland tribals of India have been covered under Fifth Schedule and tribals of North-eastern regions are accommodated under Sixth Schedule for decentralized institution.

From 1947 onward, when government of India started functioning as sovereign independent country, freedom loving indigenous communities become politically restless. There was fear of being enclosed in a system where their rights and freedom could be curtailed. Moreover, they fear the exploitation by other communities on the lookout for improving the socio-economic status of the indigenous communities. That is why, many of the communities started political agitation against the government which unfortunately developed into violent armed struggle in the region (Goldsmith, 2008).

After the formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council, other communities also stepped up for demand of separate autonomous councils. Among them the Rabhas were also one. . After a round of discussions between the government and the representatives of Rabha community, the government agreed to grant their demand for constitution of separate autonomous councils for Rabha-Hasong on 10th March of 1995. But, there was also the institution of Panchayati Raj running in the area. From that, two parallel session of decentralized form of government can be witnessed in the Goalpara district. But, no systematic elections were held for the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC). By the end of December 2012, Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee (RHJMC) demanded immediate elections to the RHAC. On 2nd January 2013, the State Government issued a notification to the Assam State Election Commission to carry out the delimitation works of the 36 constituencies of the RHAC and to take needful action for holding the RHAC election without further delay.² But, the RHJMC has demanded a clear cut statement from the state government before January 11 on the inclusion of 779 villages in the RHAC. The committee also demanded an affirmative government statement before January 11 on holding the RHAC election by April next. There are also incidents of bandhs called by RHJMC demanding election of RHAC before the panchayat elections.³ Non-Rabha organizations were opposed to the decision of holding elections for the RHAC, and wanted the inclusion and exclusion of the villages before the elections. Garo National Council, Assam president Benedict Areng and Chandan Keshav, advisor to the Non-Tribal Security Forum claimed that there were 272 Garo villages and 217 non-tribal villages included in the Rabha-Hasong area. In Kamrup district also, there were 130 villages and 87 villages where the tribal population is less than 50 percent were included in the RHAC.⁴

Still the Rabha bodies demand council polls as soon as possible. In a massive show of strength, around 15,000 people including activists of All Rabha Students' Union (ARSU), Sixth Schedule Demand Committee (SSDC), All Rabha Women Council (ARWC) and supporters of other organizations expressed their demand by mass rally to hold immediate elections to the RHAC before the panchayat elections. Leaders were suspicious about the granting of power to both Panchayats and RHAC as both are the decentralized structure of the government. It will create more confusion within the RHAC area in regard to devolution of powers in case the panchayat polls are held as the executive power on the same sets of subjects mentioned under the Assam Panchayat Acts 1994 that have also been entrusted to the RHAC.⁵ RHJMC and 34 organizations announced a fresh agitation program in support of its demand for election to Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council by April next that should be held before panchayat election.

On 18th January 2013, the State Election Commission of Assam notified elections to the RHAC and it was scheduled on April 30 and counting of the votes would take place on May 2.⁶ The agitating organizations welcomed the declaration made by Election Commission. But, it urge for the assurance from the state government to settle the dispute over the issue of powers of the panchayats and the RHAC through discussion. In the meeting the Rabha and non-Rabha organization could not come to a conclusion

² The Assam Tribune, January 4, 2013

³ The Assam Tribune, January 5, 2013

⁴ The Assam Tribune, January 6, 2013

⁵ The Assam Tribune, January 12, 2013

⁶ The Assam Tribune, January 19, 2013

about the issue of powers of the panchayats and RHAC. The non-Rabha organizations refuse to accept the demand of the Rabha organizations. Two different organizations were against each election of panchayat and RHAC. State Election Commission was keener to conduct panchayat election in Goalpara district despite the resistance from Rabha organizations. Rabha bodies were irked by the decision of the government to conduct panchayat election in the RHAC areas. The protest and bandh called by the Rabha organizations turned to violence in many of Rabha dominated areas. Security measures were taken to stop the ethnic tension in the Rabha Hasong area. Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were deployed in the disturbed areas, where they had to lathi-charged on the protesters hurting more than 14 people.⁷

Incidents of burning of schools and digging of roads to block the polling personnel came into focus. On the day of election on February 12, 2013, supporter of RHAC election set fire to the houses of supporters of panchayat election and people who went out to cast their vote. There were protests against the panchayat poll, where clash took place with police personnel killing 11 (eleven) person on the day of election.⁸

IX. RESULT

Riot that occurred in the Goalpara district on the day of election and differences between the different groups shows the electoral incentives of the political elites. Rabha group tried to have their election first to hold the executive power in their hand. On the other hand, leaders of non-Rabha organization want the election of panchayat in the area not supporting to the poll of RHAC. Difference occurred between the leaders of the contrasting groups and to have their own dominance, they demanded election for their respective need. The parallel presence of the decentralized institution at the same time, suspicion arises about the holding of executive power. Heterogeneity of the region helped the group leader to spread rumor and suspicion between the different groups. Group riot spread in the area is because of the political competition among the different leaders so that they can hold power.

X. CONCLUSION

The paper analyzed the causes of the group riot in the Goalpara district of Assam. The finding of the paper supports the existing theory of the electoral violence. Electoral incentives of the political elites transformed into group riot. They used the common people for their interest. The existence of heterogeneity in the region does not reduce group tension, but instead it increases the group tension in the area. Moreover, multi-level decentralized institution does not reduce group tension and riots, it intensified more. Multi-level decentralized institution in Goalpara district- panchayati raj bodies and autonomous bodies- intensifies more tension between the different group that existed in the region, i.e. Rabha and non-Rabha communities.

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⁷ Ibid, January 28, 2013

⁸ Ibid, February 13, 2013

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