

Information and Communication Technology and Ethnic Riots: Riots in Goalpara District of Assam, India



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Abstract: *The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a major trend in the contemporary world. Mishandling of social networking and social engineering could instigate and spread violence in decentralized regions. Social networking is widely used around the world in the process of election and for mobilizing people for social issues. ICT is also used for garnering support to a political party or to influence/misguide people in different aspects. In developing countries decentralized institutions are created to reduce inter-group conflict and to have efficient governance system. However, elections to the local bodies are accompanied by inter-group riots which are mostly mobilized by using ICT. The individual and elite level incentives attached to cultural identities can be an influence on group polarization, which may ultimately leads to the occurrence of election related riots. This article examines the relation between ICT and spread of ethnic riots. The empirical data with the help of interviews and qualitative tools is drawn from Goalpara district that witnessed inter-group riots on the day of election to the Panchayat Raj bodies in February 2013.*

Keywords: *Decentralization, Electoral incentives, ICT, Riots, Social network.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world ICT is mostly used in every aspect of daily life including in politics, economic activities, social development and governance system. Along with the positive aspects the use of ICT, it also has negative use as well. This platform can be used for negative activities including spread of false news and instigation for social unrest. The social unrest may be violence, riots, spreading hatred by rumors. The ethnic riots are a product of political competition which is an outcome of rational choice of the political elites for their incentives. 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 material gains. Elites use old animosities and differences (primordial attachment) to motivate a group according to their wishes.

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To fulfill their material gain, sometimes they instigate violence by promoting more hatred and spreading rumor about false violence. Modernity changes the meaning of identities by bringing the masses into a larger framework of consciousness, where modern technology and a modern economic system, the printing press plays an important role (Anderson, 2006). Modern technology and social media is not only available to the knowledge and power elite but also to the masses also. According to their understandings, they can form new identities which may suit them in the modern structure of the world with their rational choice intact with it. The knowledge elite may construct narratives that in turn may create new identities, but the process is not one-way. Groups may also have to construct their categories and narratives that resemble with ground realities. Combination of both processes can only create a strong group identity (Varshney, 2002, p. 33).

II. METHODOLOGY

To understand the relationship between use of ICT for electoral incentives and violence this study especially collected data from both primary and secondary sources. The study gathered data from newspapers, social surveys and interviews of elites and group individuals. Data gathered from the field are analyzed and content analysis is considered for reviewing newspaper reports. For secondary sources, I used journal articles, relevant books, memoranda and newspaper cuttings. Micro-level analysis is done based on the field data collected from primary as well as secondary sources. I have selected Goalpara as study area for several reasons. First, the place is diverse and heterogeneous, which faced group riot in February 2013. Second, Goalpara district consists of parallel level of decentralized institutions- Panchayati raj institution and autonomous council- creating more troubles amongst different groups. Third, the group riot that occurred in Goalpara erupted on the day of Panchayat election.

III. RELATION BETWEEN ICT AND GROUP RIOTS

The idea of a connection between political competition and electoral violence is not new. Scholar like Christophe Jaffrelot has also examined the link between electoral competition and riots (Jaffrelot, 1996). But how riots are linked with electoral competition? In an election central problem of individual politicians is how they can ensure that voters will vote for him/her. To make his/her win confirmed, candidates make political alliances with other ethnic parties (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 22).



By any means an individual politician will try to make alliances and compromises with other groups that can help in winning the election. But, when elites see no favorable condition in their plate, even by their community also, they try to divide the groups on ethnic/religious lines. “In this situation, the most effective method used by elites to mobilize the target voters who are at risk of voting for the main rival parties will be to use ethnic wedge issues to increase- albeit in the short term- the salience of ethnic issues that will favor their party” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 23).

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 (Bergren & Bailard, 2017). Facebook, Twitter, and other means of internet media as well as SMS techniques are also used to advocate more violence in the tensed areas (Bardall). 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.

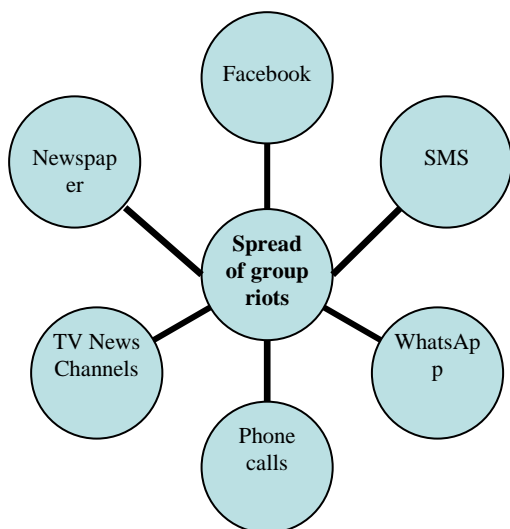


Figure 1: Factors responsible for spread of group riots.

The above figure explains how the use of ICT can spread group riots in different places. The rumors spread by leaders and party workers first instigate riot in a small area, however because of widespread use of communication the riots spread to other parts as well. For personal benefit of the elites, they use ICT to spread more violence in the region. Social networking among the younger generation and forwarding the messages to their friends without validation can spread more violence. Goalpara district also may have experienced similar

kind of process when violence broke out in one region, later spreading to other parts of the district.

IV. 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). 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.

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.¹ 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.² 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.³

¹ The Assam Tribune, January 4, 2013

² The Assam Tribune, January 5, 2013

³ The Assam Tribune, January 6, 2013

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.⁴ 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 2.⁵ 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 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.⁶

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.⁷

After the election major violence took place which spread to different parts of Goalpara between the supporter of RHAC and Panchayat supporters. The news spread that violence is between Rabhas and Muslims and as a result violent took a different turn in places like Gobindapur, Rangagara, Milanpara and other regions. The riot which emerged only because of election to an local government spread to other part in a different way because of improper use of communication technology.

⁴ The Assam Tribune, January 12, 2013

⁵ The Assam Tribune, January 19, 2013

⁶ Ibid, January 28, 2013

⁷ Ibid, February 13, 2013

V. RESULT AND FINDINGS

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.

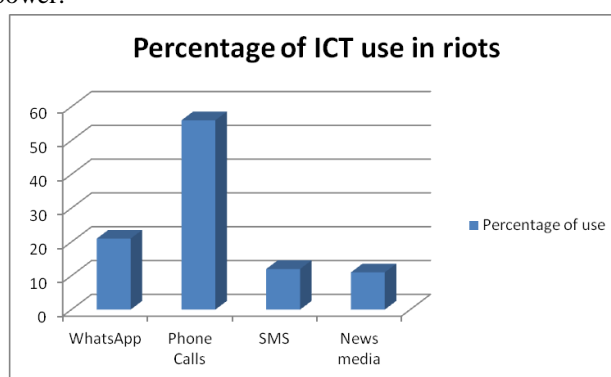


Figure 2: Percentage of ICT use in Goalpara riot

The above figure is based on the interview taken in the riot affected areas. According to the data 21 percentage of rumor has spread from WhatsApp, maximum from phone calls which is 56 percentages. Other contributing factors in spread of violence are SMS and news media reporting which consists of 12 and 11 percentages. Along with these contributing factors Facebook also emerged as communication technology to spread rumor and violence.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The use of ICT has very much relevance in the contemporary world as without use of communication technology, development of the regions is impossible. However, the technologies are used in negative ways for personal political benefit of individuals and elites. The violence that erupted in the Goalpara is widely circulated by means of social and electronic media which has instigated more violence. The conflict of interest between the autonomous council and Panchayat has become widespread because of mobile technology. It is possible that mobile technology has made it easy for the groups of Assam to develop a new form of mobilization process to garner more support for the cause of organizations.

The paper examined the causes of the group riot in the Goalpara district of Assam with the help of interviews and fieldwork.

The finding of the paper supports the existing theory of the electoral violence and use of communication technology for spreading rumors for more 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 which is more intensified by use of modern technology to mobilize the groups for further violence. People use Facebook, phone calls, SMS, WhatsApp and other social media to spread rumor of violence which motivated spread of more violence in the region.

Therefore, the government should have regulations to stop miscommunication by use of communication technology which spread violence. A fair initiative should also be taken to provide awareness and education about the proper use of communication technology. The electronic and printed media should also act ethically not supporting any group and provide free and fair news. This study contributes to the literatures which encompasses effect of the communication technology towards social mobilization and engineering. The qualitative and quantitative findings to research indicate how ICT development could change structural changes in the conflict. More and in-depth research should be carried out to understand the impact of mobile phones and other communication technology on conflict and other collective riots.

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