Chapter 6

Collective Memory of Violence of Urban Middle-Class

1. Collective Memory of Violence

1-1. Theoretical Background

It has been argued that history is essential in the formation of collective identity (a nation, ethnic group or community). According to Anderson, just as people need their own biographies, so nations require histories in order to 'forget' past divisions within their communities and validate continuities (Anderson 1991: 204-5). In particular, narratives on violence such as war, riot and massacre constitute an important part of the development of national, ethnic or communal identities. In his book on the violence that occurred at the time of Indian partition, Gyanendra Pandey states, "in the history of any society, narratives of particular experiences of violence go towards making the 'community'—and the subject of history" (Pandey 2001: 4). In many parts of the world, the interpretation of recent wars is becoming a topic of serious debate among different sections of the populace, since it is an important part in the remaking of their nationalism. It can be said that, by narrating the experience of particular violence, people develop their 'common memory' of who 'we' and the 'other' are. In the narratives, they stress the difficulties experienced and the cruelties the enemy perpetrated. In this process, the definition of the enemy—the 'other'—emerges, at the same time, the category 'us' is constructed. Also, it is often the case that the 'we' are positioned as the victims and the 'other' as the attackers. Thus, a narrative of particular violence becomes an important part of nationalism.
This chapter deals with the interpretation of ethnicity and violence in the narratives of the urban-middle class in Assam. In the case of the urban-middle class, news of the violence spread through newspaper reports. Thus, in the analysis, I will treat the perception of the urban middle-class as 'audience frame' in relation to the 'media frame' of the newspaper. As introduced in chapter 5, here we take the constructivist approach in analysing the newspaper and its effect. This implies that the interpretation of the urban-middle class is not passive but dynamic in character: that they actively classify, organise and interpret the information they attain from newspaper reports.

There are two points that should be kept in mind. First, as argued in Chapter 5, the newspaper circulation in India varied among linguistic regions, and thus, the circulation of information was divided among the Assamese and the Bengalis in the case of the anti-foreigners movement. Hence we should distinguish between the Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking group when we consider the audience frames of the urban-middle class in Assam.

Another thing is that apart from comparing the media frame and the audience frame, the analysis also looks at the difference in the time-frame between the two. While the newspaper texts analysed were written in the 1980s, the interviews were conducted in 2002, which is almost 20 years after the incidents. Thus, in analysing the narratives on violence, we should take into consideration the theory on 'memory'.

To gain some clarity on the matter it would be useful to take a look at the arguments on collective memory advanced by Halbwachs. According to this
scholar, there are two types of memory: biographical memory and historical memory. The former is memory of events that we have personally experienced in the past, and the latter is memorised only through written records and other types of records, such as documents and photography. Halbwachs calls the latter 'collective memory' or 'social memory'. In collective memory, the person does not directly participate in the events, and the past is stored and interpreted by social institutions.

In the case of the urban-middle class' memory of the violence that occurred during the anti-foreigners movement, it is rather a collective memory of each linguistic group. During the movement, most people did not experience the violence themselves, but came to know about it through newspaper reports. Thus, compared to the memories of people directly involved in the incidents, such as those of the Tiwas and the Muslims in the Nellie area to be discussed in the next chapter, it is more a collective memory than biographical memory.

However, it should be noted that in the case of the urban-middle class' memory of the violence, it is difficult to say that it is purely a historical and collective memory. In the case of the violence, especially that which occurred during the 1983 election, there were numerous incidents throughout Assam. Thus, even though the subjects in the study did not experience the violence itself, it was often the case that a family member, close relative or friend got involved in one or the other of the incidents. In short, this led them to feel they were, in a way, 'involved' in the disturbed situation of the time. As such, although most of the time they received information about each violent incident through newspapers, this has a character of biographical memory.
The ambiguity in the distinction between biographical and historical memory is the same in the case of the attackers and the victims of the Nellie incident. For those who experienced the violence directly, it is their individual and biographical memory. However, when a certain set of stories about the incident gained popularity and when they were communicated to members of the group who were not directly involved in it, we can see the establishment of a collective memory. Such phenomenon is presently visible in the case of the Nellie incident. However, for analytical purposes it is useful to keep the distinction between collective memory and biographical memory in mind, since the memory which is mediated by newspapers and that which is directly experienced is different not only in terms of the impact but also the image generated and presented in the mind.

Another important argument made by Halbwachs is that the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present. It is called the ‘presentist approach’, and Halbwachs was the first sociologist who stressed this point. In other words, our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past. Although a too pronounced presentism is modified by works of later scholars, this approach remains the basic starting point in analysing memory.

Viewed thus, the present interviews on violence will reveal more about the present state of things than of the past. Still, the comparison of media frame and audience frame is not totally invalid if we focus on the way people utilise the newspaper resources in their memories. As the analysis below will reveal, while people sometimes forget past incidents, on other occasions they
remember them clearly. The examination of the difference will help us see the political, economic and social change that is taking place among the urban-middle class in different places in Assam, and in this way shed light on the effect of the anti-foreigners movement.

1.2. Location and Method of the Research: Guwahati and Silchar

Here, I would like to highlight the basic character of the subject of this investigation, the urban-middle class in Assam, by using the census statistics of 1971 (the census was not taken in Assam in 1981 due to the non-cooperation movement by the AASU and the AAGSP). An important point to be noted is that the percentage of urban middle-class is not so high in Assam. Even if we take a look at the urban population in Assam, it was only 8.87 percent of the total population of Assam as per the 1971 census. This was the third lowest percentage among 21 states and union territories in India, where the percentage of urban population is 19.91 percent. (Census of India, 1971)

In the 1971 census, there were five major towns in the state that had a population of more than 50,000 people. They were: Guwahati (123,783), Dibrugarh (80,348), Nowgong (56,537), Tinsukia (54,911), and Silchar (52,596) (numbers in the brackets are the population of each town in 1971). Apart from these, there are two other important towns, Jorhat (30,247) and Sibsagar (27,436), which was the capital of the Ahom kingdom in pre-colonial period.

Among these towns, all except Silchar are situated in the Brahmaputra valley, which constitutes a major part of the present state of Assam. Silchar is
situated in the Barak valley, on the southern part of Assam towards Bangladesh. The two valleys are divided by the North Cachar Hills. The majority of the inhabitants of Barak valley are Bengali-speaking, and as shown in Chapter 3 and 4, they had quite a different attitude towards the anti-foreigners movement. As the major groups in urban Assam are the Assamese and the Bengalis, this chapter will focus primarily on the difference between the two valleys.

The salient feature of the urban population is the high literacy rate and large presence of people engaged in the tertiary sector. The literacy rate in the urban area was 58.29 percent, while that of the rural area was 25.24 percent. On the whole, the average literacy rate in Assam was 28.15 percent. Moreover, people who were engaged in the tertiary sector made up more than 60 percent of the population in urban areas, which is very different from the population in the rural area where most of the people were engaged in the primary or agricultural sector.

Another important feature of the urban middle class was the poor presence of tribes. At the time of the 1971 census, there were 1,606,648 scheduled tribes in Assam, and among them, only 14,255 were in urban areas. The vast majority, 1,592,393 persons, or more than 99 percent, were in rural areas. These figures prove that tribes were basically a rural-based population.

Before I discuss the collective memory of different linguistic and religious groups, I would like to briefly highlight the difference between the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys. The Brahmaputra Valley consists of seven districts, Goalpara, Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur,
whereas the Barak Valley had only one district, Cachar in 1981. As indicated above, though the region (Barak valley) is an integral part of the state of Assam, the character of the inhabitants differed considerably.

In the Brahmaputra Valley, where the anti-foreigners movement was very active throughout the area, the majority of the inhabitants are Assamese speakers (71 percent in 1971 census). In the Barak Valley, the majority of the inhabitants are Bengali-speakers (77.76 percent in 1971 census) and they were either indifferent or hostile to the movement. Thus, these two linguistic groups were not only divided geographically, their attitude towards the movement was also sharply different. In terms of religion, however, the difference was not so apparent as the Muslims in Assam were scattered throughout the state. Another significant point is that the indigenous Assamese Muslims supported the movement enthusiastically in the first phase of the movement. However, after the 1983 Assembly election and the associated violence, many of them withdrew their support to the movement.

As the languages spoken in the two valleys are different, the newspapers read in these areas are not the same. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the Assamese papers such as *Dainik Asom* and *Janambhumi*, and *The Assam Tribune*, the English language paper published from Guwahati, are widely read. In case of the Barak Valley, people generally read Calcutta-based papers such as the *Statesman, Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Anand Bazar Patrika*, as well as some of the regional papers like *Sonar Cachar* and *Pranta Jyoti* published from Silchar and Karimganj.

In this investigation of people's memory, I interviewed ten individuals in
each town. Because of practical reasons, sampling was not taken and through the help of local people I chose subjects who were mainly teachers and journalists at the time of the movement. The reason for choosing journalists and teachers as my subjects is that they are the main intellectuals of the town, and also because they served as cultural mediators. The personal characteristics of the interviewees such as age, occupation, mother tongue and religion are shown in Table 11. and 12.

Table 11. Social and Occupational Characters of the Interviewees in Silchar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Occupation/Designation</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Town</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Lecturer, ABP correspondence</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Journalist (Editor)</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teaching (Lecturer)</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Karimganj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Teaching (Lecturer)</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
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<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Karimganj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
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<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Journalist (Editor)</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching (Lecturer)</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Karimganj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12. Social and Occupational Characters of the Interviewees in Silchar
Guwahati

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Occupation/Designation</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Journalist (Editor)</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Journalist (Editor)</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
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<td>Professor</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Government Employee</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teaching (Lecturer)</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Jorhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teaching (Lecturer)</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Consultant (engineering)</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Nagaon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main part of the schedule includes questions relating to (1) people's opinion about the newspaper reporting, (2) people's opinion on the movement and violent incidents and (3) people's present opinion on the issue of immigration. Besides these main questions, the schedule includes the newspaper subscribed to, and personal information such as age, occupation and mother tongue. A copy of the schedule is shown in Appendix I.

As one of the aims of this study is to focus on people's narratives of the violence, I resorted to 'in-depth' interviews in order to gain a sharper insight into this issue. Therefore the questions posed and its order was not fixed but was kept flexible. The method adopted may be described as semi-scheduled interview, in which when the need arose I could ask questions that were not included in the list of questions prepared before hand. In other words, I could adapt the questions in the schedule according to the situation. All the
interviews were conducted in English.

2. Definition of Foreigners: Difference between the Framing of Incidents

The most prominent difference between the valleys emerged in the definition of the term ‘foreigners’. In the Brahmaputra Valley, to the question “who constituted the ‘foreigners’”, most people answered that people who came from East Pakistan or Bangladesh after 1951/1971 are foreigners regardless of their religion. However, in the Barak Valley, people tended to define the Bengali Hindus as refugees, and the Bengali Muslims as foreigners. Another issue which reveal a sharp divide between the people of the Brahmaputra and those of the Barak valley is that of the ‘cut-off’ year for the detection and deportation of ‘foreigners’.

Partition of India was an original scene. Partition was done by Nehru, Jinnah, or maybe by some political parties, but general people were not responsible for that. Why they had to come to Assam, Bengal or Tripura...? They were living happily for centuries. We must go very deep into the problem... Now you see, when we talk about India ... this is only an artificial boundary. Is it not? When India was partitioned, there was large-scale communal violence resulting into death of millions. And more millions became homeless. This is humanitarian thing... So question of ‘71 or ‘51 is absurd. There cannot be any cut-off year like that.16

Another gentleman, Mr. B also emphasized that Bengali Hindus from

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16 Interview with Mr. A, 53 years-old, ex-lecturer in Silchar, 23rd April 2002.
Bangladesh came here for shelter, and they should be accepted all over India. The reason for this sympathetic attitude toward Bengali Hindus can be attributed to the fact that most of the respondents in Silchar were Bengali Hindus who had their origin in Mymensingh or Sylhet district in present-day Bangladesh. Incidentally, nine out of the ten persons interviewed were Hindus, and all of them had their origin in East Bengal, five of who had migrated to Assam (Silchar) around partition. Even the earliest migrants in Silchar came to settle there only in the middle of the 19th century.

As noted in Chapter 2 and 3, the present day middle-class Bengalis were originally brought to Assam as officers in the colonial administration from the mid-19th century to early 20th century after the colonisation of the province by the British. During this period, the educated Bengalis mainly from Sylhet migrated to neighbouring Cachar in Assam. Moreover, at the time of the partition, a series of communal riots broke out in Bengal (the most prominent ones took place in Calcutta and Noakhali), and triggered vast migration of people from the area. From East Bengal region, many Hindus crossed the border in order to get out of danger. Also, there were some government officials who chose to continue their service in India came over to Assam. Still, many of those from Sylhet, which was a part of Assam before partition, chose to shift to Cachar, where the Bengali Hindus constituted a majority and at the same time geographically close to their original place. Thus, most of the Bengali Hindus who had migrated into Assam after the partition view themselves as refugees, or at least have relatives or close

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17 Interview with Mr. B, 63 year old, ex-lecturer in Silchar, 25th April 2002.
friends who claim this status.

Compared to the people in Cachar, interviewees in Guwahati do not share this sentiment. Thus, when asked "what kind of people have the right to live in Assam?" many of them simply answered "Indian citizens" or "those who identify themselves as Assamese". None of them referred to the refugees from Bangladesh or erstwhile East Pakistan. One respondent from Guwahati went so far as to say that "the partition is a historical fact", therefore the population displaced by the event belong to a different category, but the same is not applicable to those who enter the country after 1971. The latter cannot be legitimated on the basis of humanism.

All Indian citizens... This is basically not [a question] of humanity, this is [a question] of law, international law. I will not deny any Bengali or Muslim coming to live in Assam if they are Indian citizens, or if they get [a] visa and passport... In case of Bangladeshi, it is absolutely illegal, because it is a different country... Partition of India is a historical fact.18

Therefore, to the people in the Brahmaputra valley, whoever came to Assam after the proposed cut-off date (either 1951 or 1971) are 'foreigners' (this includes their descendants), while to the people in the Barak valley, the Hindu settlers are regarded as 'refugees' not as 'foreigners'. The partition riots in East Bengal and the oppression of the Hindus in the Islamic state of East Pakistan/Bangladesh are the basis for their definition; hence to most of

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18 Interview with Mr. C, 66 years old, consulting engineer in Guwahati, 6th May 2002
them, these 'Bengali Hindus' are not the 'other', but a part of them.

It is this sentiment, associated with the historical context of partition and the ensuing violence and oppression of Hindus in the Muslim-dominated nation-state, which led to the vast exodus of refugees into India that partly explains the framing of the issue in Bengali newspapers. As shown in the analysis of the newspaper reports, the Bengali press not only described the Hindu refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh as Indian nationals but also viewed the violence during the movement against them as an oppression of the minority (Bengalis) by the majority community (Assamese).

Looking at the definition of the terms 'foreigners' and 'refugees', we can see that in this sense, the frame of the Bengali media is shared by the Bengalis in Barak valley. As shown in chapter 5, the Bengali media indicated that the people who suffered oppression in Assam were mainly the Bengali-speaking minorities. The frame is mainly consistent with that of the Bengali people in the Barak valley.

Similarly, the frame of the Assamese media was consistent with that of the Assamese people in the Brahmaputra valley. In Assamese newspapers, the people who entered Assam after 1951/1971 were classified as 'Bangladeshi' or 'foreigners', and described as a threat to Assam. Thus, the movement leaders' effort to make the movement constitutionally legitimate by defining the target of the movement as 'foreigners' or 'Bangladeshi' was largely successful and had wide acceptance among the Assamese urban middle-class.
3. Narratives on Violence

As noted earlier, there were numerous violent incidents during the anti-foreigners movement, and people came to know about the incidents largely through newspaper reports. Broadly, violent incidents can be classified into three types: ① attacks on the peaceful picketers and movement leaders by the army and the police, ② attacks on the local people by the 'foreigners' and ③ attacks on linguistic or religious 'minorities' by regional 'fanatics'. The first and the second were often reported on and referred to by the movement leaders and newspapers in Assam, while the third was reported on largely by newspapers published from West Bengal and the opponents of the movement.

To gain a sharper view of the matter, below, I will highlight the collective memory of select violent incidents of three ethnic groups – Bengalis in the Barak Valley, Assamese Muslims, and mainstream Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley.

3.1. Bengalis in the Barak Valley: Murders of Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra

The Bengalis living in the Barak Valley showed the most distinctive character in their memory of the violent incidents. Five out of the eleven persons interviewed declared that they vividly remember the deaths of Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra that took place during the movement. Considering that there were numerous violent incidents, and more than 10,000 people had died during the movement, it is remarkable that nearly half of the interviewees stated that they remember those two incidents apart
Both of them, Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra, were Bengalis, who resided in the Brahmaputra Valley at the time of the incident, and died during the disturbance caused by the movement. Anjan Chakraborty was a student of Gauhati Medical College, and was originally from the Barak Valley. He died in the early period of the movement, when a quarrel broke out amongst the students of a hostel of Gauhati Medical College in which he was studying.19

As for Robi Mitra, he was a Bengali engineer who was working at the Oil India Limited Company in Duliajan in Upper Assam. We have seen in Chapter 5 the details of the reporting of the incident in which he was killed, but I will briefly repeat the sequence of the incident here again. During the oil blockade call by students and picketers, there was a police firing on the protesters. In the mob violence that ensued, Robi Mitra lost his life. The incident was widely reported by the newspapers, and in particular the manner of his death was emphasised by those from Kolkata. One of my respondents recalled the incident as follows.

In this part of the valley there was no violent incident as such. And there was no [one]... because the AASU movement did not have much impact in this part of the valley. So there was no question of violent incidents. But at that time when the movement was going on there, one doctor who was ... either from Guwahati or Dibrugarh Medical College, Anjan Chakraborty, still I remember, he was murdered. Anjan Chakrabarty was

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19 Interview with ex-student leader of Gauhati Medical College in Guwahati (43 years old, male), 6th May 2002.
murdered in his hostel room. ... There was silent procession... And another engineer in Duliajan or Dibrugarh, another Bengali person was murdered. These were widely reported or widely known phenomenon.20

Another respondent emphasised the murder of Bengalis in the Brahmaputra valley, and he narrated the death of two people in that context.

The prominent one, you mean... that is Anjan Chakrabarty. Dr. Anjan Chakrabarty who was killed in Guwahati Medical College. And one Dr. Robi Mitra, a scientist, he was also killed.... And after that also a very prominent citizen of Guwahati, Kalipot Sen. He was actually a mouthpiece of the Bengali community in the Brahmaputra valley. He is (sic) the leader of the Bengali community there. He was also killed.21

The last incident mentioned above, the murder of Kalipot Sen, occurred after the movement had subsided. But to the respondent Sen was a victim of the series of violence that happened during the movement.

The murders of Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra are remembered as symbols of Assamese violence in which innocent Bengalis were brutally murdered by the ‘chauvinistic’ and ‘fanatic’ movement leaders and their supporters in the Brahmaputra Valley. Although there were some people who recalled the large-scale killing such as Nellie, Gohpur or Mangaldoi, the description of the incidents are more graphically sketched in the case of the ‘murder’ of the two Bengali men. Rather than the mass-killing that took place

20 Interview with Mr. D, 47 years old, lecturer in Silchar, 22nd April 2002.
21 Interview with Mr. E, 55 years old, journalist in Silchar, 27th April 2002.
during the election period, the death of these two individuals are much more vividly remembered by the Bengalis in Barak valley as the murder of 'one of us'. This implies that the Bengalis of the Barak valley identify themselves more with the Bengalis in West Bengal than with the Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley.

It should be noted here that the victims of the two incidents were incidentally [Bengali] Hindus. In the Barak valley, too, the majority of the middle-class were Hindus. In my research there was only one Muslim among the ten persons interviewed. He also stated that the deaths of Anjan Chakrabarty and Robi Mitra were the most impressive incidents during the anti-foreigners movement.

Thus, the frame of the incidents is largely the same as that of the media frame of Bengali newspapers. On this issue, there is little doubt that the newspapers from Kolkata played an important role in framing the incident in the people's mind. As stated in Chapter 5, the Bengali media highlighted the point that 'a Bengali' was killed in the disturbance in Assam. On this point, the Bengali media frame and the audience frame of the Bengalis in Barak valley were identical.

3.2. Narrative by an Assamese Muslim: the Nellie Incident

Before I discuss the collective memory of the Assamese in Guwahati, I would like to introduce one respondent's narrative which drew my attention to the relation between the Nellie incident and the Assamese Muslims. He was the only Assamese Muslim whom I could interview, therefore it is not right to treat his narrative as representative of the community. However, his
narrative can be viewed as supporting evidence of the change in attitude of the Assamese Muslims at that time. Thus I decided to introduce his narrative with relatively longer space compared to other respondents.

The Assamese Muslims are small in number and are scattered throughout Assam. Generally speaking, the Assamese Muslims, who are the descendants of the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley since pre-colonial times, are distinguished from the immigrant Bengali Muslims or so-called neo-Assamese Muslims, and in the beginning many of them participated in the movement. Mr. F, the lone Assamese Muslim interviewed, admits that all his family supported the movement, and he himself was very sympathetic to its cause.

In the interview, Mr. F told me that he remembered the Nellie incident well among the violent incidents that occurred during the movement, and he connected it to the change in his attitude toward the movement.

[T]his agitation at the earliest was peaceful. But afterwards it took a violent turn. The worst massacre was in Nellie, Nagaon districts where hundreds of male, female and even small children [were killed]... And all these photos were published in the papers of Calcutta, Telegraph. But at that time, no Assamese paper, though paper published from Assam, had the true journalist[m] to publish the news... of such massacre. It was after Telegraph that they have to admit.22

It should be noted here that Mr. F, as well as many other Assamese

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22 Interview with Mr. F, 79 years old, lecturer in Guwahati, 1st May 2002.
Muslims, view himself as a "true and genuine" Assamese. When he was asked which newspaper he read at the time, he answered, "Dainik Asam" and "Jananbhumi". As a clarification, he added, "I am an Assamese". This implies that he accepted the media frame of the Assamese media, but later on developed a sense of difference from them, and started accepting the frame of the Bengali media.

In order to understand the reason why he stopped accepting the media frame of the Assamese papers and opted for the Bengali media, it would be prudent to take a close look at the political process during the period. Initially, the Assamese Muslims supported the AASU leaders' demands of detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners. In 1983, when the election took place, the student leaders demanded the revision of the electoral rolls. The demand was not fulfilled by the government, and the student leaders called for a boycott of the election. At this stage, the violence took place between the groups of people who supported or opposed the boycott. As the immigrant Muslims were the main group who decided to cast their votes in the election, they became the target of the violence.

Following the violent incidents and the forced election, some prominent Assamese Muslim student leaders left the AASU. The Assamese Muslim student leaders were suspicious about the involvement of the RSS/BJP elements in the violence that occurred in the run up to the election. (Hussain 1993: 127). Therefore, the election was the turning point for many Assamese Muslims in terms of their attitude toward the movement, and the Nellie

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23 Interview with Mr. Nekibur Zaman, ex-student leader of the AASU.
massacre is remembered as a proof of the anti-Muslim character of the movement.

Thus, it can be said that the Assamese Muslims who recognised themselves as part of the Assamese nationality, and usually accepted the Assamese media frames, rejected it following the Nellie incident. Mr. F clearly commented on this point.

At the initial stages, the newspapers did their job correctly. But after the Nellie massacre, the Muslims of Assam found a partisan outlook in most of the Assamese newspapers... It was Calcutta Telegraph [which] has spoke[n] the Nellie massacre. And also many Muslim villagers were harassed. This was not reported. At that time, many Muslims contributed articles in the Assamese papers on AASU movement, supporting the AASU movement. I was one of those also. My wife also contributed.24

Here, we can see the case of an individual falling in with another media frame following the change in the situation. Mr. F, who states that he usually read the Assamese papers, but later became suspicious of it and came to regard the Bengali media as more credible in reporting the Nellie incident.

3-3. Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley
Among the Assamese-speaking people in the Brahmaputra Valley, who constitute the largest group in Assam and the main supporters of the movement, there is no prominent incident that they commonly remember.

24 Interview with Mr. F, 79 years old, lecturer in Guwahati, 1st May 2002.
When they are asked which violent incident they remember well, many people said, "there were so many incidents, so I can not recollect the details of each incident." And when I referred to the Nellie incident, they said they remember it and such incidents should not take place again, but other than that they do not say much about it. Their attitude suggests that they wanted to forget the violence. For example, Ms. G told me:

So many so many incidents happened at that time. So many. We were very much disturbed. The humanity was disturbed. ... In Gohpur, a big village was burnt. And in Nalbari also. I forget actually the name of the village. Hindu village also, Muslim village also. And the Nellie was the very big [incident].

Here, the Nellie incident was simply narrated as one of the incidents that occurred at the time. She states "there were so many incidents" and tried to recall the name, but she "has forgotten" them.

It was not the common memory of a particular violence, but their interpretation of the Nellie incident among certain people that attracted my attention. Two out of the ten interviewees told me that men from Muslim immigrant villages where the massacre took place had gone out to attack other villages. Mr. H informed me that from those villages, men went out to attack local villages across the Brahmaputra River. And that is the reason why most of the victims were women, children and the elderly.

Another respondent, Mr. I, narrated the incident as follows:

25 Interview with Ms. G, 46 years old, Teacher and writer in Guwahati, 29th April 2002.
26 Interview with Mr. H, 66 years old, consulting engineer in Guwahati, 6th May 2002.
If you look at the photos [of the bodies], the bodies are only of young children and women. Where are the menfolk? The menfolk [had] gone across the Brahmaputra in arms to attack the Assamese villages. You do not see men in the photographs. You see only babies and women. Because the men had gone [out] to attack the Assamese village.27

In their mind, the Nellie massacre stood out as a different type of violence, the second type of violence which I classified in the beginning of this section, while mostly people believe it to be the third type of incident.

Moreover, it should also be noted that with regards to the Nellie incident, some people are very critical of the national and Calcutta media. Two respondents told me there were many violent incidents, but only those incidents in which the immigrants were the victims were reported by the Calcutta and the national media. Mr. I, who told me about the Nellie incident narrated:

But Nellie was not the first of the massacre. In fact, it was because of the negative attitude of the national press that Nellie was highlighted. There had been equally tragic [incidents], even, in which indigenous and local people were killed. But they never found place in the national newspapers. The projection was that, again as I said, Nellie was one of the most tragic incidents in this movement. But ... you must not suppress certain facts and highlights others. If you look at the national newspapers ... the attack on Gohpur which was on the opposite side of the Brahmaputra was not highlighted. 28

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27 Interview with Mr. I, 55 years old, lecturer in Guwahati, 2nd May 2002.
28 Interview with Mr. I, 55 years old, lecturer in Guwahati, 2nd May 2002.
These interpretations and criticisms of the national media are particularly evident in the statements of intellectuals, a category of people who actively supported the movement. As analysed in chapter 5, the pan-Indian press particularly highlighted the Nellie incident. For some section of the Assamese people, to focus on only the Nellie incident, where the victims were Bengali Muslims, seemed problematic since there were many other incidents in which the indigenous people were victims as well.

There are several implications from the Assamese middle class' narratives on violence. First, the narrative that "there were so many incidents, so I do not remember them well" implies two things. The first is that their perspective on the violence that erupted during the 1983 election period is in accordance with the Assamese media frame which reported the Nellie incident as 'one of group clashes' that occurred everywhere in Assam. The second is, by saying that they have forgotten the incidents, they avoid narrating the details of the incidents. This is striking when we consider the fact that the Bengalis in Barak valley or the Assamese Muslims eloquently narrated the violence. The 'forgetting' of the violence is particularly evident in the case of the Assamese narratives.

Another interesting point to be noted here is the interpretation of the Nellie incident. It is clear that the respondents had read the reports of the pan-Indian media on the Nellie incident. However, rather than accepting the frames, they re-interpreted the reports and were critical of the view expressed by the pan-Indian media. This came out in two ways. The first one was to stress the fact that the men from the Nellie area were out to attack the
Assamese. Therefore, in their memory, what Nellie signifies is not the massacre of the immigrant Muslims by the tribes and the local Assamese, but rather the massacre of innocent Assamese by the immigrants from the Nellie area.

The second is reflected in the criticism leveled at the pan-Indian media by the Assamese people for selectively highlighting the Nellie incident only and ignored other incidents that took place during the period. By pointing out the Gohpur incident, where Assamese were killed by the tribes, they claim that the pan-Indian media was not neutral in reporting the incidents.

It should be noted here that if we carefully read the reports by the pan-Indian media, the other incidents in Gohpur or Mangaldoi were also reported. Hence it is not fair to say that pan-Indian media 'only' highlighted the Nellie incident. However, it is also true that Nellie was most highlighted incident due to a visit by Indira Gandhi and detailed reports by the pan-Indian media. In Chapter 5, it was revealed that the highlight of the Nellie incident is both the result of the tacit tactics by the political parties and the reports by the pan-Indian media.

What should be focused here is not whether the Assamese people’s criticism on the pan-Indian media was to the point or not, but their attitude towards the pan-Indian media. We have found that although the Assamese people read reports by the pan-Indian media on the Nellie incident, they do not accept the frames, and rather try to establish a different frame.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of collective memories of violence of Bengalis, Assamese
Muslims and Assamese and their comparison with media frames reveals several interesting points. First, the memory of the Bengalis in the Barak valley of the murders of Anjan Chakraborty and Robi Mitra basically conforms to the Bengali media frame. Thus we can say that the role of the Calcutta-based media in shaping the memory of Bengalis in the Barak valley was very significant. As noted in Chapter 5, the West Bengal government played an important role by emphasising the insecurity of the Bengalis with regard to the death of Robi Mitra. The comment was reported widely by the Bengali media, and thereby turned the anti-foreigners movement into the Assamese and Bengali confrontation. Being part of Assam, the Bengalis in the Barak valley have felt the danger more vividly than those in West Bengal.

On the other hand, the Assamese Muslims remembered 'Nellie' as an incident in which the Muslims were the victim. In relation to this incident, they went along with the views of Bengali Muslims, though usually they accepted those of the Assamese media. This shows the ambivalent status of the Assamese Muslims at the time. While they basically saw themselves as Assamese and supported the movement in the initial phase, a shift came following the 1983 election and the associated violence, during which the 'enemy' was turned into 'Muslims' rather than 'foreigners'.

As noted earlier, the 'foreigners' or 'Bangladeshis' were the main target of the movement, and officially this did not change until the end of the movement. However, the violence during the 1983 election period was very much against the Muslims and the involvement of the RSS was suspected. This was not formally professed by the movement leaders, but the fact that it was primarily Muslims who suffered suggests that there was a change of
target at this time. Thus, it was at this point that the Assamese Muslims stopped supporting the movement. The memory of the Nellie incident graphically illustrates the political shift among the Assamese Muslims during this period.

In the case of the Assamese, the 'forgetting' of violence in 1983 is prominent compared to the Bengali Hindus' or Assamese Muslims' eloquence on the violent incidents. Here, it is beyond the issue of which frame they accepted or did not accept. By saying that they do not remember the incidents in detail because there were so many incidents, they try to avoid saying much about the violence in 1983.

It can be said that the influence of pan-Indian media in the reporting of 1983 violence was very strong. During the interviews, many people mentioned the article on the Nellie massacre in *India Today*. However, it does not mean that people who read the report accepted the frame. In the case of the Nellie massacre, Assamese people re-interpreted the incident and criticised the pan-Indian media. By saying that they 'forget' the incidents, they refuse to tell who the victims were. Or some people set a counter-interpretation of the incident and try to say that there were Assamese victims also.

The analysis of the collective memories of the Bengalis in Barak Valley, the Assamese Muslims, and the Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley reveals that according to the groups, people have different kinds of collective memories of violence. Some groups do remember and narrate the incidents in which 'one of them' became the victims. Other groups refuse to admit that they became the offenders in the mass killing, and try to forget. In case of the
urban-middle class, the memory is generally shaped by the newspaper reports. The next chapter deals with the memories of the victims and supposed offenders in the Nellie incident, subjects who had a first hand experience of the violence.