Chapter 7
Memories of the Massacre:
Alternative 'Self’ and Re-demarcating Boundaries by Tribes and Migrant Peasants

1. Memory and Violence
In this chapter, I focus on the relationship between minority groups' collective identities and memory of violence. Compared to the established nations that have already developed their official national history, minority groups (so-called ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or tribes, etc.) in sovereign states have to choose whether or not to articulate their collective identities. Although recently there has been increasing evidence of minority groups becoming politically aware and engaging in organised movements, there are still groups that do not (or cannot) choose to claim their rights as a specific group, and thus assimilate into the dominant nation. When a minority group chooses to distinguish itself from the dominant nation and tries to establish its own identity, it needs to narrate its own history and define itself as a subject. On the other hand, if its members choose to assimilate, they do not need their own version of history. In the 1983 Nellie massacre, the group generally recognised as the attacker was active in developing its own version of the violence, while the group seen as victim was not. In this massacre, the interrelationships of the groups were very complex. This is because both the attackers, the Tiwas, a plains tribe in Assam, and the victims, primarily comprising Bengali Muslim immigrants from the East Bengal region (present-day Bangladesh) were subordinate
groups in Assamese society economically, politically and socially. Here, we can see the way in which minorities establish their own version of narratives against the master narrative of the dominant group, and the way in which the minority group distance themselves from the latter.

In this chapter, I compare the narratives of the Tiwas (attackers), the Bengali Muslim immigrants (victims) and the movement leaders (a dominant group of Hindu Assamese) which I collected in my research trip to the Nellie area in November 2001 and February 2002. My central argument is that each group has their own interpretation of the cause of the incident, and in the process of recalling the past, they select 'facts' from their memories. By looking at the narration of the violence, the power relation between the groups becomes clear. At the same time, through the experience of violence, power relations are reconstructed and the boundaries between the communities are redefined. By examining the narratives of the groups, I will argue that the decision taken by the minority groups—whether to establish their own history or not—is deeply related to their political choice available to them – demand for autonomy or forced to assimilate into the dominant community.

2. Historical Background of Tribes and Immigrants in the Nellie Area

2-1. Tiwa Tribes and Bengali Muslim Migrants in Historical Documents

Before I present my research findings on the Nellie massacre, I would like to briefly outline the social and economic background of the Tiwas and the Muslims migrants in order to place things in their proper perspective. As introduced in Chapter 5, the land deprivation of the Tiwas by the Muslim
migrants is recognised as the main cause of the massacre. I do not intend here to examine the cause, but I would like to briefly highlight the colonial accounts of the settlement of the Tiwas and the migration of Muslims during this period. By doing so, we can understand the historical context in which the incident took place in that region.

The earliest record on the Tiwas and Bengali Muslim migrants can be found in the District Gazetteers and Census of India written and compiled by British colonial officers. Though these are often biased and written for the specific purpose of facilitating the administration of the colonised areas in India, they also provide important information on the life and status of people in the colonial time. Let us first examine the colonial account of the Tiwas which appeared in the District Gazetteers.

When the District Gazetteer was compiled in 1905, the Nellie area was included in Nowgong District. It was situated in the central part of Assam, and was far larger than the present district of Nagaon. Other than the Nagaon district, the colonial Nowgong district included the present districts of Morigaon and Karbi Anglong. Presently, the Nellie area is under the jurisdiction of Morigaon district, which was a subdivision of the Nowgong district in 1983.

In Assam District Gazetteers Volume VI, Nowgong, the Lalungs, the older name for the Tiwas, are described as follows.

The Lalungs are a member of the Bodo family and their language forms a link between

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29 'Nowgong' is the Anglicised spelling of the Assamese term 'Nagaon', which originally means 'new village' in Assamese. From the late 1980s, the government try to change the spelling of the towns closer to the original Assamese.
Bodo or Plains and Dimasa or Hills Kachari. Their name is said to be derived from *lal* (saliva), as, according to the tribal legends, they sprang from the saliva of a local god. The bulk of the tribe are to be found in the *chapar* north of the Kalang, the Raha tahsil, and the mauzas near the junction of the Kapili and the Kalang, but their numbers were terribly diminished between 1891 and 1901. Kala azar was especially prevalent amongst them, and in the short period of ten years the Lalungs declined in numbers from 46,658 to 28,985, a loss of life which is positively painful to contemplate. (*District Gazetteer of Assam, Nowgong* 1905: 81·2)

There is hardly any information on the Muslim immigrants in the beginning of the twentieth century. When the gazetteer was prepared in 1905, the number of immigrants in the district was small. Indeed, at this time, the 'immigrants' basically meant the tea-garden labourers. Thus, in the gazetteer, it was written:

The tea industry is not nearly so important in Nowgong, as in the Surma Valley or in Upper Assam, and the proportion of foreigners, (11 per cent.) is comparatively small. The total number of persons born outside the Province in 1901 was 29,629, more than a third of whom came from the division of Chota Nagpur. (*District Gazetteer of Assam, Nowgong* 1905: 68)

The situation changed by the 1920s. This is reflected in the Census of India, 1931, where there was a significant increase in the number of immigrants. According to C. S. Mullan, Superintendent of Census Operation in Assam, Nowgong was "conquered" by the "land-hungry Bengali
immigrants, mostly Muslims” from 1921 to 1931 (*Census of India* 1931: 49-52). Furthermore, the report from Nowgong was quoted.

The increase in population is specially noticeable in Khathowal, Juria, Laokhowa, Dhing, Bokoni and Lahorighat mauzas when it is solely due to the large influx of immigrant settlers mainly from Mymensingh. They have opened up vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of the Brahmaputra and have occupied nearly all the lands which are open for settlement in this tract. ...

Immigration in recent years mainly signifies the influx into this district of Mahomedan [Muslims] and Hindu families from the Eastern Bengal districts, chiefly from Mymensingh. They had begun to come in large numbers from the latter part of the previous decade but their numbers gradually continued to swell every year till 1926 when there was a slight decrease in the flow on account of the fact that almost all the areas originally assigned to them were already occupied leaving little room for further extention and also because they were attracted by new lands made available in other districts. (*Census of India* 1931: 49-52)

This account also refers to the friction which occurred between the Muslim migrants and the indigenous population over the issue of land.

Their [Muslims] hunger for land was so great that, in their eagerness to grasp as much as they could cultivate they not infrequently encroached on Government reserves and on lands belonging to the local people from which they could be evicted only with great difficulties. In the beginning they had their own way and there was frequent friction with the indigenous population who did not like their dealings as neighbours. The
appointment of special colonization officer and adoption of certain definite rules tended much to regularize settlement and prevent friction. \((\text{Census of India 1931: 51-2})\)

**Table 13.** shows the number of immigrants who came to Assam from districts in Bengal. The figures of the Nowgong district, show a tremendous increase within a couple of decades: from 4000 in 1911 to 120,000 in 1931. This clearly shows that in the 1920s, there was large-scale immigration from districts in Bengal, especially Mymensyngh.

**Table 13. Number of Persons Born in Bengal District in Each District of the Assam Valley in 1911, 1921 and 1931.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Kamrup</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Nowgong</th>
<th>Sibsagar</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>77000</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>7000</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>14000</td>
<td>14000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>151000</td>
<td>44000</td>
<td>20000</td>
<td>58000</td>
<td>14000</td>
<td>14000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>170000</td>
<td>134000</td>
<td>41000</td>
<td>120000</td>
<td>12000</td>
<td>19000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\((\text{Census of India 1931})\)

The influx of Bengali Muslim immigrants was also described in the Mauza Note made at the time of the settlement operation. In the Mauza Note of Lahorighat located in the north-west of the Nowgong district at the time, the immigrants are described as follows.

The inhabitants are mainly immigrant Mussalmans in the villages north of the Lali [a name of a river] and in only 5 villages in the south. There are some Assamese Hindus of various castes including Koch, Kaibartta, Keot, Nath, Chutia, Kachari, Lalung and
others. Between 1901 and 1921 the population of Old Gerua Bokani of which this district is a part increased by 50.8 p.c. and this is due to immigration of East Bengal Mussalmans from 1908 or thereabout. (Village note: Mauza Laharighat 1931)

In the same note, it was noted that the land cultivated by the immigrants was sold at a much higher rate than that of the indigenous villagers.

In the immigrant villages the price of land varies usually from Rs.50/- to Rs. 75/- per bigha; but in the villages near the Dhing – Bhuragaon road between Mairabari and Laharighat Thana the usual price is Rs. 100/- to Rs. 150/- per bigha. The Assamese sell land in the villages north of the Lali at Rs.10/- to Rs. 25/- per bigha; only good basti sites are sold at Rs. 25/- or so. In the jungly Assamese villages land has no selling values.

The Assamese are non-ambitious and are easily satisfied. They do not usually go in for debts; small amounts which they might borrow are quickly repaid after harvest. The immigrants are however, habitual borrowers. They spend a lot of money recklessly in litigation, good houses, cattle and dress and for buying more land. In normal years they clear off their debts when they want money they do not hesitate even to execute bonds to double the amount they actually borrow. (Village note: Mauza Laharighat 1931)

The account provides an insight not only into the increase of immigrants from East Bengal and their appropriation of land, but also the colonial policy implemented by the British officers. They regarded the Assamese as not hard working, and thus opted to bring in the immigrants as an easy way to increase the land revenue of the state.
2-2. Tribes and Immigrants in the Reports of Land and Forest Administration

Thus, we see that the immigrants were quickly acquiring the land in the upper part of Nowgong district in the 1920s. However, as the immigrants preferred to settle down in areas near the Brahmaputra river in the northern part of Nowgong, until the 1930s there were not as many immigrant villages in the Nellie area, for it lies on the southern part and far from the Brahmaputra river.

In the 1930s, the issue of land settlement by the immigrants became controversial. As mentioned in Chapter 3, in the 1930s the debate on the Line System was active in the state legislative assembly. During this period, the pressure on land caused by increasing cultivation by Muslim immigrants was felt by the local population.

A description of the immigrants is also seen in the reports of land and forest administration. While the local/indigenous population faced hardship as a consequence of the appropriation of land by the immigrants, for the colonial administration it was an easy means of increasing their revenue. From the viewpoint of the revenue department, immigration was welcome, since it increased the land revenue of the state. Thus every year, the colonial administration took careful note of the number of immigrants from the East Bengal region in its official document, Report on Land Revenue.

At the same time, for the forest administration, the immigrants were often seen as a problem in the form of 'squatters' who settled in the forest areas without any permission and used up the important forest resources. A special report titled The Forest Resources of Assam was compiled in 1940 by
M. C. Jacob, Deputy Conservator of Forests, in which not only the immigrants, but also the tribes were blamed for the extinction of the forest in the state.\textsuperscript{30}

The report stated that there were four factors which contributed to gradual deforestation including Jhum (shifting cultivation) adopted by the tribes in the hill areas, and settlement and squatting by the immigrants in the plains areas. It was specifically noted that in the colonised areas of Nowgong, deforestation occurred due to the increase of immigrant settlement.

The destruction of Unclassed State Forests is resulting in some districts especially in North Kamrup and in the colonisation areas\textsuperscript{31} of Mangaldai, Nowgong, etc., in an acute shortage of firewood. In every colonisation area, portions of the Unclassed State Forests require constitution as reserves from which a supply of fire-wood and small house-building and bridging material can be ensured for the well-being of the settlers.

\textit{(The Forest Resources of Assam 1940: 26)}

Thus, we can see that the report of forest administration in the 1940s regarded the tribes and immigrants as a cause of deforestation, which was a

\textsuperscript{30} There were mainly two types of forests under the jurisdiction of state administration: Reserved Forests and Unclassed States Forest. The former was intensively managed by the trained staff of the Forest Department, and for the latter there was no intensive system of management. According to Jacob, in Assam, only 9.7 percent of the total area constituted as Reserved Forest and this causes the gradual deforestation. \textit{(The Forest Resources of Assam 1940)}

\textsuperscript{31} In 1928, the colonisation scheme was introduced in order to allot selected land to the immigrants and prevent them from settle in other parts in order to protect the Assamese and tribal inhabitants. The land which was allotted under the colonisation scheme was called 'colonisation area'. \textit{(Guha 1977: 208·10)}
loss of important natural resources in Assam. It indicated that although there was an abundant availability of uncultivated land in Assam, by the 1940s this was fast disappearing. In such a situation, the tribes and the immigrants were compelled to compete with each other in order to gain control over the land. However, in none of the accounts, was there any mention of the land rights of the Tiwas, who had lived in and ruled the area for centuries and survived on shifting cultivation conducted not only in the hill areas but also in the plains.

2-3. Controversy on Special Grazing Reserves

In the mid-1940s, a controversy arose over the status of the grazing reserves. The grazing reserves were areas carved out from the Unclassed State Forests in order to provide sufficient space for cattle grazing. However, a 1940 report of The Forest Resources of Assam stated that “The present grazing reserves are such only in name. These grazing reserves were originally carved out of savannah land in the Unclassed State Forests”. It was suggested that the grazing reserves were not effectively utilised.

In 1943, the Muslim League formed the fourth ministry under Saadulla, and adopted a new resolution on land settlement. The first item of the resolution indicated the dereservation of grazing reserves in order to allow communities access to ‘wasteland’.

i) resumed distribution of wastelands in proportion to needs of different communities in Nowgong and dereservation of select grazing reserves for that purpose. (Guha 1978: 281)

Subsequently, these lands were classified either in ‘forest’ or ‘cultivable land’. 

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For this purpose, a special officer to look into the grazing reserves was appointed, and a report titled *Report of the Special Officer appointed for the examination of the Professional Grazing Reserves in the Assam Valley* was submitted to the government. In Guha's words:

S. P. Desai, a senior ICS man, was appointed Special Officer to ascertain what portion of professional grazing reserves could be declared as surplus available for settlement. Desai reported that the forcible occupation of grazing lands by immigrants had already taken place to a large scale, even in the predominantly Assamese or tribal areas. His conclusion was that there was no surplus land available for new settlement. Ignoring the report, Saadulla’s Muslim League Coalition Government threw select professional grazing reserves open for settling immigrants. (Guha 1978: 281-2)

Desai pointed out that opening up of the grazing reserves to the immigrants led to a conflict between the Assamese and immigrants. Moreover, from the report, it becomes clear that the immigrant pockets in the Nellie area were also in one of the grazing reserves. The grazing reserve called Alichinga is the exact location of the villages attacked in the incident. (Map 4.) *(Report of the Special Officer appointed for the examination of the Professional Grazing Reserves in the Assam Valley 1944)*
Map 4. Special Grazing Reserves in Nowgong District

(Source: Report of the Professional Grazing Reserves 1944, page number not indicated.)
Thus, we can see that the villages affected by the Nellie incident came into existence in the 1940s under the Muslim League government's 'Grow More Food' policy, and that right from the beginning, the existence of these was controversial in terms of whether the new settlement of immigrants should be allowed or not. As noted in Chapter 3, the policy was in fact described by some as a 'Grow More Muslims' policy, and led to the confrontation between the Assamese and Bengali immigrants.

On the other hand, the area north of the Alichinga grazing reserve, Tetelia Mauza, was inhabited by the Tiwas. Because of the large tribal concentration, the area was declared a 'tribal block' immediately after independence. In the areas reserved as tribal blocks, non-tribal people were prohibited from obtaining land. However, the prohibition was not strictly enforced and in many areas the non-tribals continued to acquire land in the blocks. In the case of the Tetelia tribal block, however, it continues to remain a tribal-majority area even today.

Thus, from the analysis of documents on grazing reserves and tribal blocks, we can point out that the Nellie area was one of the areas where the immigrants started to settle in the 1940s. While the immigrants were fast acquiring land, the tribals were gradually losing control over their traditionally inhabited land in the district. But it is too simplistic to conclude that the immigrants were solely responsible for the alienation of tribal land. In fact, the British government played a role in bringing the immigrants for the purposes of increasing land revenue. Thus, the cause-and-effect link between the immigrants' settlement and the alienation of tribes' from their
traditional land needs much more careful investigation. Here we can only suggest that the areas in which the Nellie massacre took place were also areas in which there had been major disputes in the 1940s on whether to open the land to the foreigners or not and the location of the disputed site is very close to the Tiwa villages.

3. Memories of the Massacre: Method and Locations

I conducted interviews in two Muslim immigrant villages and two Tiwa villages. In each village, the number of persons interviewed was 10 to 15. I usually began by meeting a teacher or some key person with a higher education in the village, followed by interviews with a few individuals, and would then conduct group interviews with the villagers. No sampling was taken in the research, for it is currently difficult to stay in a village for a long time in order to study a violent incident.33 Also, owing to my lack of proficiency in the Assamese language, I had to rely on the help of interpreters. However, by explaining the purpose of the research to the interpreters, and also by repeatedly asking questions myself of the interviewees, I could get a basic idea of their views on the cause of the movement and ways of defining the 'other'.

In these interviews, I focused on people's opinions rather than finding out 'facts', such as, what happened on that day, who were the leaders of the attack, who mobilised the people and who actually killed the victims, etc.

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33 During my one-month stay in Assam, the police visited me twice and told me not to make research visits without their accompanying me for 'security reasons'. In order to conduct research without their interference, I had to meet the Deputy Commissioner and report to the District's Superintendent of Police.
Instead, my focus was on the way people recognise what had happened and what they believe to be the cause of the incident. This line of inquiry is more important than fact-finding _per se_ for the purpose of this study, because my focus is on narratives, the way people interpret the past according to their understanding of the present and the way they define the 'other'. Therefore, my interview schedule consisted of only a few questions, so as to allow my respondents to talk as freely as possible. (The schedule is shown in the Appendix II).

Apart from the questions on the incident, I asked about general information on the villages, such as their history, the number of educational institutions present, the basic infrastructure and the current problems. These will be described below. I also interviewed the local movement leaders, who were the members of the AASU and the AAGSP at the time of the massacre. The same schedule was used to interview the villagers.

The interviews were conducted in three main parts—the Muslim immigrant villages, the Tiwa villages and the town of Morigaon. The Muslim villages were the actual site of the massacre. They are situated north of National Highway 37, and the village called Nellie is located beside the highway. As a relief camp for the victims of the massacre was set up in Nellie, the incident took its name from this village, but the actual site was 10–20 kilometres away. (Map 5.)
Map 5. Sites of the Nellie Massacre

(Source: Assam Freedom Fighter's Association 1985, page number not indicated)
The Muslim immigrant villages are surrounded by villages inhabited by the local people, mainly the Tiwas but sometimes they could be Assamese villages. In the northern part of the Muslim immigrant villages, there is an area called Tetelia Tribal Block, which consists of mainly Tiwa villages, but there are a few Assamese and other tribal villages. The villagers were said to be the main actors in the massacre. A river called Kopili divides the Muslim immigrant villages from the tribal block.

I chose two villages from among the Muslim immigrant villages and Tiwa villages and interviewed the villagers there. Apart from these Tiwa and Muslim immigrant villages, I also interviewed some Assamese villagers in the villages close to the massacre. In this chapter, I use the term ‘Nellie area’ broadly to refer to the Muslim immigrant villages, the Tetelia Tribal Block and other villages around Nellie. The informants who provided me with first-hand information concerning the massacre belong to the area. Apart from the Nellie area, I conducted interviews of residents in the towns of Morigaon and Jagiroad. The town of Morigaon is the present district headquarters of Morigaon district, and is situated 35 kilometres away from Nellie. Jagiroad is a semi-urban area situated on the highway on the way to Morigaon from Nellie, and is 12 kilometres away from Nellie. Jagiroad is well connected to both Morigaon town and Nellie by bus. The main persons interviewed in these places were the local leaders of the movement, mainly the AASU and the AAGSP activists. I also interviewed some Tiwa political leaders in these areas.

Interviews were conducted in villages A and B in the Muslim immigrant
area, and villages C and D in the Tetelia tribal block. I have withheld the actual names of the villages, since it is a highly sensitive issue and there are concerns for the privacy of the informants. Villages A and B are similar in their basic features. Most villagers engage in agriculture, and the main produce is rice. There is one Lower Primary School and one Middle English School in each village, but there are no hospitals or health centres, and no drinking water or telephones facilities. Compared to these Muslim immigrant villages, Tiwa villages are in a slightly better condition, but there are no significant differences between them. The situation of village C is similar to that of villages A and B. Here too the main produce of the villagers is rice, and there is only one Lower Primary School. Village D has the best facilities of these four villages.

It should be noted here that in village C, the influence of the All Tiwa Students' Union (hereafter referred to as ATSU) has been quite strong. This body was established in 1989 after the anti-foreigners movement. Several active members of the ATSU and other closely related organisations such as the All Tiwa Women's Association are residents of the village.

On the whole, Tiwa villages are in a better condition than the Muslim immigrant villages. In terms of land possession and family size, the Tiwa villagers own larger areas of land and have smaller family than the Muslim immigrants. In terms of education, although the number of schools is similar, the proportion of children attending is very different. In the Muslim immigrant villages, people tend to have many children and there are fewer chances for them to get an education. However, in this locality, it can be said that the standard of living of the Tiwas and the Muslim immigrants are
almost equal, though the Tiwas have slightly better access to education.

4. Narratives on the Nellie Massacre

4-1. Different Narratives on the Cause of the Massacre: The Muslim Immigrants, the Tiwas and the Local Movement Leaders

In the interviews, I started asking about the details of the incident. Contrary to my expectations, the explanations about the sequence of events relating to the massacre that were given by the Muslim immigrants, the Tiwas and the local movement leaders were quite consonant with one another. The basic ‘agreements’ among all the interviewees are as follows: the incident started in the morning (timing given varied from 5am to 10am). At first, the attackers started burning houses, and then the immigrants noticed that their villages were gheraoed from every side. After burning all the houses, the perpetrators started killing the inhabitants by using guns, bombs and daos (axes traditionally used by tribes).

The violence continued into the afternoon until the police and army arrived, at which point the attackers left. The attackers were local people, including tribes such as the Tiwas, Karbis, Mishings, Rabhas and Kacharis, etc., and also the Assamese. Some people, including the Tiwas, said that the Tiwas were the largest group which took part in the attack.

The emphasis and some of the details such as timing and the grouping of

34 In the Nellie area, the interviews were conducted in Assamese through interpreters and in such places as Jagiroad or Morigaon, they were conducted in English. I did not make any corrections to grammatical mistakes, since I preferred to show the exact words that interviewees used. The same goes for the interviews through interpreters, since I believe those are more suitable to express the situation at the time of the interview.

35 ‘Gherao’ is an Indian term indicating an act of enclosing, shutting in or surrounding.
the attackers differed from each other but, generally, their explanations were not contradictory, and it is possible to find common factors and descriptions of the sequence of events. However, opinions on the cause of the massacre are widely different.

Broadly speaking, the narrations of the three groups of people—the Muslim immigrants, the Tiwas and the local movement leaders—as to the cause of the violence are different. Although individual views on the cause of the massacre differ in many ways from person to person, we find common characteristics in each group.

The Muslim Immigrants: Revenge for participation in the election.
According to the Muslim immigrants, the massacre was a revenge for their participation in the election. At that time, the AASU and the AAGSP called for a boycott of the election. However, some of the immigrants went to the election booth and tried to cast their ballots. Most of those interviewed consider this to be a cause of the massacre.

For example, when asked about the cause of the incident, villagers in village A explained it in this way:

The election was to be held. And the people of Assam under the banner of AASU decided.
They decided not to get involved in the election process. So they asked all [of] us people not to vote. They threatened. But some 15, 16 people went to Alichinga polling centre. They went there for voting but they found nobody there, no polling officers, no election authority people. And they got back.36

36 Group Interview with the villagers in village A, 12 November 2001.
Also in village B, one villager explained the cause of the massacre as follows:

Some students union told [us] not to cast votes... No one was going to vote on that election, only from Nellie a few... 6 to 7 people went to vote. No election officer came... Their main demand was not to cast votes. [But] a few went to cast their vote [and] revenge was taken against us.\(^{37}\)

From these statements, it is obvious that the villagers view the massacre basically as a revenge for their participation in the election. Also, when asked about the confrontation with the local people, all of them replied that, before the movement started, there was no trouble between them and the local people, such as the Tiwas and the Assamese.

\(\text{\textsection 2 The Tiwas: The leadership of the AASU.}\)

The Tiwas' views are more diverse than that of the Muslim immigrants'. In village C, the incidents of the kidnapping of girls by the immigrants are cited as the cause of the incident:

Initially, they were living peacefully. But one point was noticed by us later on, that many girls were kidnapped and they used to kill them... They used to take girls: they used to keep them at their homes and some of them they used to kill. We were very much offended, and this thing was shared by the AASU and the Assamese people, these

\(^{37}\) Group Interview with the villagers in village B, 23 November 2001.
areas' people.

The main issue was girls... This thing came to light in 1982–83, but it was happening silently.\textsuperscript{38}

However, in another Tiwa village, village D, the people interviewed did not refer to the kidnapping of girls as a cause of the massacre. Although they admitted that such kinds of incidents did occur, they did not mention this matter until they were asked about it. Rather, they claimed that the election and the movement were the direct causes.

The main issue was that particular movement. We only knew that anti-foreigners' movement is going on and led by the AASU. We felt one crisis [of foreigners' influx] is going on with the Assamese people, so we united and we gave a stand.\textsuperscript{39}

Interestingly, when asked whether they had any trouble with the Muslim immigrants, most of them said there was no trouble and had a good relationship with them. Even in village C, where the people complained vociferously about the kidnapping of girls, they reported that these things did not start happening until the early 1980s. Before that—that is before the movement—they had no trouble with the immigrants.

Also, although their views on the cause of the massacre appear to vary, there was one striking similarity in the description of the incident. It was that the AASU and the AAGSP took on the leadership of the massacre, and

\textsuperscript{38} Group Interview with the villagers in village C, 15 November 2001.
\textsuperscript{39} Group Interview with the villagers in village D, 24 November 2001.
not the villagers. For example, a villager in village C, who participated in the activities of the AASU, stated:

I am unable to tell how many people sacrificed. Uncountable...I was not physically involved in the fight. It was led by the AASU. But they cheated. Everybody supported the movement.

All the villages, areas, societies and district supported. Actually we did not know why we had to boycott the election. They said the cause was foreigner. And whenever they know that this village was suffered by this kind of troubles, the [kidnap of] girls case, so they triggered, means they said OK we will [support] you.\textsuperscript{40}

Also, in village D, after the interview was over and the tape recorder was switched off, the people started talking about their mistrust of the movement leaders.

We were misguided. We helped the Assamese, but once it came to light they did not take the responsibility and criticised the Tiwas. They said—'these people are wild'. Many people started the violence. Not the Tiwas. But they did not take responsibility and escaped.\textsuperscript{41}

As is clear from the above statement, their emphasis is that the AASU and the AAGSP did not take responsibility for the massacre, but instead laid the blame on the Tiwas. Although they did not deny that most of the villagers

\textsuperscript{40} Group Interview with the villagers in village C, 15 November 2001.
\textsuperscript{41} Group Interview with the villagers in village D, 24 November 2001.
participated in the massacre, they believed their role was merely to offer help because the movement leaders asked for it. Therefore, even if the people in village C claimed there was trouble regarding the kidnapping of girls, this was just the secondary reason for their participation in the massacre. They suggested that the AASU used this matter to gain support to attack the immigrants.

The Local Movement Leaders: Troubles between the local people and the Muslim immigrants.

The members of the AASU and the AAGSP were the most vocal and very clear in explaining the cause of the massacre. Most of them claimed that confrontation had arisen between the local people and the immigrants on various issues such as land alienation and cultural identity. It was the continued influx of the immigrants from the East Bengal region that gave rise to this confrontation. For example, Mr X, a member of the AAGSP stated:

Some mistrust between the two communities... Immigrant Muslims and local people.
Mainly tribal people... The Tiwas and the Karbis and also the Assamese communities.
They [are] gradually grabbing the land. The crisis of identity. Local people feel that they [have] become minority. Actually religious minority [have] become majority in that area... Direct cause is identity. The identity of indigenous people.42

Mr Y, who was a convener of the AAGSP in Morigaon, narrated it in

42 Interview with Mr X in Morigaon, 21 November 2001.
more detail. He emphasised that the Muslim immigrants harassed the local people, forcing them to move from their homes.

The thing is this, if Muslim people are inhabited near the Assamese villages, generally, paddy field is forcefully harvested by the Muslim people at night. And for such type of misbehaviour of the Muslim people, the Assamese people generally think that they are harassed by the Muslim people... In that way, they are stealing their cattle, stealing the Hindu girls, in that way they are harassing the Assamese people and lastly, it happens that the Assamese people [were forced to] sell the land to the Muslim people...In that way, the Muslim people were grabbing the land of the Assamese people.43

To the local movement leaders, it was clearly the appropriation of their land that caused the massacre. From their point of view, the cause was long standing, with mistrust between the local people and the immigrants deepening day by day. Moreover, when asked about the relation of the AASU and the AAGSP to the massacre, all of them denied that the AASU and the AAGSP had any role in it.

It is possible to summarise the pattern of the narratives as follows. To the Muslim immigrants, the massacre was seen as revenge for their participation in the election. The Tiwas, on the other hand, emphasised that the AASU and the AAGSP urged them to attack the Muslims, though they also have their own reasons for attacking the immigrants, since they had troubles regarding the security of their members. And the local movement leaders consider the massacre to have been an outcome of the continued

43 Interview with Mr Y in Morigaon, 21 November 2001.
influx of Muslim immigrants and their expropriation of land.

Taking a look at the three styles of the narratives on the cause of the massacre, it can be said that each developed their own version and selectively picked up the 'facts' from their memories according to what they consider suitable for their stories. However, the extent of acceptance of the narratives is not the same. Some narratives are more widely known and accepted in society, while others are subordinate. In the next section, I shall argue that the local movement leaders' narrative is dominant, and others are subordinate in Assamese society, and suggest the reason for it.

4-2. The Dominant Narrative in Society: Land Alienation by Immigrants

In the writings of academics and journalists in Assam and the rest of India, the problem of land alienation by the Muslim immigrants has up to now been regarded as the cause of the Nellie massacre. The tribes in Assam resented losing their land because of the continued Muslim influx. And when scholars and journalists try to analyse the cause of the Nellie massacre, they often suggest that the Tiwas were deeply resentful of land alienation. We have already seen that the pan-Indian media, the *Indian Express* in particular, reported the cause of the incident as tribal land alienation immediately after the incident took place. It seems that the interpretation is largely accepted by the scholar and the journalists from Assam. For example, Sanjib Baruah writes:

Some of the worst violence occurred in villages around Nellie, an area where the Tiwa people once had their kingdom; much of the area is now settled by Bengali immigrants.
and their descendants. Tiwas (also called Lalungs) are a 'plains tribe' who had lost much of their land to immigrants from East Bengal. (Baruah 1999: 134)

Similarly, the Assamese journalist Sanjoy Hazarika wrote:

In the case of Nellie and its surrounding villages, those who sold their lands were the Tiwas. Their bitterness grew as they saw the immigrants nourish the soil and grow more crops, making profits on fields which were, until recently, their own... Perhaps it [the day of the massacre] would be better described as pay-back day. (Hazarika 2000: 46)

It is clear that the cause of the massacre given in these two writings is consistent with that of the local movement leaders. It should be noted that most of the local movement leaders in Morigaon were college lecturers or schoolteachers, and so-called caste-Hindu Assamese. Being intellectuals, they had better access to the top movement leaders' claims and newspaper reports. It can be said that the local movement leaders' narrative represents the dominant narrative of the Assamese intellectuals.

Although the Muslims, the Tiwas and the local movement leaders talk about the 'cause' of one incident, the dimensions of their narratives are different. The local movement leaders state the structural cause, while the Muslim immigrants and the Tiwas talk about the immediate cause. The Muslim immigrants traced the cause to their participation in the election. They recognise the violence only as a solitary event, and do not relate it to the history of continued immigration or the movement. Thus they suggest only the 'direct' cause of the incident. As for the Tiwas, when they talk about
the 'cause', their statement also refers to the immediate cause, the kidnapping of the female members of their community and the AASU's leadership.

However, the movement leaders narrate the cause in a totally different way. They attribute the cause of the violence to the historical problem of land alienation among the local people, especially the Tiwas, by the immigrants. They argue that immigration itself is a fundamental problem and suggest that the cause of the problem lies in the social structure of Assamese society. Unlike the Tiwas and the Muslim immigrants, they make no reference to any direct cause.

There might be several factors accounting for the difference in the interpretations. However, it should be noticed that the narratives of the attackers and the victims—people who actually participated in and were affected by the massacre—became subordinate, while that of the local movement leaders, which represent the opinions and viewpoints of Assamese intellectuals, are dominant in Assamese society.

5. Establishing Collective Identity in Counter-Narratives

So far, we have seen that there are three styles of narratives on the cause of the massacre, and among the three, the local movement leaders' narrative is the dominant one in Assamese society. In this version, the immigrants are projected as the 'enemy' who harassed local people and forced them to leave the place. Thus, they suggest that although the local people are the attackers in the violence, they are actually the victims of the immigrants' misbehaviour. In this style of narrative, the immigrants are positioned as the 'other' and
the local people, including the Assamese and the tribes, are lumped into one category distinct from the immigrants.

However, even though the Tiwas supported the AASU and the anti-foreigners movement and participated in the massacre, later they distanced themselves from the Assamese and sought to develop/establish their own identity. On the other hand, the Muslims immigrants did not choose to define clearly the Tiwas or the AASU as the 'other'. I analyse the reason behind the difference below.

5.1 Defining the 'Other': Identity in Counter-Narratives

As noted in the Introduction, by examining the people's narratives of the experience of the violence, it is possible to see their definition of the 'other'. In this process, they construct the boundary between 'we' and 'they'. However, in the case of the Muslim immigrants, although they stressed the gravity of the sufferings they experienced, they refrained from identifying the attackers. When asked who the attackers were, some of the people replied they did not know, while others vaguely defined them as 'local people'.

As shown in the previous section, to the Muslim immigrants, it was the members of the AASU who took revenge on them because some of the Muslim peasants had gone to cast their votes. However, they stopped short of defining the AASU as a complete 'enemy'. When asked what they think about the movement, they acknowledged that the movement itself was right. At the same time, they were quick to point out that the movement leaders harassed the immigrants who had been living in Assam before the partition and independence of India. Their main criticism was on this point. Therefore,
the point of the argument was on the misidentification of the foreigners and not on the movement policy itself.

It can be said that as there have been serious controversies over the legitimacy of the immigrants' existence in Assam, criticism of the movement policy itself could be a dangerous act for the immigrants. When they expressed their criticism, they were often regarded as illegal foreigners. The movement leaders often used the logic that 'if you are Assamese, you should support our policy'. Therefore, this made it difficult for them to criticise the movement policy itself, or to distinguish themselves from the 'Assamese'. Being immigrant Muslims, they are prone to be regarded as 'foreigners'. If they make a move for distinct identity apart from the Assamese, there is a possibility that their existence in Assam would be threatened.

Thus, in a way, they are forced to assimilate with the mainstream Assamese. They lack political base for they are immigrants, at the same time, they suffer the disadvantage of being Muslims, a religious minority in the state. For these two reasons, they are not able to choose to and distinguish themselves from the Assamese people.

The Tiwas were more successful than the Muslim immigrants in defining the 'other' and developing themselves as a subject. The Tiwas' narrative is the most interesting in this case because, although their 'enemy' at the time of the massacre was the Muslim immigrants, in the narrative they differentiate themselves both from the movement leaders and the ethnic Assamese. One Tiwa woman, a member of the All Tiwa Women Association, observed:
Before the massacre, there was no difference among the Tiwas and the Rabhas [another plains tribe in this area]. We were all tribes as well as Assamese. However, though the AASU said 'We are all Assamese', they cheated us. They had slogans like 'come out of your home'. We participated in the movement because when they [would] become [the ] government they will do the development properly but they did not. The AGP came into power in 1985. The All Tiwa Students' Union was formed in 1989. The situation is [the] same for the Rabhas or Plain Karbis. They [were] disappointed [with] the AGP and the AASU so they formed their own organisations.44

In the above statement, the AASU, the AGP and the Assamese community as a whole are criticised for betraying the expectations of the Tiwasland for failing to attend to the economic development of the people. It can be seen that the speaker not only questions the issue of the leadership in the massacre, but also raises the economic backwardness and neglected status of the Tiwas in Assam politics. In this context, the Nellie incident is regarded as one strong evidence which shows the disregard of the Tiwas by the mainstream Assamese.

5.2. Autonomy or Assimilation? Choice of Strategy and Identity by Minorities

Although their narratives are equally subordinate in Assamese society, the degree of success in developing themselves as a subject in their own history differs widely in the case of the Tiwas and the Muslim immigrants. As documented in the previous section, the Tiwas are quite successful and

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44 Interview with Ms U. in a village in Tetelia tribal block, 15 November 2001.
positive in distinguishing their identity from the Assamese, while the Muslim immigrants are not. It is my argument that the reason for the difference lies in the Muslim immigrants' present status in Assam politics and their distance from the Assamese. At this point, though it is difficult to prove with concrete evidence, I would suggest the probability of a relationship between the development of the memories of the violence and the collective identity.

It has often been argued that the plains tribes like the Tiwas had slowly adopted the Assamese way of life and the language, and that they were in a process of assimilation (Hussain 1993: 171; Guha 1984: 59). However, from the late 1980s, a section of the Tiwa people had started to assert their own identity.

Tiwa movements were not totally absent prior to the 1980s. Indeed, as early as 1967, they had established the Lalung Darbar, a socio-economic and cultural organisation which demanded the creation of a separate autonomous district for the Lalung tribe under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The main purpose for demanding an autonomous district at the time was to promote the economic development of the Tiwa people.46

To intensify the demand and realise this objective, the All Tiwa Students' Union was formed in 1989 and, together with the Lalung Darbar, demanded the establishment of the Autonomous Tiwa District. In 1994, an

45 The Sixth schedule of the Constitution of India states that a new autonomous district can be created by the Governor's public notification.
46 Interview with ex-member of the Tiwa Autonomous Council in Nellie area, 15 February 2002; The Lalung Darbar, Memorandum to Shri Rajiv Gandhi. Prime Minister of India, New Delhi (10 November 1987): 2–3
Ordinance of the Governor of Assam created the Lalung Autonomous Council (hereafter referred to as LAC). At that time, the Congress was the ruling party in the state, and the LAC was established under the leadership of chief minister Hiteswar Saikia.47

However, the LAC did not meet the demands put up by the Tiwas. The main demand of the Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (an offshoot of the Lalung Darbar and some other Lalung organisations) was the extension of the Sixth Schedule provisions and hence the creation of the Autonomous District with a distinct territory. But this demand was not fulfilled.

Also, according to the Ordinance of the Governor of Assam in 1994, 26 out of 30 members of the General Council were elected directly by the state government. Therefore, when the ruling party of the state government changed, the members of the General Council would also be re-elected.

Because of the inadequacy of the LAC, some people have termed it a puppet organisation of the state government and continued their demand for an Autonomous District Council. This led to the creation of the Autonomous Demand Struggling Forum (ADSF) in 1994. To strengthen their demand, a political wing, the United People's Front (UPF), was formed under the ADSF, which contested the election to the State Legislative Assembly. The ADSF is an organisation constituted mainly of the Tiwas, but the UPF includes other tribal communities such as the Rabhas and the Plain Karbis as well. Presently, the ATSU maintains a strong relationship with the ADSF and is a

47 The Assam Gazette Extraordinary, 13 July 1995; Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee, A Memorandum to Shri Hiteswar Saikia, Chief Minister of Assam (10 May 1993)
part of UPF, as well as of the students' unions of the Rabhas and the Plain Karbis.48

The Tiwa autonomous movement is not only political and economic in nature, but also has a cultural aspect. Tiwa Sahitya Sabha, the Tiwa literary organisation that was formed in 1981, has a strong relationship with this movement. Initially, Tiwa Sahitya Sabha did not have any political links, but in 1993, Mr Tulsi Bordoloi, the present chairman of the ADSF, became the president of the Sabha. Also, after this period, the Tiwa Sahitya Sabha started using the Roman script instead of the Assamese script used earlier. In 1995, the Sabha published *Tiwa Matbadi*, a Tiwa-Assamese-English Dictionary, based on the Roman script. It can be said that the Tiwa Sahitya Sabha is moving toward establishing its own language and literature, differentiating itself from the language of the dominant group.49 (Kholar 1995)

Therefore, it is clear that the present movement by the ATSU and the ADSF is aiming at the creation of their own identity. These groups are trying to establish themselves as politically, economically and culturally distinct from the Assamese.

Compared to the active movement among the Tiwas, the Bengali Muslim immigrants are less articulate in establishing themselves as a distinct ethnic group in Assamese society. It has been pointed out that the Bengali Muslim peasants have adopted the Assamese language and reported the same as

48 Interview with Mr Tulsi Bordoloi, chairman of the ADSF, in Jagiroad, 13 November 2001.
49 Interviews with Mr Udhab Senapati, the founder-president of the Tiwa Sahitya Sabha, in the Nellie area, 15 February 2002; Mr Tulsi Bordoloi, 14 February 2002.
their mother tongue in the Census enumeration. Indeed, it was the Bengali Muslim peasants’ adoption of Assamese language that made Assamese the majority language in the state of Assam (Guha 1984: 59; Dasgupta 2000: 15–9). Commenting on the development, Myron Weiner, the first foreign scholar to study the immigration problem in Assam before the anti-foreigners’ movement was started by the AASU, pointed to an ‘unspoken coalition between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims against the Bengali Hindus.’ (Weiner 1983: 284–5)

This situation has continued to the present. In 2002, Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS), the largest literary and cultural organisation of the Assamese people, held its annual session in Kalgachia in Barpeta district. Kalgachia is an area dominated by the Bengali Muslim immigrants. It was the first time in the history of the ASS that the session took place in such an area, and the Bengali Muslim people in Kalgachia largely welcomed it. (The Assam Tribune, 13 February 2002)

There has been a significant change in the ASS’s stance toward linguistic minorities in Assam. In the 1960s and in the 1970s, the ASS was the most influential organisation that encouraged the introduction of Assamese as the official language in the state and as the medium of instruction in schools. At the time, ASS was strongly criticised for imposing Assamese on tribes and other non-Assamese speaking people. In the anti-foreigners’ movement, ASS was one of the core organisations that formed the AAGSP. However, in 2001, Mr Homen Borgohain became ASS’s president, and he adopted the policy of building a greater Assamese nationality. His concept of a greater Assamese nationality does not exclude
people whose mother tongue is not Assamese. His view was inclusive in nature - emphasising that those who work to promote Assamese literature and show an interest in Assamese language and literature should be accepted as Assamese people. (Borgohain, *Address of the President, Sixty-sixth Session of Asam Sahitya Sabha* (9 February 2001); *The Assam Tribune*, 13 February 2002)

While the Bengali Muslim people in Kalgachia seemed to welcome this move, the Tiwas are still doubtful about this change in ASS's stance. To my query whether the ASS is now changing their stance, Mr Tulsi Bordoloi, chairman of the ADSF and the ex-president of the Tiwa Sahitya Sabha, replied as follows:

Yes, it is ah ... Actually, some measure has been taken by the ASS in case of development of language or the culture of the ethnic people. They have also taken the Muslim people [who] migrated to Assam, [and] given [them] the name 'new Assamese'. But it is not sufficient. How much damage had been already made, especially in case of ethnic people. In comparison to that, [the] measures taken by the ASS is not sufficient... Many times, this Sahitya Sabha has been used as the platform of ethnic chauvinism. [This is a] mistake. If the ASS would have contributed to the development of Assamese language, ethnic culture, then there would not be any ethnic Sahitya Sabha.50

From the above argument, it can be said that the situation of the Tiwas and the Bengali Muslim immigrants are very different. The Tiwas started seeking their own identity separate from the Assamese, and the Bengali

50 Interview with Mr Tulsi Bordoloi in Jagiroad, 14 February 2002.
Muslim immigrants continued the same practice of linguistic assimilation to the Assamese. It is clear that the difference in the narratives of the Tiwas and the Muslim immigrants is related to their present political status, whether or not they can seek for a distinct identity. The Tiwas' political advantage helped them to differentiate themselves from the Assamese, while the Muslim immigrants are ambiguous on this point. Therefore, it can be said that people select 'facts' from their memories and create their own version of narrative histories according to their political, economic and cultural status.

6. Conclusion

From the analysis in this chapter, it is possible to say that there are many 'facts' about the massacre and thus there are many interpretations concerning what caused it. From these various interpretations, people choose certain interpretations that best suit them, or the ones that are least harmful to their interests.

Expectedly, these narratives are not equally accepted in society. For obvious reasons, that of the local movement leaders became the dominant one, while the narratives of the Tiwas and the Muslim immigrants occupy a subordinate position. Between the two, the Tiwas are creating their own social and political space through their demands for an autonomous district. At the same time, they are developing a counter-narrative about the violence, distinct from that of the Assamese. On the other hand, the voice of the Muslim immigrants is more subdued. Although they lament over the casualty, they are not so vocal in criticising the attackers. They neither have
their own organisations nor media to express their interests.

From the facts presented above, it can be said that a group's strategy has a significant influence on their narratives of the past, in this case, the memories of violence. The groups under consideration differ in the sense whether they do or choose not to pursue their own identity. When they choose to establish themselves as distinct and separate from the dominant group, they need to narrate their own version of history, to define themselves as a subject in it, and to differentiate themselves from the dominant group. However, when it is impossible for them to differentiate themselves with the mainstream community, they are forced to assimilate with them and there is no option for them to develop their own history.

In this context, the Tiwas has already been in the process of establishing their own identity in order to attain an autonomous district. Although their demand for the autonomous district existed even before the movement, it was after the movement that the Tiwas became disappointed at the Assamese, the ATSU was formed and they started full-fledged movement to attain their autonomy. In this process, they need to define themselves as different from the Assamese, and the experience of the Nellie massacre is interpreted in this context. They emphasise the betrayal by the Assamese people, and claim that the Assamese exploited the Tiwas to suit their own interest. We can conclude that the experience of the massacre and participation in the movement against foreigners immediately clarified the power relations between the Tiwas and the Assamese. In addition, the autonomous movement of the Tiwas redefined the boundary between the two communities.
As for the Muslim immigrants, they are still forced to assimilate to the dominant Assamese community. For them, it is not only unnecessary, but even harmful, to differentiate themselves from the indigenous Assamese society. Thus, they only referred to the direct cause of the Nellie massacre, and never utilised it like the Tiwas do to bolster their autonomous movement. There are fragments of narratives which mourn the tragedy they suffered, but they are scattered and never have a place to be represented or leaders to speak about it.

This lack of a mobilised movement is not due to the Muslim migrants being more backward than the tribes. In fact, the Muslim migrants are larger in number and there is a new middle class emerging among them as in the case of the tribes. However, the Muslims are less enthusiastic in defining themselves as distinct from the Assamese and mobilising a movement. The reasons are, first, being an immigrant group, Bengali Muslims lack a territorial base in Assam. The second is their fear of the emergence of another movement which could drive them out of Assam. As argued in Chapter 3, Muslims in India are easily targeted as an 'enemy community' for they have an extraterritorial association with Pakistan or Bangladesh. Particularly, in case of the Bengali Muslims, because of their origin, they are easily suspected of being agents of Bangladesh. Thus, they are in a difficult position in relation to mobilising a movement, therefore choose (or are forced) to assimilate to the Assamese culture.

Until now, there has been no intensive examination of relationships between narratives of history (especially those involving memories of violence) and the identity formation of ethnic minorities. From the analysis
in this chapter, it can be said that minorities have to choose whether or not to articulate their identities, especially when we make comparisons to established nations that have developed their official histories. This formation of collective identity has a strong influence on the development of counter-narratives against the official history of the dominant majority community.

By examining the narratives on the Nellie massacre, we have seen that quite a different type of narrative emerged among the Tiwas and the Muslim migrants as compared to that of the Assamese middle-class. The memories of the violence are diverse. The middle-class Assamese narratives are dominant in the society. The Tiwas's narrative contests the dominant narrative by establishing an alternative discourse. The narratives of the Muslims are fragmented, and never form a discourse effective enough to counter the dominant one. In the concluding chapter, I would like to argue the formation of a discourse on violence out of the narratives in relation to power and ethnicity.