



Email: editorijless@gmail.com

Volume: 11, Issue 2, 2024 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW, EDUCATION, SOCIAL AND SPORTS STUDIES (IJLESS)

A Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

DOI: [10.33329/ijless.11.2](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijless.11.2)

<http://ijless.kypublications.com/>

ISSN: 2455-0418 (Print), 2394-9724 (online)

2024©KY PUBLICATIONS, INDIA

www.kypublications.com

Editor-in-Chief

Dr M BOSU BABU

(Education-Sports-Social Studies)

Editor-in-Chief

DONIPATI BABJI

(Law)

©KY PUBLICATIONS



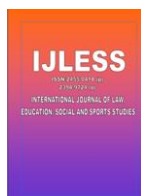


The Nellie Massacre 1983: Unveiling the Dark Side of the Assam Movement

Dibyajyoti Konwar

Assistant Professor, Department of History
Sonari College, Charaideo
E-mail: dibyajyotikonwar731@gmail.com.

DOI: [10.33329/ijless.11.2.44](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijless.11.2.44)



ABSTRACT

This study examines the 1983 Nellie Massacre, an under-examined events in Assam's socio-political history, through the frameworks of nationalism, collective memory, and state violence. Using Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities and Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire, this paper critically analyzes the massacre within the broader context of the Assam Movement, focusing on its origins, execution, aftermath, and long-term implications. The massacre, far from being a spontaneous riot, was a politically orchestrated attack enabled by state inaction. Drawing on archival official records, survivor testimonies, scholarly works and Assamese literature, this study highlights the role of exclusionary nationalism, state negligence, and communal tensions that culminated in the atrocity. It argues for urgent, survivor-centered policy responses, including a formal apology, reparations, historical inclusion, and communal reconciliation. Recognizing the massacre is essential to ensuring justice, healing, and the prevention of future state-enabled violence in Assam and beyond.

Keywords: Nellie Massacre, Assam Movement, ethnic conflict, Bengali Muslim

Introduction

This study examines the Nellie Massacre through the lens of nationalism, collective memory, and state violence. Using Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities, it explores how ethnic nationalism constructs an in-group versus out-group dichotomy [1] and created divisions by labeling Bengali Muslims as outsiders during the Assam Movement. On the other hand, Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire [2] helps to analyze how survivor narratives and oral histories act as counter-memory against state-sponsored amnesia. The massacre is not just an isolated incident of communal violence but a politically orchestrated event shaped by exclusionary nationalist ideologies and state complicity. Drawing on diverse sources, including survivor testimonies and government reports, this study reveals the deep social and political impacts of the massacre, highlighting the urgent need to recognize and address this tragic chapter in Assam's history.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining secondary data analysis and archival research. The primary sources include scholarly articles, Assamese literary works, government reports, and survivor testimonies. Secondary sources consist of academic studies by Kimura, Chopra, Yasmeen, Sharma, and Narayan. Official government documents and reports were analyzed to understand state responses and discrepancies in documented facts. Oral histories from Assamese writings were critically examined to highlight marginalized perspectives. Triangulation of these sources ensures a multi-dimensional analysis.

Discussion

Historical Context: The Assam Movement and Communal Polarization

The Assam Movement (1979–1985) arose as a reaction against the perceived influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, particularly following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The indigenous Assamese population viewed this demographic shift as a threat to their cultural, linguistic, and economic identity [3]. By the early 1980s, Assam's population was approximately 19.9 million, with an accelerated growth rate leading to increased density and competition for resources [4]. The 2011 Census later recorded that Muslims comprised 34.22 percentage and Hindus 61.47 percentage of Assam's population [5]. While official numbers from the 1981 census are unavailable due to disturbances, these figures reflect significant demographic shifts that heightened communal anxieties. Linguistically, Assamese was the official state language, but Bengali was widely spoken in regions such as the Barak Valley, adding complexity to identity conflicts. These demographic trends became entangled with political narratives that framed Bengali Muslims as illegal immigrants and threats to Assamese culture. "*The Assam Movement*", as Makiko Kimura noted, "*effectively constructed Bengali Muslims as 'the Other,' implicitly rendering them stateless and vulnerable to violence*" [6]. Diganta Sharma emphasized that "*the political rhetoric at the time significantly dehumanized Bengali Muslims, creating a social atmosphere conducive to mass violence*" [7].

The Massacre: Execution, State Complicity, and Survivor Voices

On February 18, 1983, coordinated mobs, reportedly from the Tiwa community, surrounded Bengali Muslim villages in and around the village of Nellie in the Nagaon district of Assam and carried out systematic killings. Survivors were pushed toward the Kopili River, where many drowned or were killed [8]. Despite the presence of security forces, no effective action was taken to prevent the massacre. "The failure of the state machinery to act reflects not merely bureaucratic inefficiency but possibly a deliberate policy of inaction" [9]. Hemendra Narayan highlights the enduring psychological effects, noting that "*even decades later, the survivors live in constant fear and societal exclusion,*" which reveals the massacre's profound and lasting human cost [10]. Survivor testimonies documented by Yasmeen powerfully illustrate the depth of intergenerational trauma. One survivor reflects, "*My grandchildren still ask why their grandparents were killed for no reason. The silence around it only deepens our pain*" [11]. This underscores how the violence continues to haunt families across generations, with the lack of acknowledgment compounding their grief and sense of injustice. These voices directly challenge official narratives and emphasize the need for acknowledgment.

Comparative Analysis

The Nellie Massacre bears similarities to the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in India and the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. In each case, dominant ethno-nationalist narratives justified targeting minorities. Unlike the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, however, the Nellie Massacre remains largely underrepresented in national discourse. The state's failure to prosecute the perpetrators and acknowledge the event reflects systemic problems common to cases of mass violence globally, including state complicity, political opportunism, and collective denial.

Counter-Narratives

Official narratives frame the Assam Movement as a legitimate protest for protecting Assamese identity and sovereignty. Some political actors justified the exclusion of Bengali Muslims as a necessary measure for maintaining Assam's cultural integrity. However, these justifications are critically flawed. Kimura explains, "*Such justifications obscure the systematic targeting of minorities under the guise of nationalism*" [12]. Furthermore, government reports either omit or downplay the massacre, contributing to collective amnesia [13].

Aftermath and Legacy

The Nellie Massacre had a deep impact on India and is remembered as a dark and tragic event in the country's history. It took place during a sensitive time and even overshadowed the elections. To look into the violence, the government set up the Tiwari Commission, but its report was never shared with the public, leading many to believe there was a cover-up. Over 600 police complaints were filed and 310 cases were registered, but justice was slow and affected by political pressure and poor investigations. In 2018, a local court cleared all 57 people accused in the case due to lack of proper evidence, which many saw as a huge failure of justice. Around the same time, the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, deciding that anyone who came to Assam after March 24, 1971, would be considered an illegal immigrant and removed. Even though the political agreement was made, the pain of the massacre still remains for the families who lost loved ones and never saw justice. The tragedy is a powerful reminder of how dangerous hatred, fear of outsiders, and politics based on identity can be in a diverse country like India. Yasmeen aptly observes, "The massacre has been largely silenced in public memory, rendering the survivors' grief invisible to the larger Indian society" [14]. Sharma reinforces this point: "The lack of proper documentation and acknowledgment has led to the survivors being trapped in cycles of poverty and marginalization, with little hope for justice or reconciliation" [15].

Policy Recommendations

1. The 1983 Nellie Massacre is a stark, unresolved tragedy in Assam's history. The profound lack of accountability, justice, and state recognition has perpetuated lasting trauma for survivors and the region's social fabric. To address this historical injustice and foster genuine reconciliation, a suite of survivor-centric measures is urgently needed. These include:
 1. **Official Apology and Acknowledgment:** The Government of Assam should formally recognize its failure to prevent the Nellie Massacre and take responsibility for the events of February 1983. As a necessary first step toward justice and healing, the state must issue a clear, public, and unconditional apology to the victims, survivors, and their families, acknowledging the pain and loss they have endured.
 2. **Historical Inclusion:** The Assam state curriculum should include a comprehensive, accurate account of the Nellie Massacre to ensure students learn the truth about this tragic event. This history must be presented in a balanced, fact-based manner, with a strong focus on survivor voices and firsthand accounts, so that the experiences of those affected are not forgotten and the lessons of the past are carried forward by future generations.
 3. **Comprehensive Reparation and Rehabilitation Program:** Establish a well-funded initiative to provide financial compensation and sustained psychological support for survivors and their descendants, addressing both economic hardship and long-term trauma within affected communities.
 4. **Safeguard Citizenship Rights:** To build trust and prevent future discrimination, it is imperative to create a citizenship documentation process that is transparent, consistent, and fair for all, ensuring no community is unjustly targeted.

5. **Community reconciliation initiatives:** Support and fund sustained, community-led initiatives that promotes dialogue, reconciliation, and mutual understanding among Assam's diverse ethnic and religious groups to heal past divisions and build lasting peace.

These steps form an essential framework for redress, aiming to heal deep wounds and build a more equitable and harmonious future for Assam.

Conclusion

The Nellie Massacre stands as a grim testament to the lethal consequences of exclusionary nationalism and the failure of the state to protect vulnerable people. This study reveals that the massacre was a planned attack on a minority group, not a random event. Survivor stories and oral histories break the silence and show lasting trauma across generations. Despite the large scale of the violence, there has been no official apology, justice, or support for the victims. Similar events in India and around the world highlight the need for truth and change. Addressing the legacy of Nellie requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands concrete, survivor-centered policy actions. These include a formal state apology, inclusion of the massacre in the history, provide compensation, protect citizenship rights, and support efforts for communal reconciliation. Only through such comprehensive measures can Assam begin to heal, honor the memory of the victims, and ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated. Remembering Nellie is not just an act of mourning – it is a call to justice, accountability, and enduring peace.

References

- [1]. Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- [2]. Chopra, S. (2016). Archives of violence: Seeking and preserving memories of the Nellie massacre. *National Law School of India Review*, 28(1), 1–20.
- [3]. Kimura, M. (2003). Memories of the massacre: Violence and collective identity in the narratives on the Nellie incident. *Asian Ethnicity*, 4(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1463136032000120452>
- [4]. Narayan, H. (2008). *25 years on... Nellie still haunts...* [Self-published?].
- [5]. Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, 26, 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>
- [6]. Sharma, D. (2007). *Nellie, 1983*. Eklabya Prakashan.
- [7]. South Asia Monitor. (n.d.). Assam's demographic dilemma: Will politics of population divide or unite Northeast India's most. *South Asia Monitor*. <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/assams-demographic-dilemma-will-politics-population-divide-or-unite-northeast-indias-most>
- [8]. Wikipedia. (n.d.). *1981 census of India*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved September 11, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_census_of_India
- [9]. Wikipedia. (n.d.). *What the fields remember*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved September 11, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_the_Fields_Remember
- [10]. Yasmeen, J. (2023). Understanding narratives of harmony from the Nellie massacre. *Global South Perspectives*, 33–45.