

Research Paper

Ethnic Turmoil and Individual Resilience: A Qualitative Inquiry into The Experiences of a Teacher in Karbi Anglong, Assam During Ethnic Clashes

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ABSTRACT

In this study, an attempt has been made to study the experience of A Teacher, who was a witness of the Karbi-Dimasa Conflict in 2005, This study aims to understand the emotional turmoil faced by an individual who faces such a situation in which they are not directly related but witness the adversity of the clashes. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participant of the study. The participant for this study is a 48-year-old female, who is a teacher by profession and she was appointed in a government school in the year 2005. The study uses Thematic Analysis to understand the experience. A Transcript of the audio recording of the interview was prepared, which was read multiple times to find out the Basic Theme, Organising Themes and Global Themes of which the Global themes were found to be Nescience, Sheltered, Perilous, and Courage. This study provides the perspective of an individual who was not a part of any of the ethnic groups present in the conflict but was an employee who was appointed to work in that place which was severely affected by conflict.

Keywords: *Karbi-Dimasa Conflict, Nescience, Sheltered, Perilous, Courage*

Karbi Anglong is one of the largest districts among the 35 administrative districts in Assam. Karbi Anglong, in particular, is a region of different ethnic groups, having different ethnicities, cultures, rituals, traditions, customs, beliefs, languages and legends. Since 2003, the district has experienced ethnic conflicts such as the Karbi-Kuki conflict in 2003, the Bihari-Adivasi conflict in July 2005, in August 2005, the tension between Karbi and Khasi, the Karbi-Dimasa conflict in September 2005 and Bodo-Muslim conflict in 2008 and so on. Therefore, the Karbi Anglong district is often known as one of the conflict-ridden areas in Assam. Since 2003, the district has been mainly affected by such ethnic conflicts and most important is the Karbi Dimasa conflict in 2005, which is the main subject of our present study.

Ethnicity is the state of being ethnic or belonging to a certain ethnic group (Kellas, 1998, p:6). An ethnic group is defined as a group of people who are generally recognized by themselves and/or the others as a distinct group, with such recognition based on social or cultural characteristics (Farley in Cornell,1998, p:17). Thus, when a subpopulation of

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individuals reveals, or is perceived to reveal, shared historical experiences as well as unique organizational, behavioral and cultural characteristics, it exhibits ethnicity (Aguirre and Turner in Cornell, 1998, p:17). Smith refers to six main attributes to define an ethnic group sharing the same ethnicity: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific homeland, and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population (Smith, 1991, p:21). Since all the abovementioned attributes of ethnicity give the group its individual characteristics and distinguish it from the others, ethnicity could be considered in a way synonymous to the notion of identity or, to set it in a different way, identity is that sense of ethnic distinctiveness (Cornell, 1998, p:18). This link between identity and ethnicity is made explicit in Horowitz's (1985) definition of the latter: ethnicity is a highly inclusive group identity based on some notion of common origin, recruited primarily through kinship and typically manifesting some measure of cultural distinctiveness (Horowitz in Vuckovic, 1997, p:1).

Conflict describes a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible goals. It is not necessarily violent, but the use of tension, dispute, or unease is more common in a nonviolent context. A violent internal conflict is generally called a civil war or armed conflict when casualties and destruction are substantial, the conflict has a certain duration, the protagonists are organized, and military operations are used to achieve political goals.

Ethnic conflict, therefore, is a form of conflict in which there is an ethnic dimension. The ambitions of at least one party are defined in ethnic terms, and the conflict, its antecedents and possible solutions are perceived along ethnic lines. The conflict tends not to be about ethnic differences themselves but over political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial matters.

The Karbi-Dimasa Conflict, 2005:

Many ethnic conflicts have occurred in the Karbi Anglong district since 2003, but none involved the main tribes of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. Killings and attacks between the two districts occurred during the Karbi-Dimasa Conflict, that took place in 2005. The immediate conflict broke out on the 26th of September 2005, when the three Auto-drivers from Manja belonging to the Dimasa tribes were taken nearby forest and were brutally killed with sharp weapons by unidentified assailants. In reaction to this, on 17th October 2005, 34 Karbis were hacked to death at Charchim in West Karbi Anglong about 25 Km away from the Kheroni Police station. There was also an involvement of armed groups such as Dima Haram. The conflict had major impact on political, social and economic conditions of the Karbi Anglong District.

The Impacts and Consequences of the Conflict:

The Karbi-Dimasa ethnic conflict in 2005, greatly affected the atmosphere of the Karbi Anglong district. The conflict resulted in the loss of life, destruction of Property and a huge waste of human and economic resources. The victims were the innocent village people who were displaced from their own homes and had to take refuge elsewhere. The conflict caused around 75,000 refugees, who were deprived of access to proper food, basic shelter and housing, clothing, essential medical services and sanitation. Agricultural activities were disrupted along with other economic problems such as food insecurity, destruction of property, loss of livestock etc.

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Besides these, many schools or colleges were closed and students were unable to attend classes or appear for their exams, the residential schools provided security to the teachers and students already residing in the schools, they were not allowed to leave the premises even during the holidays for the sake of their safety. Which eventually led to some children dropping out of schools and colleges due to financial and socio-economic constraints. The present study sought to document the in-depth experience of a newly appointed teacher of a residential school who has closely encountered the violence taking place beyond the school gates and in the lives of the students residing there.

One of the most important variables to be used in the study is **Individual Resilience**, Perhaps the most parsimonious definition of resilience is “bouncing back.” Resilience is an inferential concept, in that two major judgments must be rendered to diagnose resilience. First, there is a judgment that individuals are at least “doing OK” concerning a set of expectations for behaviour. Second, there must be significant exposure to risk or adversity that has posed a serious threat to good outcomes.

Operational Definition

With research being done in almost every area, there are numerous definitions of a single variable available to be studied and further researched, therefore, this section specifically states the definitions of the variable to be particularly used in the present study.

ETHNIC CONFLICT: Ethnic, or interethnic, conflict refers to disputes between contending groups who identify themselves primarily based on ethnic criteria and who make group claims to resources based on their collective rights [Errol A Henderson, 2010]. The role of ethnic conflict in this study primarily focuses on the impact of the conflicts on the people present there, not all people might be directly affected but they indeed face consequences, like lack of availability of communication, some basic requirements shortage, like fooding and clothing and most importantly, a blow to the safety. The constant fear of being attacked anytime, without any explanation for them. The situation of ethnic conflict can pose a threat to everyone present in that locality.

RESILIENCE: Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. The concept of resilience in this study focuses on the resilience of the participant, who witnessed the adverse situations closely but still was resilient enough to not flee but rather stay back and complete her responsibility.

Need for the Study

Ethnic Conflicts are not a new concept in India, with the presence of diverse ethnicities and religions, some conflicts arise at regular intervals. Which severely impacts the victims as well as people who directly have the misfortune to witness these clashes. There are numerous studies done on the topic of ethnic clashes in India showcasing the emotional and psychological impact of the clashes on the victims. The present study also attempts to dive deep into the understanding of the experience of an individual who was appointed in a place that was severely affected by ethnic clashes and they were not particularly related to any of the ethnic groups. The study tries to understand, the mind process and perception of the individual stuck in a situation as such of which they were not aware, and probably didn't

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have a way out. And the participant's journey of acceptance of the situation and ways of coping with the situation.

Research Question

The research questions that are aimed to be answered in the study are listed below:

- What is the emotional turmoil that a person faces who witnesses ethnic clashes?
- What was the actual scenario that the person faced and how those incidents have brought a change in the thinking process of the individual today?

Objective of the Study

The objectives indicate the main focus area or specific goals of the study, the objectives of the present study are listed below,

- To understand the emotional turmoil people face when they are restricted in a particular area, which is affected by ethnic conflicts.
- To understand how the actual scenario of security and communication.
- To understand how that experience has shaped the present thought process.

METHODOLOGY

Approach

The present study adopted a qualitative approach Denzin and Lincon (2000) have opined that there is a consensus among researchers that qualitative research is a naturalistic and interpretative approach, it concerns itself with the understanding and meaning which people attach to various phenomena, be it action, decision, belief, experience, values etc. within their social world.

In the qualitative approach, data is in words rather than numbers. The present study uses Thematic Analysis to understand the experiences of the Participants.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. By focusing on meaning across a dataset, Thematic Analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Identifying unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences found only within a single data item is not the focus of Thematic Analysis. This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about, and of making sense of those commonalities. However, what is common is not necessarily in and of itself meaningful or important. The patterns of meaning that Thematic Analysis allows the researcher to identify need to be important concerning the particular topic and research question being explored. The analysis produces the answer to a question, even if, as in some qualitative research, the specific question that is being answered only becomes apparent through the analysis. Numerous patterns could be identified across any dataset - the purpose of analysis is to identify those relevant to answering a particular research question. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows the researcher to focus on the data in numerous different ways. With Thematic Analysis, researchers can legitimately focus on analysing meaning across the entire dataset, or they can examine one particular aspect of a phenomenon in depth. They can report the obvious or semantic meanings in the data, or they can interrogate the latent meanings, the assumptions and ideas

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that lie behind what is explicitly stated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The many forms thematic analysis can take means that it suits a wide variety of research questions and research topics.

Participant

The participant of the present study is a 48-year-old female hailing from Abhaiyapuri, a town in the district of Bongaigaon, Assam. She is a teacher by profession and has been working in this field for the past 20 years, the present study is about her experience when she was appointed as a teacher in Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Diphu, Karbi Anglong Assam in the year 2005. She was appointed as a contractual teacher on 5th September 2005 and worked for one and a half years. At the time of her appointment, the Karbi Dimas ethnic clashes were going on.

Sampling Technique

The purposive Sampling technique was used for the present study. Purposive sampling (also known as judgement, selective, or subjective sampling) is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher relies on his or her judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in the study. purposive sampling is considered desirable when the universe happens to be small and a known characteristic of it is to be studied intensively. Also, there are conditions under which sample designs other than random sampling may be considered better for reasons like convenience and low costs.

Data Collection

The participant was interviewed individually to avoid social desirability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using audio recordings that lasted between 15- 17 minutes. This was done after obtaining Informed Consent from the participant.

Informed Consent is a process by which a person voluntarily opts into a research study and it can only take place after they have been fully informed of all that the study will entail and all that they will be required to do to become a participant, and are fully aware of what will happen to their data. Consent must be 'freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous'. The participant was informed about their right to withdraw. Following the interview, a debriefing was carried out. The audio-recorded interview was later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis which is a Qualitative Analysis method was used to analyse the transcripts of the interview collected.

Thematic Analysis is a method used for identifying analysing and reporting patterns within a given data set. [Braun and Clarke 2006].

[Braun and Clarke,2006] have also suggested a six-step method of Thematic Analysis which was followed for the present study. The steps include familiarisation with the data through multiple readings. After multiple readings, preliminary codes were assigned to the data in order to describe the content within the codes.

A search for Patterns or themes in the codes across different interview questions was done. When this was completed a review of the themes was done where some of the common themes were merged, discarded, or renamed following this the themes were defined, given

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names and a report was produced where an analysis of themes was done to retain the confidentiality of the participant's name was renamed with initial.

Validating the Study

The interview guide was validated using a subject expert before going forward with the data collection. The additional questions which was needed for clarification were sent to the participant for a response when the transcript was completed a member check was done to validate from the participant the acquiring of their responses. After the confirmation was received detailed Analysis followed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The present study consisted of participant a 48-year-old female who is a teacher by profession and has been working in the field for the past 20 years belonging to the Abhaiyapuri region of Bongaigaon District, Assam.

Thematic analysis of Interview data identified 5 Global themes. The organizing theme and basic theme have subsequently been laid out.

Table 1: Themes that emerged from the transcript.

Global Theme	Organising Theme	Basic Theme
1. Nescience	1.1 Unfamiliarity	1.1.1 Unawareness
2. Sheltered	2.1 Attempted return	2.1.1 Attempted return failed
3. Perilous	2.2 Confined	2.2.1 Confined within a safe area.
4. Courage	3.1 Terrifying	3.1.1 Terrifying situations faced
	4.1 Persistence	4.1.1 Determination
	4.2 Accomplishable	4.1.2 Perseverance
		4.2.1 Safe return was accomplishable.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to understand the experience of an individual who gets appointed in an area facing ethnic conflict, the participant of the study is chosen by purposive sampling technique, is a teacher by profession and was appointed in a government school in Karbi Anlong in the year 2005. The result obtained by Thematic Analysis of the dataset suggests a total of five global themes, namely Nescience, Sheltered, Perilous, perseverance and courage.

1. NESCIENCE

The word Nescience is derived from the Latin word, *nescire* to be ignorant of, from *ne* not + *scire* to know, that is not to know, in the present study, the meaning of nescience used is “being unaware”, through the experience of the participant it was found that she was not aware of the adversity of the situations in the district of Karbi Anglong, through the media reports, although she was a bit aware of the clashes, she came to know about the curfews in the area, only once she reached there. In the main town of Diphu, the situations were however under control, because of the security, but there was a problem regarding communication services. The participant was also unaware of having to join work

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immediately after filling out the documentation. The global theme of Nescience was reached by the basic theme of “Unawareness” which was derived from the below-cited lines from the transcript.

“We reached there we came to know that there was a curfew going on in that area”

“I came to know about the clashes going on between both the groups”

“After reaching. the situations I faced were very adverse”

The above-quoted lines from the transcript, suggest that the situation faced by the participant was not foreseen, she came to know about it only after reaching the place of work. The little awareness about the situation she had was through the media, which suggests a misinterpretation of the situation by the subject.

Unfamiliarity: The global theme of nescience is derived from the organising theme of Unfamiliarity. The literal meaning of the word unfamiliarity is the fact of having no knowledge or experience of something. In this case, the participant did not have any knowledge about the situations going on in the Karbi Anglong district, during those days, for which the word Unfamiliarity is used to depict the feeling.

Unawareness: The basic theme of Nescience is unawareness which means the state of not knowing or realizing that something is happening or that something exists, in this case the participant did not know in the first place about the intense clashes between the ethnic groups taking place in Karbi Anglong.

2. SHELTERED

The word sheltered means being protected from difficulties or unpleasant realities. In the present study, it could be seen that the campus of the school where the participant resided was stated to be the sheltered area for the students as well as the teachers. The security within the campus was intact, and it was only safe for them to stay on campus. There were instances where the participant had to move out of the secured location, where she faced difficulty in finding the required resources and had difficulty commuting from the school campus to the main town area. The participant also mentioned having difficulty communicating with family members regularly because the mobile network was weak and one needed to the main Diphu town to call their family. There was a constant curfew in the area near the school. As it was a residential school the needs of the students and teachers were taken care of within the campus itself as well as the security. Students from nearby villages were restricted from going back home, as it was only safe for them to stay back in the school as the situation outside calmed down.

The lines from the transcript that suggested the basic theme of the global theme sheltered are quoted below;

“residential school, so they thought of it as a safe place”

“could not even go outside”

“for the safe side..they were kept in the school itself”

These are a few of the lines indicating the basic theme “Confined within a safe area” and the other basic theme “Attempted return failed” is indicated by the following lines quoted from the transcript

“I was supposed to come back home but I could not come back”

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“it was even scary to go outside”.

From these basic themes, the organising themes of “Attempted return” and “Confined” were reached, which were later categorised under the global theme of being sheltered, meaning being in a protected area, which in this case was the school campus for the students as well as the teachers present.

Attempted Return: The Organising theme of Attempted Return was chosen because throughout the tenure of her job, and after facing these adversities, the participant did think of trying to return home, but she could not due to her obligation towards the organisation.

Attempted Return Failed: The basic theme of attempted return failed was derived from the direct interpretation of the transcript, where the participant mentioned wanting to return home but could not.

Confined: The organising theme of the global theme Sheltered is confined which means small and surrounded by walls or sides, or being inside a protected area, in this case, the participant and the students as well were confined inside the safe boundaries of the residential school, where their security was also taken care of.

Confined within a safe area: The basic theme for the organising theme is confined within a safe area which more specifically defines the actual situation of the participant.

3. PERILOUS

The experience of the individual in the ethnic conflict-affected area was described by her as terrifying, in many instances, she faced situations that were extremely difficult for her, as it showed the prospect of human, which isn't normally witnessed, from the incidents the students described and went through, left a great impact in the emotional aspect of the participant. As she recalled her experience, it felt that even today, she could remember the intensity of violence, that she heard from the students. Even though she was not directly exposed to violence the incidents shared by the victims in their respective villages, made her terrified of the situation as a whole.

The literal meaning of the word “Perilous” is full of danger, or danger, which in the present study is indicative of the situations around in the localities near the school. The lines of the transcript which is indicative of the basic theme “terrifying situations faced” are quoted below:

“heard from the students about the horrific situations”

“what if...people with weapons just stop and harm us” This line is taken from the instance where the participant was accompanying her pregnant colleague to the hospital, this line clearly shows the emotional turmoil she faced while present in that circumstance.

“the environment was rather very gloomy”

The basic theme of the “terrifying situation faced” was later made into the organising theme “terrifying” which was later categorised as the Global theme “Perilous”.

Terrible: The organising theme for the global theme perilous is terrible, which is used to depict the emotions the participant was feeling at that moment of time while being present in that location it includes the emotions of fear and sadness that the participant felt.

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Terrible Situations Faced: The basic theme was derived directly from the transcript which better described the situation faced by the participant which later was termed as terrible in the organising theme.

4. COURAGE

According to the American Psychological Association, the word “courage” mean the ability to meet a difficult challenge despite the physical, psychological, or moral risks involved in doing so.

Though courage and fearlessness often are regarded as synonymous, many have argued that perseverance despite fear is the purest form of courage. Indeed, Rachman proposed that true courage is being willing and able to approach a fearful situation despite the presence of subjective fear.

S. J. Rachman, a Canadian psychologist specializing in fear and courage, says that many people think of courage as fearlessness. However, Rachman defines courage as perseverance in the face of fear and stress.

In the present study, Courage can be best defined as one ability to have perseverance, that is completing the task at hand, no matter how stressful or fearful circumstances are. The participant was well aware of her duties and even though the situation worsened, courage to face the situation at hand, she was never discouraged from completing her duty as a teacher, and provided support and encouragement to her students.

The lines from the transcript that is indicative of Courage and perseverance are listed below:

“the courage to stay strong”

“realise that if they can do it..I should be able to do it too”

“If they can do it, I should be able to face it too”

Persistence: Persistence is the personal tenacity, determination, and resolve to pursue a course of action despite difficulties, obstacles, or resistance. Persistence in attempting to accomplish a desired outcome is sometimes perceived as an irritation and a nuisance to those who may be opposed to the unceasing efforts of another or as evidence of profound personal courage by those who admire the dedication demonstrated to achieve a desired goal.

Determination: The basic theme of Persistence is Determination which is the ability to continue trying to do something, although it is difficult, in this scenario the participant was determined to deliver her job properly, even though she had the opportunity to return home during vacation.

Perseverance: Perseverance is a uniquely human characteristic that identifies an individual’s ability to spend long periods devoted to a single goal or set of goals. Those who persevere can set goals for themselves and then take active, calculated steps toward those goals. People demonstrating high levels of perseverance can handle significant, sometimes repeated, setbacks in pursuit of goals.

Accomplishable: The participant seemed to believe that her safe return home is very much accomplishable, and even though she faced a terrifying situation she would be able to go back home safely.

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Safe return was accomplishable: This basic theme clearly describes how the organising theme of Accomplishable was reached from the transcript.

CONCLUSION

Through the present study, we were able to understand the emotional turmoil faced by an individual while being restricted in an area, away from a conflict-affected area and were able to get an understanding of how the security and communication of the people were taken care of and finally were able to know how an incident as such can impact the thought process of the individual today, according to the participant that incident gave her more courage to face any situation and have perseverance and patience to calmly face any kind of stressful situation in the future. By using thematic analysis we were able to find four global themes from the transcript which were Nescience, Sheltered, Perilous and Courage, which were reached by various Basic and Organising themes.

Limitations

The study has some limitations. The limitations to be noted are as follows-

- One of the major limitations of the study is that only one participant was taken for the study to be done.
- Qualitative research is often very time-consuming so it gets difficult to get participants who will be ready to spend some time participating in the research
- As the incident took place many years back, the participant was unable to recall many details, which might have led to some misinterpretation of the event.
- Data collection was done in the regional language for the convenience of the participant, which created some degree of confusion in the interpretation of the data.

Suggestion for future research

As the sample size of the present study was small, further studies can be done by taking the similar experience of more participants. Research should be done on experiences that have recently taken place to avoid the decay of memory and so that the participants can recall the events in more detail. Misinterpretation of the data due to language barrier should be avoided in the future.

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Conflict of Interest

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