

A TRAP OF IGNORANCE AND POLITICAL ERASURE IN NORTH EAST INDIA: A VISUAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The image was taken at Naskara LP School of Dhubri district in Assam, an East-Indian state that borders Bangladesh on August 15, 2017. This predominantly Muslim-populated region has often faced lash back for harboring illegal immigrants and terrorists. Muslims make a significant minority in India and are often called out by national idealists and Hindu right-wing parties for their alleged lack of patriotism and devotion to religious extremism. This religious discrimination is more prominent in regions like Dhubri that share a national boundary with Bangladesh, known as East Pakistan before its independence. Besides the religious politics that has alienated them from the rest of the country, the people of Dhubri also deal with the wrath of the monsoon season that floods their houses, streets, schools and places of work disrupting day-to-day lives.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 14.08.2023
Approved: 22.09.2023

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POLITICAL ERASURE IN NORTH
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Article No.26
RJPSS Apr.-Sep. 2023,
Vol. XLVIII No. 2,
pp. 230-235

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/
view?file=3273&session_id=rjpss-
2023-vol-xlviii-no2-sept-2023](https://anubooks.com/view?file=3273&session_id=rjpss-2023-vol-xlviii-no2-sept-2023)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2023.v48i02.026](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2023.v48i02.026)



Image Background and Context

The image was taken at Naskara LP School of Dhubri district in Assam, an East-Indian state that borders Bangladesh on August 15, 2017. This predominantly Muslim-populated region has often faced lash back for harboring illegal immigrants and terrorists. Muslims make a significant minority in India and are often called out by national idealists and Hindu right-wing parties for their alleged lack of patriotism and devotion to religious extremism. This religious discrimination is more prominent in regions like Dhubri that share a national boundary with Bangladesh, known as East Pakistan before its independence. Besides the religious politics that has alienated them from the rest of the country, the people of Dhubri also deal with the wrath of the monsoon season that floods their houses, streets, schools and places of work disrupting day-to-day lives.

The image shows the Headmaster TazemSikdar, Assistant Teacher NripenRabha and two 3rd-grade students Jiarul Ali Khan and Haider Ali Khan saluting the Indian Flag on August 15, 2017, India's 70th Independence Day celebration. The image was taken by Assistant Teacher Joydev Roy and uploaded on Facebook by MizanurRahman who wished everyone Happy Independence Day and requested the audience to acknowledge their plight. Within a few hours of uploading, the image went viral. Shared over a hundred thousand times, this photograph of two children saluting the Indian flag in chest-deep waters sparked conversations across the nation. While people on social media mostly hailed the

patriotism of these teachers and children, few showed concerns over the living conditions and hygiene of the water where the two children have been saluting the flag. On the other hand journalists and social workers questioned the state affairs and challenged the Hindu-right government saying that the Muslims of Dhubri are as patriotic as any other Indian and should not be asked to prove their devotion to the country based on their religion. Though the context of these conversations may have been rooted in different ideological codes, it is important to address the fact that this image evoked a strong emotion among the spectators. The image is a sight to understand the social and political position of those photographed and how the viewers perceive it.

Reading this Photograph as an Iconic Image

Hariman and Lucaites (2007, p. 29) point out the five assumptions that should be kept in mind while we analyze a photograph to check if it's iconic or not: aesthetic familiarity, civic performance, semiotic transcriptions, emotional scenarios and contradiction and crisis. These are the five vectors for determining whether the image is iconic or not. The Dhubri image seems similar to iconic images but it is in fact a viral image. However, it possesses some of the properties of iconic photographs as described by Hariman and Lucaites and we need to unpack these properties to analyze the image.

The Dhubri image uses conventional visual arts and persuasive practices familiar to the audience (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, p. 30) to reproduce ideology. The image challenges the belief that Muslims in India, especially those living in districts close to Bangladesh are as much Indian as other citizens. The civic performance vector applies to the image as it captures a ritual performance of flag hoisting as part of the Indian Independence Day celebrations and “acquires the capability to reveal or suggest what is unsayable or is not said in print” (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, p. 33). The Dhubri image communicates social knowledge and fuses gestures, interactions, social, political and cultural styles together as codes of the image as experienced by the audience (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, p. 35). Saluting the flag and participating in hoisting for the Independence Day celebration despite the flooding can be seen as the devotion of the people in the picture to their nation. The floods, the emptiness of the school and the fact that only two students were present raise questions about living conditions. The fact that the individuals in the image belong to the Muslim community also challenges the right-wing narrative that Muslims are anti-nationals. How this image was circulated, it presented opportunities for people to have different discourses around the codes it represents. Hence the image provides resources for defining audiences' relationship to those

who were photographed (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, p. 35) and interpreting the representation of the Muslims in the northeastern states of India that border with Bangladesh.

The way people responded to the image by sharing it, hailing those in the image who risk their health to hoist the flag and lauding their patriotic sentiment clearly points to the emotional scenario vector that Hariman and Lucaites (2007) mention. The image, as perceived by the audience, evokes strong sentiments of patriotism that can be seen in reappearing comments like Jai Hind (hail India). It also evokes fury alongside conversations about the safety of children in flood-stricken areas and the lack of government initiatives to meet the needs of these people. The fifth vector posed by Hariman and Lucaites (2007, p. 36) maintains that iconic images both challenge and reinforce the dominant ideology. In the case of the Dhubri image, the readings of the audience reinforce the ideology that true patriotism is seen in the rituals performed by the individuals in the image by hoisting and saluting the flag. The belief that respect for the flag and celebration of Independence Day despite the floods signifies devotion to the nation is strengthened. Although some of the images highlight the government's ignorance of the plight of the people of Dhubri, especially children, it fails to fix these issues being a source of contradiction (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, p. 36).

Even though the Dhubri image has the five vectors of influence that are generally seen in the iconic photographs, my understanding is that it doesn't qualify as one of them for three reasons. Firstly, the images that Hariman and Lucaites (2007) discuss are photos produced by photojournalists while a Teacher of the school shown in the image has captured the Dhubri image. Second, the image does not represent a range of historical experiences for two reasons: (1) apart from the flag hoisting on Independence Day of India, there is nothing historically significant in the image and (2) the image is fairly new to be put in that category and so is the definition of patriotism implied by the Hindu-right wing political leaders, therefore lacking the historical context. Third, the image will most likely not pass the test of iconic photographs.

Unpacking the Image through Ideological Codes

According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007, p. 35), "iconic images fuse codes together as an image of collective experience" that enable audiences to interpret their relationships with others. Based on the conversations on traditional media and social media, the Dhubri image produces three main discourses in the Indian context: patriotism, Hindu nationalism and political ignorance. These codes combined evoke

a strong emotional response among the audience and challenge dominant ideologies about the Muslim community in India.

The image became a symbol of patriotism as it went viral. The four individuals in the image saluting the Indian national flag evoke devotion to the nation. The two children in the photograph who participate in this ritual in chest-deep waters exemplify this devotion. The act of sacrificing health and safety in a flooded region to hoist the national flag is compared by the audience to the Indian soldiers who put down their lives for national pride and safety. Saluting the flag here is not merely a ritual but a salute to every Indian who put his or her country before their own interests. Respect for the national flag has been a significant gesture of patriotism in India and the Dhubri image captures that gesture in a unique setup. This gesture is recognized and hailed by the audience, many of whom shared the image with prominent political leaders by tagging them on social media.

Patriotism being the strongest response to the image brings me to question the response of the audience on social media. Most of the audience responses reinforce the dominant ideology that gives importance to the flag hoisting on Independence Day, ignoring or not acknowledging the Hindu-nationalist discourse. According to Graham (1990) Jaffrelot (1996) and van der Veer, (1996), as quoted by Robinson (2010), Hindu religious nationalism has changed the character of politics in contemporary India. The propaganda of creating a Hindu nation has gained popularity since the BJP, a party with Hindu nationalist ideology, won the 2014 elections and formed a non-coalition government (Sur, 2018). The Hindu nationalism discourse is of the essence here because it has redefined the definition of nationalism. Hindu nationalists have often attacked Muslim organizations for not acknowledging Indian Independence Day, as many of them did not always hoist flags in the past (“We hoist the flag but does the RSS honor it, asks Deoband,” 2016). According to these Hindu nationalists, a true Indian is someone who hoists and salutes the national flag on days of national importance, takes pride in being an Indian citizen, doesn’t criticize the failures of the state and always puts the nation before religion. In this case, the Muslims who don’t hoist flags and give more importance to prayers, criticize the government’s oppression of the minorities are non-patriotic, even anti-national. Therefore, the need to prove patriotism is much more for a bearded man wearing a skullcap and burqa-clad women in Dhubri than their Hindu counterparts. The Dhubri image and the appreciation it garnered just point to the acceptance of the Hindu nationalist norms by the audience.

The traditional media took the Hindu nationalist discourse forward and used the image to critique political ignorance of the floods in the area. They highlight the

condition of the flood-stricken schools in Dhubri and criticize the need for children to participate in this event as the state has mandated that every school (i.e. schools funded by the government) event should be photographed and images should be sent to the district's education coordinator. Opinion leaders call it an oppressive move of the Hindu nationalist government. Newspapers highlight the absence of other students of the school to cite the dangers of flag hoisting amidst floods. Rahman (the photographer) said that it was too dangerous for all children to participate in the event since they didn't know how to swim. Therefore only the only two students who knew how to swim are seen saluting the flag in the picture while the rest of the students and teachers participated in the event from across the road ("The real story behind flooded Assam school hoisting national flag," 2017). The lack of guests and local leaders in the picture also points to the political ignorance faced by Dhubri. While I recall from my own school days that each of the schools in the cities was visited by prominent political figures as chief guests on Independence Day. Political ignorance is also prominent in the lack of response to the image by the government. Though many of them were tagged in these images on social media, none of them responded to the patriotism of the people in the image.

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