LIGHT AND SHADOW: HOW WOMEN REMEMBER THE NELLIE MASSACRE

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Dedicated to all those who dared to go back to that dark place in their hearts where memories of the day live.

It was a sunny day in March 2016 when my father and I first visited Nellie. Nellie is a small town situated about 70 km from Guwahati, the capital of Assam. National Highway 37 divides the town into two parts. One part has the small yet vibrant market with the crowd swelling on Mondays, the day of the weekly *haat* (market). The other part is relatively quieter with rows of small shops and quiet roads leading to villages in the interiors. The first thing that struck me about Nellie was how beautiful it was with blue hills in the near horizon. On many evenings during my stay, I was mesmerised by the clouds inundating those hills just above the large field of the Nellie High School. The red sun set at the end of the wide, mostly empty highway. Boys played football in that field, always watched and cheered on by a crowd. On rare occasions, there were meetings of some political parties or

functions and competitions during festivals like Eid. Nellie, despite its sleepiness, had its own distinct flavour.

When we reached Nellie on that first day, the wide roads were dusty and almost deserted. There weren't many people around. We looked very much the outsiders that we were in that sleepy town on a non-market day. The few people on the road were curious enough to approach us and enquire why we were there. We had to go to the house of a local politician. A few contacts in Guwahati had given his reference. I was searching for people who would talk about a massacre that happened 35 years ago in Nellie. It came to be known as the Nellie massacre. To give an idea of this massacre, let me present a small snippet from one of the interviews I did over a period of several days:

> 18 February 1983, 8 in the morning, they, all the Hindus united, taking together their administrative departments like a conspiracy and surrounded us from all sides with the intent to kill. First, they burnt down our houses… starting on Friday morning till the afternoon they had burnt all our houses to ash. Not content with this, they went to the banks of Basundhari *beel* (small lake) where our people had gathered and started shooting with guns as well as bows and arrows. People ran out of fear, fell into the *beel*, and were chased up to Kiling and Kopili rivers. Some took shelter on Azari Bridge where there was a CRPF camp nearby. CRPF had come at 3 or 4 in the evening. The attackers had mics announcing slogans from the trees. Girls were shouting, 'You still have time; don't come back; carry on.' When it was about 3.30 p.m., they announced to the attackers that they should return as CRPF had entered the place. They stopped only when CRPF entered at around 4. They ran out then.[1]

This was what happened according to one of the survivors, a known local leader. The Nellie massacre happened on 18 February 1983, when neighbouring Assamese Hindus and Tiwas attacked a cluster of villages in Nellie then in the Nowgong district (now in Morigaon district of Assam) at the peak of the Assam agitation. The attacked villagers were mostly Bengali speaking Muslims of East Bengal origin.

According to official estimates almost 1,800 were killed. Unofficial reports claim 5,000 or more were killed. There were no convictions for the killings. The survivors received scant compensation. The massacre was quickly erased from the larger public memory. I was in search of this story. I was in search for why I did not know about the massacre.

We stopped at a very small eatery near the stop where we de-boarded from the traveller. Travellers are multi-seated vans, which are used for public transport in the region. They are a convenient means of travel and ply from Guwahati to places like Nagaon and Tezpur. The places near the highways, therefore, are now accessible which they were not a few years ago. The eatery was filled with men from nearby villages who had come to the town centre for their daily affairs: the market, to go to some nearby town or another block, and so on. The eatery was managed by a cheerful young man in his early 20s. The menu was brief: tea, onion and lentil fritters, black *chana* (grams) fry and chicken *pulav*. Either it was a lazed out resting place for those who had just settled their business for the day or hour and had dropped in for a cup of tea and snacks and a dose of chit-chat, or it was a hurried stop for anyone who had to catch the next traveller to Nagaon or Guwahati. Let me call this eatery Karim's shop. It was in Karim's shop that my father got his regular cup of tea in the morning when we stayed in Nellie for a few days, every day before we went in search of stories or after we came back tired in the evening. It was the space men came for relaxing and catching up on the news of the day. Karim's shop was owned by an old woman and was dismantled by the time I went to Nellie the next year. I never saw another woman in Karim's shop besides the old owner and another woman who worked there. I was the third female presence in that shop on most days. Women's presence was conspicuous due to its otherwise glaring absence.

Throughout my stay in Nellie and during the meetings scheduled with the survivors in most of the 16 villages, the encounters I had with women were intriguing, one of the chief reasons being their absence in certain places and presence in others. Karim's shop was a space completely occupied by men and so was the marketplace. I saw women

come to the marketplace, but small spaces such as eateries were mostly filled by men. I also call the meetings with women intriguing because all of them had unprecedented beginnings, each different from the other, each in a different setting and different circumstances. I met these women in different nooks and corners of their daily lives—in the fields in large groups, in their bedrooms as they prepared for their afternoon siestas with their daughters and grandchildren, in their kitchens as they prepared daily meals, or in their workspaces. Most of them spoke in Assamese, which is their second language. While most of the men use Assamese to conduct their daily business with the linguistically dominant Assamese society, women do not always have to interact with an outer society, and therefore most of them did not use the second language on a daily basis. Many of the women hesitated to speak to me initially because of this language barrier. However, most of them overcame this hesitation very quickly. Some took some more time than the others, which is also reflected in in their narrations. In every different space and struggle, every remembrance had different connotations.

We encountered one such story on an afternoon in March, a day after my first visit to Nellie. We had gone to Borbori, about 10 km from Nellie. Although the massacre is referred to as the Nellie massacre, Borbori is not mentioned as a constituent village of Nellie. It had an estimated population of 912 when the massacre happened, of which 585 people were killed. The front yard of Borbori's mosque has a mass grave where most of the dead are buried.

We were given the reference of a village elder, who happened to be out of town on that day. Despite his absence, he managed to call up his family and arranged for us to meet a few people at his house. All those gathered were men. The women-folk of the house listened to the discussion from the adjacent bedroom. However, they did ask a female survivor to come and meet us because she was one of the most severely injured survivors. Her wounds seemed to qualify her as a narrator of events. She had been hacked in several places and still lives in extreme physical pain. She still has to take regular injections to ease the pain.

It is difficult for her to bear the cost of the medical bills. She agreed to meet us with the hope that we might be able to help her financially. For her, justice meant being compensated enough to cover her medical expenses. Let me call her Monura Khatun[2] (it might be useful to add here that all the names of individuals I use in this piece have been changed). Monura remembered how her father was attacked several times while he was carrying her to Kopili river. She, too, was attacked. She sustained multiple cuts on her head and was shot with arrows on her shoulders. Her left leg was cut and it troubles her even now when she walks a few steps. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) soldiers took her from the river, and she was kept in a hospital in Guwahati for 11 months. Both her parents were killed. She was sent back to the village. Monura regrets, 'I should have been dead ... It becomes unbearable sometimes. I have to survive on medicines and injections. I received no compensation and did not get whatever was given then. I receive no help from any government schemes.' She abruptly adds, 'The Kopili waters could not hold so many dead.'

Borbori and the other villages in Nellie are located such that two rivers, Kopili and Kiling, run on their borders. The area is filled with water bodies, big and small. They are called *beels*. A significant water body is the Demal *jaan* (stream), which often came up in the survivors' narrations.

Having related her story to the assembled people, Monura pulled me aside to a bedroom to show her wounds. Her right leg had a long, deep cut which seemed to have been stitched badly. She walked with a very prominent limp. Her left shoulder had deep arrow marks. She showed me the wounds to convince me that she really was in dire need of financial help for buying medicines. It was difficult to explain to her that I did not represent any organisation.

After the discussion, we were shown around the village by the men—the mosque, the mass graves, and the places where they organized annual prayer meetings in memory of the massacre. The grand-daughter of the absent host and her friends accompanied me. They were an eager bunch of girls completing their high school

education. They were interested in where I had come from and what I would do with their stories. They told me how many people had come from outside and taken pictures and videos but nothing much had happened. They were aware of their bloodied history which their elders would rather not discuss with them. They were aware that nothing much happened even if the world was interested in them. They were acutely conscious of the stagnancy of the situation.

As we walked around, Najma, the grand-daughter, told me that a woman standing in the small opening between the houses nearby wanted to talk to me. As I approached, three other women joined her. They wanted to tell their stories too. While we were in the village elder's house, a fight broke out outside his campus. When we enquired someone told us that a man wanted his wife to narrate her story of survival in the meeting. Someone had tried to stop the man, and the quarrel ensued. I asked why she should not get to speak. What could be the stakes of not letting someone speak? Was it some local dynamics or mere age-old patriarchy? Why did the women have to find a dilapidated building-opening to come and narrate their stories to someone? And why should there have been a fist-fight to relieve/re-live one's story?

These women's narrations, standing in that small opening between the two buildings, were more animated, detailed, and personal than those of the men I had heard till then. Later, when I had interviewed journalist and writer Diganta Sharma[3] who wrote a noteworthy book on Nellie, *Nellie 1983*, he told me how at the beginning of his research on Nellie, he too had no access to the narratives of the women as he was quickly perceived as an outsider. One evening he could not return to Guwahati as he usually did due to the rains. He had to stay with a local family. There he had the chance of interacting with the women-folk of the household. As he started listening to the story of one woman, others from the neighbourhood also came in, and very soon he found himself listening to an outpouring of stories even the following day.

Nurun Nesa[4] spoke first in that gathering between the two buildings that afternoon. It was her husband who had had a tiff with

the others so that she could speak. She remembered that she was seven or eight when the attack happened. She recounted,

> My younger sister died right under my hand when she received a blow with a stick which also fractured my hand for life. Six members of our family were killed, and we received no compensation. Two brothers and two sisters were killed along with my parents. We never went to school as our parents were not there to take care of it. Somehow, we grew up and got married.

While it was generic throughout the narratives to refer to the number of family members killed and the compensation received, or more often not received, Nurun Nesa's regret that there was no one to take care of them, hence no one to think about their education was specific. She recollected what had happened on the day of the attack,

> It was our neighbours who attacked us. We had gone to the *madrassa* [Islamic school] that morning. Our teacher sent us back. We did not even get to eat the food our mother had cooked. We had to run without eating. Our neighbours, the Bengali people gave us a way of escaping. As we crossed, they attacked us from behind. My mother was a fat woman. She could not run. She had a baby in her arms. Someone knocked the baby off with a stick. My mother kept crying, asking us to run away and not turn back. As I ran, my younger sister came running to me asking me to lift her and run since she could not. I refused, but pulled her along. We hid in a fox pit near the river. I was holding her, trying to protect her. An attacker shouted to a fellow to bring a machete to kill me. Even before the machete could be brought, he hit me with his staff. As it struck, my sister died immediately, right under my hand. I climbed out and jumped into the river. Due to the blow, I momentarily lost sight of everything. I clung to an old woman's saree. She shouted at me, 'Leave me. I have left behind all my sons and daughters. Was it to save you?' True, who would care for another's child? After crossing the river, another of my sisters came running and asked me where our parents were. I told her they were no more. The people of Telahi [a nearby village] found us and carried us on cycles. They washed us with warm water. We

> were assembled in the schoolyard. The people of Telahi collected funds and fed us for three days. They gave us clothes to wear. After three days, we were taken to Nellie. I was admitted in the hospital. After that we were brought to Borbori. Nobody dared to come to Borbori. We were afraid that we would be attacked again. The policemen stationed there forced us to come back saying there were police in civil dress. We somehow survived on rice, lentils and potatoes, which the government provided. We received Rs 5,000. It did not make any difference. When people from other communities die, they get huge amounts as compensation, we don't get anything.

Nurun Nesa's recollection was detailed. She remembered the morning and a meal left untouched. It could have been the last time her mother fed her and her siblings. She remembered to add that her mother could not run because she was fat and had a baby in her arms. In contrast to her mother, whose last words and thoughts possibly were the safety of her children, was the old woman who refused to be bogged down either by her own children or those of others. Nurun Nesa's plain acceptance of the fact that her parents could be dead by the time she met her remaining sister is also disconcerting. I thought that her narration began with the mention of compensation and ended with the same along with the mention of the scant food in the relief camps. However, when Aleema Khatun was speaking, Nurun Nesa added,

> When my mother had fallen down, the baby in her hands also fell down. Someone speared the baby and was shouting while waving it in the air, 'Whose baby is this? Take it away.' I turned back to go. A woman stopped me and told me not to or else even I would not be alive. My baby brother died, struggling on the spear blade.

It was evident that Nurun Nesa was still struggling with the trauma of the sight. Remembering to add the detail after Aleema Khatun started speaking, she struggled to add a conclusion to her narration. She knew that she had not emphasised enough how that moment

disrupted her life. Her narration repeatedly paused to replay in a loop the moment she left her mother with the baby, her mother's inability to run, the baby being speared and her attempt to run back maybe to undo the moment. For Nurun Nesa it might have been an attempt to own up to her grief. It was important for her to tell me her story, even if it meant challenging the local authorities.

Aleema Khatun[5] remembered that she was new to the place then, married only 25 days before the attack happened,

> I was a new bride and did not recognise anyone. I did not even know my husband properly. We were preparing to eat our meal, but we had to leave. Like cattle, we ran, women first, then men. We ran through the Bengali *basti* [a small colony], and for three miles we ran. After that my husband came and caught my hand. There were people everywhere. I thought we would die; there was no escape. We were running, seeing people being killed around. When we reached Dharamtul Bridge, my husband told me, 'I have no claim on you. I cannot defend you anymore,' and he jumped into the river. I was unaware if I had jumped into the river on my own or not. I was drowning one moment and coming up the next. I reached a pillar of the bridge. I had very long hair that got wrapped around a pillar. Some people found me and checked if I was alive. They pulled my head out, and I stared back. They asked me to come out. I had no clothes on. They asked a young boy standing nearby to give his *lungi* (loincloth) to me. Arrows and stones were still raining. The man and the young boy were still around. People were falling down as soon as the arrows or stones hit them. The water in the river turned red. People were screaming for help. I was helpless myself; how could I help them? I held on to a pillar and a man. I had left everyone behind, my parents and siblings. I beckoned him towards me. He swam up to where I was. People came on boats and were hitting everyone on the way, those who were trying to save themselves. I collected a few arrows from the ground. The man asked me to throw them away. At around four in the evening army trucks came in and assured us that they had come from Jagiroad[6] to save us. The Assamese people who were attacking us ran into the nearby jungles. We were taken to

> Jagiroad on army trucks. I was wounded in a lot of places. My father could afford to pay for my treatment.

Aleema Khatun's position as a newly married bride made it difficult for her to escape initially. It was the helplessness of being new amidst strangers in an unfamiliar place. What multiplied the angst of the moment was her husband's betrayal, letting go of all the supposed promises of marital comradeship in a dire moment. He renounced the responsibilities assigned to him by society as the 'husband', perhaps fairly so for society too was being torn in that instant. It was a heart-breaking moment for the new bride. She was not even aware if she had jumped into the river. As she referred to 'the man' in different sentences, I could not understand if it was one or many men that she was talking about, if it was her husband or another man. She was ambiguous about her reference, trusting her listener to be aware of the implied meaning. I did not intervene to ask who the man was. Her narration was non-linear as she moved from observing the colour of the water of the river to the helpless people to her nonchalant collection of the fallen arrows. In one moment, she gave up her family ties and in the other she noted how her father paid for her treatment. Aleema Khatun recognised that she had become a helpless dice in the play of fate. She did not struggle against it. She accepted whatever turns the flow of events took. There was calm acceptance. She did not even resist Nurun Nesa trying to interrupt her narration as Nurun kept coming back to finish her own story.

Both the women and other survivors in Borbori referred to how the people in the Bengali colony attacked them after first letting them escape. 'Bengali' here means Bengali Hindus. The attacked community had linguistic affiliations with them as they too spoke Bangla. But it was a moment in the history of the state when the rift in all identities, whether linguistic or religious, was becoming more glaring and hateful. When the first interviewer quoted in this paper referred to the attackers as 'all Hindus' he did not definitively refer to a homogenous Hindu group, and the same can be said when the attackers were termed 'Assamese'. It was a motley crowd whose participants had

different religious as well as ethnic affiliations. The Assam agitation formed the background of all the violence. It started as movement against all 'outsiders' in the state which went on to mean 'foreign infiltrators'. It meant anyone from Nepal, or erstwhile East Bengal or East Pakistan. This came to mean mostly Bengalis and Bengali speaking Muslims. It was a moment of rift between all communities, Assamese, Bengalis, Nepalese, Bodos, Tiwas, Karbis, and others. It was at such a time that the Bengali Hindus in Nellie decided to attack their Bengali Muslim neighbours with whom they shared an immediate neighbourhood. It was an instance of self-determination in the state which turned extremely vitriolic and culminated in the Nellie massacre, the Chawlkhowa Chapori massacre, the Gohpur massacre, the Nagabandha killing, and a few others. The Nellie massacre was/is the largest and is relatively more heard of.

I went back to Nellie a few months after the monsoon of 2016. Most villages in Nellie remain flooded for a few months during the year. I went after the floods had receded, but there were occasional showers. The first village I visited this time was Indurmari. It is one of the remotest villages in Nellie. Its official name is Basundhari. It gained the moniker Indurmari because of its remoteness. 'Indur' means rat and 'mari' means killed: a place so remote that if a rat is killed there, its rotten smell won't reach you or bother you. When we reached Indurmari in September 2016, public transport in the area was almost non-existent. No auto, the only means of transportation in the area, was willing to cover the short distance from the National Highway starting at Dharamtul to Indurmari for a reasonable amount. It was a hot and humid mid-morning when we reached Indurmari after much negotiation with an auto driver. When we reached, we found what seemed like half the village assembled under a tree. The old and the experienced shared their recollections, while the children hung around. There were no schools for them in the vicinity, and they stopped going to schools in the nearby villages after a certain time. This happened more in case of girls. Thus, many got married at an early age too.

We sat under the trees, expecting a breeze to come and assuage the brunt of the September heat. As the narrations flowed over one another, I did not even get a chance to ask the people their names or even any question. The narrations overlapped one another, the speakers interrupted each other sometimes to correct and sometimes to remind them of certain facts that they might have left out, to add to the details, cry together in between, console, and then the speaker would carry on. There was a strange dynamic relationship in these collective narrations. The people encouraged one another to come forward and speak. They believed that even if nothing more came out of talking to me, it would lighten up their sorrow even if momentarily. Many interviews lost many details due to the commotion that ensued in the background as speakers once done with their part cried, discussed, remembered, and recounted the event once more amongst themselves. I realised later that it was a rare village where the women-folk had come out in large numbers to speak their hearts out. They were spontaneous, supportive of each other as well as curious about me. As people started speaking together confusion ensued. It was my first encounter with such a large assembly of people. I was as clueless as them. To my good fortune, they settled down somewhat soon and decided amongst themselves to take turns and talk. Nevertheless, when one of them remembered some detail, they did not hesitate to interrupt the one speaking.

Towards the end of his narration, the first speaker pointed out to a woman sitting nearby, 'That girl right there was in her in-laws' place in Besamari. She has nobody. Her father died, brother and mother died. She was left with a boy. Nobody else of that family survived. Only these two siblings survived.' It was a cue for the woman to speak. It was only after a few speakers that she got a chance to speak. Let me name her Taslima.[7] This is what she said:

> I was married off two years before 1983 in Nagaon. Three months before, I had come to Besamari from home. I could not go back as every other day there were strikes. The wooden bridges were burnt down, and Assamese people would beat up people on the

> roads. I just kept crying. Many villagers came to see me as I was a girl brought from Nellie who would not stop crying. I cried, rolling on the floor that I would never see my parents again. I was made to understand that my parents were not dead. But I would say that I will never be able to see my parents' faces.

Taslima referred to how during the Assam agitation, people, especially those who visibly appeared to belong to the Bengali speaking Muslim community, were de-boarded from buses and beaten up and sometimes even killed. Some of these were rumours which added to the atmosphere of panic that was already existing. It is said that the Nellie massacre was also the result of some rumours. First was the abduction of four Tiwa girls by Bengali Muslims, and the second was a planned attack on Tiwa and Assamese villages.[8]

Taslima resumed,

> I would not eat or drink anything. Everyone tried to reason with me. I did that for three months. After that, on a Friday, I got up in the morning and my mother-in-law told me, 'You don't eat anything; you cry all the time. It's a Friday. You should take a shower and pray two *rakat namaz* [unit of Islamic prayers] and pray for your parents.' I cried. There is a place in the west from where rumours started coming in that Assamese people had arrived. Later, everyone started running helter-skelter. I ran crying.

Taslima's narrative then shifted to what had or must have happened in her maternal home:

> On Friday when it happened, my *nani* [maternal grandmother] was at our home. She said that she was leaving for the mosque after cooking and eating as there was no saying what was going to happen, what the Assamese people would do. The Assamese people had burnt down all the houses. My mother refused to go saying, 'I won't go. I won't leave this house, abandoning everything.' Everyone pulled her out because the houses were being burnt down. Later, my mother went. My mother had a 3-year-old baby in her arms and four older children. We were four

> people. They took my mother, and she was crying aloud that she will not see me again and that she will die that day. My parents, brothers and sisters died; I never saw them again. I never saw them again. After a few days, two or three days later, I was told, 'Don't cry, your parents are alive. They are in the Nagaon Civil Hospital. They had looked for my parents. They could not find them, but did not tell me. Instead, they told me that they are there. They told me that my parents had been kept in a nice room, but I could not go and visit. They conversed amongst themselves, but did not let me listen. I kept crying, did not eat and drink. Later, my aunt told me, crying. She too was badly injured. She cried and asked others to explain to me that I had no one left other than that little boy. 'She has no one left; everyone was killed. The girl will go mad. So try to make her understand.' After a week, Moinuddin was brought to my place so that I could find some peace seeing my brother. Later, he was handed over to me. He stayed for some time and went back. After a month, I was taken there and handed over the property. I kept Moinuddin alone. He had good signs. I educated him some, and some of it my uncle did. I received Rs 25,000 for five people killed, no, Rs 30,000 for six. I kept that money in the bank. That's all I know.

Taslima broke down into sobs after a minute or two. As I listened to others talk, she continued sobbing which gradually turned into loud crying, 'If I remember that day my heart still feels strange.' Taslima's narrative, while describing the various facets of the event, also underlined the displacement of women from their natal homes after marriage. This displacement proved to be a source of big problems in the National Register of Citizen's (NRC) listing as married women found it very difficult to prove their legacies, with anomalies in documents and the tallying of documents. However, Taslima's displacement became her desperation, a distance that could not be bridged; the bridge had been burnt. Her yearning for her parents and her anxiety about their safety may be one that every daughter faces in a society which 'gives away' their girls in marriage. When she recounted what must have happened at her parents' home, I wondered if it was

an imaginary reconstruction. Did her mother actually think of her in her last moments, with her four other children facing death threats? Taslima's heart believes so.

It will be inappropriate if I do not pause here to mention the crisis that NRC has brought to the state. According to the Government of Assam's official state portal, NRC is the register of Indian citizens. The first NRC was prepared in 1951. The process of updating the NRC began in 2015 under the supervision of the Supreme Court of India. The updated NRC includes names of persons or their descendants whose names appeared in the 1951 NRC or in any of the electoral rolls or any of the admissible documents up to the midnight of 24 March 1971, which will prove their presence in Assam or any part of India on or before 24 March 1971. NRC is seen as an answer to the question of infiltration and rightful citizenship that afflicted Assam even before India's independence in 1947. The Assam agitation and subsequently the Nellie massacre were a result of this question of belonging in the state. A correct NRC may put the records straight. The final NRC published on 31 August 2019 left out almost 19 lakh applicants. Those left out do not belong to one community, but the threat to Muslims becomes more intense if the proposed Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019 comes into force.[9] It proposes to confer citizenship to six communities, Hindus, Sikhs, Jain, Christians, Buddhists, and Parsis from neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. It leaves out Muslims. NRC reinforces the fear of conflicted/contested citizenship as was rendered by marking the members of certain communities as doubtful voters or D-voters. NRC's updating brings back the uncertainty of belonging to the state today leading to many deaths in fear of being declared 'foreigners'. However, Taslima's narration did not hint at any of these fears. Her account was more personal.

I believe that I could reach out to the women in Indurmari because my contact person was a woman. She was my host for the day. Asiya Khatun is an enthusiastic woman of about 40 who urged people to speak up, 'Come on. Come speak. Why don't you speak? Nani, won't

you speak?' While someone at the back volunteered to speak, Asiya requested an old woman to speak as people discussed among themselves whether to speak or not. Some shied away because they did not speak Assamese. They gathered around me while one of them spoke. She could not complete her story as another woman, Farida,[10] sitting nearby overtook her,

> It started at six. I had started cooking, had kept rice to be cooked. After the rice was done, my husband brought fish. I had taken the fish to clean when I saw that Muladhari [a nearby village] was on fire. My husband asked me to go out along with the children. I asked him what about our belongings? He told me, 'We can get back things, but not people.' I have four girls. I took them all out to the road. My husband gave me the young one, saying, 'God will look after me; you look after my children.' So I left him and went out. When I went away, I heard that my husband had been killed. I was yet to see where he was killed. When I asked people they told me he was still there, that he was near the river. When I went to the river, he had already been killed. He was shot dead. After that I never received any compensation, no tin or *taka* [money]. I had some land and that is how I survive. All they gave was bamboo. Bamboo and more bamboo. My husband was killed, and 1500 rupees were taken away from the compensation of 5000.

After half an hour, as Farida walked with me to her home, she excitedly asked me about the recorder in my hand. She wanted to check how it worked and if it was a mobile phone. She wanted me to record her saying out her name and play it out for her. Her eyes sparkled with joy when she heard her own voice. It amazed me that she did not realise that her voice was captured for a longer duration when she had recounted her experience. Now she was talking about a husband for whom his children were more precious than things. However, he also had done what most other men had in assigning the care of the children to the mother while he took on the responsibility of guarding his house. This was repeated in many narratives where the women tried to run to safety with their children. Many were killed because

their clothes (sarees), made it difficult for them to run across mud and water. This escape was not made any easier when they had to carry or drag their children along with them. Only a few men recounted that they had their children with them. This is not to say that men did not carry their children to safety, but theirs was a smaller percentage in the narratives that I heard.

Another instance of assigned gender roles was evident in another woman's narration:[11]

> I woke up from my sleep that morning and went near Demal waters. From there I could see that the neighbouring houses were on fire. So I called my father-in-law, mother-in-law, and father and told them that there was a fire. I had been married for one-and-a-half years. I told them that the fire had started. I went to my uncle's place nearby and seeing the fire again I said, '*Sangram* [fight, conflict] has started. We are all finished.' I asked my mother-in-law what I should cook. She asked me to go and cook something. I cooked breakfast, and they ate, and after that we saw that Sylbhetta [a nearby village] was on fire. Then the running started. I was told to follow the people wherever they went.

The daughter-in-law was assigned to cook breakfast. It was an important task even amidst all the chaos, amidst the threat of fire. It was only after she had dutifully cooked the meal and 'they ate', did the running start. She was also instructed to follow the other people. I also cannot help but admire the family's cool demeanour, which stayed calm enough to eat and then run. In the next few days, food became a scarcity for those who survived. In the relief camps in the high school in Nellie, which became their shelter for the next few days (and months for some), the government rationed them *khichdi*, flat rice, rice, lentils, and a few other basic necessities. In contrast to many other narratives, where the last memory is of food remaining untouched, this family shared what was possibly the last meal together.

The violence is underlined again when a woman recollects, 'Sister died, aunt died, uncle died, sister-in-law died. My sister's delivery was due. She was killed, and her was stomach torn open. Her baby

was killed and laid beside the river. My uncle's throat was slit, and he was thrown near the river. Then my mother was shot in her head and she fell down.' In many instances of communal violence such as the Partition of India in 1947, Gujarat riots of 2002 and others, acts of violence on pregnant women and unborn children are repeated. Is it stories of violence or perpetrators of violence that enact and re-enact certain kinds of responses in particular kinds of violent settings?

As the narrations went on, one woman cried inconsolably, trying to speak, 'My mother was killed. She was hit by an arrow,' another quickly added, 'I was hit by an arrow. One of the arrows pierced my head, and I fell into the river. My mother and father died.' Someone consoled the crying speaker, 'Let them hear our story of grief.' The interviews soon turned into an assembly for re-living and relieving their grief, remembering their long-lost parents, children, spouses, and dear ones together. This assembly slowly dispersed when drops of rain started falling. Before they dispersed all those present chipped in as though a summary was necessary to conclude the assembly. Some of them even laughed as the others enacted and cried out the slogans of the Assam agitation. They marvelled at their own remembering and found it amusing who remembered and who forgot. Some prided themselves in remembering even though they were very young and chided others for forgetting.

At the end of the meeting, we were escorted to Asiya Khatun's house. As we enjoyed the warm hospitality of our host, the rain grew stronger. Only then did I realise that the amount of planning I had put into reaching this place was not enough to get us out of it. We did not have any autos to take us out from Indurmari. Asiya Khatun took charge. She walked us through the village to reach Demal stream. She rowed us across the stream in a small boat to reach an open field. Almost everyone in the village owns such small boats or shares the ownership of one. Boats become even more useful when these areas are inundated by monsoon rains. We had to walk for a kilometre or so to reach the connecting node, Matiparbat, from where autos ply on uneven dirt roads to reach Amlighat.

The next village we visited was better placed than Indurmari. Autos ply up to Dharamtul, and then it depends on one's luck what you find for transport; we walked about a kilometre, crossed the old bridge over Kopili, and then our host for the day arranged motorcycles to pick us up. The road was bumpy with only a small concrete stretch. A few men had been informed beforehand, but there were no women. When I asked if I could talk to the women, they said definitely, but the women who had witnessed the massacre had been married off to other places and so on. 'No one will be able to say,' they informed. It was a blanket dismissal. I wondered if *all* the women who were there during the attack had moved from the village, and no one remained.

During our visit to the next village called Muladhari we met a family in their living room. The husband was adept at speaking at length as he was affiliated to one of the political parties. Whenever I asked the wife, let me call her Fatima,[12] to add anything, she replied, 'That is it.' Every time she said what more could she say other than what her husband had already said. Her husband reminded her, 'How much you had to run with your nephew.' Their son explained, 'Many people cannot speak about it. Their voice dries up. Mother won't be able to say.' His mother sobbed silently. The son started talking, but while he spoke she sobbed more and suddenly started speaking, 'My nephew was two-years-old. We took the *Quran* from the mosque and carried him out. Where to go now? I gave up the *Quran* to Allah, ('on the road,' added the son) and lifted my nephew in my arms. I had just one nephew then.'

Fatima's narration was interrupted, and the discussion moved back to the violence in Assam in the early 2000s. The son and father narrated how the environment in schools changed such that the son could not complete his schooling. Even the mother commented on how Jagiroad, the nearest town, was a better place for education. The discussion veered towards land rights, documents, and national peace. Land rights and documents figure significantly if one has to understand the Nellie massacre. Scholars such as Sanjoy Hazarika (2000) and Makiko Kimura (2015) believe that land alienation was

one of the main reasons for the massacre. Fatima tried speaking in the middle of the discussion. She tried to speak firmly, to control her story. She spoke a word or two, which was quickly drowned over by her son or her husband. Then she started speaking a little louder aware that her voice should be heard in the commotion in the room, 'We had a house here. We ran here hoping there will be people. As we ran, we saw fire. We told everyone. The houses were being lighted continuously. All the members of our family came out. We had two boys in the house, a younger brother and the nephew.'

As Fatima finally started gaining confidence, her narration became inaudible again in many places because her husband kept on speaking. Even though I could hear her then, later it was difficult to decipher what she had said in the recording. I connected the dots to get a comprehensible narration:

> Then we went to the fields. We saw battalions wearing black dresses, moving forward while firing at the same time. One after another *fauji* [soldier] kept coming. Then one of my uncles suggested that we should go to Jagiroad. A lot of people ran. We looked back and saw no one. An elder sister-in-law, an uncle, an aunt were with us along with 4–5 boys. Those boys were our friends from the neighbourhood. We must have walked a little bit. We saw little boys and girls lying in mud near Boro rice. They had fallen in the mud and were struggling. There was no help nearby; who would help them? I moved forward. There was this *beel* a little further. My little nephew was still in my arms. I looked back and saw my sister. She was walking ahead and people were being killed immediately after her. I chided her, 'Can't you hear the women being killed right behind you? Do you want to die? Give me your son.' She asked me, 'What did you do to the *Quran* that was with you?' I told her that I had kissed my salutations to the *Quran* and kept it on the road and left it there. I thought human beings were more important, *Quran* should come later, but our religion says *Quran* should come first. But my understanding said that the *Quran* should come after living human beings. My sister asked me if I will keep the *Quran* aside or her son. I told her, 'The boy has

> life in him.' We were talking and walking into the fields. We were not a lot of people together, 10–15. We were running and fell into a drain. There were children lying in the drain.

Fatima's narration gained sudden speed, and she switched to fast Bangla, which I could not understand much. Her husband jumped in to translate,

> Children were lying in the drains unattended. CRPF personnel picked them up later and sent them to civil hospitals for treatment, and they were brought up by the government. They do not know till date where their mothers, fathers or brothers are. Since they did not have anybody, the government kept them in various places like Delhi and Mumbai. The government educated them, gave them jobs, and they do not know that their parents may have been killed here. They have been educated in English; we speak Bangla. Even if they come here, they will not be able to say that this is their land or place of birth. People from Delhi-Mumbai are not the same as our children; their education and upbringing differ, and their looks will differ too. But they were born here and so were their parents. Their parents were killed here, but the children do not know. Of course, they have no one who can tell them that. They will only know the government as their parents.

Fatima did not tell us if she was a child during the attack or a teenager. She had taken the important decision to save the life of her young nephew over her religious text. Many would call it an act of blasphemy, but in that moment she knew lives matter more. She was an observer who could watch children struggle in the mud, aware of her inability to help them, chiding an elder sister at her carelessness and at the same time and carrying her nephew to safety. Fatima's narration grew from her personal account to commenting on the fate of children who had lost their parents. Her hesitation might have had its roots in her limited knowledge of Assamese in which most of the people in the room were speaking or in the plain and powerful act of speaking. Once she gained confidence to speak in halting Assamese,

she shifted gears to speak fast in her mother tongue only to be halted by her husband.

Like Fatima, another hesitant speaker was Mariam Jaan.[13] It was in the kitchen and bedrooms of her sister-in-law's house that I met her. We had come to meet another group of men in their drawing room. I asked if I could meet the women in the house. I was shown inside. Mariam Jaan's sister-in-law was overwhelmed while recounting her experience, but Mariam refused to talk about it, especially on record. She hung around listening to others. After her sister-in-law had narrated her experiences, I asked Mariam again if she would like to speak. She refused to talk to me. Yet, she did not keep quiet,

> Only after the conflict in 1983 so many people settled here. Earlier there were fewer people. All the people were killed and finished off. Has somebody told you about it, or you have come on your own? You have come on your own? What will you do by taking all these? What will you do by writing about it? We have this school; so from there to the fields, all the people burned down the houses. That day instilled fear. There is no saying what may happen if I recount it again.

Mariam clearly voiced her distrust of me, an outsider. There was no saying from where I had come in spite of whatever I claimed. There was no guarantee about what I would do with what she said. What if she got implicated in some kind of trouble? Her sister-in-law tried to convince her to speak, pointing out that I was a Muslim, 'So no harm will come.' But Mariam persisted, 'What is the guarantee? She is from some other place. I am from here.' Despite maintaining that she would not speak she continued,

> If such an incident had happened somewhere else in the world, some other nation, it would have incited the rest of the world to respond. But this incident was never even allowed to be reported too far. Other countries did not come to know of it. I am not educated, but I say this after much thought. If other countries heard of it, they did not print it anywhere. It keeps on happening. So many people were beaten up, hacked, burned, what happened?

> These things never came in books or on camera. You may take these things and put them in books or on camera as you wish.

Mariam rightly pointed out how the world did not hear much about the Nellie massacre. The remoteness of Nellie added to the fact that the north-eastern part of the country is seen as different or sometimes lesser than what is mostly considered 'mainland India'. Even today, the major calamities that afflict north-eastern India such as annual floods remain unheard of. Assam, however, notoriously found some recent recognition due to the National Register of Citizens. Thus, the massacre, which took place more than three decades ago, was not heard of much. Mariam Jaan's careful complaining referred to the oblivion the massacre has been wrapped in. Her complaint was reiterated by many other survivors when they mentioned how justice had never been done. No one had ever been convicted for the killings. The state had limited its justice to giving a small amount as compensation: Rs 5,000 for every death, Rs 2,000 for anyone injured, and two bundles of tin. The bundles of tin were given to rehabilitate the survivors by helping them rebuild their houses, notwithstanding the fact that building even a cottage requires much more than such a small compensation. Mariam continued with a sigh,

> It is a matter to think. Playing with fire, fight for power, killing the public; nobody helped the people here. If somebody had come to help, the government had promised many things, but gave nothing. So many things were promised, but nothing was given; they promised rice but it was not delivered; they promised sugar, but it was not delivered.

Mariam was referring to the Public Distribution System, which changed every time a new government came to power, according to her for the worse. Such changes adversely affected the villagers who were mostly near the poverty line. When coaxed again to speak about the massacre, she added, 'Three to four days we did not see what is called food. There was no food. We sat and cried. It really saddens us when we hear about it. Who is the minister in your place?' When I replied,

she exclaimed, 'Oh all over. How did it happen? Did it happen in your place too, "foreigner, foreigner?"' Mariam was painfully conscious of the economic and social implications of the changing political scenario then. It was probably one of the reasons why she refused to clearly refer to a political conflict in the past. This was again evident when her sister-in-law insisted that she speak about the massacre. She tried to convince her saying that I am a student and needed to know for a school project. Mariam deftly undercut, 'No, a college student has as much power as a king. I cannot trust an Assamese person.' Mariam's wariness about my identity as a student seemed to be closely linked to her astute sense of awareness of history. The Assam agitation during which the Nellie massacre took place was led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) spearheaded by students from several colleges and universities. It is believed that the student leaders had instigated the local Assamese Hindus, Tiwas and Karbis to take part in the attack so that these neighbouring tribes could get back land that had traditionally belonged to them but had been sold off to the Bengali speaking Muslims over the decades.

Mariam Jaan concluded with the observation that the compensation paid by the government was even less than the price of a cow in the area. 'Is the price of a man only Rs 5,000? Even a cow's price is Rs 30–40,000. A cow here is Rs 70–80,000 sometimes. We did not even get the price of a cow for a human life.'

Despite her unwillingness to speak to me, Mariam Jaan touched the most sensible nerves in the story of Nellie: the agitation, its oblivion, and the distrust between the communities. Her suspicion of me was not unique. It is an inversion of the mirror that the culturally and linguistically dominant Assamese society uses to look at her community. It reflects a fear painfully alive in the pockets of Nellie. I had a glimpse of this subtle distrust when children in another village screamed in fun as we walked past, 'Oxomiya, Oxomiya' (Assamese, Assamese). When I paused and asked a few of them if I could click a

picture of them playing, they said no, only to break into smiles and pose shyly the next minute. They saw someone as an outsider when they crossed paths just as society at large treats them, indicating a live fault-line.

This subtle distrust was again visible in the attitude of another woman in her 30s.[14] She did not remember much about the massacre and was aware that speaking about it with a complete stranger like me may lead her to trouble. 'There is no guarantee, what with the NRC and CAB,' she observed as she deftly cut betel nuts mechanically in the betel nut packing unit she worked in. Even though she told me that she did not want to speak about it, she translated what her mother said about the massacre. She cast an occasional glance of annoyance at her mother as she nudged her while gesturing towards me. Even though she answered the questions I asked, I could see that she was not pleased. It could also have been because I was slowing her work down. She would chop a lesser number of betel nuts, which might affect her pay for the day. Her colleagues were fast at work, although they too joined in cheerfully in the diversion in their work hours, adding whatever they had heard their elders say.

Only later did I realise that the annoyance might also have been due to her mother's insistence that I have lunch with them at their home. Their home was on my way back to where the traveller would pick me up. I tried to politely deny her offer several times as we walked back together on the concrete, deserted road on a very cold February afternoon. She was persistent despite language barriers. I finally accepted to have lunch with her. It was a very spicy meal which made me cry, but the old woman smiled with apparent bliss. Her satisfaction that food was shared with a stranger in her kitchen, joined in by her daughter-in-law and little grandson, reminded me of those numerous meals left untouched when the villagers fled their homes on a similar cold February morning many decades ago.

NOTES

1. Male survivor A personal interview with the author (7 March 2016).
2. Female survivor A, personal interview with the author (8 March 2016).
3. Diganta Sharma, personal interview with the author (11 March 2016).
4. Female survivor B, personal interview with the author (8 March 2016).
5. Female survivor C, personal interview with the author (8 March 2016).

6 The nearest town.

7. Female survivor D, personal interview with the author (7 September 2016).

8 See Kimura, Makiko. 2015. *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

9. At the time this paper was revised, the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 had been implemented amidst widespread protests.
10. Female survivor E, personal interview with the author (7 September 2016).
11. Female survivor F, personal interview with the author (7 September 2016).
12. Female survivor G, personal interview with the author (16 September 2016).
13. Female survivor H, personal interview with the author (16 September 2016).
14. Female survivor I, personal interview with the author (19 February 2019).

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