SUPPRESSED SILENCES: WOMEN AS WITNESSES AND THE WOUNDS OF WITNESSING SECRET KILLINGS IN ASSAM

DIXITA DEKA

zubaan

ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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SECRET KILLINGS: A FLASHBACK

Classes were over. It was a late summer afternoon. Like any other day, my parents had come to pick me up from school. Holding their hands, I was surprised as we walked past our car towards the nearby crematorium, Nabagraha, in Guwahati. My mother was quite regretful that we were not carrying any flowers with us. I recall blurred images of anxious people standing in groups, some leaning against the fences; their numbers kept increasing on the field adjacent to the crematorium. I do not remember their voices, their discussions or even their faces. Everything seemed to be in a mute mode then. In that crowd, there was an absurd silence and what appeared to be endless waiting. It was 17 May, 1996 and I was a kindergarten student back then. The next thing I remember was the arrival of a white mortuary van followed by hundreds of people with a dead body and the blurred voice of a woman shouting in grief, swirling abuses in angst. All I can recall is hearing ULFA.

A renowned journalist and human rights activist from Assam, Parag Kumar Das was shot dead earlier that afternoon by 'unidentified miscreants' when he went to pick up his son from school at Rajgarh in

the heart of the city. Even though I have been trying hard to remember to this day, I cannot recall what the lady said. Memories have faded but the gloomy images of that funeral continue to remain. The smell of incense filled the air. As we returned, I remember seeing and stepping on marigold petals that were mixed up with the soil as the entire area of Chenikuthi saw a massive rush of people and vehicles that afternoon. Growing up or living in North-East India in the 1990s, one was habituated to hearing news on militancy, military and the everyday lives of the civilians that were threatened under insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Fast forward 20 years to 2016. I am sitting with a former woman cadre of the insurgent organisation, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)[1] in a village in the interiors of Sivasagar. I call her Barsha in this essay. For my M.Phil research project, I was trying to understand the motivations that drew women to ULFA and the nature of their representation in both underground and over-ground spaces. I was stunned and mostly speechless hearing teary-eyed Barsha narrate the brutal killing of her uncle Umakanta Gogoi and his family of five other members at No. 2 Borbil village in Kakotibari in Sivasagar by the 'secret killers' in 1999 (Deka 2019a). Arupa Patangia Kalita's novella *Arunimar Swades* (Arunima's Country) is said to be inspired by that mass murder of the family in Sivasagar (Kalita 2001). Barsha, in her 40s now, joined ULFA to avenge those killings.

For women in ULFA, it was not territorial sovereignty that drew them to the insurgency but it was a matter of safeguarding human dignity that was under attack both in an atmosphere of counter-insurgency as well as in the patriarchal society that they lived in (Deka 2019b). While intellectual trends in North-East India have shifted today from conflict to a development discourse, I would argue that the after-lives of violence perpetrated in the past, if left unaddressed, are liable to resurface. Remembering such events not only brings embarrassment to the state and humankind but also leaves civil society haunted in the grief and guilt of unspeakable memories.

From the recent past, can anyone from North-East India forget the Oinam massacre in Manipur?[2] Can Mizoram recover from the scars of air raids in 1966 by the Indian state as a counter-insurgency tactic? Can anyone forget the image of Meira Paibis disrobing publicly in Manipur in protest against the impunity enjoyed by the armed forces under the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act?[3] Doesn't the Nellie massacre[4] of 1983 continue to influence the contemporary politics of Assam? On the grounds of analogous trauma, the secret killings in Assam were re-materialised during every passing state Assembly election as a crucial agenda of the electoral campaign. In a way, there is no escape from the memories of violence left unaddressed. However, the questions that remain include how far these stories have travelled beyond North-East India? And who narrates these stories?

Till I met Barsha, it was through the occasional news coverage, dinner table conversation at home, classroom lectures on counter-insurgency, fiction, and perhaps the only non-fiction so far, *Secret Killings of Assam: The Horrific Story of Assam's Darkest Period* (Talukar et al., 2008), where I learned about these killings. While this book, written by Mrinal Talukdar, Utpal Borpujari and Kaushik Deka is a selected re-presentation of cases covered judicially, the book was published at a time when official reports were not easily obtainable, making it the most cited work on secret killings. However, reading these reports alone might deprive readers of the lives of the affected people in the aftermath and more so in living with questions like: Who speaks? Whose stories are represented? Who remembers what of the secret killings, and how and why? What is the nature of these memories? Are memories categorical? Did the people forgive the perpetrators? Can they heal?

What incredibly moved me on a personal level was the brutal death of Umakanta Gogoi and his entire family. Some of the members were first shot followed by a bomb blast which dismembered the bodies of all the six members beyond recognition overnight. Barsha's narrative instantly rekindled my memories of witnessing Parag Kumar Das'

funeral and I remembered that his killers had not been convicted. While the period of secret killings has been ubiquitous in writing the history of insurgency in Assam, the changing state leadership has left behind or materialised this bloody past very conveniently. In this essay, I move from the 'who killed' narrative that has remained the dominant focus in oral and written testimonies and go back to the survivors and the families of the victims who have lived without closure for two decades now.

Officially, the secret killings occurred between 1998 and 2001 and involved abductions, murders, disappearance or dismemberment of ULFA's family members, close aides and their suspected sympathisers. The killings were allegedly carried out under the tutelage of the state by the police duly assisted by surrendered ULFA cadres (popularly referred to as SULFA), where the army was kept in the loop (Justice K.N. Saikia Commission of Inquiry 2006). The intentions behind these executions are commonly perceived to be the inability of family members to persuade their underground kin to surrender and to terrorise society to break their support for ULFA.

The Justice K.N. Saikia Commission was formed in 2005 to investigate the secret killings and it enquired into 35 cases covering the lives of a little over 50 individuals. It is to be noted here that Congress came to power in Assam in 2001 with the pledge of investigating the secret killings as the prime issue of its election manifesto. Secret killings had occurred at a time when the state was governed by the regional political party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). This was one of the major reasons that tarnished the regional party's image in Assam from which it has failed to recover to date. The commission conceptualised the secret killings as 'Ulfocide', drawing inspiration from their genocidal nature of mindless brutality. The commission established facts 'to prove remote orchestration from an apex source of conspiracy committing ULFOCIDE through its instrumentalities including SULFAs as executioners' (Government of Assam 2007: 5).

Injustices were monetarily compensated by the commission, but it has failed to convict anyone so far. The official archives of

violence represent the counter-insurgency operations statistically in terms of the number of people arrested, surrendered, or killed. Such an approach fails to cover the intensity and influence of counter-insurgency operations on human minds. During the secret killings, an extreme atmosphere of fear, suspicion and treason has kept the 'secret' nature of the killings alive, thereby preventing many people from speaking out. To everyone's shock, the commission was quashed in September 2018 by the Guwahati High Court (*The Assam Tribune* 2018). But does the discontinuation of the commission nullify the fact that people were killed? Has there been any attempt at exploring the lived experiences of the survivors and the families in the aftermath of the secret killings? How have their lives been for 20 years now without legal justice? And how did it shape their social identities thereon? The political standpoint in exploring the secret killings has been centred on a blame-game in the process of which political parties have overshadowed people's voices and their everyday suffering.

My initial attempts at exploring these narratives left me with the insights of academics, journalists, police officers, human rights activists and former insurgents who were all men. While their views were indispensable, women's voices remained unrepresented, under-represented, misrepresented or overlooked. This may urge one to question: Who is authorised to speak on insurgency and counter-insurgency in North East India? Where do women's voices find ground in a conflict zone where they have been victimised and, at the same time, have exercised their agency? Voice like that of Barsha may fill this void and at the same time record resistance against state-sponsored violence. Like Barsha, there are so many other women in Assam who have been wearing their hearts on their sleeves, challenging the powerful narrative of silence and secrecy behind these killings. Their memories counter the official numbers of deaths and reasons behind the secret killings. This essay is inspired by the memories of women like them who have continued to embrace their changing identities in the aftermath of the secret killings where they experienced social isolation, personal indignities, everyday fear and unbearable grief.

Yet, they continued speaking and expressing themselves on behalf of their dead and disappeared family members, strongly practising remembrance as an act of resistance.

WOMEN AS WITNESSES

To work with memory is challenging. Memories are not linear. Many a times memories fade, get distorted and can also be selective. Women's memories of witnessing violence and having experienced the direct repercussions of such violent acts not only affect them physically and psychologically, but also guide the roadmap of the construction of their social identities. Women's memories of violence in a conflict zone should not be perceived as uniform because women as a homogeneous category is itself contested (Mohanty 2003). According to Goswami et al. (2005: 19), women in regions of armed conflict are affected as women relatives of armed activists, women relatives of state armed forces, women militants or combatants, women as shelter providers, women as victims of sexual and physical abuse, women as peace negotiators and women as rights activists.

My attempt at writing this essay is based on the conversations I had with the former women cadres of ULFA followed by women relatives of insurgents and women's rights activists mainly from the human rights organisation, the Manab Adhikaar Sangram Samiti (MASS) in Assam. However, these categories are not inclusive in one sense as they failed to explore the lives of women without affiliations like civil women or women relatives of human rights activists, to name a few. This prevented examining new categories emerging out of the conflict zone. As such, I do not intend to fit the intimate stories of human lives into categories such as these but to reflect on personal narratives of women that I came across spontaneously, through intermediaries or by locating them through the commission's reports that mapped the official taxonomy of the secret killings in Assam.

I present two stories of Hiron from Barpeta district and Dipika from Nalbari district in Assam who lost their brothers in 1999 and the repercussions of those losses on their social lives and emotional well-being. Along with their narratives, I try to substantiate the physical and moving images of violence and grief at that time through the many vignettes of human speech, silence and scars that I came across while travelling throughout Assam searching for these stories. While I shaped my research in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Sivasagar Sivasagar, it emerged from my conversations that Kamrup and Nalbari had seen the maximum number of secret killing cases, recorded or unrecorded. However, I could visit Nalbari district quite late due to my inability to establish contact with anyone there.

I knew the names of the 'popular' families in Nalbari who were affected by the secret killings. These included the brutal murder of the family of ULFA's Publicity Secretary, Mithinga Daimary, the relatives of ULFA's Deputy Commander-in-Chief Raju Baruah and the elder brother of ULFA's Foreign Secretary Sashadhar Choudhury in Nalbari district.The deaths in these families demonstrated the brutality unleashed during the secret killings where no one was spared and they successfully established the ultimate goal of fear and suspicions in human lives and relationships. While I have elaborated on a couple of these cases elsewhere (Deka 2019c), here I focus on the two lesser-known stories which were narrated by the female kin of those killed or who had disappeared. Listening to their narratives, I realized that whether or not they were physically present on the day of killing or abduction, they refused to be passive mourners. Their quick responses to violence exposed the state's indifference towards the criminal activities of the police and the surrendered cadres of the time.

I was quite astonished by the fact that despite their ardent urge to speak out and a constant search for a platform for recording their angst, grief and vulnerability, women's voices as narrators of the secret killings phase have not made it to the public discourse so far. This necessitates researching secret killings not just as a manifestation of violence under counter-insurgency but also to look at these executions

through the lens of the women who lived difficult and stigmatised lives after having lost their family members. They might have been monetarily compensated but have been conveniently forgotten.

I established my initial contact in Nalbari through former MASS activists. Out of the many people I met during my research, it was only MASS activists who either expressed their opinions or accompanied me to meet the women narrators. I had a strange experience hearing these women. They would either be silent or would provide what Theidon calls a 'thick description' (2013: 108). This was guided by their trust in the intermediaries who referred or accompanied me and also based on what I said which led to their intuition in trusting me when we were first introduced. There may have been many factors like my ancestral village (my maternal family originated in Nalbari), my language (with Assamese as our first language, we could communicate without an interpreter) and my educational background (graduated from Cotton College in Guwahati which had an impact on the people I met in Assam and overshadowed my current professional affiliation) or the fact that I was travelling solo to locate and meet them to learn about the events that had been forgotten by the state and persuading them to reciprocate my efforts. Like in any other human relationship, trust was mostly the key to effective conversations in my research as well. It was not rocket science to build, maintain and commit to this trust. It was, in fact, the breach of trust that had refrained people from speaking out about their miseries in the first place. Re-establishing that trust was difficult and required a patient ear, a careful vocabulary and an empathetic attitude.

When I explored Nalbari I had no specific travel plans regarding where to start. My intermediary, a MASS activist, took me to visit Hiron Devi's family at Patacharkuchi in Barpeta district. Patacharkuchi is a 30 minute car ride from Nalbari. Her brother Nripen Sharma was a former colleague of my intermediary and he was abducted from his home on 3 April, 1999 only to be found dead with severe cuts on his head. Earlier that day, the car I was travelling in stopped on the highway at a place called Moromjaan minutes away from the military

camp at Rangia which delayed my work for three hours. Even though my intermediary, whom I call Deepok in this essay, informed Hiron of our visit she went to Sarthebari town with her husband as we did not show up in the morning. When we reached their home in the afternoon, we found the doors locked. Deepok called up Hiron asking about their whereabouts and Hiron expressed her desire to meet us and requested us to stay back. A voluntary gesture like that when a conversation on secret killings was due was a rare experience for me. I had lunch with Deepok at a hotel on the highway while talking about the human rights activists who had been killed by secret killers. We tried to map the many stories of violence and resistance witnessed in Nalbari and its adjoining areas and about the families who continued to live with the memories of their dead, dismembered or disappeared family members.

By the time we travelled back to Hiron's home anticipating her return, Hiron and her husband had reached covering a distance of 22km from Sarthebari. At a time when conversations on secret killings did not usually bring the lives of the human rights activists to the forefront, I intended to break that chain and bring out those peripheral stories. Peripheral in the sense that the work of the human rights activists, particularly of MASS activists, during the secret killings has never been of any significant focus in academic discussions on counter-insurgency operations, thereby leaving the then growing human rights movement in Assam with an irresolute predicament.

MASS had assisted the survivors of the secret killings in their legal battles. Members of MASS were the first ones to extend solidarity with those who had had bitter experiences of violence at a time when fear prevented one's neighbours and relatives from acting. This part of history might have been conveniently left out as it would have brought back the guilt of many in the state feebly witnessing the secret killings. Instead, MASS was often considered the over-ground faction of ULFA or a sympathiser of the insurgent organisation rendering its work illegitimate and bringing it under police surveillance (Mahanta 2013: 111). MASS was founded in 1991 by Parag Kumar Das against human

rights violations in Assam in the aftermath of Operation Bajrang in 1990. This necessitates re-telling the plight of the human rights activists who soon became new targets of secret killings along with the relatives of the insurgents whose lives were otherwise considered vulnerable.

Hiron's brother Nripen Sharma had been associated with the Patacharkuchi unit of MASS since 1996. He was fond of poetry and was a commended performer in state-level drama competitions. In 1997, he expressed his disgust with the police at a public meeting for killing a ULFA cadre. In the same year, the police and army came in search of Nripen as his affiliation with MASS gave him the image of being someone anti-state and pro-ULFA automatically.

When I met Hiron that afternoon for the first time, it did not take long for us to break the ice. Her energy in narrating the most devastating and personal chapter of her life had no limit or hesitation. Even though her husband and Deepok were present during our conversation, it felt like she was speaking as if there was no one there. She owned her voice and words severing the very myth of silence and secrecy hovering around the secret killings. Hiron lived with her husband and children at Patacharkuchi. She must have been in her late 30s when I met her as she told me about her fears as a young higher secondary student frantically searching for her brother when he was abducted 20 years ago. She showed me a black and white picture of her brother which she had carefully kept in a glass cupboard that I saw in most Assamese households where decorative pieces and crockery meant for guests was kept.

I sensed that Hiron was struggling with her tears as she narrated the past that seemed to have left a deep scar on her mind. Her story was not just about counter-insurgency but also of her yearning for her sibling's love lost abruptly and untimely. Her story was about the vulnerabilities of a young girl in search of justice for her brother. Hiron could not see the dead body of her brother when it was recovered as she had lost her senses then. This is also a story of how she continues to encounter with her brother's killers who lived in the same village. She

said she stopped talking to them when she recognised them in their masked faces when they came to abduct Nripen on that dreadful night.

Hiron said her brother was an active social worker who loved theatre and wrote beautiful poetry. Her husband told us that as far as he had heard about things before his marriage to Hiron, Nripen became a target of the secret killers because he raised his voice against the police. It is to be noted here that nine human rights activists from MASS were killed by unidentified miscreants or secret killers in Assam.[5] Together they had questioned the meaning of justice in the state where the perpetrators continued to be promoted and were readily transferred from places where they had committed heinous crimes. This had furthered people's rage against the security forces as well as the state that had left their scars unhealed. Hiron's pain and anger were evident when she started narrating the tormenting moments of her life that had brought her unforeseen grief. She told me a story that was not fiction and which I had not come across till then,

> My brother was abducted from our ancestral home 2 km from here. That year he was the Secretary of Bohag Bihu[6] here at Patacharkuchi. It was 1999. That evening my niece and me noticed a Sumo car with two police personnel taking rounds around our house starting 4 p.m. I got suspicious seeing the police as people those days were frightened of the police. When I told my elder brother Nripen about it, he said I was over-reacting. I told him not to sleep at home that night. Having witnessed the police surveillance, I became suspicious and restless.
>
> Around 1.30 on the same night, cars stopped on our doorway. Hearing the sound, Dada[7] switched off the lights. We heard a knock on the door and people talking. My brother recognised one of the voices of a police officer and inquired if it was him and the person said yes. The officer told him that they had come to ask about something connected to the Bihu Committee, of which Dada was the Secretary. The moment my brother opened the door the officer caught his hands. May be if they had known that I had heard my brother naming the officer, they would have killed me too. Listening to the commotion, my father grew restless

> as he was a bedridden heart patient. The other police person whom I recognised from his prior visits to our home had also accompanied the secret killers that night. They asked me where my mother was.
>
> Dada started weeping; holding my wrist firmly perhaps because he then understood the intentions behind the suspicious movement of the police earlier that evening. I saw 6–7 people inside our room who were led by the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of our police station. He was wearing a T-shirt and black trousers. Two other men were wearing half-sleeved shirts and pants with their faces covered with *gamusas*.[8] Dada was slapped thrice. I repeatedly told them that our parents were unwell and pleaded with them to tell me where they were taking him. They forcefully dragged my brother towards the courtyard. I followed them and kept on asking where I should go to enquire about him. The boys in their masked faces were local lads from the neighbourhood and I recognised them by their posture. My mother also started shouting and crying hysterically. We were in the courtyard asking why my brother had been arrested and requesting them to give us in writing that they had picked him up. They told me to go to the police station the next morning. It was a stormy night and there was heavy rain. My brother was crying, saying *mai* holding one of my wrists. They dragged him and took him away.

Hiron continued narrating her ordeal and I kept listening without interrupting her but writing her narration as far as I could. It was challenging to ask questions or present half of her narrative when it became vital for me as a researcher to make sense of their lives holistically. This later resonated in other stories across Assam marking commonalities in the way families were harassed and people killed.Hiron's narrative was a long one, and it was challenging to be selective in what to include and what to discard when memories are not structured. Sociologist Amy Kaler addressed such a dilemma stating the need to accommodate narratives that were long enough for the reader to make sense of the time, place, experience, and interactions that influenced the narrator's life (Kaler 2003). With such an assumption, I chose to confine this essay to the memories of

two women but with a detailed description of the unfolding events in their lives as far as it was possible. Hiron continued her story with tremendous rage in her eyes but in a calm voice:

> Around 1.30 a.m., I rushed to my uncle who lived nearby across the *baari* (gardens)in the dead of the night. He did not understand the gravity of the situation and told me to rest till the morning. Around two years back, Dada had raised his voice against the police when someone from ULFA was killed. I heard that he was threatened that he would witness another funeral soon.
>
> Around 3 a.m., I decided to go out in search of Dada. My father was unable to breathe properly. I tried to comfort him by the heat of the lamp. Recalling the sight of the way they had dragged my brother, I was quite sure he would not return. Walking down the dark lane I saw footprints, and it seemed that someone had been dragged from that place. I followed those marks and then found his *logun*[9] not very far from our house; it must have fallen there. Seeing that, I became certain; they must have finished him by then. I reached the police station. Suddenly I encountered the OC who had called my brother to the door. He got down from a truck in front of the police station, and I enquired about my brother. He was drunk, and his voice slurred. He accused me asking when had he brought him and asked me to go to Pathshala.[10] Hearing our loud voices, other personnel from the police station came out and asked what had happened to me. I was a young girl, then pursuing my higher secondary studies and was wearing a frock. The police personnel told me my brother was not at the police station. I had already told them the names of the people who had come to our house and had arrested my brother. I went to Pathshala to meet the other police person who had come to arrest my brother, but his security guards did not allow me to reach him in his quarters saying that he was sleeping.
>
> Around 6.30 a.m., I went to meet the wife of a police officer who belonged to our locality but was serving in another district. I went to take her advice because I did not know what to do. Her contacts at Pathshala Police Station told her that an incident like that had occurred the previous night and also gave the names of the police personnel who were involved. Baideo[11] gave me a

> phone number. She told me to contact the District Commissioner immediately and asked me to file an FIR. I did everything possible. Meanwhile the boys who had come with their faces covered kept following me wherever I went. They are still here, but *etya moi dekhileo namatu* (I don't call them since then).
>
> (Hiron Devi in conversation with the author, Patacharkuchi, 25 February 2019)

The news of Nripen's abduction and his sister's efforts to get her brother back had spread like wildfire across the locality. Along with Hiron, women from five villages surrounded the police station on the morning of 4 April 1999 demanding information about Nripen. A few teachers from the villages also joined the protest and tried to convince the OC who had gone to Hiron's home the previous night to release information to prevent the police force from further public disgrace. To Hiron's surprise, the police officer who was earlier in denial mode confirmed with confidence that he would provide them with some information by 4 p.m. that day. The information received was that a body had been recovered on the banks of river Pohumara, which was recognised to be of Nripen's by the villagers. Hiron could not see her brother for the last time. She lost her senses for a week after that. She was told about the deep injuries and cut marks on his face and legs when she regained her senses. Nripen was tortured brutally before being shot in his head. Hiron lamented, '*Taak katise* (they had cut him). The villagers later told me they had heard someone screaming "*ayo*", but they were scared to look out. The next day on recovering his body from the bridge on river Pohumara, they saw blood on the bridge dripping down.'

While Hiron was vocal in describing that long harrowing day in minute detail, she ran out of words when talking about her brother when his body was recovered. Her silence denoted the inexpressibility of physical harm and not necessarily a denial to reveal the details. Anthropologist Lee Ann Fujii (2010: 158) believes that silence is polyvalent as its meanings can be multiple and contradictory that can both hide and reveal.The display of dead and tortured human bodies

or those of the people who survived miraculously from the secret killers has left behind outrageous memories of state-sponsored violence in Assam. Most of these memories are unspeakable, just like the ones as horrendous as those archived during the Holocaust (Wajnryb 2001) or the Indian Partition (Butalia 1998).

The memories of the secret killings also compelled survivors and witnesses to perceive death differently from the way they had, which in a way helped them to condemn, convince or console. For instance, Barsha, who was the first one to have entered the remains of the bombarded house at Kakotibari in Sivasagar on 11 September 1999 and witness the dismembered body parts of her uncle Umakanta Gogoi and his family, said, 'A person can die with one bullet, there was no need to shoot them and bomb their house.'[12] Likewise, recalling the torturous death of Nripen, Hiron's husband said, 'Using bullets and killing someone causing violent bodily injuries are different.'[13]

At that time Hiron consoled her parents on their son's death, saying, 'There are many families who did not even get the bodies of their loved ones and are still waiting. We at least know what happened to him.' This resonated with the grieving family of Khagen Das, whose aged mother told me, *'Loratur hara edal o napalu. Doxi hole sinta nokorilu hoi, nirdoxi soli asil* (I did not even get a bone of my son. If he had been guilty, I wouldn't have grieved. But he was an innocent child). Others have atleast got the bodies of their children, but I got nothing.'[14]

While relatives' fear and their inability to persuade their kin to surrender are usually considered to be at the genesis of the secret killings, as mentioned earlier, inter-group (ULFA-SULFA or police-civilians), intra-group (within SULFA)and petty rivalries that arose between different groups deepened under counter-insurgency when the state brought in draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act (AFSPA) and the National Security Act (NSA). While impunity guaranteed under AFSPA created the pre-conditions for violence, the secret killings occurred outside this impunity. Additionally, the human psyche's engagement with brutality also

needs further exploration. The perpetrators not only killed but also displayed a callous attitude in the way they carried out the executions.

People were vulnerable to attacks in what Judith Butler calls an atmosphere of precarity. She defines precarity as a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (2009: 25). However, while official archives of violence primarily include men's testimonials, women's voices are guided by fears and silences that are layered in nature. Such silences may also represent their desire to create a normal atmosphere for their children to grow up (Jelin 2003). While the children knew about the past in pieces or as a whole, they hardly asked and neither did their parents volunteer to confess, share or address their concerns. These children grew up to 'discover' things on their own.[15] It was extremely difficult for the women in Assam to find the vocabulary to express the kind of violence that they experienced or survived during the counter-insurgency operations.

Till I started getting in touch and engaging in conversations with women for my research, I did not understand the intensity of the effects of secret killings on their natal as well as marital lives. Hiron said her husband never started any conversation about the past as it was extremely traumatic for her. This was not because of family secrecy or an intentional denial, but because something very intimate and hurtful had to be reiterated frequently. However, fear still has the upper hand irrespective of the sex of a person when it comes to raising voices against extra-judicial killings. This has prevented many cases from reaching the courts for justice. Nripen's ghastly murder was not included in the Saikia Commission's report as Hiron's family did not pursue the matter further. Hiron confessed it was her uncle (father's brother) who asked her not to fight a legal case as there were rumours that her life would be under threat if she did. Suspicions, fears and rumours like these kept many stories of secret killings from official records. Records of events like these, however, were etched in human minds which were tragic and had no nostalgia attached.

Dipika's efforts to remember her younger brother Khagen Das, who was popularly known as Babli, necessitated the re-opening of the case for a difficult conversation on unmet justice. Like Hiron, Dipika too could not bid her younger brother a final goodbye.

A layered study of the secret killings shows the multiple layers behind the executions that have otherwise been expediently clubbed and closed. During the secret killings, people were not just killed but were dismembered and many also disappeared. The wounds of living without closure and still hoping that someday the missing person may come up are extremely heart-rending. Babli's mother, Reba Das and his elder sister Dipika Das from Nalbari have been living with such wounds, sharing their grief with the mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of conflict zones in other parts of the country.

THE WOUNDS OF WITNESSING VIOLENCE

Extra-judicial killings are not unique to Assam. In the neighbouring state of Manipur, a group of mothers and widows of the victims who were killed in fake encounters formed the Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association Manipur (EEVFAM) in 2009. The women came together to 'reclaim mourning by a public display of their private, and often unrecognized, grief and to chart a way towards collective healing' (Vashist 2016: 25). EEVFAM also filed a writ petition to the Supreme Court sharing details of around 1,528 civilians who were killed in fake encounters between May 1979 and May 2012. At a time when the armed forces were trying to reclaim privileges of impunity in armed conflicts, the court brought the armed forces under criminal proceedings in 2016 in response to that writ petition (Rajagopal 2016). Further, in the same year a sensational revelation by a Manipur Police Commando not just illustrated the dangerous living conditions of civilians in a highly militarised zone, but he also confessed to having executed 133 people on the orders of

higher authorities (*The Wire* 2017). In Kashmir too voluntary groups of women have resisted enforced disappearances under the perennial armed conflict in the valley. For instance, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) was formed in 1994 by Parveena Ahangar with other victimised families of enforced disappearances. The members mourn on the 10th of every month in sit-ins at Pratap Park in Srinagar, keeping the memories of the disappeared alive. They hold photographs of their missing family members, display their belongings, sing lullabies, morun and weep weep (Manecksha 2017). APDP has also been printing annual calendars with the stories of 12 disappeared Kashmiris every year since 2016 as a way of remembering, mourning and refusing to forget (*Kashmir Observer* 2019).

Scholarly work on women's resistance to witnessing and experiencing violence in Kashmir also draws attention to the 'myriad things' that women speak about that have shaped their everyday identities under militarisation (Kaul and Zia 2018). But in Assam, has anyone heard of such sustained public expression of grief and remembrance? Or for that matter, do the voices against the extra-judicial killings in the North-East region of India get a generous national media coverage? Do women across the conflict inflicted areas in India enjoy the privilege of a safe space to speak or resist? Isn't grief the same? Isn't the yearning for the killed and the disappeared the same across languages, classes, castes, religions and regions? What makes the secret killings different from the fake encounters and enforced disappearances that have been the 'secret' identity of the perpetrators, unlike in Manipur or Kashmir where the armed forces are readily recognised, accused or convicted. As a result, in Assam family members of the victims, particularly women, continue to grieve alone in religious places or on rare arrivals of researchers and journalists behind closed doors. Personal experiences of grave grief such as these have necessitated reiterating the conversation on the wounds of witnessing violence and the wounds of living with them.

When Babli's elder sister Dipika left for Patna for a medical emergency, she must have never thought that she would not meet

her brother again. Babli went out of his house in in a village in interior Nalbari to a public phone booth to learn about Dipika's health. He was around 23-years-old then. Dipika never got that call, and Babli never came home. After one month and three days of her return, as Dipika vividly described the duration, her family informed her about Babli's disappearance leaving her in utter shock. She heard from the villagers that bystanders had seen Babli pleading with his abductors to leave him as his sister was under treatment. She said, 'Babli pleaded a lot. *Ekaane xikaane xunisu* (I heard from the people around). But they took him away. Then the secret killers picked up Ajay in the same car.'[16] Dipika's description of losing and missing her brother is situated in the aftermath as she was not in Assam during her brother's abduction. Her voice frequently trembled as she recalled the incident when her joint family split due to regular army harassment, one of her three brothers was always on the run fearing for his life, and her mother continued to celebrate Babli's birthday and at the same time commemorated him annually on 18 June, the date of his abduction. The reason behind Babli's kidnapping or the army's harassment of Dipika's family members was because her other brother had been a ULFA cadre since 1998. They were five siblings, and she had lost her elder sister who had been diagnosed with cancer earlier.

Rumours loomed large during those days that family members were logistically and physically in touch with the underground rebels making them instant targets of secret killers. When the Indian government banned ULFA in 1990, it could hardly wipe out the widespread support for the once over-ground organisation. Helping ULFA logistically by doing small favours like passing on information or goods or sheltering them or cooking for them was a matter of pride for Assamese households. The literal meaning of a counter-insurgency operation could not take away people's sympathy for the 'boys' in the 1980s and 1990s as they were presumably fighting for the cause of the nation. However, what cannot be overlooked is that many times the insurgents sought shelter forcefully pushing the civilians under the suspicion of the armed forces. Rakhee Kalita Moral (2015: 11–12) in

her seminal work, *Rumour, Rhetoric, Rebellion: Negotiating the archive and the witness in Assam* emphasises how local gossip found space in the way people's allegiance to the insurgent movement was navigated. Words and phrases like 'allegedly', 'they said', or 'I heard' often marked the opening sentences by witnesses when narrating counter-insurgency operations (Deka 2019d).

While Hiron lived under constant rumours like her life was under threat, she decided to get married. Till three months after her brother's death, Hiron had fed her parents and sneaked out in the dark to live with her uncle's family for the night. During those dreadful times, she longed for someone who was a good man and could be her guardian. Dipika also lived in anxious anticipation of when the security forces would knock on her door and interrogate her. The fact that one of her brothers was in ULFA and the other one had been abducted by the secret killers prevented Dipika from finding a suitable match. In other words, people were scared to be associated with her family. This was evident in what many surviving families of secret killings whom I met talked about—the difficulties of convincing a prospective groom's family. This was in contrast to experiences in militarised societies where young girls were married off to protect them from any untoward incident that assaulted her 'dignity'. According to Cockburn (2010: 146), 'Being located close to war, in the flesh or in the imagination, combines with the experience of being a woman in patriarchy to foster an understanding of the significance of gender.' Cockburn emphasises one's location and position in shaping one's perception of war.

When I expressed my desire to know about Ajay, who was abducted along with Babli, Dipika said he lived in the same locality. While there was no clue about Babli, Ajay was thrown on the highway near his house with severe injuries on his body. Dipika recalled the time when she went to meet Ajay, requesting him to be her witness in finding Babli when the Saikia Commission was formed, and Babli's (as Khagen Das') disappearance was included in its fourth set of cases. Ajay, however, did not make any significant effort that would have left Dipika's family with some emotional assurance. Yet, Dipika

interpreted his silence as fear and narrated her reaction to this non-cooperation with clarity:

> When Ajay was picked up, his wife immediately filed an FIR. My family did not. They complained about my brother missing but not taking the names of the perpetrators. That was our greatest mistake. Later we came to know about one of the people who had abducted them. *Ajoy'k bohut otyasaar korisil, bohut otyasaar korisil, taar sariufaale bandage* [they had attacked Ajay brutally, and his body was plastered with bandages]. I went to Ajay's home, requesting him to be our witness. He agreed. Later we heard that he had been threatened. I told him I did not want to harm him in any way nor did I not want any trouble for him as he was our only witness. In the court, we were usually called on different days. I told him I wanted to attend when he was called. I wanted to hear what he had to say. But he did not inform me. *Muk kua nai teur jeevontur khatirot, taarkarone moi teok beya pabo nuaru. Teur family ase, protekor kotha bhabibo lagibo, mur saarthor karone, teur jeevantu boli dibo nuaru* [he must have been silent for the sake of his life and for that I cannot be cross with him. Everyone has their families and we have to think about everyone. I cannot think of sacrificing his life for my vested interests].
>
> (Dipika Das in discussion with the author, Nalbari, 25 February 2019)

As I was struggling to meet people to listen to and understand their first-hand experiences and insights about the secret killings, I did remember reading about Ajay and Khagen in the Saikia Commission's reports (Justice K.N. Saika Commission of Inquiry 2007). I did ask one of my intermediaries from Nalbari about the possibility of meeting Ajay as he was a survivor of secret killings. However, Ajay's wife told my intermediary that he was not in town. As fate would have it, I did go to Ajay's house unknowingly with another intermediary in March 2019. Though Ajay was at home when I visited them, I could not meet him as I was told that he was sleeping. Twenty years later, Ajay continued to be silent. At a time when some were going out of their way to re-open the cases and causes, confessing and opening up their hearts

in an attempt at healing or delegitimising the commission itself to erase a bloody political past there were still many who were silent despite having faced the brutality themselves. As Dipika correctly interpreted Ajay's silence as fear, this can be just one side as I sensed a more profound interpretation of Ajay's silence while talking to his wife, Asha.

In her 40s Asha seemed a little reluctant when I visited her. Yet, she had a welcoming smile as she knew my intermediary. Even though I did not plan to interview her and had visited them in the hope of seeing Ajay and talking to him, I ended up having an emotionally charged conversation with her. She sounded extremely comfortable and confident and addressed my curiosity. While researching secret killings, I often called people I did not know, and I also went out in search of people I did not know with the people I had met for the first time.

In Guwahati, I often called people beforehand and sought their consent for visiting them. In the villages and towns, particularly in Nalbari and Sivasagar, engaging with people was a little different and less formal. I had to cover long distances only on the hope that the people would trust me. My intermediaries often bridged those difficulties in the villages and towns that I visited without prior consent as many of the families lived secluded lives both geographically and emotionally. However, Asha expressed her fears, sorrows and difficulties associated with those times. She did not take names or accuse anyone but elaborated on how it felt for a woman with a baby in her arms to see her husband being taken away by the secret killers. With teary eyes, she narrated,

> My elder daughter was 8–months-old when my husband was abducted. Tears roll down my face whenever I recall that day. At that time, this house was under construction. I won't name anyone, but SULFA men came and they started picking up the workers one after another. They used improper language, mostly slang words. They were all Assamese. They were wearing white T-shirts and shorts. I initially mistook them to be from the police

or army as they frequented our house but did not think of them as SULFA.

At around 4 p. m. my husband came home with a sack of rice as the ration was almost over. I asked him if he would have lunch as it was late. He said he would eat and then go out to play. When his abductors came, he could not make out if they were from SULFA. During those days, we knew my husband was under SULFA's surveillance. So we lived carefully. After our workers were interrogated, they called my husband to the car that was waiting outside our house. I was with him carrying our daughter. They recognised him. My husband said he knew the people and asked me not to worry. But I panicked as I had heard that if the army or the secret killers picked anyone, they did not release him.

I had seen in the past when I had followed him to the army camp with our baby in my lap when the army picked him for interrogation. So, when SULFA picked him, I immediately rushed to the office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC). The people I met on the way told me what to do and what not to. I did not hear anyone and took a rickshaw to the DC's office. It seemed that the DC felt bad looking at my condition and asked me if I suspected anyone. I named a person, and he asked me how I knew him, to which I said we lived close by. Then he suggested that I should go to the office of the Superintendent of Police. By that time the DC seemed to have started his work. Around 3 a.m. my husband returned with serious injuries. May be the perpetrators thought my husband had died, so he was thrown on the roadside near the highway not very far from this house.

While hearing Asha then or Dipika a month before that, I could not understand the intention behind targeting Ajay. I was contemplating the reasons behind the frequent army searches and seizures at Ajay's house. Why were they suspicious of SULFA? Was it because secret killings had gripped the district at that time? Later as Asha continued talking about her inability to seek help from anyone, I was still confused about her expectations that ULFA would help her. It made me wonder if Ajay was, like many others, targeted because he extended support to ULFA logistically. To my absolute surprise, I later realised Ajay was in

ULFA and had surrendered in 1994. I vividly remembered as people, including Dipika, mentioned Ajay's survival but no one other than his wife had given me this information. I am still not sure if they wanted to hide Ajay's past identity as a SULFA or had assumed that I already knew about it. Whatever the reasons, Ajay's story gave further proof of the intra-group rivalries where even surrendered cadres were targeted by SULFA allegedly sponsored by the state to kill. This should prevent one from perceiving all the surrendered cadres as 'bad' or as 'secret killers'.

Asha's distressing visit to the DC also draws attention to the capabilities of the powerful class in preventing the violence from escalating. In fact, on Parag Kumar Das' death anniversary in 2018, the former DC of Sivasagar, Lakhinath Tamuli, confessed on record that he was staunchly opposed to the secret killings in Sivasagar despite mounting political and military pressure on him (*Pratidin Time* 2018). It is true that apart from the heinous murders of Umakanta Gogoi and his family, Sivasagar did not record many cases of secret killings, unlike in Nalbari or Kamrup.

There is a need to consider political relationships and state intentions in India, where extra-judicial killings have often been instituted in societies under militarisation. For instance, news of extra-judicial executions along the Red Corridor in central India is not unknown (Sundar 2019). With bureaucratic assurances and assistance, Asha was able to reunite with her husband. However, his survival brought with it new everyday challenges for Asha. She said,

> I recognised one of the abductors as he was my husband's friend. My husband was brutally beaten up by a hockey stick; his skin was peeling off. I had photos of those injuries as published in newspapers, but one day I took all the pictures and threw them into the river because they kept reminding me of the past. Neither anyone from the government nor from ULFA came to console us. No one even came to extend emotional support to me. In the past, when the army arrived, I would never care about materials. I stayed alert for my husband as I knew if the army took people,

> they did not come back. At times, I stayed with relatives when there were rumours that the army will be coming. Our neighbours also grew distant after my husband's abduction.
>
> Since 2003, things have turned a little normal. Then an army officer from a camp nearby came home. I was carrying my children and told him, 'Sir, if you suspect us for anything, then gun us down, but please do not harass us like this every day. After you are transferred, someone else will come and harass us. Give us some security. My husband was in ULFA, but he surrendered. ULFA thinks we are with the armed forces, and the armed forces think we are with ULFA. We are with no one.'
>
> The officer said I was his sister from then, and before he went maybe to Kashmir, he wrote down somewhere that no one should harass us. Ever since then nobody has come to harass us. He was a young officer but left giving us great help [I could sense the gratitude in her voice when she said *bohut dangar xohai*]. Remembering Babli's mother breaks my heart. She came to meet my husband in the hospital. She said, '*Tumi bapa ghuri ahila, amar bapak kot thoi ahila* [Son, you came back, but where did you leave my son]?' My husband was silent and could only weep.
>
> (Asha in discussion with the author, Nalbari, 17 March, 2019)

From suspicion and anger, I observed Asha's changing voice as it turned into gratitude for those who had helped her in small ways during those times and her reluctance to engage further with what Ajay might have witnessed or think of had happened to Babli who was abducted along with him. However, Asha did confess that if she had the slightest idea that Babli was in the same car, she would have told the DC about him as well. That remains her biggest regret.

People in conflict zones, in North East India, Maoist dominated central India and in Kashmir express a shared hatred for the armed forces. It is vital to engage with this hatred critically, not in terms of an anti-national narrative but from a politically and strategically motivated past that has scarred human lives for generations.

In conversations with the survivors of the secret killings, particularly women, they talked of every police officer or army man

who was neutral and compassionate in carrying out the investigations even if they had their kin in ULFA. Yet, breach of trust by the police or the armed forces that could not protect them in an erstwhile 'disturbed' region was larger than the goodness of humanity that they had come across. With that background, Ajay's silence was not only out of fear of physical harm but possibly also because of suspicion, continued emotional trauma, guilt or shame of some kind, or maybe he was genuinely sleeping that day, and it was my own suspicion that I felt during this research that made me suspect Ajay's silence. Silence does have many meanings.When Ajay did not come out to meet me, I neither questioned nor waited. I did not even attempt to meet him again. I was not supposed to. Instead, I tried making sense of his silence.

Suspicions were so deeply embedded that most of the people I had an opportunity to converse with on their tough and traumatic lives refused to meet me when I called them directly or when my intermediaries called them. It was when we met in person that we could trust each other or at least pretend to. People's trust had been shaken to such a large extent because they had seen known faces harming them and their relatives or neighbours isolating them (which was true in many narratives yet it cannot be generalised)and in their endless wait for justice to the extent that they had become indifferent to the very concept of justice.

At times, there were opportunities for me to share people's grief even if it was for a moment. At other times, I was taunted and subtly humiliated and told that people like me (particularly researchers, journalists, politicians and even the over-ground ULFA leaders) remembered them when it was convenient. In this conundrum, I discovered a kind of women's solidarity where they came up front to talk to me as I was a woman too. Men talking about insurgency and counter-insurgency is mainstream and seeing a woman researching and writing on these issues was surprising for many. While the men I met during my research offered me insights into the executions and the intentions behind them, the women were more into expressing

the immediate and direct impact of the secret killings on their lives. However, both were emotionally broken and had moved beyond forgiveness and talked of seeking revenge legally. I do not attempt to demean the work of the male academics or journalists here, which was significant for me to begin this research. However, I do see the urgency of women's engagement in re-presenting or representing the marginalised voices from conflict zones because of the multiple roles that they voluntarily or involuntarily play in a society shaped by gendered demarcations.

A CONCLUSION IN 'WAITING'

Initially, it was an ethical dilemma if I should write the names of the women who shared their stories with me or keep them anonymous. Even though they had given me their consent to use their names, it was not an easy decision for me. However, after meeting people across Assam, particularly in Nalbari, it was evident that these stories were well known, collectively remembered, selectively recalled and officially archived either by the commission or by MASS. Keeping the women anonymous and attempting to conceal their identities would only humiliate their experiences. However, I have refrained from naming the alleged perpetrators. I reminded myself that my position was ofa researcher, not a journalist, an activist or an investigative agency. Yet, in my inability to influence the course of law and justice. writing these stories has been an act of activism and resistance against the constructed silences around the secret killings. As a researcher, I could also not get away with the role of a therapist by default. As Susan M. Thomson wrote about her struggles in carrying out the role of a therapist while researching the Rwandan genocide, I can resonate with the frightening experience of listening to painful sufferings day after day which Thomson too might have experienced (Thomson 2010: 115).

As I write the conclusion to this essay, I cannot help but reflect on my self-reflexivity in making sense of the violence that occurred in Assam. It was difficult to both research and write about the secret killings by discarding the emotional upheavals one went through in engaging with the families. The self-imposed guilt of reminding the families of their disturbing past was central. I had to wait to process these emotions. However, a conversation on secret killings has also been waiting, in the literal sense, in terms of time. Wives waiting for their lost husbands donning *sindoor* (vermilion) on their foreheads, mothers dying waiting for their disappeared sons, survivors continuing to wait for legal justice or families waiting endlessly for a public apology from the state for its inability to safeguard the fundamental human rights of the people and also from ULFA for jeopardising the lives of hundreds of civilians in its struggle for sovereignty.

The families have either been compensated by the state or conferred the title of *swaheed poriyaal*s (martyr's families) by ULFA and MASS. But is that enough? What has been the impact of the extra-judicial killings on the lives of the children in North East India? What about the post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by family members living with these painful memories? There has been a constant wait to unravel these questions. My close encounters with human grief, mainly through the experiences of Barsha, Hiron, Dipika and Asha, gave me a glimpse of their last 20 traumatic years.

Journalist Wasbir Hussain (2006) in his book *Home-Makers without the Men: Women-Headed Households in Violence-Wracked Assam makes* a significant contribution in emphasising the lives of women from conflict zones particularly from Assam turning themselves resilient after the deaths of their partners who were civilians, or held office in the government and police force or had insurgent affiliations. What makes his attempt stand out is the emphasis on the inter-relationship between gender and violence in societies under militarisation where violence unleashed by both the military and the militants leaves a deep blot on human minds that cannot be erased easily. To talk after having experienced the devastation of conflict is challenging and more so in

this case when no one has been convicted. It implies that the the men who assisted the security forces during the killingscontinue to live in proximity to the survivors of violence, which must be an emotionally exhausting and exasperating experience.

Counter-insurgents in India often justify their actions with the philosophy of violence begets violence. Such a belief keeps the cycle of violence circular, deepens terror, and makes healing difficult. The people I came across said they could never forgive the secret killers. Subsequently, they could never let go of the past and it became difficult for them to cope with their grief for a very long time. To heal, it is necessary to confront the hurt, but for that there is a dire need for the survivors to feel heard and not suppressed and forgotten. It was strange for me to see the women once suspicious of my intentions being in contact with me and occasionally asking about the progress of my work and adding new information which they missed out during our conversations which they thought may be necessary, but mostly to stay in touch without any specific reason. While their wait for legal justice seems to be endless, women sharing their experiences of living through violence tend to establish new solidarities towards healing and breaking the silences on difficult conversations.

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NOTES

1. ULFA was formed on 7 April, 1979 at Sivasagar in Assam against the alleged illegal occupation of Assam by India and the economic exploitation of the region by the Central Government. It demanded a sovereign Assam. Currently, the organisation is divided into ULFA which is engaged in peace talks with the government and ULFA (Independent) which is the underground faction.
2. On 9 July, 1987, the Naga insurgent group National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) attacked the Assam Rifles Post at Oinam in Manipur. What followed was mindless violence by the security forces against civilians under the counter-insurgency operation codenamed Operation Bluebird. Nandita Haksar and Sebastian M. Hongray's in book *The Judgement that Never Came: Army Rule in North East India* (2011) offers a rich illustration of people's testimonials on Operation Bluebird.
3. Under the draconian AFSPA law, people could be arrested on suspicion without warrant. When Thangjam Manorama was arrested for her alleged connection to underground groups and raped, and her bullet ridden body was found, a group of elderly women activists from Meira Paibi in Manipur disrobed themselves infront of Kangla Fort in 2004 against the Indian army with banners like 'Indian Army Rape Us'.
4. On 23 February 1983, over 1,600 Bengali Muslim immigrants were brutally killed by Tiwas residing in the same locality in Nellie, Assam. Japanese researcher Makiko Kimura in her book *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters* (2013) elaborates on the position of the victims, perpetrators as well as the students' groups through her rich ethnographic work.
5. During conversations with MASS activists I got the information that the nine human rights activists from MASS were Parag Kumar Das, Mahesh Nath, Lotika Kochari (who was also ULFA's Publicity Secretary Mithinga Daimary's sister), Golapi Basumatary, Nripen Sharma, Cheniram Nath, Monoj Konwar, Atul Phangshuand Dasham Sonowal.

6. Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu is celebrated by Assamese people to mark the beginning of the Assamese New Year.
7. Elder brother in Assamese.
8. *Gamusa* is a traditionally woven piece of cloth that has social significance for Assamese people. It is gifted as a souvenir, symbolises respect and is also used as a towel.
9. A sacred thread worn by men for their religious affiliation, particularly by those following Hinduism.
10. Pathshala is a town in Barpeta district in Assam which is around 9 km from Patacharkuchi.
11. Elder sister, or for respectfully addressing an elderly woman in Assamese.
12. Barsha in discussion with the author (Sivasagar, 24 November 2016).
13. Roben Goswami (Hiron Devi's husband and Nripen Sharma's brother-in-law) in discussion with the author (Patacharkuchi, 25 February 2019).
14. Reba Das (Khagen Das' mother) in discussion with the author (Nalbari, 17 March 2019).
15. Interview with the wife of a SULFA cadre (January 2019). She recalled how her daughter who was an infant then came to know everything about her father's murder by the secret killers over time but never asked her mother about it.
16. Dipika Das in discussion with the author (Nalbari, 25 February 2019).

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