

## **Between footnotes, rumours, and field notes, locating memories of extra-judicial killings from North East India**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts at initiating a conversation on an under-represented event of extrajudicial executions popularly called ‘secret killings’ in the North East Indian state of Assam. Ever since India’s independence in 1947, the North East region of India has witnessed the beginning of armed struggles towards self-determination and sub-nationalism. Unlike and until the late 1990s, today the region is comparatively ‘peaceful’ if peace would equate to the official death statistics. However, an ambivalent meaning of peace unfolds in the region’s oral narratives coming from the people who have experienced, witnessed, perpetrated, recall or overlooked violence that had left them without closure. In this paper, I intend to reach out to the under-represented voices irrespective of their sex but with a keen reflection upon the difficulties of locating women and representing their testimonies of violence. I have attempted to do this gravitating towards the footnotes, rumours, and field notes. These vignettes and memories contest the homogeneity of women as a category and necessitate making the narrative on secret killings inclusive.

**Keywords:** Secret killings, North East India, ULFA, women, memories, rumours

### **What fits in? An introduction**

Why do some stories matter while the rest do not? Is it about the identity of the person whose story one intends to tell that matters? Or is it about the current intellectual vogue or policy decisions of the state that influence the coverage of areas worth studying or disseminating? As a researcher from the North East region of India, I have struggled to address these needs of shifting interests for ‘fitting in’ my research out in the public discourse. Whether it’s a question of fitting within a predetermined theoretical backdrop of the North (Connell, 2014), for academia that would otherwise not consider one’s research worth funding or publishing, or to fit within the set binaries of whose story one intends to tell. In this ardent need to fit in, many voices voicing violence from insurgency and subsequent counter-insurgency operations in North East India, to which this paper is geographically confined, have remained under-represented, distorted, misrepresented, forgotten, and often silenced. As such, the quest for peace in North East India masquerading in the economics of the region alone is problematic without addressing the unresolved scars from the past. This has only legitimized the older rules of violent governance in the region. One such event left without closure in the North East Indian state of Assam has been the secret killings. While the intensity of violence is measured based on the official statistics of casualties, the trauma of the secret killings

continue to haunt human lives and shape their identities that resonates in the archives of violence globally.

The secret killings, popularly called as '*gupto hoitya*' in Assamese language<sup>1</sup> where 'gupto' stands for secret and 'hoitya' for killing, have been a form of extra-judicial killings that had targeted the family members, close aides, and suspected sympathisers of the insurgent organization United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam irrespective of their age and sex. The twin intentions behind these killings that have been popularly accepted have been to force the families to persuade their underground kin to surrender and to create a fear psychosis in the society in order to prevent the people from sheltering insurgents (Bhattacharyya, 2015).

For the unversed, ULFA's struggle to sovereignty dates back to 1979 and has remained one of the longest-running insurgencies from the region after the Nagas' demand for a greater *Nagaland*, a homeland for the Nagas. Ever since, ULFA had based its central thesis of armed struggle on the alleged illegal occupation of Assam by India and the economic exploitation of the resource-rich region by the central government in New Delhi (Mahanta N. G., 2013). While men dominated the ranks of ULFA, women were first recruited at the time of counter-insurgency operation, codenamed Operation Bajrang in 1990. It was a time when men lived under the surveillance of the armed forces and their mobility was highly restricted (Deka, 2017). Under the ambit of feminine modesty, women could carry out their ulterior motives as they were not easily suspected (Fanon, 1959, p. 58). Despite dodging the armed forces, internal schisms at different points of time had resulted in the bifurcation of ULFA into two factions- ULFA, which is engaged in peace talks with the state and the underground faction called ULFA (Independent).<sup>2</sup> However, the voices of women insurgents or the women who were victimized or had survived the violence during counter-insurgency operations or the very acts of brutality like the recovery of mass graves (Talukdar & Kalita, 2011) or the secret killings of civilians have remained as 'official data,' sub-sections and footnotes and never occupied a sustained representation in press or literature.

The secret killings that had officially been recorded to have occurred between 1998 and 2001, allegedly carried out by the police and the surrendered insurgents under the state tutelage

<sup>1</sup> Assamese also known as Asamiya or Axomiya is an eastern Indo-Aryan language widely spoken in the Indian state of Assam as well as in the adjoining region.

<sup>2</sup> ULFA (I) currently operates from Myanmar along the international boundary with India and has continued to carry out extortion drives in Assam. The organization has regularly recorded its statements over the contemporary socio-political and economic issues concerning Assam through multiple media houses.

continue to remain as one of the darkest episodes of exercising extra-judicial power in Assam.<sup>3</sup> To elaborate, the surrendered ULFA cadres, collectively called as SULFA, were said to have been involved in locating their former comrades underground. They served as the unofficial spies to the police, carried out petty crimes, as well as viciously executed the families of the insurgents. While people's discontents against the state differed covering the dominant issues of religion, ethnicity, territoriality, or development,<sup>4</sup> the role of the state uniformly resonated in its tactic of organizing what Patricia Gossman called as 'secret armies (Gossman, 2000)' in a few Indian states where people's movements had turned into armed rebellions. The organization of clandestine units by the state that comprised of ex-militants reverberated with the death squads in Punjab (Gossman, 2000), the Ikhwanis in Kashmir (Manecksha, 2017), the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh (Sundar, *The Burning Forest: India's War Against the Maoists*, 2019), or in this research, the SULFA in Assam. Extra-judicial killings such as these are, however, not unique to Assam.

In 2012, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed by the Extra-judicial Execution Victims Family Association Manipur (EEVFAM) against 1528 cases of fake encounters by police and security forces between May 1979 and May 2012 in Manipur alone (Vashist, 2016). However, unlike the fake encounters, there has been no evidence to prove the identity of the perpetrators during the secret killings. This makes studying the event very complex and locating the voices remembering the event even more sensitive. Leaving the personal narratives aside, the very event of the secret killings had remained off the national gaze (Deka, 2019) that vividly depicts the under-representation of the region and particularly the acute violence that has been meted out to the civilians of the region (Hazarika, 2018; Haksar & Hongray, 2011; McDwie-Ra, 2009). It is in this sense that I came across the first-hand narratives of secret killings completely by chance during one of those days when I was researching on the lives of the women combatants of ULFA in their public and private spaces. The secret killing accounts have completely shunned down a nuanced understanding of 'her-stories.' Though my research on the memories of the extra-judicial executions is not based on women's testimonies of violence alone, what I found in the field was the dire need to look into women's memories and their individualities which are erstwhile taken for granted. They tend to speak not just for themselves but also express a kind of solidarity

<sup>3</sup> For further reading may refer to the first report of Justice K.N.Saikia Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Identity in different manifestations continues to dominate social movements today in 2019 in India which may not remain confined to religion or ethnicity but has come to cover the issues of or raised by marginalized groups.

towards other victimized families. For example, my women respondents helped me locate many families irrespective of whether those ‘cases’ were popular or not. They did not perceive grief differentially.

For anthropologist Dolly Kikon, “The domestic is a part of the public sphere for societies in armed conflict because testimonies of violence and loss are not personal affairs (Sundar & Kikon, 2019, p. 79).” This necessitates reiterating how traumatic memories from the past are manifested in the present which are a potentially rich source of oral telling and history writing. During this research, I interviewed former women insurgents of ULFA, female family members who survived or had witnessed the acts of killing, and also interviewed male family members who had survived the killings and about their families. Many of these men were the former combatants of ULFA as well as the human rights activists. Irrespective of rural-urban spaces, men continued to speak as authorized story tellers of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Even if I had to approach the women, it was through the men. There were rare occasions when any male respondent had suggested me to meet any prospective female respondent. At moments like these, I found how the extra-judicial killings in North East India are remembered selectively with hesitations and in fear, and truths are traded as rumours or vice versa. Memories such as these are confined to footnotes or are overlooked as field notes. This paper aims at reflecting upon my field experiences in indulging with the silent, silenced, and unspeakable memories of violence.

## **Footnotes and rumours**

While ULFA’s armed struggle has been well covered academically, the bureaucratic representation of violence unleashed during the secret killings and the subsequent statist idea of compensated peace have eschewed the scars of living a life without closure- emotional, legal, or financial (Deka, 2019). The narratives on the secret killings also refrained from highlighting the anomalies of a state investigation in societies under counter-insurgency where the lives of innocent men, women, and children were at stake. Footnotes, in this sense, offer a detour to an erstwhile plain narrative and raise intriguing questions on its very content. It is in these footnotes; I found reference of previous fieldwork anecdotes, which helped me exploring painful human memories and locating possible respondents across Assam. This challenged my erstwhile ‘insider’ position in Assam, where it became difficult to reflect where to start from.

My initial curiosities to learn about the secret killings beyond the footnote were also rooted at the sight of garlanded portraits of family members hung on the living room walls at many of my respondents' homes who were mostly the former women insurgents. The garlands not only indicated death but unravelled a roadmap to initiate conversations with the former insurgents whose family members were tortured, killed, or had remained disappeared ever since. These portraits have been a constant reminder for my respondents of witnessing the veiled assailants who had either abducted or shot down their family members, of the kind of isolated lives they led when their neighbours and relatives refrained from staying connected in the subsequent fear of being targeted, of the guilt they bore closely on these deaths that involved the 'innocents' and that of the justice that was denied to them for almost twenty years now. For most of the insurgents, avenging the extra-judicial executions—secret killings or the fake encounters had primarily been their motivation to join the underground organization (Deka, 2017). This can further be contextualized within the wider framework of counter-insurgency that militarized the public life thereby creating a 'garrison mentality' in governing Assam (Barbora, 2006) where civilians often fell into the tussle between the insurgents and the counter-insurgents.

At a time when locating respondents was tough, the very attempt to initiate conversations on violence allegedly perpetrated by the police or the surrendered cadres was testing. The rapport building phase was not just a means to get 'data' but the nature of negotiations and interactions towards rapport building itself was the data. Observations and discoveries made during this entire time contributed to my field notes that reflected upon the intensity of emotions that continue to shape human lives today and necessitated rediscovering new or reviving the silenced voices in the field. During the fieldwork I observed that there was either silence or denial, and that out of those who spoke to me on the secret killings and some of whom who had been my intermediaries, particularly journalists, former insurgents, and human rights activists – were all male. In fact, at every opportunity to meet the family members of the victims of the secret killings in a home setting, women were either observed serving food or being the mum listeners to the conversations. Such silences tend to emanate out of many circumstances—a traumatic past, fear for further physical harm, suspicion, genuine forgetfulness, or the gendered socialization where their male counterparts are 'authorised' to speak and represent their families in the public. Amidst this conundrum of fear, suspicions, and vulnerabilities, voicing out violence was not easy. As such, taking inspiration from Lee Ann Fujii's ethnographical account on the Rwandan genocide of 1994, I

found her use of meta-data highly relevant while researching the silences, rumours, denials or ‘not so sure’ narratives coming from disturbed regions (Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*, 2009).

On meta-data, Fujii writes, ‘They point us to actors whose experiences may have been silenced by current political or social conditions, or to actors who wish to avoid saying too much. They teach us how to evaluate and analyse our data, which are particularly important tasks when determinations of truth with a capital T are not possible or appropriate (Fujii, 2010, p. 160).’ Remembering events like these that had never been politically or legally resolved due to the acclaimed lack of evidence ( Department of Home and Political, Government of Assam, 2007), one is ought to hear a lot of ‘allegedly,’ a mysterious ‘They said,’ and even ‘I heard’ in the narration. Rumours are confined not just to speculations regarding the identities of the secret killers but mostly cater to the need to edit one’s ‘terror of not-knowing’ (Simons, 1995, p. 55). For instance, in my attempts to locate a woman survivor of the secret killings from Guwahati, who witnessed the murder of her parents and elder brother in 1999 when she was around thirteen years old, I came across many rumours about her whereabouts. These rumours turned out to be false when I finally met her family. One of her brothers joined ULFA in 1991, and he was often referred as a valiant armed combatant of ULFA’s militant wing by the organization. This has been considered as the rationale behind targeting his family by the secret killers. However, I had to drop my desire to meet his sister for I was told by her surviving elder brother and sister-in-law that she overcame the trauma of witnessing death with extreme difficulty. She chose to live a life with her husband and young children away from the shadows of the past. This was in contrast to what four of my male respondents had recalled at four different places on asking about her, each having no idea that I met the other—

Respondent 1, a former male insurgent in June 2016 said, ‘After coming over ground, I met her and she cried recalling the whole incident.’ Respondent 2, a former male insurgent in July 2018 said, ‘We don’t know where she is but heard she is not mentally stable after witnessing the incident.’ Respondent 3, a male leader of a students’ organization in December 2018 said, ‘I don’t know exactly but maybe she was married off very early to overcome the trauma.’ In December 2018, respondent 4, a male relative of hers whom I approached to said, ‘She lives in an interior village and so I will not be able to get her number for you.’

I fed these observations into my field notes periodically which later emphasized how the inaccessibility to women from conflict zones had not only left out women’s voices explaining the fear they experienced, depicting their agency to resist, or coping grief, but also necessitated reflecting upon the ways rumours produce more rumours ( (Simons, 1995, p. 55)

in the absence of definite information. As elucidated by Veena Das, the very act of telling has the potential of producing rumours (Das, 2007, p. 108) that would otherwise seem unreal. Meta-data like rumours in writing the narrative of the secret killings then serve not as the residue but the very crux of narrating the unknown and the unsure. Justice K.N.Saikia Commission, the judicial commission which was appointed in 2005 to investigate into the secret killings in Assam on many instances had also pointed out how the targeted families were ‘suspected’ to have sheltered insurgents or to have been sympathetic towards the underground outfit ( Department of Home and Political, Government of Assam, 2007). Suspicions tend to fuel rumours in societies under counter-insurgency that eventually influence the very act of locating people and remembering their stories.

### **The politics of remembering the killings**

Memories of traumatic experience are candidly confessed, hesitantly shared, denied, remembered selectively, often assumed, or undergo a complete silence. This, however, is not about forgetting but remembering differently and selectively. Silence and voice, in this sense, are considered as varieties of communication, productive of power (Selimovic, 2018, pp. 1-2). Likewise, secret killings in Assam are also not forgotten, particularly by the political class. The narrative is conveniently used by political parties at the time of elections even today in 2019. It has been one of the primary reasons behind the decline of the regional political party in Assam, the leadership of which at one point of time back in 1979 started the Assam Movement against the illegal immigration from Bangladesh into India, which has drastically changed the demographics of the North East. The movement ended with its leaders signing the Assam Accord in 1985 with the central government in New Delhi that also saw the birth and the rise of the regional political party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). However, the secret killings that occurred under the reign of AGP between 1998 and 2001 when human lives became extremely precarious; soon after that, the AGP leadership could never regain its lost power.

In an attempt to break away from an exclusive political narrative, I tried to interview both the former insurgents and the counter-insurgents keeping the stories of the civilians in the forefront. Trust has been a vital influencer in the field that guided the nature of people’s speech and silences. In his ethnographic work on the drug dealers at New York’s El Barrio district, anthropologist Philippe Bourgois highlighted how the trust he had shared with his respondents helped him in raising difficult questions with comfort (Bourgois, 2003). Based on the trust entrusted upon my intermediaries, I could get access to my respondents that

included the state, the non-state, and the anti-state actors. Yet many voices ceased to blurt out in suspicion of a safer space for confessions and conversations. While working on the memories of Partition, Urvashi Butalia has pointed out that voices are hierarchical, and it's challenging to recover women's voices (Butalia, 1998, p. 353). As my intermediaries initially introduced me mostly to the popular over ground leaders of ULFA, I met and interviewed them but ended up jotting down what has already been narrated over and over again—the perpetrator and the victim narrative and the politics behind the orchestrated killings. However, interviewing family members of these former insurgents who underwent the ordeal of the secret killings explicated the need to remember the days preceding the killings when humiliation, physical harassment, and verbal abuse were normalized under counter-insurgency operations. I observed that while the former combatants allowed recording the interview, any technical tool of recording was intimidating for most of their family members. At these moments field diary was my only tool to record their attitude in recalling the past. An opportunity to interview at home offered the sight of the physical being and the emotional well-being of my respondents. It was interesting to observe how women would participate 'in-between'—between the brief break the male respondent would take, or between the pause of the male family member in order to remind him of the lost thread of accounts he had forgotten or skipped intentionally, or over tea when the interview would officially end but informally begin with the mothers, wives or sisters of those being killed. To explore this political trajectory of women's speech and silence on the secret killings, one has to reflect upon their childhood socialization as well as look back to the nature of their dissenting voices in public spaces. In Assam, women acquired different meanings of the Assam Movement (1979-1985) that later gave way for ULFA to flourish. 'The traditional duty of looking after the household and the handloom changed into thinking of the social change that was going on and it could influence the politics of the state (Sharma, 2017, p. 25).' However, only two women could obtain political positions at the end of the movement allegedly leaving the women agitated and regretful (Mahanta A. , 1998, p. 49). This resonates in ULFA's struggle too where women were recruited for crucial tasks (Deka, 2017), many a times having witnessed violence inflicted upon the civilians and their family members while experiencing and surviving violence themselves. Yet, women could neither obtain any significant ranks underground or in overground spaces, and their once crucial role in the anti-state activities has been conveniently forgotten and degraded. Under the modern armed conflicts, the neat categories of combatants, civilians, or sympathizers are blurred where 'both the public and

the private spaces are militarised and violence does not remain confined to the combat front, but enters people's safe havens (Mushtaq, 2018, p. 54).’ This also restrains one, particularly women from reclaiming their authoritative voices over the testimonies of violence. ‘Women remain largely absent from ethical and policy debates regarding when to go to war, how to fight a war, and whether resorting to war is morally justifiable (Sangra, 2018, p. 29).’ Trust upon my intermediaries or effective rapport in this case my attempts at visiting and interviewing their male family members that they overheard or witnessed, and my own choice of taking chances and engaging the women in conversations spontaneously tend to have influenced women to speak out.

Remembering secret killings in current times implied engaging with extremely personal memories of pain, grief, and healing. The narrative is incomplete if one tends to study the secret killings based on the commission reports alone. It lacks the experiences of the survivors and the families in their attempts to overcome the loss, the difficulties in filing cases or reasons for refraining from doing it, and having faced its repercussions further on their social lives. Here, both silence and speech are useful instances of making sense of people's vulnerabilities towards the public expression of their experiences. For example, when I met a mother at her eighties in Sivasagar in 2019, she started addressing the perpetrators with slang words in Assamese which otherwise is considered inappropriate for ‘dignified’ women to utter. Her son was suspected of helping ULFA logistically and was shot dead in front of her eyes in 2001. This was in contrast to the silence and occasional third-person narrative another mother from Guwahati resorted to. She is in her late seventies today, and one of her sons was abducted in 1999 who was never found. It had its connection to her other son being a ULFA combatant. On my many visits to their home, this elderly lady would quietly sit on the couch and listen to our exchange. I jotted down then about my own fears and reluctance in involving this elderly lady into the conversation for I ‘assumed’ her to be extremely vulnerable to the traumatic memories of living without a son— without the knowledge of his whereabouts since 1999. However, her other son, who then came overground told me that his mother would not speak much about his lost brother at home, but would share her woes with relatives and trusted neighbours. Here, through silence, she tends to exercise agency of her voice (Selimovic, 2018, p. 5). Silence as such, wouldn’t always signify ignorance but a manifestation of the unspoken. Another mother from Nalbari, however, was vocal about her loss and expressed profound concern for her unmarried daughter. She told and retold the same story of her son’s abduction in 1999 and his

subsequent disappearance every time I visited them. It has its connections to the impact of that disappearance on their everyday life where people stopped maintaining any social ties with the family out of fear. The personal narratives of these mothers compel one to challenge and examine the very category of women holding traumatic experiences. I came across these mothers mostly by chance, and it was within these unexpected conversations that I felt the necessity to build on my field notes parallel to the responses of an interview schedule, which are not independent but highly embedded and an addition to the narrative. These are infinitesimal observations of voice modulation and body language that help connect the missing thread of sensing vulnerability in the official archives. This tends to examine the power relations in the field as well as the researcher's epistemological standing in considering what is to be remembered or what may constitute knowledge.

### **A concluding thought**

People claim to know 'many things' but they are silent on bringing a discussion on the secret killings in the forefront. A conversation on the secret killings has been long due and more so in the current times when Justice K.N.Saikia Commission has been quashed in September 2018 (The Assam Tribune, 2018). However, this could not deny the fact that people were killed and no one was convicted. This paper attempted to initiate that conversation and in doing so I came across the necessity to study violence beyond the superficial statistics of death. Instead, in the meta-data that I came across in the field in the form of rumours, silences, denials, and suspicion offers a layered and inclusive understanding of violence that is difficult to be articulated, confessed, and forgotten. The meta-data also guided the course of my fieldwork when I confronted the ardent urge of the women to speak thereby, challenging the narrative of silence and secrecy dominating the extra-judicial executions in Assam. There is an urgent need to represent human grief through personal narratives over official reports. In the current climate of peace talks in North East region in general, and Assam in particular, any conversation on resolution without addressing the scars from the past would be futile.

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