Home-Makers without the Men: Women-Headed Households in Violence-Wracked Assam

Wasbir Hussain
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The Scholar of Peace Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign policy practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Discussion Papers, in conjunction with WISCOMP Perspectives, brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership.

The eighth in the series of WISCOMP Discussion Papers, Homemakers without the Men: Women-headed Households in Violence-wracked Assam is the outcome of a media project awarded to Wasbir Hussain to research on how militancy in the troubled state of Assam in Northeastern India has impacted women and children.

Perhaps the most significant development in recent years has been the changing profile of victims of armed conflict and militarism. The intra-state conflicts of the 20th century have inflicted great casualties on non-combatant civilians as well. Women and children are deeply affected in any conflict situation, either directly or indirectly. In a region torn by conflict, women often have to assume roles that they had not envisioned. In the absence of their men who become victims of armed campaigns, it is the women who have to assume new roles. They have to struggle to ensure the safety and survival of their children; provide for their health and education and simultaneously strive to gain social acceptability in a patriarchal society with rigid notions of divisions of labour between men and women.

Written against the backdrop of insurgency in India’s northeastern state of Assam, Wasbir Hussain highlights the stories of 12 such women-home-makers who are being called upon to assume new roles in the private and public spheres, due to compelling circumstances through a series of articles titled Home-Makers without the Men, which also appeared in the Sentinel, a leading Assamese English daily. Through these narratives, Wasbir Hussain documents the determination of these women who rise above their personal loss and endeavor to lead “normal” lives. The study highlights the trajectory of the lives of these women, who have effectively transformed themselves from victims to survivors in a region torn by constant conflict and strife. Traveling
through the violence-torn state to visit these women, he also brings out the dynamics and undercurrents of militancy in Assam. He draws attention to the development of militancy in Assam since 1979 beginning with the activities of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). He points to the existence of several organizations like the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), Dima Halam Daoga (DHD), United People’s Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) etc. that are aspiring for their respective goals of freedom and autonomy and brings to light the struggle for Bodoland as well as the ethnic strife in the state.

The narratives, reflect the varying backgrounds of these women, they are drawn from different areas of the state and from different ethnic communities. While some of these families have political lineage, there are others who have not been part of the political struggle in Assam, but have had to contend with the fallouts of that struggle. Wasbir Hussain documents a variety of profiles in resilience and courage in this series of articles. On the one hand is the ingenuity of Tillottama who leases out her land for cultivation to procure rice for her family, on the other is Kamrun Nissa with her admirable courage and determination as well as an overwhelming humanness to raise her abandoned step-children as her own. Yet they are joined together by a common strand – the ability to move from victimhood to survivorhood in the wake of armed conflict in Assam.

Wasbir Hussain also highlights the state and societal responses towards these women. While some have managed to elicit support from the state machinery, others have been deprived of the provisions of relief made to such families. He points to the lack of mechanisms to overcome the psycho-social trauma experienced by these families. By being unable to articulate their sorrows and heal in the aftermath of the trauma caused by political violence, a new generation grows up filled with feelings of revenge and retribution. Breaking this cycle of violence becomes all the more difficult under these circumstances.

The WISCOMP Research Team
Acknowledgements

Having written on insurgency and ethnic strife in Assam and elsewhere in northeastern India for the past two decades, I was very keen on doing a series on the widows of violence in Assam. I was primarily interested in narrating their sorrow, struggle, anguish and pain, and, of course, on how they faced life with utmost courage and determination and emerged from their problems.

I am indeed grateful to WISCOMP, Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace, New Delhi, for accepting my proposal I had titled ‘Homemakers Without The Men.’ The result has been a series of 12 stories on 12 or more such women survivors across Assam that I enjoyed writing.

I am truly indebted to many people who have helped me by way of identifying the women I eventually met and interviewed, and providing me with as much details as possible on the events of the time. Ajit Basumatary and Jaiklong Brahma, two young journalists based in the Bodo heartland of Kokrajhar, deserve special mention for accompanying me through the deep interiors of Kokrajhar district in western Assam to meet with some of the survivors, traversing rickety wooden bridges on several occasions.

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Wasbir Hussain
Conflict Dynamics in Assam: An Introduction

Assam, like the rest of the northeastern Indian states, is an ethnic minefield, and it is not surprising, therefore, that it is one of South Asia’s hottest trouble spots. For more than 25 years, starting from 1979, the State of 26 million people, stretching over 78,438 square kilometers, has been witness to a number of armed separatist insurrections and ethnic strife, leading to killings and maiming of people, besides displacement of thousands of them from their homes.

In just one decade, 1992-2002, as many as 4,888 people had been killed across the State in insurgency-related violence. These included 643 security force personnel and 2,597 civilians. Besides, the number of people killed in ethnic flare-ups is estimated to run into several hundreds, although accurate statistics are not available.

Rich in natural resource, Assam had been a relatively peaceful state until the formation of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) on April 7, 1979. A group of six radical Assamese youths met that day at the Rang Ghar, the famous amphitheatre of the Ahom royalty (the Ahoms ruled Assam for 600 years starting 1228 AD), launched the ULFA and vowed to fight the Indian State until they achieved a ‘sovereign, Socialist Assam.’ The culture of violence had begun in the State.

Over the years, the ULFA grew in strength, established trans-border linkages with rebel groups both within the Northeast and in neighboring Southeast Asian nations and succeeded in creating a reign of terror. It also resulted in the proliferation of a multiplicity of insurgent outfits in the State. Different ethnic groups like the Bodos, Karbis and the Dimasas created their own militant organizations to push ahead with their demands, ranging from self-rule to maximum autonomy and independent homelands.

As the ULFA was consolidating itself and spreading its tentacles in the region, a radical section of the Bodo tribes-people in western Assam formed what was then called the Bodo Security Force (BSF) on October 3, 1986. The BSF, which was later re-christened as the National
Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), was engaged in a bloody hit-and-run bush war for an independent Bodo homeland. On May 25, 2005, however, the NDFB entered into a ceasefire with the Government after the group responded favorably to Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi’s September 30, 2004 call for a truce.

In fact, security agencies had, at one stage, identified as many as 35 terrorist and insurgent groups in Assam, operating in different parts of the State. Most of them have either become defunct over the years and many are just rag-tag entities without a proper ideology. Many have arrived at formal or informal understandings with the authorities and have since shunned violence.

It is often seen that the dividing line between insurgency and ethnic violence in so far as Assam is concerned is thin or blurred. On many occasions, for instance, ethnic violence, which sometimes triggered widespread riots, was actually provoked by rival ethnic militias. Take the case of the bloody killings in Southern Assam’s Karbi Anglong district in October 2005 when close to a hundred people, more than 90 per cent of them belonging to the majority Karbi tribe, were killed.

The authorities are on record saying that both Dimasa and Karbi militant groups were involved in the violence. That the Dima Halam Daoga (DHD), a Dimasa rebel group fighting for a separate Dimaraji state, and the United People’s Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), a Karbi insurgent outfit pushing for self-rule, were involved became clear when DHD rebels shot and killed nine UPDS militants in the district in the midst of the ethnic strife. The UPDS rebels were apparently engaged in ‘chasing’ the Dimasa militants when DHD men lying in wait at a village attacked and killed the UPDS militants.

There have also been many instances of Bodo rebels turning their guns on minority Adivasis in the Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts in western Assam, where the two communities cohabit. Before the latest agreement between New Delhi and the rebel Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) – claiming to represent the Bodos in general in Assam – was reached on February 10, 2003, a Bodo Accord was signed in February 1993 that had led to the creation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). The BAC was a non-starter as the Government could not arrive at a consensus in so far as the territorial boundary of this Council was concerned. But, the set of modalities that it put in place to fix the
Council's boundary triggered off a violent ethnic cleansing in western Assam.

Take a look at the inter-ethnic violence and the trigger factor in Assam’s Bodo tribal heartland: In the summer of 1996, the Bodos clashed with the Adivasi Santhals, another ethnic group that cohabited the area around the district town of Kokrajhar, 250 kilometers west of Guwahati, Assam's capital. More than 300,000 people belonging to both communities were displaced, and around 250 people were killed in the ethnic riots that began on 15 May, 1996 and continued sporadically till the end of that year. As on February 2004, an estimated 130,000 people belonging to both communities were still living sub-human lives in so-called relief camps set up by the Government, although some have since been rehabilitated by the State Government. A relative calm prevails in the area, but the divide between these two groups has been widened beyond expectation.

Both communities, the Bodos and the Santhals, had been living in peace in the area for decades. But after the Bodo Accord of 1993, the Government came up with a formula that only those villages with a 50 per cent Bodo population were to be included into the BAC. This provision is generally believed to have encouraged a section of Bodos, including armed militant groups representing the community, to attempt ethnic cleansing – driving out the non-Bodos to convert vast stretches into Bodo majority areas and thereby get them included into the Bodo Council and widen its territory.

The radical elements within the Santhal population responded by forming such rag-tag armed groups with scary names as the Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam. The Cobra rebels began by snatching arms from the police and the paramilitary troopers, and had the potential to transform themselves into a more organized militant outfit. However, the Adivasi rebels later entered into a truce with the authorities.

The Bodos are the largest of the ‘Plains Tribes’ of Assam and live primarily along the northern banks of the Brahmaputra river. The Bodo population was estimated at 1.2 million in 1991, and this is “an ethnic group of people belonging to the great Mongoloid stock…. the Bodos claim that they are the first comer (to the Assam plains) and therefore they demand a better share of the land.” The movement of populations resulted in the relative political marginalisation of this numerically dominant tribe.
Since the early 1990’s, the Bodos too have tried to build up movements, pressure groups and insurgencies to assert their rights and these have substantially impinged upon the territorial rights of the other communities – most visibly of the Adivasi Santhals – who had settled in the various districts of western Assam about a century ago, after arriving from the Chhota Nagpur and Bastar areas.

New Delhi appears to have been convinced that an integrationist policy in holding the Northeast together was after all not a correct approach in view of the diverse nature of the region’s demographic profile. This may have halted it from performing its role as a ‘homogenizing state’ any longer, and instead recognize the unique differences and distinct identities of the region’s ethnic groups and communities.

It seems that it is this realization that is making the Indian Government concede demands for autonomy time and again, giving in to the aspirations of different ethnic groups at different points of time. This, in turn, has opened the Pandora’s box with the proliferation of movements to achieve economic and political liberation on ethnic lines, thereby leading to feuds between ethnic groups within the region over territorial supremacy.

There are as yet no reports of the outlawed ULFA enlisting the services of child soldiers, but the average age of a new recruit into the outfit is as low as 18 years, according to security agencies. However, media reports from Assam in June 2002 suggested that a number of Bodo schoolgirls had been ‘forcibly recruited’ as cadres by the NDFB, though the NDFB subsequently denied such reports.

Other northeastern Indian states, particularly Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland, face situations similar to that in Assam. In Manipur, at least 17 insurgent groups are said to be ‘active’, and are engaged in regular confrontation with the security forces. The State has also witnessed bitter ethnic flare-ups between the Kukis and Nagas (1992-1995), the Kukis and Paites (1996-1997), and tensions have also escalated in recent years between the Meities and Nagas.

On its part, Nagaland has experienced a 58-year-long insurrection, now led by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the NSCN Khaplang faction (NSCN-K), pushing the demand for an independent Naga homeland. In Tripura, unabated migration from across the border in present-day Bangladesh has reduced
the indigenous tribals to a minority. The result has been the formation of trigger-happy tribal insurgent groups like the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) who have targeted the ‘plainsmen’ (Bengalis), massacring large numbers of Bengali settlers at regular intervals. There is another rebel group known as the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF).

In any conflict situation, women and children are directly or indirectly drawn into the vortex of the problem itself, and Assam is no exception. There are innumerable instances of husbands, sons or brothers becoming victims of armed campaigns – either at the hands of militants or security forces battling militants. A large number of cadres belonging to the ULFA, NDFB and other groups have been killed by security forces during counter-insurgency operations. Similarly, the militants have killed many security personnel.

This has led to a situation where scores of households across Assam have come to be headed by women, who have lost their bread winning husbands, sons or brothers. These women have been forced to run their families, in the face of heavy odds, and bring up their children as a single parent, providing them proper education etc. Besides, in a large number of cases, these women also have to ensure that their traumatized children emerge from the crisis and lead normal lives. Indeed, these are remarkable women who have not given up living life.
Home-Makers without the Men

That black 1996 morning changed Tillottama’s life

The date: November 19, 1996. There was a nip in the early morning air as is usual in Assam during this time of the year. Romel Chandra Basumatary, a 52-year-old primary school teacher had a quick breakfast and left his tin-roof home in Banargaon, located in Western Assam’s Kokrajhar district, to the village market nearby.

It was around 8 in the morning, and the bazaar was coming to life. Kameshwar Daimary, a farmer, now 46, parked his bicycle in front of a pan shop to purchase a packet of bidis. “A truck pulled up right near my bicycle and the men who were on it started firing like mad at everyone. They then got down from the vehicle and started firing again. I fled to the river bank nearby and watched the mayhem,” Kameshwar told this writer at Banargaon, 260 kilometre west of Guwahati, in early April.

Romel fell to the ground, never to rise again. So did Santa Ram Brahma (18), Swgwmada Brahma (21), Sunil Basumatary (25), and Thojendra Basumatary (40). Two women, Purnima Basumatary and Nila Basumatary, succumbed to their injuries at hospital in the district town of Kokrajhar, 9 kilometres away.

Today, a waiting shed at the spot built in memory of these ‘martyrs’ bear mute testimony to the 15-minute blitzkrieg by the rebels that changed the lives of many in this rather sprawling village of around 40,000 people. Everyone said that those rebels belonged to the outlawed National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), an outfit formed on October 3, 1986 with a pledge to fight for an independent Bodo homeland.

We walked past the Banargaon High School on a newly built pebbled road to Romel’s home. It comprised three houses surrounded by a bamboo fence. A framed photograph of the deceased was hanging at the portico of what looked like the main house. A mud-plastered thatch-roof structure on bamboo stilts right at the entrance to the compound was, of course, the granary.
Clad in a pale-yellow *dokhona* – a wrap-on that Bodo women usually wear – and a white top, Romel’s wife Tillottama, 56, got chairs organized for us to sit in her courtyard. A mother of four, two sons and two daughters, she was quite forthcoming in her replies to the delicate queries, relating to the tragedy in her life, her struggle since the death of her husband and her challenges.

“I was dazed when I saw my husband dead, lying in a pool of blood. I knew my life was shattered, but right then I also realized that I had to live for the sake of my children,” Tillottama said, tears rolling down her cheeks despite her effort at putting up a brave face. Her life now as the head of her family had just begun.

Resting her chin on her palms, Tillottama recalled the first few days of her life without her husband, who as head of the family, used to take care of all matters concerning finances, organizing the provisions etc. “Whatever money we had was spent on performing the last rites and so on. I was blank for a few days, not knowing how to move on,” she said.

Within days, Tillottama began doing the rounds of the Deputy Commissioner’s (DC) office in Kokrajhar to obtain the ex-gratia amount of Rs 100,000 that the State Government used to pay then to the next of kin of people killed in militant violence (now the amount has been raised to Rs 3 lakh). Simultaneously, she started visiting the office of the Deputy Inspector of Schools (DIS), also at Kokrajhar, to complete the formalities so that she could receive the family pension.

“I had to make around 40 visits to the DC’s office for the next two years after my husband’s death before I received Rs 70,000 as ex-gratia,” Tillottama said. Neither she, nor villagers like Kameshwar seemed to know as to why the authorities did not pay her the entire ex-gratia amount of Rs 100,000. District officials in Kokrajhar could not say as to why only Rs 70,000 was paid as ex-gratia to her. “May be, it was paid during that time in installments,” one of them said. If it took two years for Tillottama to get the ex-gratia amount, it was after four long years that she started receiving her family pension.

Life in the Bodo dominated western and northern Assam areas – the scene of both militant and ethnic upsurges – in the nineties was such that killings had become sort of routine, and, as such, the authorities
and the society at large had gradually become less concerned or even detached over the impact of such violence on the affected families. The manner in which the officials at the Kokrajhar DC and the DIS’ office made Tillottama run around to get her dues, without any consideration of the fact that she had just lost her family’s breadwinner, indicated just that.

So, how did Tillottama manage her home before she got some money? “I leased out our 12 bighas (nearly 4 acres) of land to people from the village to grow paddy on condition that they would give me half the crop. Soon, I realized that we had rice from our fields enough to last just six months a year,” she said.

Tillottama realized that her elder son Milon, now 28, has to secure a job and start earning. Mother and son began a serious job hunt. In 1999, Milon got appointed as a primary school teacher at the Ghoskata Lower Primary School nearby. But life was not to change much as Milon’s was not a regular job. So, he has been getting just Rs. 1,800 a month.

“The local Deputy Inspector of Schools somehow did not list Milon as the son of a militant victim’s family. That has deprived him from securing a regularized post which would have fetched him a salary of around Rs. 4,500 a month,” Tillottama lamented.

This resolute woman poured her heart out, saying how, a year after her husband’s untimely death at the hands of a bunch of trigger-happy militants, the Assam Plains Tribal Development Corporation turned down her plea for a small personal loan. “I approached the Corporation for a loan of Rs 10,000 that I needed desperately to get my eye operated. It rejected my request saying they have no such provision,” she added.

The Corporation bosses were right when they rejected Tillottama’s petition for a personal loan as there was no provision to cater to personal needs of the people. But, where do ordinary villagers, hundreds of whom are survivors of violence across Assam, go in search of help once they lose their key earning members? There is no official mechanism in place in the State to look after such people although Assam has been in the grip of militant and ethnic violence since the late eighties.
Tillottama’s young daughter-in-law, Milon’s wife, served us steaming hot tea. A crowd had gathered around us by then. Among them was Parbati, 35, wife of Thojendra Basumatary, one of those killed in the Banargaon massacre. Parbati has five children, two sons and three daughters. Her elder daughter is married, while the rest are in school.

“My husband was a muster-roll (semi-permanent) worker with the local Public Works Department (PWD). We had no land of our own and you can imagine my plight after he was killed. I had to feed my five children,” Parbati said. For quite sometime, she survived on loans from villagers, and by doing odd jobs.

Like Tillottama, Parbati too received only Rs 70,000, and not a lakh as ex-gratia from the authorities. And, she too doesn’t know why. But, this frail woman made good use of her money, buying six bighas (1 bigha=0.33 acre) of land and leasing it out for half the crop in return. “I get rice enough to feed my family for four months a year,” she said with a vacant look on her face.

For almost everything needed to run her home, Parbati has to depend on the Rs 1,800 that she earns every month by working as a casual helper at the PWD office in Kokrajhar. “I hope my job gets regularized. I can be assured of a monthly salary that I cannot do without,” she said, and excused herself.

It was already late in the evening and Parbati has to cook for the kids at home. She will have to catch the 8 A.M. bus to Kokrajhar to reach office on time. Everyday, she would return home after dusk and then begin her routine chores of cooking and looking after the children.

The sun had turned a bright orange. I took leave of Tillottama and decided to see the structure that has been built in memory of those who died that November morning. The pinkish-brown marble memorial, listing the names of those killed that day, stood tall amid the vast paddy fields by the roadside. Lot of such cenotaphs dots the towns and countryside in the Bodo heartland, indicating just how much of violence had rocked the area.

This neat memorial in Banargaon was erected by the All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU). The influential student group’s symbol of crossed swords and a shield stands out at the top. Three young Bodo girls, wearing bright yellow *dokhonas*, walked past.
They are certainly aware that the NDFB is currently on a truce mode and is ready to talk peace with New Delhi. One of the girls looked back. She seemed to think everything could soon be OK and the NDFB may bid adieu to arms and emerge from hiding. If only, those gunmen would not have killed those simple, innocent folks at Banargaon that day. But, such is insurgent politics – kill innocent people, target symbols of governmental authority, catch the attention of the government, and then bargain.
Survivors of terror: Pariahs in society?

Anita Mashahary and Janaki Brahma have lots in common. Both are young Bodo women, were wives of one-time top leaders of the powerful All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU), and both of them have been widowed in their prime.

That’s not all. If their husbands had been silenced by the cruel ‘death dance’ of militants or some unknown armed rivals, they had also been shunned by their own society, at least during the early days of their personal misfortune, primarily out of fear of incurring the wrath of the killers.

Anita and Janaki’s stories have punched holes into the general belief that the society as such always gives the much needed cushion to survivors of terror, more particularly if they are women who have lost their husbands or sons. The result: most such women have firmed up their resolve to meet the challenges and move ahead in life, all by themselves.

Anita (32) lives with her 13-year-old son Jwrang and 10-year-old daughter Hatarkhi at Daularpara, a roadside village 45 kilometre north-west of Kokrajhar, in western Assam. The courtyard of her tin-roof home is neat. Clad in a green dokhona, a wrap-on that Bodo women usually wear, she was tending to her lovely pink bougainvillea when I visited her in early April.

She welcomed us warmly into her small living room. A framed photograph of her husband Bagrangsu Mashahary stood next to the TV. There was another one hanging from a wall. Bangrangsu had been in student politics for long and held senior positions with the ABSU from 1987 until 1995, first as a leader of the Ramfalbil unit of the student outfit, and then as a member of its central committee.

He married Anita, a schoolteacher, in February 1991. Life was rather smooth for the Mashaharys. In 1996, a new political party emerged in the Bodo heartland’s political arena. It was called the People’s Democratic Front (PDF) and was supposed to be close to the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), a militant group fighting to achieve an independent Bodo homeland.

“I didn’t want him to join the PDF. But, he was forced to join the new party by its founders and others even before his term in the ABSU had
ended,” Anita said. She perhaps had the premonition of an impending danger after her husband was appointed secretary of the PDF’s Kokrajhar district unit. After all, the Bodo politics during the time – both mainstream as well as insurgent politics – was murky to say the least.

The ABSU and all groups aligned to it were virtually at ‘war’ with the NDFB, and the PDF, therefore, was seen by these forces as a group out to neutralize them. The emergence on the scene around the same time (1996) of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), a new rebel group which sought to achieve the same goal (of a separate Bodo state within India) as that of the ABSU and its allies, made the area a virtual battle zone.

Now, there were two heavily-armed insurgent groups seeking to represent the Bodos, the BLT and the NDFB. This obviously led to a turf war as both the playing field and political space available was rather too small. This resulted in a bitter fratricidal feud in the area, and people like Anita and Janaki’s husbands had to pay the price of being involved in the messy politics of the time.

Anita lost her composure and sobbed as she related the events of that fateful day, October 13, 2000, when Bagrangsu was kidnapped and killed. “It was around 2.30 in the afternoon. Three cars drove into our home. Some armed men got down and barged inside. They took away my husband and another youth,” she said. Bagrangsu’s body, with bullet wounds and hands tied at the back, was found on the banks of river Swrmanga three days later. The other youth was released the next day itself.

BAGRANGSU may have been caught in the cross-current of the prevailing local politics, but the way the society responded, almost shunning Anita and her two little children in the aftermath of his death, was surprising. “For long, hardly anybody visited us after my husband’s death, perhaps for fear of being linked to the PDF. Some people may have had sympathy for us, but they kept away. May be they thought they would be targeted by those who killed my husband,” Anita said.

Till today, Anita has failed to reconcile to the fact that her husband was killed by people belonging to her own community (Bodos) and that her society did nothing to put her life back on track after the tragedy. “I expected those around to treat me and my children sympathetically. After all, neither me, nor my kids were involved in politics whatsoever,”
Anita lamented. The ABSU, of course, helped her perform her husband’s shradh ceremony, but that was under the organization’s banner. No individual ABSU member came forward to render any assistance thereafter.

Two years later, and after 30 or more visits to the Kokrajhar Deputy Commissioner’s office, Anita received Rs 100,000 that was due to her from the government as ex-gratia. “I have no fixed income now, and depend on half the paddy that those who till my field give me. I need a job badly,” she said. Anita is studying for her B.A degree at the Janata College nearby and wants to give her children the best she can. “Melodious music is the medicine of my life,” she said, pointing at her collection of audio cassettes.

Like Anita, Janaki’s husband Rupswrang Brahma, too, was a senior ABSU leader (he was Speaker of the ABSU’s Kokrajhar district unit) before he was inducted into the PDF. One day, in 2001, someone reached him at his native Sialmari village (No 2) in Kokrajhar district, and said he was wanted in the nearby sub-divisional town of Gossaigaon in connection with some work relating to his NGO, Sikhnajhar Forest & Land Protection Committee. Rupswrang was last seen by some villagers having tea at a roadside tea stall at Kachugaon, a small town.

“After a week, we somehow received information that my husband was killed. We haven’t found the body yet,” 30-year-old Janaki said at her home in Serfanguri, a highway-side town, tears rolling down her eyes. Her daughter Miranda, now 4, was just about 10 months old when her father disappeared all of a sudden.

It was not Janaki, a virtually uneducated mother of an infant (she studied up to Class IV), who was expected to go to the local police station and lodge a missing report following the disappearance of her husband. But, her relatives or the village elders were expected to lodge an FIR with the police. “But the situation was such at that time that no one gathered the courage to lodge a missing report with the police. It was only after a month that an FIR was filed at the Serfanguri Police Station,” Janaki said.

Clutching on to Miranda, Janaki recalled that neither the police nor the organizations which her husband served for so long took any serious initiative to search for his body. “I did not receive help from the people around me in any front. Even, I never got any ex-gratia payment as
I did not know how to go about claiming it,” Janaki said, sitting near a reeling wheel on her courtyard.

Significantly, neither Anita nor Janaki want to mobilize women survivors like them, and form a group to look after themselves and face life together. “I have lost faith in organizations and groups. I don’t even want to take up any such initiative at an individual level,” Janaki said. It is clear that people like them have lost faith in the civil society for its indifferent attitude to their misfortune and not contributing anything to help them deal with their trauma.

Today, she depends solely on the rice she gets from those who cultivate her 2 acre field. “Half of the produce goes to the growers. Still, I sometimes have enough rice to last us a year,” Janaki said. She weaves clothes on the hand loom that is dear to her and sells them to retailers in the local market for some extra income.

The only people who backed her all through her ordeal were her parents. “They still help me in whatever little way they can. They work as my emotional support system,” Janaki said. She has forgiven all her village-folk for abandoning her when she needed them the most. “I’m happy they (villagers) come to visit me these days. Now, my only dream and challenge is to see Miranda do well in life. I need help for my child’s upbringing, but don’t know where it could come from,” Janaki said, before bidding us goodbye.
How Lakshi Hembrom lost her power to think

Clutching a pile of books on one hand and a tattered jute sack on the other, Shome Hasda and Barka Mardi looks intently at the cars whiz past. Classes over, the two four-year-olds leave their rickety primary school, that has no benches or side walls, and walks up to the highway (National Highway 31-C) that links Assam with the rest of India.

The little ones with unkempt hair, clad in worn out shorts and shirts that badly needs a wash, would idle around until it is dusk. For them, there is neither enough food, nor comfort to lure them back home after school. Their thatch or plastic-roofed huts are dingy and dark. Their parents hardly have any belongings. For Shome and Barka, the jute sacks are prized possessions, for they lay them on the mud floor at school to sit during classes.

All the 17,000 odd Adivasi Santhals live in such condition at the Joypur relief camp, in Western Assam’s Kokrajhar district, without proper sanitation, educational facilities or healthcare. For almost a decade, they have been living like this in nearly 2900 such hutments on this highway-side settlement that passes off as a relief camp. Ever since the Bodo-Santhal riots that rocked the district of Kokrajhar in 1996, and once again in 1998, these people are carrying on a life and death struggle.

The official count put the death toll during the orgy of violence in the district at 468. And more than 300,000 people, belonging to both communities, were uprooted from their homes. Even today, 32 such relief camps function in Kokrajhar district alone, housing 101,907 people, including 26,811 women and 36,126 children. Lakshi Hembrom (45) is one of them. A survivor, she has seen a violent past, is going through a miserable present and heading towards an uncertain future.

Nagen Ram Kahar, a portly man in his fifties, who is the president of the Joypur camp, sends for Lakshi as I turn up at the settlement on a warm afternoon in early April. Soon, a frail woman clad in a check lungi and a green cotton scarf arrives and settles down for a conversation, surrounded by a group of fellow inmates.

On May 17, 1996, this Adivasi woman’s husband, Betka Tudu, was killed by a rampaging mob. The Bodos and the Adivasi Santhals have lived in the area for years, but never killed each other before. Tudu’s
death and the prevailing situation at that time immediately left Lakshi and her four children homeless, hungry and traumatized. Lakshi had no time to even mourn her husband’s death. For, after the last rites, following a postmortem, she led her three children to the relative safety of the Joypur camp.

“Life has been tough ever since that mayhem when I lost my husband. The meager ration that the authorities supply us is just not enough,” Lakshi says. The inmates have usually been getting government ration for only 10 days a month – 620 and 400 grams of rice for each adult and child respectively per day. In the initial years, an inmate used to be provided about 50 grams of salt a day. But, that has stopped coming now.

So, how does she manage to feed herself and her children? “Often, we survive on one meal a day. I also join my fellow inmates to hunt for wild roots and tubers. Of course, we look for rats, too, all over the place. Rats can be delicious,” Lakshi says. Satyanath Tudu, the young Headmaster of the middle school at the camp, could sense my uneasiness. “Our people consume rats. It has been sort of a tradition,” he explains.

Lakshi may have been broken by her husband’s death in a brutal manner. But, she seems to have been shattered by her toddler son’s death in 1998. “I had lost my child simply because I could not pay for his treatment. I’m sure, if had even a little money, I could have saved him. His face flashes before me again and again,” she weeps.

Lakshi doesn’t know if she would ever leave the camp and settle down elsewhere. She had arrived here from the shack that she and her family had stayed in for years at the nearby settlement of Radhanagar Sonapur. I am not calling it a village because it never was one. The place was part of the Chirang Reserve Forest, and as such a protected area. But, like in many such reserved forests across Assam, encroachers cleared the tress and settled down illegally. The Adivasis who settled at that place named it Radhanagar Sonapur.

There is a relative calm in the area now. But, Lakshi cannot return to Radhanagar Sonapur. That settlement has since been occupied by Bodo settlers. They, too, are encroachers. So, Lakshi is actually a homeless, who is heading a family without a home. She has hardly any income of her own, and her 22-year-old son is a daily wage earner who cannot meet the expenses of the family of four. Lakshi has already spent the
Rs 95,000 she got from the authorities as ex-gratia after her husband’s death. She does not remember whether or not she had received the remaining Rs 5,000.

Kahar, the camp president, likes to intervene and make his point heard. He says that they would all like to leave the camp and settle down elsewhere provided the government gives them land and money to build houses. I ask Lakshi for her personal opinion. “I’m helpless. I have lost the power to think. I shall agree to whatever our leaders decide,” she says, her sullen face expressionless. She starts muttering, “There’s no point lamenting my husband’s death or my fate. I know I have to battle for survival the rest of my life.”

Just then, Jashmi Hembrom (42), another survivor walks in to join her. Her husband, Lakhan Murmu, was killed on August 30, 1998 near the place where they lived in Gaurinagar, close to the Joypur camp, during yet another bout of bloody violence between the Bodos and the Adivasis. Like Lakshi, Jashmi and her husband were encroachers who had set up home in Gaurinagar.

A distraught Jashmi, along with her teenage daughter, sought refuge at the house of a member of her community. “I realized my future is bleak, so when I got a match for my daughter, I gave her in marriage without much thought,” she says. Jashmi’s daughter moved out with her husband, a farmer. For month after month, Jashmi lived alone, all the time thinking how to take control of her life.

Unlike Lakshi, Jashmi appeared to have a lot more will power. She managed to collect the ex-gratia amount of Rs 100,000 from the district authorities, deposited the amount at a bank, gave a portion of the money to her daughter, purchased a few cattle and was managing to earn just enough to take care of her own self. Still, life for her was tough. And so, she did not refuse when a man she knew offered to marry her. Jashmi re-married a year ago.

“Life has hardly changed for me. I am living in this camp for nearly a decade now with nowhere to go,” she says. Camp inmates like Robin Hembrom (29), a teacher, joins Kahar in demanding land for the people living in camps like the one in Joypur. “We have been pleading with the Forest Department to de-reserve the settlements where we lived before the riots brought us to the camps. The authorities can then give us the land documents,” Robin says.
Land or no land, life has to go on. But, the sad thing is that there are hardly any NGOs working in the area to reduce the misery of these camp people. The primary school aside, the camp also has a middle school, Joypur Manglajhara ME School. Set up in 1996, the school has six teachers who depend on donations for their meager salaries every month. The Lutheran World Service (LWS) provides the salary to one of the teachers. In fact, the Christian missionaries belonging to the LWS is about the only non-government organization working among these displaced people, although in a very small way.

In recent weeks, some Adivasi groups had pressed for a speedy rehabilitation of people like Lakshi, Jashmi and hundreds of camp inmates belonging to the community. They had even threatened to boycott or oppose the maiden elections to the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) if the issue was not resolve by then. Later, of course, the groups announced their decision to participate at the polls (the BTC polls took place in May, 2005) taking into account political exigencies. The authorities at the BTC – the politico-administrative structure that people in the Bodo heartland have achieved in 2003 after a protracted homeland agitation – might eventually come to the aid of the riot-hit people on its own. Even then, the void in Lakshi’s life cannot be filled. She will continue to exit, not live. But, that perhaps is her destiny.
Life’s cruel jokes on Kamrun Nissa

Kamrun Nissa was just into her teens when she got married in 1976. Her husband Faiz Ahmed, a contractor, was associated with the Congress party. He had a modest home right at the centre of Tengakhat, a nondescript town with pot-holed roads on the way to Duliajan, headquarters of Oil India Limited (OIL), in eastern Assam’s Dibrugarh district.

Life was just fine for Kamrun Nissa. Her husband was working hard, trying to bag as much work as he could, besides doing everything possible to climb the Congress party ladder. Faiz’s determination paid off. He went on to become the local Block Congress president. Faiz had no reason to complain about on his home front, for he had a devoted wife.

A year passed by, and then another. Kamrun Nissa was getting restive by the day. She had the family of Faiz’s elder brother Kamrud for company. But, that did not ease her restlessness. What could Faiz be thinking as she has failed to bear him a child? This thought troubled Kamrun Nissa no end. She, after all, was a lady with a heart of gold. By now, she had made up her mind and prevailed upon her husband to take a second wife.

It was the early eighties. Assam was in the grip of a massive anti-foreigner uprising. The All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) was spearheading one of independent India’s biggest mass movements. Its leaders had taken a vow to oust the illegal Bangladeshi migrants, who they feared could outnumber the indigenous people of Assam. A section of those active in this stir wanted more aggressive action.

The culture of violence was taking roots in the State. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was in place, after that meeting at the Rang Ghar in Sivasagar on April 7, 1979. These fledgling rebels who met at this famous amphitheatre of the Ahom royalty sowed their dream of a ‘sovereign, Socialist Assam.’ Killings, threats and intimidations were slowly emerging in the State.

Faiz was gradually consolidating his position in the local Congress politics. He was pleased, and more good news was coming his way. “I was so happy the day my husband got a baby boy through his second wife. I realized I had taken the right decision in getting him to marry..."
again,” Kamrun Nissa tells me at her home, her voice drowned by the sound of the pre-monsoon rains hitting the tin-roof above one afternoon in late April. Soon, Faiz got a second son.

It was 1991. Assam Assembly elections were approaching. There was talk in Congress circles that Faiz was to be given the party ticket to contest the Duliajan seat. The party was on a comeback trail as the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government headed by Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was dismissed a couple of months back (in November 1990) and President’s Rule imposed. All because ULFA activities had peaked, and New Delhi concluded that law and order had collapsed in the State.

January 20, 1991 began on an uneventful note for Faiz. After a late evening cup of tea, he was playing with his sons, Farid (7) and Zakir (5), flying paper planes in front of his home. It was around 4.30 in the evening. The market at Tengakhat was coming to life with people coming out for shopping. Suddenly, a man approached him and asked if he was Faiz Ahmed.

Within minutes, Faiz lay dead, shot by masked gunmen draped in shawls. “I was inside at home. I first thought it was firecracker bursts. When I rushed out, I realized to my horror that it was my husband who was killed,” Kamrun Nissa said. Faiz received four bullets on his chest and one on the shoulder. Little Farid watched his father crash onto the ground. Zakir was, of course, too young to fathom the enormity of the tragedy. The killers fled in a gate-away car, dropping a shawl as they left.

The next day (January 21, 1991), Assam Congress veteran and former Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, accompanied by other senior party leaders, came to visit Faiz’s family. He handed over an amount of Rs 10,000 as an immediate relief in his individual capacity. Within three months, Saikia became the Chief Minister, having led the Congress to victory at the polls held in April. He had not forgotten Faiz.

Saikia directed his aides to get Faiz’s wife a suitable government job as soon as possible. After all, his contribution to the party was immense. But, the Chief Minister’s aides were soon to discover that the matter was not that simple for Faiz left behind two wives. Once again Kamrun Nissa made things easy. “I had already decided that if a job were to come our way, it was to go to her (the second wife). So when it did
come in 1992, I told the authorities to give it to my late husband’s second wife as she had two children to look after,” she said.

The job at the local Sub-deputy Collector’s office at Tengakhat fetched the lady Rs 1,800 a month. That eased the cash crunch a bit for the four-member family (two wives and the two children), which was looked after for over a year by Faiz’s brother Kamrud. The government released an ex-gratia amount of Rs 100,000 to the bereaved family, two years after Faiz’s death. This amount was equally shared between them (the wives). Two years passed by, with the two women battling together to make ends meet and bring up Farid and Zakir.

One day, in 1994, the other woman disappeared, leaving behind her sons. “We searched for her all over the place, but couldn’t trace her. Later, we came to know that she re-married and left with her new husband,” Kamrun Nissa recalled. No one came to collect or enquire about Farid and Zakir. “We realized that the two boys were abandoned,” she added. But, Kamrun Nissa was no ordinary woman.

She took upon herself the responsibility of looking after the two boys. “After all, they are my husband’s children. I cannot abandon them like their own mother did,” Kamrun Nissa said. Life had suddenly become much harder for her. “First, the source of funds dried up after she (the second wife) disappeared. Then, I had to take special care of the elder son Zakir who became sort of traumatized after the fatal attack on his father,” she said.

Zakir, who was then a Class IV student, was probably hit by post-traumatic stress disorder. He used to keep on repeating the number of the car apparently used by his father’s killers and so on. “For a year, Zakir did not sleep at night. He refused to go to school and I had to keep him on my lap most of the time. He was gripped by fear. It was tough bringing him back to a semblance of normality,” Kamrun Nissa stated. But, with as caring a person as Kamrun Nissa around, whom the boys love and regard as their own mother, things were kept under control despite heavy odds.

The police took up the case and rounded up several shopkeepers from near Faiz’s home. But till today, Kamrun Nissa is not aware of who had taken her husband’s life, and for what. “He (husband) had no enmity with anyone. Besides, we never received any intimidation or warning from any quarter whatsoever,” she said. No group or individual had
claimed responsibility for killing Faiz, and the police, too, could not arrive at any conclusion. They usually don’t in such cases.

Kamrun Nissa was finding it difficult to make ends meet. She decided to approach the Deputy Commissioner (DC) in Dibrugarh. “I mainly asked for the job that was left behind by my husband’s second wife to be given to me. The DC asked me to obtain a written note from her saying she was quitting her job and that she had no problem if it was now given to me. But how could I have located her as she had disappeared,” Kamrun Nissa said, expressing surprise at the district magistrate’s attitude.

“Neither the party to which my husband belonged (Congress), nor the society as such came forward to help me in my hour of crisis. Whatever help I got was at the individual level,” she lamented. Kamrun Nissa then decided to knock at the doors of the Lok Adalat, a fast-track court of justice, which holds monthly sittings at the district town of Dibrugarh. “For a couple of years starting in 1996, I used to visit Dibrugarh every month to appear at the Lok Adalat to seek justice. I primarily wanted the job that disappeared with the sudden exit of the other woman (Faiz’s second wife),” she said. But, justice never came, and Kamrun Nissa, unable to afford between Rs 50 and Rs 100 required during each trip to Dibrugarh, finally gave up hope on the Lok Adalat.

By now, she knew she could no longer depend on the government or the judiciary for justice, and resolved to face life on her own. She pulled out all resources available to her and somehow managed to construct three sheds in front of her house. Today, she earns Rs 1,600 a month as rent from three shops that have come up in those sheds. The boys were growing up and Kamrun Nissa obviously was in need of more money.

In 2002, she managed the job of a helper at the local Anganwadi centre that brings her a meager Rs 500 a month. Every morning, she walks the half kilometer distance to the centre to arrive at the place by 7 a.m. At the end of her two-hour duty, she walks back home, and starts the day, doing household work, cooking for the boys, taking care of the younger one’s studies and making sure that Farid, the elder of the two, was learning the ropes of running a shop well. Zakir, of course, had some good news coming his way. He was among the few hundred kids across Assam to be chosen for the Rs 600-a-month stipend by Project Aashwas to pursue his studies, the assistance being provided by the National Foundation for Communal Harmony, New Delhi. This Assam
Police-UNICEF venture is aimed at assisting child victims of insurgency and ethnic violence in the State.

Zakir has since appeared in his school final examinations and is looking forward to continue with his studies. And, Kamrun Nissa is bent on ensuring that he can fulfill his dream of earning a degree. She keeps a happy face to make sure the boys stay cheerful. Kamrun Nissa lost her husband to that hooded gunman’s bullets, but she was destined to be a mother. She became one, a caring mother to two boys who would otherwise have been virtually orphaned. Kamrun Nissa symbolizes the spirit of womanhood, and lives on to tell her story.
Family ties cost Bharati Dear

The seventies was a sweet-and-sour decade for Gandhians Uma Rajkonwar and his wife Damayanti, residents of Ujjani Konwar, near the village of Lakuwa in eastern Assam’s Sivasagar district. The Rajkonwars, who led a sedentary life, decided to get their son, Dimba, an employee of the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC), married. Everyone in the family, particularly Dimba’s eight siblings, were very happy.

When Nityananda Gogoi – an Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) official working at the refinery hospital in Digboi – received the proposal from the Rajkonwars for his daughter Bharati’s hands, he and his wife readily agreed. For the Rajkonwars were a well-known family, had participated in the freedom struggle, honored with the ‘tamrapatra’, and were generally liked by everyone.

The year was 1971. Bharati, the eldest of the Gogois’ seven children, got married to Dimba Rajkonwar. Soon, the couple left for Shillong, then capital of undivided Assam, where Dimba was posted. A little more than a year later, he got a transfer to Dibrugarh, and was closer to both his and his wife’s home in Sivasagar district.

Dimba and his young wife Bharati set up home in Dibrugarh and were settling down in their day-to-day chores. She was by now employed with the State Public Works Department (PWD). Both husband and wife had a normal work schedule. Dimba, an Ahom, whose ancestors ruled Assam for 600 years beginning 1228 AD, was actively involved with the Chailung Sukapha Memorial Committee. Sukapha was the first Ahom king, a dynasty that for long managed to ward off Mughal forays into Assam.

The couple had their first child in 1975, a son. Bharati became busier than before. Dimba did his bit, was filled with joy and resolved to bring him up as best as he could. He continued to be actively involved in things dear to his heart. Aside from being associated with the Sukapha Memorial Committee, Dimba was an active member of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, Assam’s apex socio-literary body. He used to write, but in private, his works read perhaps by Bharati and just a few of his close friends.
By now, it was 1979. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was born, formed that year by six radical Assamese youths who vowed to free the State and achieve its independence. Dimba’s brother Rajiv Rajkonwar, the sixth of Uma and Damayanti’s nine children, was among those youths who had met at the Rang Ghar, the famous amphitheatre of the Ahom royalty located in Sivasagar. The day was April 7, 1979, and the ULFA emerged. The rebel group was to change Assam’s political and security situation.

Rajiv had already vowed during the Umpha Puja, an Ahom festival which comes once in 12 years, to bring back the glory days of the Ahom era, the days when his ancestors ruled Assam. That was after the police tortured him over his role as a local leader of a youth outfit, the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP). By now, he had broken his earlier promise to remain a vegetarian. During that festival, he had consumed offerings from the Ahom temple at the village, a mixture of pork, beef and mutton.

Rajiv Rajkonwar had become a rebel. One day, he fell at his father’s feet, made an offering of ‘tamul-pan’ (betel nut and leaf) and told him he would return either dead or with freedom for his state. Rajiv Rajkonwar went on to become Arabinda Rajkhowa, a dreaded guerrilla chieftain and chairman of the outlawed ULFA. That was the last time that the Rajkonwars had seen Rajiv.

Life was to change for Dimba and Bharati. They, after all, were members of a family to which the ULFA chief belong. “I remember we were very harassed those days. The Army visited us five to six times, and at times troops, accompanied by policemen, used to arrive at our home at midnight,” Bharati, now 57, told me at her modest home at a by-lane in Dibrugarh.

Once, Dimba was picked up by security men and booked under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act or TADA. He was freed on bail about a month later. This perhaps was part of the tactics adopted by the counter-insurgency authorities at that time to put pressure upon the battle hardened rebels who were keeping the men in uniform on their toes. Harassment of innocent family members, after all, can be a traumatic experience for the rebels who, too, are humans.

“We never used to talk or discuss about Rajiv (Arabinda Rajkhowa). My husband also never used to tell me anything about his elusive
brother,” Bharati said, sitting in her living room. She recalled that sleep was a problem, for the soldiers used to come calling frequently to look for any information on Arabinda.

The family started getting apprehensive after batches of ULFA rebels began surrendering to the authorities. Many of them were used by the police, Army and the paramilitary to spot ULFA militants or lead them to their hideouts or safe-houses. Some surrendered ULFA men, who came to be known as SULFA cadres, started indulging in excesses and became sort of a law unto themselves. “I remember having an eerie feeling as if something terrible was waiting to happen,” Bharati said.

August 11, 1998. The sun had set, but it was still quite humid. The time was around 6.45. Dimba Rajkonwar was pacing up and down in the State Transport Corporation yard, in front of his office in the heart of Dibrugarh. His duty was not yet over. The night buses were yet to leave for Guwahati and other cities and towns in the State. The place was not well lighted, but still visibility was not too bad.

Little did Dimba know that he was taking life’s last breaths. A motorbike arrived from nowhere and the riders pumped two bullets onto Dimba from behind. He fell to the ground with a thud. His colleagues and bystanders rushed him to the Assam Medical College Hospital, not far away. But, he was no more, for the killers attacked him from almost point-blank range. Dimba Rajkonwar died aged 54. The ULFA boss had lost a brother.

“I had just reached home from office. My sister rushed in and said baideu (sister) come with us, someone has shot at bhindeu (brother-in-law), he’s in hospital,” Bharati recalled that traumatic moment in her life. She made for her husband’s office first and then the hospital. “But, he lay there, lifeless.” The body was taken to Dimba’s native Ujjani Konwar, where father Uma and mother Damayanti were waiting to see their son, one last time. “Dimba has become a swahid (martyr),” Bharati quoted her father-in-law as having said at that time.

Dimba and Bharati’s elder son was doing a course on computers in New Delhi when the tragedy occurred. Their younger son was a student of class IX. “My life was suddenly shattered. I became a single parent, saddled with the responsibility of looking after two young sons,” Bharati said. Significantly, the State Government, contrary to its normal practice, has not given her the mandatory ex-gratia payment of Rs 100,000 till date.
“I remember telling some ministers during the tenure of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) Government (the party was in power in Assam at that time) and later approached Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and other Congress leaders. But, the ex-gratia payment never came,” she lamented. Is it that the authorities decided to deprive Bharati of her due ex-gratia payment just because she belongs to a family one of whose members is a militant leader?

She, of course, had some kind words for the Assam State Transport Corporation, her husband’s employers. “The ASTC released most of my husband’s deposits like Provident Fund and insurance dues. I am now waiting for his gratuity,” Bharati said. She recalled with gratitude the sympathy of people around her after her husband’s demise. “After all, my husband was a simple, innocent soul. People used to like him a lot,” she said.

“My only resolve after the tragedy was to make sure that I bring up my children well and make them independent in life,” Bharati said. That she did manage to do. Her daughter has done her masters in English literature, and is currently looking for a job. The elder son works in a private company and the younger son is doing a course on fashion designing. “I had requested Chief Minister Gogoi for a job for my daughter. But, there has been no response yet. I am still hoping the Government will do something for her,” Bharati said.

This lady, unlike many survivors of violence like her across the State, is a woman with determination. She was shattered by the death of her husband, but has not given up on life. “I am really keen to form an organization to help those women widowed as a result of violence in Assam. Women like us need to take charge of our lives and move ahead despite the odds,” Bharati said. Her husband’s sisters at times tell her to join politics and try and become a people’s representative.

What could Bharati possibly tell the ULFA chieftain Arabinda, her brother-in-law, should she come face to face with him? She said: “I shall tell him to stop violence and begin talks with the Government. I will tell him to restore peace in Assam by resolving their problems through dialogue.”

Bharati has not received any special help from the Government for the untimely death of her husbands at the hands of gunmen. Nor has she received any compensation. “But, my only regret has been that the
investigations into his death has not yielded any result so far,” she said.

Dimba Rajkonwar’s reply to Bharati’s fear for his life has always been that a person destined to die at a certain time and place will die in any case. Bharati, however, doesn’t seem to believe only in destiny. “He was killed just because he happened to be the ULFA chairman’s brother,” she said.

Looking straight into the framed portrait of her husband in the living room, Bharati said, “I cannot excuse or forgive my husband’s killers who had snatched away my children’s father.” She managed a smile as she bid us goodbye. I saw Bharati shutting the door behind us, not out of fear, but because the pre-monsoon rains came down heavy that early May night. The winds were strong too.
How Hemoprova was driven to the brink

Summers can be quite sultry in Assam. Premadhar Konwar (53), a portly man who worked at the Hindustan Fertiliser Corporation’s (HFC) plant at Namrup, in the State’s eastern parts, returned to his company quarters from the market nearby. It was 8.40 in the night. Handing over the purchases to wife Hemoprova, Premadhar headed straight for a bath.

Having changed into a white dhoti kurta, a gamocha (a hand-woven scarf the Assamese use) slung on his shoulder, Premadhar enquired if dinner was ready. The man followed a strict routine. The couple and their two sons must have dinner at 9.30 everyday. This night, too, the family had their dinner together. Premadhar shared his wife’s household work as much as he could. On this occasion also, he had left his plates in the kitchen.

Hemoprova gave him tamul-pan (betel nut and leaves that the Assamese consume rather generously) that he promptly put into his mouth. After sometime, Premadhar opened the front door of his house and emerged on the small portico. It was rather dark, for the lamp at the Durgabari, a Durga temple in front of the Konwars’ home, was not on that night.

“I was inside, but saw him talking to someone. There were about four of them. Suddenly, I heard the sound of a gun shot. I remember screaming and rushing out. Then I fell unconscious,” Hemoprova told me when I visited her at her home in Namrup, more than 500 km from Guwahati, one damp May morning.

Premadhar fell to the ground, dead. The killers fired a single shot right on his head. June 27, 1993 was to change the lives of Hemoprova and her two sons, Preeti and Bibhuti Bhusan, forever. But, who could have killed Premadhar, and why? He, after all, was just an employee at the HFC plant’s production department, not an executive. Premadhar was not involved in any politics whatsoever, not even of the local trade union variety.

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was still active, more so in and around Namrup and other parts of eastern Assam, despite the Army launching Operation Bajrang against the rebels in November 1990. By the time Premadhar was killed, the Army’s second offensive against the ULFA, Operation Rhino – launched in September 1991 –
was in full swing. The ULFA, fighting for a ‘sovereign, Socialist Assam’ since its formation in 1979, was till then not known to be carrying out random killings. But still, could the outfit be behind Premadhar’s killing?

The bereaved family, sticking to traditions, was eating out of banana leaves for one whole month. Younger son Bibhuti, who was just eight, was happy eating that way, for he found that a departure from the normal meals at the dining table. But, Hemoprova, herself too dazed after the tragedy, was a worried woman. Elder son Preeti, then around 14 years of age, was increasingly getting restive.

“He started talking about taking revenge. Often, he used to ask as to why anyone should kill his father,” Hemoprova said. Preeti Bhusan in all probability was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and in the absence of any professional counseling, the family was unable to calm him down.

It’s indeed strange that although Assam has been in the grip of insurgent violence and ethnic strife since the late eighties, the authorities had not thought it necessary to provide professional counseling to the survivors of violence. “I had to really slog to bring my son back to a semblance of normality,” Hemoprova recalled.

She herself was fast sinking into a depression. “I stopped visiting anybody least they think I had come to seek some help. I also hesitated to venture into the market. I was apprehensive of the people’s response, I was slowly becoming sort of an emotional wreck,” Hemoprova told me, sitting in the small living room of her house.

The lady was now required to head her home, but she was not in control of things around her. “I remember just sitting and doing nothing. When my younger son used to approach me for help with his school homework, I used to send him away, asking him to manage on his own,” Hemoprova said.

She became a recluse and started avoiding people, including her husband’s colleagues. “One day, I was walking near my home when a company doctor stopped his car by my side and asked me as to why I was not talking to him. He wanted to know if I was avoiding him,” Hemoprova recalled. The doctor gave her a few professional tips that could take care of her condition.
Her relatives, too, started motivating her to face life and move ahead. For more than seven years after the incident, Hemoprova had stopped visiting her relations. “It was only two years ago that I visited my father-in-law’s home at Amguri (near Sivasagar) for the first time after I lost my husband. I had no option but to take charge of my life for the sake of my sons,” she said.

Three years had passed and funds were fast depleting. Hemoprova’s need for a job was increasing. Of course, her mother was extending her all possible help, including sending rice in bulk. She approached Hiteswar Saikia, then Chief Minister of Assam, for a job, but did not get one. The State Government was most unhelpful. By now, there were scores of widows like Hemoprova across violence-wracked Assam, and the authorities had perhaps got immune to human sufferings.

Hemoprova was not given even the mandatory ex-gratia of Rs 100,000 although her husband was felled by armed men. “Six months after the incident, I met the Deputy Commissioner at his office in Dibrugarh and handed him a petition detailing the circumstances under which my husband was killed. Till this day, I haven’t heard anything from the DC’s office regarding the ex-gratia payment,” she lamented.

The HFC, her husband’s employers, had cleared the provident fund amount due to him. And, Hemoprova was entitled to a monthly pension of Rs 290 from the fertilizer company. But, it was too meager an amount. The HFC authorities had, of course, permitted Hemoprova and her two sons to continue staying at quarter No 476 (Sector C), the house where the couple had started life, raised their family, and then, on a dark night, lost the man.

Leaders and members of the HFC plant’s employees’ union were working relentlessly to get Hemoprova a job. Her husband after all was liked by all. Finally, the union leaders succeeded in their endeavour. Hemoprova, now 45, got appointed on September 1, 1996 as a lower primary teacher at one of the schools run by the HFC plant at Namrup. She began with a salary of Rs 3,500 per month.

The lady really managed to return from the brink. “Once I got the job, I began with a clear focus: carry out my responsibility of teaching the school children to the best of my ability, and bring up my sons well,” Hemoprova said. Premadhar wanted his elder son to become a doctor or an Army officer. But, life had charted out a different course for
Preeti Bhusan. Today, this 26-year-old is into business. “He is in a much better state of mind now, but if anything goes wrong, he would still ask if that’s because his father was not alive,” she said about Preeti Bhusan.

If Premadhar had wanted his elder son to join the Army or take to medicine, he had encouraged younger son Bibhuti to take his dance lessons seriously. This was the course Bibhuti was to tread in the years that followed. After his high school finals, he joined a music college nearby. “Now, he can perform Satriya (a traditional Assamese dance form introduced by the 16th century philosopher-saint Sri Sankardeva), Bihu and Bharat Natyam with ease,” Hemoprova said.

If she is back on track today, it’s entirely because of support from her family, her husband’s colleagues, particularly the trade union leaders at the HFC plant, and the responsibility that she had towards her sons. The Government on its part had no contribution in bringing her shattered life on track. “One can’t expect much from any Government, but I expected the police to arrive at some conclusion on the identity of my husband’s killers,” Hemoprova said.

“Till I die, I would want to know why my husband was killed,” she said, looking at his framed portrait hanging from the wall. Hemoprova looked solemn, but still she managed a smile. Her life revolves round her school, her family, and the temple which she visits every Monday. Of course, the centre of her attraction these days is her grandson Mrinmoy (Preeti Bhusan’s son), whom she lovingly calls Pusku. Clutching the eight-month-old on her arms, Hemoprova bid us goodbye from the same portico where her husband was shot dead 12 years ago. Life indeed has to go on.
**Raktima & Bhanumati:**
Their Kids’ Mom, Dad too

Little Phami had never seen her dad. This eight-year-old class III student doesn’t know what a dad is like. From the day she was born, mother Bhanumati had been her father too. All because two armed militants, posing as guests, descended on Bhanumati’s home in the western Assam district town of Kokrajhar one morning and pumped bullets on her husband, Swinbla Basumatary. The president of the All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU), the powerful student group representing the Bodo ethnic group, died in hospital. It was July 30, 1996. Bhanumati, who was two-and-a-half months pregnant, became a widow.

Unlike Phami, Jaiklong, Khongkar and Dwifang had seen their father and grew up under his shadow. But, the cruel jaws of death were waiting to snatch him away. On June 5, 1999, Garla Batha Basumatary, president of the nascent People’s Democratic Front (PDF), was refueling his car at a petrol pump in Serfanguri, a highway-side town in Kokrajhar district, when he was shot at from behind by unknown gunmen. After a year of treatment at hospitals in Chennai and Guwahati, Basumatary lost his battle with death. The injuries to his spinal cord, hit by three bullets, proved fatal. He died on September 7, 2000, leaving Raktima a widow. The three boys lost their father.

I met the two widows – Raktima at her sprawling home at Samtaybari, nearly 50 km north-west of Kokrajahar, and Bhanumati at Salakati, close to Kokrajhar – in early April and discovered that women who must be both father and mother to their children are forced to lead their households from the front, often battling discrimination by the society around them. If it is a difficult job to run households as women – after overcoming psychosomatic trauma over the untimely death of their husbands – facing life as a widow in conservative rural societies can be challenging. Widow re-marriage is permitted by the Bodo society, and widows are not actually discriminated against, but men tend to avoid coming forward to help them for fear of their names being linked to such women.

Raktima, now 39, was a primary school teacher before her marriage to Garla Batha Basumatary in 1983. Her husband was then secretary of the ABSU’s Kokrajhar district unit and headmaster of the Serfanguri High School. A singer and film maker of some repute, Basumatary in
1985 made *Jariminni Khongkor*, the first video film in Bodo language. In 1990, at the height of the mass uprising for a separate homeland in the Bodo heartland, spread over western and northern parts of Assam, he released his audio album, *Thwisam*. His songs on Bodo nationalism touched the hearts of thousands, and were extremely popular, in keeping with the mood of the time.

The Basumatarys’ eldest son Jaiklong, whom the parents lovingly called Raja, was good in studies, generating much hope in his father’s mind. Basumatary was steadily climbing the ladder in the ABSU hierarchy. Life looked settled, with wife Raktima giving up her job to look after the family full time. In 1993, the ABSU signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the central government that ended the Bodoland uprising. The Bodos were given some amount of autonomy and the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC), an elective politico-administrative structure, was formed. Soon, Garla Batha took over as the new president of the ABSU, an organization that was basking in the post-Bodo Accord euphoria.

“Bodo politics was deeply divided. A new rebel group, the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) had emerged on the scene. My husband, in keeping with his commitment to the Bodo society, wanted to bring about unity among the fragmented Bodo groups and formed the People’s Democratic Front on October 26, 1996,” Raktima said, sitting in the portico of her house, overlooking a fish pond, lined with trees.

The PDF, which sank into oblivion as quickly as it had emerged, was said to have been aligned or close to the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), a rebel group fighting for an independent Bodo nation. Still, Raktima would not like to blame the BLT, the NDFB’s arch rival, for her husband’s killing. She thinks her husband was a victim of political rivalry and that certain forces conspired to take his life. “I don’t know why he was killed, but he could, at least, have been warned by those who did not like him or his views before taking that extreme step,” Raktima said.

She was soon to face life without her husband, and see its different colours. Raktima did not receive the mandatory ex-gratia of Rs 100,000 from the State Government although her husband was a victim of militants’ violence. If that was bad enough, she was betrayed by her insurers. “I am still struggling to realize my insurance claim of Rs.5 lakh from the National Insurance Company which is refusing to part
with the money, saying I should have made the claim within three months of the attack on my husband,” Raktima said. She had moved the High Court and has spent around Rs 30,000 fighting the case to get her insurance dues.

“I have been a silent sufferer. I was hoping that the organization my husband served for so long (he was all along with the ABSU, the PDF stint being very short) would extend some help in my hour of crisis. But, nobody visited me to enquire as to how I was managing things,” Raktima said. But, she was managing all right, thanks to her determination to effectively perform the role of both father and mother to her sons. Jaiklong had passed his Class XII examinations securing a first division. Raktima made up her mind to send him to a good college for his bachelors degree. The young man, currently studying at a Kolkata college, hopes to make it to the Indian Foreign Service.

Raktima is luckier than many widows of violence like her across Assam. Her husband had 42 bighas or about six hectares of land which she used to the best of her ability to take care of her household and fund her children’s education. “I engaged people to cultivate the land in return for half the paddy crop. They could take away the other half. I sell paddy and vegetables at the market in Serfanguri,” she said, without a hint of shyness. Raktima was only bothered about her sons’ future and got her produce carried to the Serfanguri market from her home at Samtaybari, negotiating a dirt road with a rickety, and rather dangerous, wooden bridge. At times, she would supervise the sales herself.

What disturbed Raktima and her sons, particularly the eldest of them, Jaiklong, was the curiosity generated among the people as to how the lady was managing to send her sons to pursue their studies outside. Her other two sons are studying at Guwahati and a nearby town respectively. She may have become sort of a recluse by stopping to socialize, and visiting people only on occasions like a marriage or a death in someone’s family, but Raktima has charted out the course her sons are to take, a role their father, or they both jointly, would have performed under normal circumstances. “They are not going to join politics or have anything to do with politics, at least till I die,” Raktima said.

Nine years after her husband’s death at the hands of suspected NDFB militants, Bhanumati, who managed the job of a teacher at the Salakati
ME School in 1999, seems ready to reflect on widowhood. “There is no discrimination as such between men and women in the Bodo society. Besides, there is no taboo on widow re-marriage. Still, it is difficult for a man to marry a widow because such a bond usually becomes a point of discussion and curiosity,” she said. Bhanumati is a voracious reader, and loves novels in Bodo, Assamese and Hindi. “I don’t mix up with people much. Some of them, after all, might think I’m an unlucky woman,” she said in a matter of fact manner.

If heading a household as a woman, looking after the children, earning a livelihood, and ensuring her own security as well as that of her children is in itself a gigantic job, for a widow, managing all these becomes all the more difficult. “A massive awareness is necessary and there is need for a social revolution to remove the undercurrent of doubts and suspicion that widows are subjected to,” Bhanumati said. Groups like the All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF), she thinks, can do a lot in this direction once it is clear in its objective. “I myself want to do something for the welfare of widows of violence in my area, but my foremost priority is to look after my daughter and fill the void of a father in her life,” she said.

Bhanumati is fortunate enough to have received an ex-gratia of Rs 100,000 from the erstwhile Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) authorities and an equal amount later from the Bodoland Territorial Council (the BAC was dissolved and a new structure called the BTC came up after the new Bodo agreement signed by the Bodo leaders and New Delhi in 2003). But, she was able to get her dues through her own relentless efforts.

“I faced and surmounted most of the struggles myself. Even the job I got three years after my husband’s death was with my own initiative. I feel, there should be a mechanism in place to make things a bit easier for people like me, who had to lose their breadwinners in militant violence,” Bhanumati said. Society, she said, should lend its moral support to such women, and not discriminate them. Else, people like Raktima and Bhanumati would become recluses, and could lose the zeal to survive. That would only hit little kids like Phami hard, and shatter dreams of people like Jaiklong who have just stepped into adulthood.
Husbands’ loss made them women of steel

Wives of powerful men are not always women of steel. More often than not, they are simple home-makers, who usually live in their husbands’ shadow, but contribute tremendously to their success by guiding them to be on the right track. Often, these women carry on with their selfless duties unsung.

But, when they lose their husbands, particularly to trigger-happy militants in violent insurgency theatres like Assam, for instance, they transform themselves into women of steel. Then, there is no looking back for them as they surge ahead trying to fulfill their husbands’ mission in life, and establishing and demonstrating their individual identity in the process.

Here’s the story of three women in Assam, all wives of powerful politicians, whose lives had been cut short by homeland-seeking insurgents. All of them have gone on to prove that with courage, determination, and a bit of luck, women can take charge of their lives, bring up children as a single parent and excel in their field of choice. Sample the manner in which some of these women had lost their husbands, and the manner in which they took charge of their lives after that:

February 22, 1991: Manabendra Sharma, Assam Congress’ General Secretary, and a top trade union leader, got out of his house in Guwahati’s Uzan Bazar locality rather early in the morning. He was on way to visit the family of a fellow politician who had died. The family, who lived nearby, was preparing for his ‘shradh’ ceremony. Suddenly, a motorcycle emerged on the scene and the youths riding it pumped bullets on Sharma. It was 6.45 in the morning. There were people in the area. But, nobody raised a voice, family members later told me, and whoever had opened their shops, immediately downed their shutters. Manabendra Sharma was dead.

May 6, 1996: Assam Rural Development Minister and State Congress leader Nagen Neog was returning home in his native Baruagaon, 15 kilometer from the headquarter town of Golaghat, in eastern Assam. He was escorted by security guards, who followed him in another vehicle. All of a sudden, militants of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), who were lying in wait, ambushed the two...
cars at the Singrijan bridge, on the Golaghat-Furkating road. The time was 7.45 p.m. It was a deadly attack, for the militants were said to have intercepted wireless radio communication from the Minister’s motorcade. Neog was killed, along with nine others, eight security guards and a civilian driver. The rebels decamped with the weapons carried by the security personnel.

February 27, 2000: Nagen Sharma, State Forest and Public Works Minister and a top leader of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a frontline regional party, was going for a meeting at the Dakshin Nalbari College, around 5 kilometer from the district town of Nalbari, in Western Assam. His motorcade came under a bomb attack, which killed him and four others, including his Personal Security Officer.

Like any other normal woman, Ajanta Neog, then a housewife, was haunted by a tremendous feeling of insecurity after her husband Nagen Neog was slain by insurgents in a most daring manner. Her sons were very young – 10 and 5 years of age respectively – and she had no identity of her own. Moreover, an insensitive State administration had decided to withdraw the house guards and security cover provided to her husband, a senior minister, within 24-hours of his death.

“The first issue that I had to tackle was that of survival. And, I concluded that my first priority was going to be my sons. I was preparing to fight all odds to make sure their lives come to be secure and meaningful,” Ajanta Neog, now Minister of State for PWD, told me in early June at her plush office at the State Secretariat in Guwahati.

This was a woman who was not prepared to leave her husband’s wishes unfulfilled. Within two months of the tragedy, she joined the Bar at the Gauhati High Court and enrolled herself for a master’s degree in Law. “The family and the people of my husband’s constituency in Golaghat were with me, lending me moral support. I had to be with them as they were always with my husband,” she said.

For that, an individual identity was most important. “By becoming a practicing lawyer, I got a certain identity of my own. The livelihood aspect was also taken care of. And, joining the masters course in law helped me keep my mind occupied and kept me busy,” Ajanta Neog said of the recovery phase in her life. She had by then sent off her sons to boarding school.
But, she was bent on avenging the death of her husband, in a different manner though. “I decided that the method I was going to chose was social work, and politics was the vehicle that would help me achieve my objective,” she said. The Congress party obliged her by giving her the party nomination in 2001. Ajanta Neog won the seat held earlier by her husband. Today, she wants that there should be a laid down mechanism with the State administration, at different levels, to provide for security and rehabilitation to women survivors of violence in Assam.

When Manabendra Sharma was shot dead that wintry morning in the heart of Guwahati, his wife Basanti could not cry. “My sons had suddenly lost their father, and my mother-in-law her eldest son. I had to keep my shock and grief all to myself for their sake. It was terrible,” Basanti Sharma told me at her home in Guwahati.

At once, this schoolteacher was saddled with the responsibility of keeping her two grown up sons on track. The elder was pursuing his studies for a BA degree, while the younger was a higher secondary student. Little did Basanti know that fate had willed her to enter the field of politics. “I never had much of an interest in politics and I never allowed my husband to bring politics home,” she said.

Only once, she had been to Parliament to witness the proceedings, a trip organized by former Union Law Minister Dinesh Goswami, a leader from Assam. And, here she was, on the verge of plunging into active politics herself. Assam Congress leader Hiteswar Saikia persuaded her to go to the Rajya Sabha as an MP. Basanti Sharma became an MP in 1991 itself and went on to get a second term that ended in 2002.

She took three years to come to terms with the reality: of heading her household in the absence of her husband. “My sons were in Guwahati, and I used to come home quite frequently from Delhi. I had to tackle many problems. There were people who used to provoke my sons, pointing out people who they said had killed their father,” she said.

Basanti Sharma may have succeeded in successfully steering her sons (the elder one went on to become Assam Youth Congress president and later settled down with businesses of his own, and the younger son is also a businessman), but as an MP, and now, as Chairperson of the Assam Women’s Commission, she has had to battle odds in her quest for justice.
“When you have a law in the country, the law should take its own course in delivering justice. But, in my case, it was not so. My husband’s killers are still at large,” she lamented. Three people, all militants, were arrested in connection with the killing, but they fled from jail. Two of them later surrendered while one was killed in a shootout with security forces.

Basanti had raised the issue in Parliament, but could not move things. “I failed in this front as an MP,” she said. When MPs argued for withdrawal of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, she was unhappy. That’s history, and today, Basanti Sharma would not like to rake up old issues. She is, however, bent on delivering justice to the needy women in Assam, particularly the widows of violence. “We are compiling a list of such women who had lost their husbands to violence in the State,” she said.

AGP leader Nagen Sarma’s wife Alaka could not believe that her husband had died in a bomb attack when friends from Mumbai reached her in Guwahati by telephone to express their condolences. “Nalbari, after all, was my husband’s constituency. How could he have been killed there,” she thought. But, soon she realized that her husband was no more, and had left her and their 10-year-old daughter.

But this economist, and a follower of Jaiprakash Narayan, was not prepared to run away from her duties and responsibilities that suddenly fell on her shoulders. “My husband was everything for me. The question at that point in time (when he was killed) was whether to return to Mumbai, where I was earlier based. Besides, my relatives were pleading with me to join them abroad,” Alaka told me at her home in Guwahati.

She would not leave, and decided to be in public life to address various issues. What are some of the issues dear to her? Here is Alaka’s list: ensuring justice to the poor within the existing system, people’s empowerment and to ensure that such empowerment reaches the lowest of the low, and increasing the productive capacity of Assam’s economy.

Alaka said she has ‘forgiven’ her husband’s killers, but admitted that insurgency has been retarding the State’s growth. “The political class doesn’t have any clear concept and neither does it have any definite commitment to solve the problem of insurgency in Assam. Poor governance and lack of political leadership and direction have sustained insurgency,” she observed.
Ever since her husband’s death, Alaka has been heading the Nagen Sarma Memorial Society, a non-profit body engaged in social work. Asked what could she like to do for women survivors of violence in Assam given a chance, she listed out the following: documentation of such women, an outreach programme to meet such women with ‘wounded hearts’, set up a non-political public forum where all shades of people can pour out their anguish, organize small groups of people for resource awareness, campaign for good governance and draw up a massive economic reconstruction programme.

Alaka may have a long wish list, but she, too, agrees that there is an urgent need for an institutional response mechanism within the State Government to deal with women survivors of violence across Assam. “Nobody in the Government seems to have a clue on how to deal with such people. This cannot go on like this for ever,” Alaka said. The civil society’s role in the State, she said, has been negligible so far in giving succor to women who have lost their husbands or sons in course of various conflicts in the State. This needs to change.

Alaka contested the by-election (as an AGP candidate) within a month of her husband’s death and won the seat, defeating veteran Congressman Bhumidhar Barman. In the very next election, in May 2001, she lost by 10,000 votes. May be Alaka was not familiar with the ‘political language’. Today, however, she is a lot different, and is moving ahead with a promise to change the lives of at least some people in Nalbari. Nagen Sarma’s death, after all, has changed her own life drastically.
Travails of a Police Officer’s wife

October 12, 1990. It was office as usual for Sub-Inspector Dulal Borkotoky, then 52, working for the intelligence wing of the Assam Police, called the Special Branch. Duliajan, in eastern Assam’s Dibrugarh district, where he was posted, is the field headquarters of the public sector Oil India Limited (OIL). But that was not why this sleepy township was famous for those days. The place, 500 km east of Guwahati, was the hub of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), fighting for an independent Assam. It was soon discovered that Lakhipathar, a heavily wooded forest close to Duliajan, where Borkotoky carried out his day-to-day intelligence gathering job, was the General Headquarters of the ULFA.

Duliajan is a small pot-holed town, and every important address is located within a 3 to 4 km radius. Borkotoky got back home in the OIL campus (he was staying in an OIL accommodation) at 2 p.m. for lunch. He wanted to have the day’s meal with his mother who had come over two days ago from Borhapjan, near the district town of Tinsukia, not far away. Borhapjan is where Borkotoky hails from. Lunch over, he returned to office. It was 5 in the evening when he finished his day’s work and headed back home. His wife Amiya and mother were already dressed up for an outing when Borkotoky reached his residence. They returned by 7 p.m. After a bath, Borkotoky was resting in bed. His mother was sitting in the living room.

It was close to 8 p.m. And, in Duliajan, or any other small towns like these across Assam, power supply is highly erratic. It was dark outside the OIL campus. A car slowed down and stopped outside Borkotoky’s home. “Two men came in and asked our daughter Geetanjali if ‘deuta’ (father) was around. She said he was in. They sat down. My son suspected they could be ULFA boys and hid his father in the toilet. The boys said their ‘sir’ wanted to meet him (Borkotoky). A third man entered by then, carrying a sten gun. My husband eventually came out to meet them. He was shivering in fear,” Borkotoky’s wife Amiya told me at her home in Jorhat, where the family currently lives. He was asked to dress up quickly and come with them.

“I fell at their feet, urging them not to take my husband away. The boys replied in a matter-of-fact manner that their group doesn’t kill or harm Assamese people. Saying they would return him, the men drove away
along with my husband,” Amiya recalled. She, along with daughter Geetanjali, then a BA Part I student, and son Abhijeet, then in Class XII, had every reason to doubt the words of the abductors. The situation in the State was bad as the ULFA was at the peak of its armed activities. On October 9, 1990, three days before Borkotoky’s kidnapping, the rebels had abducted another Assam Police intelligence officer, Giasuddin Ahmed. He was picked up from Digboi, not far from Duliajan.

“We were huddled together and praying to God. Around 1 a.m. the boys came again. I opened the door. They barged in and wanted me to open the cupboard. I obliged. They immediately started looking at some files that were there. Before leaving with the files, they told my daughter not to worry, saying her dad would be back in about five days or so. They asked us not to inform the police and maintain that Borkotoky was on leave,” Amiya said. From the third day or so, policemen started visiting their home, making enquiries about Borkotoky. Amiya was telling them he was on leave. Police enquiries gained momentum after a week.

Six months passed. Rumours were doing the rounds as is normal in such cases. Some rumours said he was taken to Delhi by the ULFA and that the group would keep him permanently and utilize his services and so on. Another rumour said Borkotoky had suffered a heart attack. It was March 1991. One day, the Duliajan Police Station received a phone call saying Borkotoky was on way. Around that time, a cycle-borne youth delivered a letter at his Borhapjan home. Addressed to the ‘Borkotoky family,’ the letter said they were to return him, but Borkotoky had a cardiac arrest and died. The authors of the letter apologized for his death and said they carried out Borkotoky’s funeral with due honour. The body was never handed over to the family.

Amiya’s worst fears had come true. She was spending her days in agony at her in-laws’ Borhapjan home all these months. But, now that she has received definite news of her husband’s death, Amiya performed the necessary rituals. These over, she made up her mind to face life, surmount the odds and forge ahead with the challenges. She, after all, was responsible now for the future of her two young children. They returned to Duliajan. Son Abhijeet’s education got disrupted. Heeding to advice from family and friends, Amiya got her daughter married in 1992. Her son-in-law, taking into account Abhijeet’s mental state,
suggested they move in with him and shift to Jorhat. They did. Abhijeet managed to complete his Commerce degree in 1997.

Amiya did receive an ex-gratia payment of Rs 100,000 from the Assam Government. But, a job eluded her or her daughter. “The authorities had said I would be given a job. I approached the Special Branch top brass two or three times in Guwahati. But, nothing eventually materialized,” Amiya said. To me, survivors of men killed by trigger-happy militants in Assam having to run from pillar to post, pleading with the authorities to give them a job, which is their due, has turned out to be a common story. It is also not uncommon to find that in the end, many of the survivors fail to manage a job for themselves with which to keep their home fires burning. The Government, too, does not, as a matter of routine, offer its helping hand to many such kin of men gunned down by rebels.

Abhijeet could not bear the sudden loss of his father. “I was angry because we could do nothing although my father was kidnapped and had died while in custody. How could we fight an organization after all,” he lamented. He has matured over the years into a young man. Married, Abhijeet’s 18-month-old son Rongko keeps his grand mother’s constant company. Amiya dotes on the little one and tries to forget the darkest hour in her life, the death of her husband for no specific fault of his. Borkotoky, after all, was a government servant, doing a job to earn his living. But, insurgents, most of the time, refuse to see reason. They think they have to carry on with their struggle with the lethal power of their guns.

Snatching little Rongko, who was trying to get out through the front door, Amiya settles down to continue her story. “He (her husband) was so sincere and disciplined that I keep reminding my children these traits all the time.” she said. Then, Amiya recalled what could have been Borkotoky’s premonition of an impending danger. “He used to keep saying that the situation was not good. Then, after his colleague Giasuddin was abducted on October 9, 1990 from Digboi, his office staff used to ask him ‘what if you are kidnapped next.’ He once told me this after coming back from office,” she said. That apprehension of Borkotoky’s colleagues proved prophetic. He is no more. But, he has left behind Amiya, Geetanjali and Abhijeet, all of whom have proved to be strong survivors.
‘Secret Killers’ who made Bharati a widow

Nalbari is a filthy, pot-holed, footpath-less district town in western Assam, just about 70 kilometer from capital Guwahati. The district has always been a hotbed of the dreaded United Liberation Front of Asom or ULFA. Several top leaders of the rebel group, including its elusive ‘deputy commander-in-chief’ Raju Baruah, whose real name is Hitesh Kalita, the outfit’s one-time publicity chief Mithinga Daimary, currently under detention (real name Deepak Das), and Lohit Deuri, a former ULFA ‘commandant’, now surrendered, hails from this district. These leaders had either pursued or are still vigorously pursuing the ULFA’s violent armed campaign for a ‘sovereign, Socialist Assam.’

And if one hails from this district and happens to be Bharati Kalita, sister of ULFA top gun Raju Baruah, it is natural for people to look at her as more than just another ordinary Assamese woman. And when, in 1988, Bharati married Dijen Saloi, a small businessman in Nalbari, something more was added to her family profile – she became the sister-in-law of a much-feared ULFA leader. Dijen’s younger brother Tapan Saloi happened to be the ‘assistant commandant’ of the rebel group’s Nalbari unit. So, whether Dijen and Bharati liked it or not, they were known as a couple whose kin were top ranking insurgent leaders.

“Yes, it’s a fact that our close relatives have been with the ULFA for long. But, neither me, nor my husband had anything to do with the rebels or their movement. We tried as best as possible to lead our own life,” Bharati tells me at her modest home in Nalbari’s Bishnupur locality on a damp Sunday morning earlier this month. But, like many other women in Assam, who have been indirectly drawn into the vortex of the prevailing conflicts in the State, family ties happened to cost Bharati dear. She ended up losing her husband at the dead of night one day, shot at home by ‘secret killers’ whose identity still remains a mystery, despite conjectures. Dijen had just turned 50 when the gunmen cut his life short.

It was January 3, 2001. Owls hooted in the dark night outside. The time was 1 a.m. It won’t be daybreak until about three hours later. Dijen Saloi, wife Bharati, their 11-year-old son Ankur and seven-year-old daughter Barnali, were in deep sleep. Suddenly, the silence of the night was broken by the roar of car engines. There were two vehicles
in front of their house. “The men knocked at the door, broke it open and barged inside. They first entered the room where my husband’s nephew Pulen (son of Dijen’s younger brother) was sleeping along with his cousin Arup. The men enquired as to which exactly was our room,” Bharati recalled.

Having pinpointed Dijen’s room in the joint-family home, seven masked men, all armed and clad in black trousers and jacket, called out, ‘bou (that’s how an elder brother’s wife is referred to by the Assamese) open the door or else, we shall force ourselves inside.’ They broke open the door any way, and started looking for Dijen. “Soon, they found him hiding under the bed. A gunman pumped bullets on him immediately, killing him. They then shot Pulen dead and left,” Bharati said, tears rolling down her eyes. Within minutes, the youths returned and sprayed bullets on Arup, fatally injuring him. He survived, but still limps from that injury. Both Pulen and Arup were tenth standard students then.

Viewed superficially, Dijen and Bharati should have had no cause of worry. The rebels would not touch them, being close relatives of top ULFA leaders. And, the security forces, too, would not target them for they had no direct links with the ULFA whatsoever despite being kin of senior rebel leaders. But the conflict dynamics in Assam, both in the past and today, has been far from simple. A day prior to Dijen’s killing, suspected ULFA rebels had shot Avinash Bordoloi, a surrendered ULFA member at Horihotuli, near the Police Reserve in Nalbari. Avinash had just bid adieu to arms and was planning to settle down.

Retaliation to such killings was already in vogue. Mystery killers would target the family members of top ULFA leaders. These were to pass off as ‘secret killings’, implying that either former rebels on their own or with direct or indirect assistance from the men in uniform were behind these attacks ostensibly aimed at sending a message down to the rebels to stop their killing spree. ULFA publicity chief Mithinga Daimary’s family members were eliminated by ‘secret killers.’ And, a month before the fatal attack on Dijen, ULFA ‘foreign secretary’ Sasha Choudhury’s brother, Deepak, was gunned down by some such as yet unidentified men at Helosa, near Sarthebari in Barpeta district.

Bharati said her husband never used to think that he or his immediate family could become the target of ‘anti-ULFA forces.’ She said: “Of course, my husband always got very worried about the safety of my
family who lived at Charia village, near Nalbari. Whenever there used to be an attack by the ULFA, he used to visit Charia and get my sister to live with us for fear of retaliation by certain forces.” Dijen’s fears were not unfounded: his wife’s family was spared, but not his wife. She had to lose him. Dijen was clearly a victim of the peculiar currents and cross-currents of the prevailing conflict in Assam.

Almost immediately, her husband’s death impacted severely on Bharati. She had to close down the grocery shop that Dijen was running for a living and rented out the premises. Mortgaging the little land the family owned, Bharati started building a small tin-roof house in the locality where she spent the years of her married life. Her brother, a schoolteacher, helped her with some money that he gathered by selling off some of his own land. Bharati recalled the day, October 28, 1998, when she joined the job she got: that of a primary school teacher at the Debiram Prathamik Vidyalay, not far from where she lives. “If I would not have had this job, my life today would have been more miserable. How would I have brought up my two children?” she remarked.

What about help from the Government? Hasn’t she received the usual ex-gratia payment of Rs 100,000 that anybody whose kin dies in a violent incident is supposed to get from the authorities? Bharati replies: “Some policemen had told me at that time that I would get Rs 100,000 as ex-gratia provided I made a request in writing and also state that it was the ULFA that had killed my husband. How could I write or state something that is not true. So, I decided not to think of any help from the Government.”

Bharati said that despite ‘moral support’ from the society, she actually had to face the struggle all by herself. Aside from the cash crunch, she had to tackle her children, who had been traumatized by the killing of their father right in front of their eyes. “I was senseless or in and out of my senses for almost a week after the incident. My son was hit by depression but did not talk much for fear that it might disturb me further. But gradually, he started behaving in a very defiant manner,” she said. Even today, Ankur, who is more matured than his age, doesn’t seem to trust anyone. The trauma of losing his father for no fault of his perhaps still haunts this young man. Sadly though, he has not received any counseling so far. And his condition is certainly not beyond repair.

Aside from worries about the future of her children, Bharati is eagerly awaiting justice. “My husband is dead, and so are so many other
innocent men. All I want now is justice. The authorities must find out
the killers and punish them,” she said. Doesn’t she think that all these
would not have happened if the ULFA did not exist in Assam’s arena
in the first place? Bharati replied: “If it was not the ULFA, some other
radical youths would perhaps have emerged on the scene in the State.
After all, one must look at the reasons for the rise of an armed
insurgency. Isn’t Assam economically backward and there are no jobs
for the youths.”

Having said this, Bharati would like the ULFA to try and fulfill its
objective in a peaceful manner, through talks and a ‘give and take’
approach. And yes, she would tell brother Hitesh (ULFA deputy ‘c-in-
c’) this, in case she happens to meet him. “It’s now more than 15 years
since I had last seen my brother. It seems impossible to meet him now.
But I pray that wherever he is, he will be before God’s eyes and stay
safe,” Bharati said, in fond remembrance of her brother. To his sister,
he is the kid brother first, and then a rebel chieftain.
Why Tribeni doesn’t like politicians anymore…

Tribeni Baruah, popularly known as Rubi, doesn’t like politicians anymore. Her children on their part hate black cars. They have reasons for their dislikes. After all, not everybody loses their husband or father early in life. And that, too, dying at the hands of militants for no fault of their own.

February 27, 2000. Pranabesh Baruah left his home at Nalbari – around 70 k.m. west of Guwahati – early, without even a bath, telling wife Tribeni that he would be returning shortly. “I told him to change his dress, but he was in a hurry. He simply took out his bicycle and left,” Tribeni told me at her home in the heart of the decrepit district town on a damp August morning.

At 59, Baruah was maintaining an active lifestyle. After dabbling a bit in business, he had focused himself as an educationist all his life, besides engaging in social work in Nalbari, his home district. He had once taught at the Handique Girls’ College, a premier women’s college in Guwahati, before joining his wife to set up the Honsons English School near his home in 1994.

“Everybody liked my husband, particularly the youths. Peace was always uppermost on his mind and he used to tell the young people that all their grievances could be solved through peaceful means. Therefore, I never ever imagined any harm could come to him, particularly from militants and so on,” Tribeni said.

So, when Baruah rushed out that morning, nothing unusual crossed Tribeni’s mind. Of course, the day was full of engagements for the family: they had a marriage to attend and their two daughters were to make a dance presentation at a local college. Tribeni was busy until noon, getting her daughters ready for their performance.

“At 12.45 p.m. the phone rang. The caller asked about the whereabouts of Baruah sir. A short while later, a guardian of one of our school students telephoned and asked for my husband. The person enquired if I knew that minister Nagen Sharma’s car had been bombed,” Tribeni recalled.

Still she did not think anything untoward has happened to her husband. It was lunch time. Tribeni and her children decided to have lunch.
By this time, a crowd had gathered in front of their school. Everyone was asking, ‘where is Baruah sir.’

Someone from the crowd said he had seen ‘Baruah sir’ traveling with minister Nagen Sharma in a black car. That was it. The Baruahs, and the families of four others who were killed that day, would never forget the black February morning.

A doctor – a family friend of the Baruahs – asked Tribeni to get onto his car. They drove straight to the Civil Hospital, not far away. “Even then, I never really thought my husband was one of the victims of the devastating blast,” she said.

But, it was at the hospital that Tribeni actually realized that her husband was no more. She was brought home. Tribeni became senseless. Her mother-in-law, who was with them, was distraught at the news of her son’s death.

Baruah was killed along with four others, who included Nagen Sharma, a top leader of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional party that was in power in Assam at that time. Sharma, who was, State Forest and Public Works Minister, was going for a meeting at the Dakshin Nalbari College, around 5 kilometer from Nalbari, when his motorcade came under a bomb attack. The outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), engaged in a violent armed campaign for an independent homeland, was generally blamed for that deadly bomb attack.

Baruah died that day just because he happened to be in the minister’s car, traveling together. “My husband liked Nagen (Sharma) a lot. It was a quirk of fate that he was with him, in the same car, that morning,” Tribeni said. She became a widow. And so was Nagen Sharma’s wife, Alaka, an economist and development activist.

It’s another matter that Alaka later stepped into her husband’s shoes by joining politics and becoming an MLA. But, Tribeni had to carry on her mission: running her school and bringing up her three children, son Simanta, and daughters Indrani and Darshana.

It isn’t surprising that Tribeni started disliking politicians after that tragic incident. All the more after then Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who was Nagen Sharma’s colleague, apparently ignored her plea for help. “Mahanta had visited me at my Nalbari home after the incident and had consoled us. Later, I went to see him, accompanied
by Alaka (Nagen Sharma’s wife), and presented him a memorandum requesting some assistance for my school,” Tribeni recalled.

The Chief Minister did promise to consider, but according to Tribeni, did nothing after that. “I met Chandra Mohan Patowari (another senior AGP leader) also. The only AGP leader from whom I got a support of Rs 50,000 for the school was Rekharani Das Boro,” she said.

It was then that Tribeni decided not to seek support from anyone in the Government. “Suddenly I thought, why I should beg. I gave up and started generating resources on my own to run the school that was my husband’s passion,” she said.

Aside from running the school, Tribeni had to counsel her children at home. “My children turned a little aggressive. My daughters developed revulsion for black cars as their father was riding one such car that fateful day. Besides, they started hating ministers and used to either switch off or change channels on TV if any minister appeared on the programme,” she said.

Such behaviour could have been symptoms of some sort of a post-traumatic stress disorder as the kids were directly impacted by the death of their father. Only those who lose their loved one all of a sudden, caught in the vortex of mindless violence, can possibly realize the extent of the trauma.

If Tribeni lost her husband, the political establishment of the time had lost her sympathy. There are not many examples, say in Assam – despite the State being an insurgency-ravaged one – of the State authorities, including the political leadership, of dealing with a survivor with sensitivity.

If many of the poor women survivors across the State were made to run around before they were paid the ex-gratia amount of Rs 100,000 (anyone killed in militancy-related incidents are paid that amount), comparatively better-off people like Tribeni are antagonized by the authorities by being insensitive to their feelings. For instance, Chief Minister Mahanta could have easily organized some financial assistance, irrespective of the amount, for Tribeni’s school at Nalbari.

Most survivors, however, receive support, even if it is just moral support from other quarters. In Tribeni’s case, local youths from Nalbari visited her and tried to give her solace. “I don’t know if any ULFA members
were among those who visited me in my hour of crisis. But, what touched me was that they profusely apologized for my husband’s death,” she said.

Today, Tribeni sees herself as a peace activist and social worker who would, however, not use politics to achieve her objectives. “I do not really hate the ULFA as they must have had some reasons to take up arms. But if I happen to meet its leaders, I would try to convince them to resolve their problems in a peaceful manner,” she said.

After her husband’s death in a rebel bomb attack, Tribeni has started looking at the problem of militancy more closely, developing, in the process, strong views on the matter. “Poor governance and rise of militancy are inter-related. Joblessness and lack of opportunities have forced many young boys to join militant groups,” she said.

Ask her whether she hopes for an early solution to the militancy problem in Assam, Tribeni gets agitated. “The politicians themselves do not want a solution to the militancy problem in the State because of their own selfish motives,” she remarked.

If it is poor governance that is among the causes of militancy in economically under-developed states like Assam, as Tribeni thinks, lack of sensitivity in handling survivers have distanced a whole lot of such people away from the realm of the government.

But authorities everywhere are known for their ad hoc measures to deal with the different dimensions of conflict and not really for pursuing a holistic approach to deal with the problem.
Even a rebel Chieftain’s mother cries

She’s like any other grandmother anywhere on earth – affectionate, worldly-wise and caring. But at 78, Miliki Baruah is engulfed by sorrow. She, after all, had lost one son to some mysterious gunmen’s bullets, and another, although alive, has been away from home for as long as 25 years.

Sadness, however, cannot overpower this highly focused woman with clear views of her own. She has been rather forcefully calling for an end to the bloodshed in her native Assam even as her elusive son Paresh Baruah, ‘commander-in-chief’ of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), continues to lead his group’s violent homeland campaign.

Miliki’s life has had its own share of ups and down, much like anyone else. Married to Dwijen Baruah, a farmer in village Jerai Chokoliboria, near the eastern district town of Dibrugarh, she went on to become the mother of five sons and a daughter.

Life was just fine at Jerai, a village of around 20,000 people, mostly belonging to the Motok, Ahom, tea and ex-tea garden communities and a sprinkling of Muslims. Later, Jerai Chokoliboria was to become famous as the village ULFA’s military chief Paresh Baruah, its general secretary Golap Baruah alias Anup Chetia and Chakra Gohain, one-time ‘deputy commander-in-chief’ (now surrendered) hailed from.

But before that, the village was known for its star footballers like Rebati Phukan, for example, who is now among those named by the ULFA in early September 2005 to explore peace with New Delhi. It’s like any other village in Assam, surrounded by thick bamboo groves and areca nut trees. The residents are a simple lot, but conscious and aware of the prevailing situation in the State.

Things were moving fine for Miliki and Dwijen Baruah. Eldest son Bimal got a job at the Army Supply Depot in the nearby town of Panitola. Second son Pradip was employed with the Military Engineering Service, third son Paresh Baruah, who had made a name as a fine footballer and volley ball player, had secured employment with the Railways, and posted at Tinsukia. While her fourth son Dinesh followed Paresh, also joining the Railways, youngest son Bikul became a teacher at a local school.
Life started changing for the Baruahs sometime around 1979-80 when Paresh, who was until then at a Railway mess in Tinsukia, disappeared. Ever since, he has continued to be in the limelight as the dreaded military boss of the ULFA, a group they formed on April 7, 1979, to achieve a ‘sovereign, Socialist Assam.’ Jerai Chokoliboria became the favourite destination of the police, Army and the paramilitary, all craving for information about the local boy who turned a dreaded guerrilla chieftain.

For the next 15 years, the Baruah family, as also many others at Jerai, became victims of a familiar cat-and-mouse game. They had started getting used to the midnight knock by men in uniform. Everyone knew Paresh was unlikely to be home, but psychological pressure, after all, is a common counter-insurgency practice.

On a cold winter night – February 19, 1994 – two cars stopped in front of Rebati Phukan’s house at Jerai. Some men disembarked and, after a while, drove away with Dinesh, who was there at that time. The next day, his bullet-riddled body was found lying by the National Highway, near Chabua. Family ties cost the Baruahs dear. The killers were not known, but clearly it was sort of a revenge attack. Korobi became a widow. She had been married to Dinesh for just seven months.

The family received me warmly when I visited their spacious tin-roof house at Jerai on an April morning this year. As I scanned the living room, I noticed a name-plate that said ‘D.Baruah, NFR (Northeast Frontier Railway).’ That’s like a souvenir that reminds the Baruah household of one of its lost sons. Korobi, too, is not there, for she had left for her parents’ home.

Bimal, the eldest of the brothers, talked rather candidly. “We all had gone through tremendous mental agony during 1984-85. The security personnel visited us regularly and things were difficult,” he said. He remembered younger brother Paresh as a bright student who had received recognition for merit at the lower primary stage.

A brown shawl wrapped on her body, bespectacled Miliki joins us in the conversation. “People are now saying the boys (ULFA cadres) must enter into peace talks with the Government. But, these people must do something concrete and not just harp on the need for talks,” she began.

Miliki, flanked by son Bikul and daughter-in-law Renu, added: “There’s no point beating about the bush. Everyone – the ministers, central leaders and the people – must work together to bring peace back in
Assam. But at the same time, there is a need to know as to why the boys (ULFA activists) are living such a life, staying in the jungles, braving rain and sun.”

I met Miliki and two of her sons a couple of months before the ULFA, in early September, nominated an 11-member panel, calling it the People’s Consultative Group, to begin preparatory talks with New Delhi and set the ground for possible direct talks between the rebel leadership and the Centre. Award winning Assamese novelist Dr Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom, was, of course, very much on the scene already, having been formally accepted by the ULFA to act as a peace facilitator to try and bring the two warring sides together for peace talks.

Miliki said: “If a woman (Mamoni Raisom) can come forward to facilitate the return of peace in Assam, why are the other big guns not coming forward?” Obviously, she as a mother is yearning to get her elusive son Paresh back even while trying to overcome the tragedy of losing Dinesh.

“I could do nothing. My son was killed…Only a mother can understand the pangs of losing one’s son. Dinesh had never done anything wrong, he was busy pursuing his passion, playing football. He (Dinesh) could not even kill a pigeon,” she said.

Today, Miliki, despite being ULFA boss Paresh Baruah’s mother, is seen by many as a crusader for peace in the strife-torn State. Her views and comments get adequate media coverage. “Lots of mothers across Assam have lost their sons. Boys, both belonging to the ULFA or the security forces, are still dying. I can’t understand why the Government is not really bothered. I would like the killings to stop and the two sides should call a truce and talk peace,” Miliki said.

In homes across Assam, there are many parents like Miliki who have been caught in the cross-fire just because of family ties – a son being with the ULFA and other children working for the Government, the Public sector or even the Army, police or the paramilitary. There have been instances where the family members of rebel cadres were tortured by the security forces. Such actions have only strengthened the resolve of the rebels.

In fact, people like Miliki should be regarded as peace-makers and treated as such. Unfortunately, the law enforcing agencies tend to go
by conventional counter-insurgency methods which can never cure the problem, and in the long run turns counter-productive.

Look at this, for instance: on November 5, 2000, unknown gunmen fired three rounds at the house in Jerai where Miliki and the others stay. Again, in 2003, around 50 to 60 rounds were fired at the same house from automatic rifles. The assailants fled when security guards posted at the house by the State Government fired back. These attacks, although unsuccessful, were obviously not casual raids by miscreants.

As the efforts for peace initiated by Mamoni Raisom gathers momentum, the women in the Baruahs’ home at Jerai are hoping for a peaceful future when they all could lead a normal life. “We only hope we can get a better and peaceful tomorrow, a tomorrow where Assam will shine,” Bikul’s wife Renu, said.

The men too are clamouring for peace. “We do not want killings, either by the militants or by the Government side. Enough blood has been shed already,” said Bimal. His brother Bikul added: “We want peace talks, we are with the people.”

On her part, Miliki is all the time worried about her son Paresh’s safety. “The fire will always burn inside me till I die. I shall continue to wait for him (Paresh) till my last breath. I want him to return home,” she signed off.
Conclusion

Remarkable Women, Remarkable Lives

If their tragedies are similar, so are their stories of survival. Tillottama Basumatary became a widow because her husband fell to the bullets of trigger-happy rebels while visiting the market one morning. Kamrun Nissa’s husband was gunned down by masked men outside his home as he was playing with his son, Anita Mashahary and Janaki Brahma lost their husbands after they were kidnapped and killed, and Lakshi and Jashmi Hembrom’s husbands were victims of a deadly ethnic riot.

Similarly, Bharati Rajkonwari’s husband was shot and killed from point-blank range as he stood outside his office. Gunmen barged into Bharati Kalita’s home and shot her husband dead under the bed where he was hiding. Amiya Borkakoty’s husband, a policeman, was kidnapped and killed. Hemoprova Konwar faced the horror of gunmen pumping bullets on her husband right on the verandah of her house one dark night. And, Ajanta Neog, Alaka Sharma and Basanti Sharma became widows because their politician husbands were shot or bombed by insurgents.

From the Bodo tribal heartland of Kokrajhar in western Assam to the nearby district of Nalbari, and Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts in the extreme east, violence has touched people, shattering their lives. The survivors, whose stories I have detailed, belong to a wide spectrum of society: wives of schoolteachers, student and political leaders, wives of close relatives of militant bosses, daily wage earners, police officers and PSU employees and small businessmen.

While women like Tillottama lost their husband in random attacks by militants, out to prove their strength, others like the husbands of Anita and Janaki were selectively picked up because of their role as student leaders, becoming victims of murky local politics. The two Bharatis, Bharati Rajkonwari and Bharati Kalita, lost their husbands because of their family ties. While Bharati Rajkonwari’s husband was the brother of Arabinda Rajkhowa, Chairman of the dreaded United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Bharati Kalita is the sister of ULFA’s elusive
Deputy Commander-in-Chief Raju Baruah. Their husbands were killed by people who could have been ‘secret killers’, meaning gunmen used by government agencies or other forces.

Lakshi and Jashmi became widows because their husbands got caught in the bloody Bodo-Adivasi ethnic riots that had swept the western Assam Bodo belt. Both Adivasis, their husbands were killed by marauding miscreants belonging to the Bodo community. And, Ajanta, Alaka and Basanti have been survivors of political killings. Ajanta’s husband was a Congress Minister who was killed as he was driving. Similarly, Alaka’s husband Nagen Sharma, a Minister belonging to the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional party, was bombed while he was traveling in his car to a meeting. Basanti’s husband Manabendra Sharma, a senior Congress leader, was shot dead near his home as he was walking.

It has been proved that anybody can become a victim of violence in a volatile theatre of insurgency and ethnic turf wars. If someone going to the market gets killed, relatives of top rebel leaders get killed too. If on one occasion ULFA hit squads had chased and killed a Superintendent of Police in Assam, at other times brothers of the ULFA’s topmost duo, Chairman Rajkhowa and Commander-in-Chief Paresh Barua, were killed too. The impact of such killings are being felt directly only by the wife and children of such victims. Of course, parents too get shattered.

The twelve or more widows of violence speak the same language, irrespective of whether she is a kin of an ULFA militant, wife of a police officer, a politician or an ordinary citizen. This is the language of deep anguish, pain, trauma, and hardship. All of them harp on the need for peace. Moreover, in the initial stages after losing their husbands, usually the main breadwinners of the family, they had all been hit by the fear of uncertainty. Besides, the responsibility of bringing up the children and managing the household weighed heavily on them.

It was found that neither the government nor the society has been really sensitive to these women survivors. This is contrary to the general feeling that the society as such comes forward to help such survivors cope with their tragedies and rebuild their lives. Anita, for instance, related how her neighbors at the village would not visit her house for fear that the killers could target them for coming to her aid. And the
worst was the shunning of widows in many cases by Bodo men for fear that their names could be linked to such women.

The Government on its part has no institutionalized response mechanism with laid down rules to deal with widows of violence. The result: the survivors have had to make dozens of visits to the local Deputy Commissioner’s office to get the mandatory ex-gratia payment of Rs.100,000 to victims of violence. Surprisingly, till recently, the authorities were paying the ex-gratia amount by cash, and that perhaps is the reason why some of the survivors said they had not received the full amount of Rs 100,000. Moreover, there is no laid down procedure of providing employment to women who have lost their husbands in course of violence. One expects such laid down rules to be in place in a State like Assam since it has been in the grip of violence for more than two decades at a stretch.

Despite the odds, these women have shown remarkable courage and determination in overcoming the crises, taking charge of their households and moving ahead in life. Most of them said they had decided to forget the past and hide their grief for the sake of their children. Bringing up their children has been the most important challenge for most of these women.

One common refrain among all the survivors has been their aversion to the idea of revenge. Rather, many, including Miliki Barua, mother of ULFA C-in-C Paresh Baruah, said she would like peace to return to Assam. This despite the fact that one of her sons was gunned down by unknown killers. However, most of the women I met said they won’t like to take the lead in organizing the survivors of violence and lobby for their rights and so on. Many said they have lost faith in both society and the government. Many wanted to be left alone.