

The 'Secret Killings' in Assam: Counterinsurgency and Censoring Perpetrator Information

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Abstract: In the late 1990s, a protracted armed conflict between the Indian government and the insurgent organization United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in the northeastern Indian state of Assam escalated to include 'secret killings' of family members, close aides, and sympathizers of ULFA among its many violent manifestations. The killers primarily targeted insurgents' families to persuade their underground kin to surrender, and to create fear among community members who sympathized with the movement or sheltered its cadres. The 2007 report of Justice K. N. Saikia Commission pointed out the role of the surrendered insurgents and the state police in the secret killings, noting that the army was kept in the loop in some cases. Surprisingly, while over three hundred people were killed between 1998 and 2001, no one was convicted. This article describes the challenges I faced in conducting ethnographic fieldwork on this sensitive event, which continues to draw political and media attention in the region. I focus on the challenges of interviewing survivors, families of victims, and police officers about the secret killings in Assam. I particularly reflect on my fieldwork experience, especially the decisions about what to ask, what to write, and what to censor about my participants; I also consider the ethical dimension of making these decisions. I argue that these decisions were often made spontaneously in response to emergent situations and my ethical principles. I let the responses of my participants guide me in the field and did not carry any predetermined strategies to guide the interviews.

Keywords: perpetrators, violence, memory, insurgency, Northeast India

Introducing Insurgency and the Secret Killings in Assam

The insurgency in Assam started in 1979 when the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was formed. ULFA argued that Assam was never part of India. It was instead ruled by the Ahoms for two hundred years until its annexation by

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the Burmese in 1817. Later, through the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826, the British took over Assam. It was during the British Rule that Assam underwent significant administrative changes.¹ British colonialism in Assam marked the discovery of rich natural resources, and Assam soon turned into an extractive zone for resources. The success of the British tea plantations in Assam demonstrated the suitability of its land, soil, and climate and established Assam as a prosperous industrial zone for drawing revenue. What was interesting to observe was the connotation of the region as a 'colonial hinterland'² even after British Rule ended. It remained a site of resource extraction for the post-colonial Indian government. The central government in New Delhi made decisions regarding its oil, coal, tea, timber, and plywood without taking into account the social and economic wellbeing of indigenous communities. Additionally, there was a popular fear that substantial demographic changes owing to the migration of people, particularly Bengali Muslims from East Bengal, would infringe on the rights of the indigenous people. Such apprehensions of losing one's indigenous land, resources, and identity also sparked the Assam Movement of 1979, which aimed to detect immigrants from Bangladesh and remove their names from electoral rolls and deport them to their home country. While the Assam Movement led by the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and All Assam Students' Union (AASU) settled for the Assam Accord in 1985 and formed a new regional political party, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a radical faction within the movement was unhappy with the settlement. They created ULFA with the aim of establishing swadhin Asom (independent Assam).³

ULFA membership peaked in the 1980s and its members were most active in the districts of Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Tinsukia, and Nalbari. Most cadres came from farming communities, and firmly believed that only self-determination would help Assam's people grow economically. In the 1980s, ULFA started working with these communities. They constructed embankments to prevent soil erosion, undertook agricultural activities, and worked to construct roads. They also resorted to vigilantism, discouraging thefts, corruption, brewing

1 Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 21–68.

2 Tilottoma Misra, 'Assam: A Colonial Hinterland', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15.32 (1980), 1357–1359 and 1361–1364.

3 Rajeev Bhattacharyya, *ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn* (Gurugram, Haryana: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2023).

liquor, and gender-based harassment. They had their own courts for settling local disputes. Print media in Assam called ULFA a 'Robin Hood' for its contribution towards societal reforms.⁴ ULFA's military wing was led by Commander-in-Chief Paresh Baruah, and its political wing was led by its Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa. While ULFA ran a parallel government in Assam throughout the 1980s, they committed extortion, killings, and kidnappings beyond Assam.⁵ ULFA's growing popularity and violent crimes marked the beginning of counter-insurgency operations in Assam.

In November 1990, President's rule was imposed on Assam, which was declared a 'disturbed area'. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) empowered the army to arrest anyone and to seize or destroy property based on suspicion, and with total impunity. Counter-insurgency operations increased in the late 1990s with the creation of the Unified Command Structure (UCS) in 1997, after which army, police, and paramilitary forces worked together. It was in this atmosphere of militarization that the 'secret killings' began in Assam, prompting many cadres to surrender. In lieu of attractive rehabilitation packages, many surrendered cadres (SULFA)⁶ volunteered or were forced to guide the police and the army as they committed secret killings. The modus operandi of the secret killings went like this: the killers would come late at night covering their faces with black cloth, would knock on doors addressing people in native Assamese language, pick them up with the assurance that they would be brought back, and would travel in car models mostly used by the police in those days. Survivors reported that the army was kept in the loop.⁷

After the recovery of a human limb in the outskirts of Guwahati in 1998, the print media framed the killings to be *gupto hoitya*, or 'secret killings'.⁸ The killers used the secret killings to break ULFA cadres' mo-

4 Uddipan Dutta, *Creating Robin Hoods: The Insurgency of the ULFA in its Early Period, Its Parallel Administration and The Role of Assamese Vernacular Press, 1985-1990* (New Delhi: WISCOMP, 2008).

5 Rajeev Bhattacharyya, *ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn* (Gurugram, Haryana: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2023).

6 SULFA is short for Surrendered ULFA.

7 Justice K.N. Saikia Commission of Inquiry, *Report on the First Group of Seven Cases on Secret Killings*, 21 August 2006, <<https://ia801306.us.archive.org/27/items/SecretKillin/ReportAssamFirstSevenOCR/Secret%20Killing%20Report%20Assam%20First%20Seven%20OCR%29.pdf>> [accessed 5 July 2024].

8 Mrinal Talukdar, Utpal Borpujari, and Kaushik Deka, *Secret Killings of Assam: The Horrific Story of Assam's Darkest Period* (Guwahati and New Delhi: Nanda Talukdar Foundation and Human Rights Law Network, 2009).

rale so they would surrender, and to destroy people's support for them by punishing those who sympathized with the movement or sheltered insurgents. During the secret killings, anyone with direct, indirect, or suspected connection to ULFA could be tortured, killed, abducted and/or disappeared. Around three hundred people were murdered if not more.⁹ Four commissions were formed to investigate the killings out of which the last one, the Justice K. N. Saikia Commission, offered significant clues about the killers' identities. While the vocabulary of 'secret' killings could be attributed to the mass media, the commission stated that the killings were carried out by SULFA cadres under the instruction of the state, with support from the police and army.¹⁰

The 2007 Saikia Commission report documented the murders of over fifty people between 1998 and 2001 under common circumstances, and labelled the killings 'Ulfocide', to highlight the killing of ULFA family or associates.¹¹ The report accused the then Home Minister of remotely orchestrating the killings, and described the role of the SULFA, state police, and the army in the secret killings.¹² Despite the commission's documenting of these killings, there was no follow-up, and no one was convicted even when surviving family members named the perpetrators. In 2018, the Saikia Commission's constitution was quashed, signifying the government's determination to erase those memories officially.¹³ Ironically, people continued calling the killings 'secret killings' following the established media construct, but in reality, there was no secret about the perpetrators' identities.

On 29 December 2023, the ceasefire faction of ULFA led by Arabinda Rajkhowa had signed a Memorandum of Settlement with the Government of Assam and the Government of India. The underground faction, ULFA (Independent), led by Paresh Baruah, continues to operate from Myanmar. While the names of all martyrs were collected for compensation, only thirty-five cases covering the murders of around fifty peo-

9 Dixita Deka, 'Living without Closure: Memories of Counterinsurgency and Secret Killings in Assam', *Asian Ethnicity*, 22.3 (2019), 428–46.

10 Justice K. N. Saikia Commission of Inquiry.

11 Ibid., p. 7.

12 See also Home and Political Department, Government of Assam, *Action Taken Report on the Report submitted by Justice (Retd.) K. N. Saikia Commission of Inquiry*, 2007.

13 'HC Quashes KN Saikia Report on Secret Killings', *Nagaland Post*, 4 September 2018 <<https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2018/09/04/hc-quashes-kn-saikia-report-on-secret-killings/>> [accessed 5 July 2024].

ple were financially compensated under the Saikia Commission.¹⁴ Along with the people martyred during the secret killings, there were others who lost their lives during counter-insurgency operations. Together, these deaths — secret killings, custodial deaths, enforced disappearances, or fake encounter killings in which common people were killed and framed as insurgents — can be categorised as extrajudicial killings.

I followed a qualitative methodology for this study. Primary sources like commission reports and secondary sources like newspaper archives helped me initiate the pilot study and build networks with my interlocutors. Through ethnography and interview methods, I conducted fieldwork across eight districts in Assam between June 2018 and May 2019, and met over a hundred participants. I observed them in extreme pain, fear, frustration, and suspicion. In this research, human rights activists and journalists served as my gatekeepers. I only interviewed people who were survivors, witnessed acts of perpetration, received offers to join the death squads, or were high-level police at the time of the killings and were accused of being alleged architects or silent spectators. In the resulting interviews, participants shared insights about the perpetrators and the processes of perpetration. I reflect on my fieldwork experience especially the decisions about what to ask, what to write, and what to censor about my participants; I also reflect on the ethical dimension of making those decisions. I believe it was largely the spontaneous moments during conversations with the families which informed me of the risks involved in writing certain things and censoring the rest. Further reflections with my interlocutors helped confirm those decisions. I constantly made attempts at keeping my conscience clear, keeping the interest of the families first over my ambition of ‘data collection’ for my then PhD dissertation.¹⁵

Interviews with police officers could also offer insights into their interpretation of the armed conflict and counter-insurgency operations in Assam. However, it was only after interviewing the families that I could consider interviewing police. Here, it became important for me to focus on the process of data collection, and not merely on the data itself, and to assess the accessibility of the field and the accountability of both the researcher and the researched in defining a ‘perpetrator’ in a conflict zone.

¹⁴ In conversation with participants in the district of Nalbari, I learned that updated lists of martyrs were submitted to the police station for compensation.

¹⁵ Dixita Deka, ‘Secret Killings in Assam: Violence, Memory, and Politics’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2020).

Navigating the Field: Access and Ethical Challenges

While the secret killings of Assam have been represented in Assamese fiction by men and women writers, academic writing on the topic has been scarce. It is a sensitive topic of conversation, and so the studies that exist are rare exceptions, written mostly by male academics and journalists. My entry into the field as an Assamese woman and PhD scholar was possible for three reasons. First, participants trusted the journalists, human rights activists, and surviving family intermediaries who served as my gatekeepers. I started meeting my intermediaries during my MPhil, which was about the lives of former female ULFA cadres.¹⁶ That was two years before I could suggest a conversation about the secret killings with them.

Second, as a woman with a petite stature, I was not perceived as 'dangerous'. Instead, some participants demonstrated concern for me and stopped me from interviewing people whom they considered to be 'bad'. Journalists, in particular, warned me against meeting police officers from the period of the secret killings, who they described as greedy, inhumane, and characterless. They seemed to feel an obligation to protect the 'woman' researcher and keep her informed about the dangers of this fieldwork. Questions surrounding the gender of the researcher and of how the interaction with the perpetrators was perceived by others are common issues for researchers focusing on perpetrator studies. In Argentina, for example, social scientist Valentina Salvi notes that 'sitting at the table' with the army officers was frowned upon and considered to be a sinister act.¹⁷ Along similar lines, historian Erin Jessee argues that in Rwanda researchers run the risk of being labelled as suspected political subversives for engaging with genocidaires.¹⁸

Finally, grief and lack of closure drew many families to my project and made them trust my intentions. When the state failed to follow the Saikia Commission reports' recommendations,¹⁹ people expressed

16 Dixita Deka, 'Between underground and over ground: Narratives on the Identity of Women Insurgents in Assam', *Asian Ethnicity*, 20.4 (2019), 469–85.

17 Valentina Salvi, 'Before, During, and After: Difficulties and Controversies in Fieldwork with Retired Officers from the Argentine Army', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 6.1 (2023), 44–65 (p. 47). Salvi also discusses the specifically gendered dimension of the interaction between the researcher and the male perpetrators she interviewed.

18 Erin Jessee, 'Seeing Monsters, Hearing Victims', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 67–90 (p. 69).

19 Home and Political Department.

their anger and anxieties, and shared their tragic stories with me to honour their loved ones and preserve them in social memory. They also recalled the minute details of the perpetrators' appearance: what they looked like, the clothes they wore, the language they spoke, and sometimes even their names. Yet, the killings had remained a public secret. These stories of the secret killers, who were mostly protected by the state, further found space in fiction.²⁰

Having successfully built these networks in the field, I then encountered some major ethical challenges during the fieldwork. It was difficult to decide whether participants should be named or not. This decision was made in conversation with participants. I have anonymized intermediaries throughout my research. Based on informed consent, which requires the researcher to explain the purpose and outcome of the questions posed to the participants,²¹ and after considering the potential risks, harm, or benefits for them,²² we agreed that I would name participants. This decision was made because I have mostly interviewed members of families represented in the Saikia Commission Reports, who continue to publicly seek justice for their kin. However, we agreed not to share sensitive narratives which emerged during the interviews, in adherence to contextual ethics — i.e., the principles followed by the researcher pertaining to specific cultural contexts.²³ For instance, I abstained from disclosing the names of the perpetrators mentioned by survivor and eyewitness participants because I could not interview anyone who confessed to these crimes and could not jeopardize the safety of my participants. These named perpetrators included police officers and SULFA. In a way, ethical considerations are what Lee Ann Fujii considers to be an ongoing process and are beyond the structure of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). She rightly emphasises that, when conducting research with human subjects, 'to enter another's world as a researcher is a privilege, not a right'.²⁴

20 Aruni Kashyap, *The House with a Thousand Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013); see also Arupa Kalita Patangia, *Arunimar Swadesh (Arunima's Country)* (Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan, 2001).

21 Margit Sutrop and Kristi Lõuk, 'Informed Consent and Ethical Research', in *Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity*, ed. by Ron Iphofen (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 213–32 (p. 219).

22 Lee Ann Fujii, 'Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45.5 (2012), 717–23.

23 Daniela R. Piccio and Alice Mattoni, 'Ethics in Political Research', in *Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity*, ed. by Ron Iphofen (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 873–87 (p.884).

24 Lee Ann Fujii, 'Research Ethics', p.722.

It was also difficult for me to decide if I should interview the police. Most participants expressed apprehension about me approaching perpetrators and suggested that I refrain from meeting those 'dangerous' people, while others told me it would be of no use as they would only lie. A minority of participants wanted me to meet them to learn the other side of the story. I decided to conduct my interviews with the police after finishing the interviews with families, as I wanted the community to know first that I was reaching out to the security forces and not the other way round. This precaution was taken based on my previous fieldwork experiences where my participants, particularly insurgents under ceasefire, questioned my interest in researching their past lives and in a way suspected my identity. Earlier they had had experiences of having conversations with police informers disguised as journalists and researchers. In order to prevent any rumour like that regarding my identity, I had to be careful in deciding the chronology of my meetings. This also helped me know their opinions regarding my possible conversations with the police in the future. While the survivors were interested to know whom I was meeting, the police officers confined their replies to the questions being asked. My positive rapport with journalists helped me connect to a few high-level retired police officers. I abstained from interviewing active police officers to avoid attracting unwanted official attention. While I enjoyed a sense of security in the field, there was constantly the fear of abjection both in having conversations with those accused of perpetration, as well as in establishing the 'value and validity of the ethnographic knowledge'.²⁵ In other words, I was worried the survivors and families would suspect me of being either a sympathizer of ULFA or a police informer. I was also worried whether my dissertation would make sense as I derived my data primarily from observations and ethnographic narratives, and that it might be questioned in terms of its validity and rigour.

It was nearly impossible to get the participants to sign consent forms: a common challenge in conflict-affected settings. In El Salvador, for example, Elisabeth Jean Wood emphasises the need to be flexible regarding informed consent, and to allow participants to instruct the researcher when to censor information about the war, as well as what needs to be published.²⁶ I made contacts mostly through com-

25 Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 212.

26 Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

mon friendships and, on that ground, built trust and established verbal consent to use their insights for academic purposes. The inability to achieve closure inspired many participants to open up. While it was possible for families to document perpetrators' names, it was difficult for them to secure justice as the perpetrators were either still employed by the police or protected by the government. As such, it became important to understand how survivors and eyewitnesses defined and identified perpetrators.

Describing the Perpetrators: Memories of the Survivors

Similar to the Saikia Commission reports, my interviews with over a hundred participants revealed direct police involvement in committing extrajudicial killings. Under the purview of AFSPA, the army's complicity was also likely. The residue of the violence perpetrated by these forces manifested in the survivors' silence. Telling one's story could provide the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one's experiences and of oneself.²⁷ Storytelling by the victims, or for that matter, stories of marginalized people more generally, works towards the 're-humanization of people humiliated by violence or the establishment of a culture of respect for human rights throughout society'.²⁸ Re-telling stories about these deaths and disappearances could also reveal the complexities that kept the stories from providing closure and the families from achieving some sort of healing.

For instance, Harendra in Nalbari, whose brother was abducted, offered intricate details about the secret killings. My intermediaries to Harendra's home included a man who requested anonymity and a woman whose brother was abducted by the death squad and never found again. Both of them were from Nalbari. My intermediaries enjoyed the confidence of Harendra Barman, brother of Dharani Barman. Dharani was abducted from Guwahati on 3 August 1999, and his tortured body was recovered two days later, leaving the family in extreme shock. Despite the role of the police in preventing Harendra's family from conducting a funeral march and in silencing potential protests,

27 Sapna K Sangra, 'Transcending Ethnic Differences: Feminist Perspectives from Jammu and Kashmir', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 53.33 (2018), 29–33 (p. 30).

28 Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston, 'The burden of memory: Victims, storytelling and resistance in Northern Ireland', *Memory Studies*, 2.3 (2009), 355–76 (p. 356).

the family deliberately kept a low profile to avoid losing anyone else. They cremated the body without a social gathering, and it was only after a couple of years that they could perform their traditional rituals with the community.

In March 2019, when we reached Harendra's home, we saw him eagerly waiting for us in the doorway. He was a schoolteacher, probably in his late forties. Harendra's extended family resided at the house, and after some time, his older brother joined us in conversation. I noticed a young girl and a woman peeping through the window curtain and listening to our conversations. It felt odd as they were not introduced to me. Still, it seemed normal for my intermediaries and participants not to welcome them in the living room, where we started talking about the event that had shaken the family to the core.

The woman intermediary who accompanied me to Harendra's home was well known in their circle for her efforts to keep the memories of her disappeared brother alive. Harendra's brother Dharani was thirty-six years old in 1999. He was a football player at the district level. He was also somewhat 'popular' with his small businesses and engagements with local politics. He helped to establish a school in the locality, where Harendra was appointed after Dharani's demise. On 2 August 1999, Dharani went to Guwahati to visit an ailing relative. The next day, he went to the hospital and met his relative. However, he did not then return home to Nalbari as planned. His family became suspicious as his disappearance coincided with the abduction of my (female) intermediary's brother from Nalbari. Harendra explained:

On 4 August 1999, we started to panic about our brother's whereabouts. During that time, a couple of people were already abducted by the secret killers from the locality. We were at a loss for words and hope. On 5 August 1999, our relatives searched for Dharani frantically and began connecting to the police stations. One of our brothers also started inquiring around the hospital premises where my brother was last seen. He was told by a shopkeeper that an incident had happened where a few boys chased a man. He finally got some information from Boko Police Station that they had recovered three dead bodies. From his clothes, sandals, and belts, Dharani was recognized. The body, as told to us, was recovered from a place called Kukurmara under Chaygaon Police Station. The body was decomposed. We did not file any FIR (First Information Report) out of fear as it was anticipated that we could be targeted next. However, we tried to record our complaint through the *gaon burah* (village head-

man). Eventually, we realized that the then Superintendent of the Police had asked the *gaon burah* to forget what had happened and to alert the young men in the village to be careful thereafter. That compelled us to be silent to save the lives of the other family members.²⁹

I was told about Dharani's murder during one of my first interviews at Nalbari. Unlike the well-represented cases from the district, like those told by family members of insurgent leaders who were killed,³⁰ many stories about disappeared civilians like Dharani were silenced. According to my intermediaries, Dharani was 'popular', and during those days, 'healthy and strong' men were often suspected of being insurgents. They further told me that anyone connected to sports and music or who drove a car or rode a bike was assumed to be associated with ULFA. Dharani fit these categorizations as he was an active sportsperson and had also helped settle village disputes.

My male intermediary also noted that Dharani and the brother of my female intermediary had attended the funeral of a journalist who was killed by the death squad. He explained how the journalist had come under the radar of the secret killers when he had rejoiced at the killing of a surrendered cadre at his funeral. That cadre worked for the police as a secret killer. According to my intermediary, it was challenging to keep track of the people attending funerals or protest rallies. Any civilian could be working undercover. As such, attending the funeral of the journalist made Dharani his possible ally and concurrently a threat to the secret killers. While it is possible in other conflict zones for people to come out in huge numbers to protest human rights violations without having known the victims personally, in Assam most people avoided funerals of people murdered by the secret killers due to fears of getting killed as well.

For example, Ananta Kalita from Hajo, who miraculously survived being shot by the secret killers on the Assam-Meghalaya border in September 1999, recalled how organizing and participating in protest rallies in honour of colleagues killed by the death squad had made him its next target. He was a farmer and member of a popular student organization. Ananta escaped death and became an eyewitness to the

29 Harendra Barman, interviewed by Dixita Deka in Nalbari on 17 March 2019 (The interview was conducted in Assamese and translated into English by the author).

30 Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018); see also Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

involvement of the police, army, and surrendered ULFA cadres in his abduction and attempted murder.³¹ Active and popular people who had the potential and courage to challenge SULFA, and thereby apply pressure on the police and the local administration, quickly became the targets of the death squads.

Having established Dharani's popularity, I asked Harendra about the funeral and the community's participation in the rituals. Harendra's reply made clear his helplessness in securing the community's presence during the last rites, as well as in fighting for justice and pursuing a legal case against the perpetrators. In a sombre tone, he elaborated:

After the incident, the *gaon burah* had warned us against fighting any legal matter. He was scared at what was happening around him and had turned indifferent. There were strong protests against the secret killings in some places, but whoever had taken a lead had become a target. We were not even allowed to see Dharani's body. We were just given custody of his clothes. To claim his body, we had to confirm in writing that we would directly take the body for cremation and would not take it for a funeral march in protest. We heard of another family in the locality who were asked to cremate their family member within two hours. The government had to be involved in what was happening back then. People stopped visiting homes after getting news of people dying. *Manuh morle, line dhore, amar dada morute kunu aaha nai* (People gather when someone dies in our community, but no one came when our brother was killed). *Aanba lagbo aru purba lagbo* (The body was to be brought and to be cremated immediately). Eventually, people stopped organizing the prayer meetings. We conducted some rituals for our brother only after four years.³²

Harendra's and Ananta's stories revealed the complicity of the police in the killings and the vulnerability of civilians. People were often suspected of being insurgents or their close aides, and could easily be framed as such. Mourning was not easy either. Gail Holst-Warhaft rightly points out how mourning is controlled and managed by powers such as the military, civic and religious authorities, the modern funeral

³¹ Deka, 'Living without Closure'.

³² Barman.

industry, the media, and pharmaceutical companies.³³ During the secret killings, public gatherings were restricted, and funerals were under surveillance for two reasons: first, media coverage would expose the negligence of the state in addressing people's grievances against the police; and second, the police anticipated that the underground cadres would reveal themselves by attending the funeral of their kin or sympathizers.

By killing Dharani, the secret killers unleashed terror in the locality. Even though Harendra's family received Dharani's body, they were deprived of conducting the death rituals, which are believed to help the dead transition peacefully to the afterlife. Their inability to conduct the last rites violated their right to live with dignity and also prevented their ability to give Dharani a dignified cremation. Similarly, Ananta survived his injuries but was constantly threatened by the police. From 1999 to 2016, he was under the security cover of twelve guards who were recruited by the government after Ananta's revelation of the involvement of the police.³⁴ My fieldwork suggested that the silence around the secret killings in Assam was symbolic of the suspicion, fear, grief, guilt, and shame associated with the aftermath of the killings. It was also rooted in the state's collaboration in the violence that, if made public, would embarrass its officials. Such silences made up the meta-narratives³⁵ and micro-narratives³⁶ that emerged in retelling the stories of political violence, which were difficult to comprehend. Observing these silences and learning from them was crucial for identifying the "taken-for-granted" positions and the silence-in-voice.³⁷ These observations well describe the process of perpetration where perpetrators varied both in numbers and responsibilities. In the conclusion to *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, Erin Jessee and Kjell Anderson emphasise that it was necessary to question not just the participants

33 Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and its Political Uses* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 9.

34 Deka, 'Living without Closure'.

35 Lee Ann Fujii, 'Interpreting truth and lies in stories of conflict and violence', in *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, ed. by Chandra Lekha Sriram and others (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 147–62.

36 Swati Parashar, *Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 146.

37 Ayelet Harel-Shalev, 'Learning from Silences', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22.3 (2020), 1–8 (p. 6).

but also the researchers about how they would frame the perpetrators.³⁸ Thus, it necessitated a working definition of the term 'perpetrator'.

For Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson, the term perpetrator refers to the 'agency of the individuals who have perpetrated forms of mass violence against civilians', while perpetration encapsulates the 'process of collective commission of mass violence'.³⁹ For them, perpetrators could be understood according to three different levels: top level (architects), mid-level (organizers), and bottom level (killers).⁴⁰ Conversely, Antonius Robben and Alexander Hinton offer a broader definition of a perpetrator, relating to his/her actions in various types of organizations with varying degrees of involvement in and responsibility for the violence committed.⁴¹ However, they replace Üngör and Anderson's concept of the perpetrator-killer with that of the perpetrator-facilitator as they believe the 'social category of "killers" is not restricted to perpetrators who physically kill people but also includes interrogators, guards, and physicians who have contact with, harm in ways large and small, and help facilitate the violence and killing'.⁴² This aligns with Scott Straus's description of a perpetrator, which acknowledges that perpetrators can directly or indirectly cause harm to non-combatants:

If they are direct, they kill; they maim; they torture; they incite violence; they order violence; they distribute weaponry. If they are indirect, they contribute to an institution or organization that itself participates in violence; they make meals for people that go out and kill; they reveal the location of would-be targets; they steal or take advantage of victims.⁴³

In that sense, the secret killers have caused both direct and indirect violence: some people worked closely with the police and identified

38 Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, 'Conclusion: Toward a Code of Practice for Qualitative Research among Perpetrators', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 199–220.

39 Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson, 'From Perpetrators to Perpetration: Definitions, Typologies, and Processes', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 7–22 (p. 7).

40 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

41 Robben and Hinton, p. 6.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

43 Scott Straus, 'Studying Perpetrators: A Reflection', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 28–38 (p. 36).

the targets; some — like the surrendered cadres who had enjoyed the trust of the family members of their former colleagues — lured them to meet their underground kin; some abducted targets; some tortured and killed; the army mostly ignored such incidents, thereby covering the killers' movement from one district to another; and the state allowed such crimes to happen while ensuring the impunity of the armed forces. These observations capture my perception of perpetrators, who as Üngör and Anderson as well as Robben and Hinton describe, could be situated at different levels. In the case of the secret killings, there were architects, organizers, facilitators, and killers, among whom the police were ubiquitous. While the killers mostly involved SULFA, later on they were executed by the police or went into hiding after accomplishing their task. The intention was to wipe away every evidence related to the deaths and disappearances, be it of the killers or the killed.

After the counter-insurgency operations of 1990, the state government of Assam ensured several perks for underground cadres who surrendered. Many young men were drawn to these attractive surrender schemes, through which they were offered cash, permission to retain weapons, and business contracts with the government. They were also allotted personal security guards, as it was believed that they could be attacked by their underground counterparts. Surrendered cadres were directed by the police to carry out the killings, and were provided with logistical support, such as information, shelter, weapons, and vehicles. Political scientist Sanjib Baruah further describes how counterinsurgency in postcolonial India was shaped by a military metaphysics that ruled out any scope for the armed rebels to be prosecuted under the criminal justice system.⁴⁴ The 'death squads', a tool of counterinsurgent terror in Assam as Baruah calls them, emerged under those conditions when ULFA was elevated to the status of 'existential threat to the state'.⁴⁵ This also resonated in other parts of Northeast India like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur where the regime of the AFSPA had militarized social lives. Baruah considered AFSPA to have had its roots in imperial policymaking where the army and police worked in tandem.⁴⁶ As recognised by the Saikia Commission, the government was involved in designing the 'death squads' under the active security laws, and the police and the surrendered insurgents then killed with impunity. The work of surrendered insurgents also resonated with vigilante

44 Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation*, p. 130.

45 Ibid., p. 127–30.

46 Ibid., p. 170.

groups — for example, the Ikhwanis of Kashmir or the Salwa Judum of Chhattisgarh — who were turned into trained militia by the government.

One of my biggest challenges in engaging in perpetrator research was my inability to name the perpetrators as it could risk the lives of my participants. There was also the fear that my research could be perceived as activism. Securing legal justice for my participants was beyond the scope of my research. However, as someone who grew up in a conflict zone and has experienced the repercussions of counter-insurgency operations directly and indirectly,⁴⁷ working on a topic like this, I believe, could not be apolitical. However, as a researcher, I felt my inadequacies in facilitating change or justice when participants offered detailed information about who the perpetrators were or how they looked. While these were open secrets in the social milieu in Assam, articulating this information in public could invite legal trouble, illustrating the manufactured nature of silences around the killings. There was a constant fear of being framed as an ULFA sympathizer by the police. As a researcher interested in conflict studies, I became eager to explore the worldview of the counterinsurgency through the police, whose connection to the secret killings seemed certain from survivors' narratives.

Interviewing the Police

While researching 'alleged' perpetrators across conflict zones, Chandra Lekha Sriram suggests replacing questions about their 'responsibility' with questions about their 'role, behaviour, and aims' in post-conflict settings.⁴⁸ I chose to interview a few police officers who were named and identified in newspaper archives or in the Saikia Commission reports as either architects of or top officials during the secret killings. Like Sriram, I approached them not as perpetrators, but as individuals who could offer what Sriram explained as a holistic conversation about questions of accountability and governance.⁴⁹

47 Dixita Deka, *Suppressed Silences: Women as Witnesses and the Wounds of Witnessing Secret Killings in Assam* (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2021).

48 Chandra Lekha Sriram, 'Perpetrators, Fieldwork, and Ethical Concerns', in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn, and Barbora Holá (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 57–71 (p. 61).

49 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Having read about the secret killings over the past two decades, I noticed a lack of engagement with actors other than a couple of survivors who were vocal about the killings. This prompted me to initiate conversations with the police about counter-insurgency operations in Assam, particularly regarding the secret killings. Unlike the families with whom I had stayed or had frequent conversations, interviews with the police were brief, and often accompanied by uncomfortable silences. Conversations with the police opened up new methodological questions of relevance for future research in perpetrator studies. Power was at play in shaping these conversations, as I could not typically challenge the police.

I approached a couple of retired police officers who held high positions in Assam when the secret killings were taking place. While the families had mostly named particular officers deputed at the police stations in their respective districts, I approached high-level officers who were well aware of the violence that had gripped Assam throughout the 1990s until the beginning of the new millennium. I ultimately interviewed two retired officers. The first was former Director General of Police (DGP) G. M. Srivastava, who was also the Inspector General of Police (Operations) when the secret killings occurred. The second was former DGP Harekrishna Deka who was tenured between 2000 and 2003 in Assam, a period during which one case of secret killing occurred. Among the few questions that shaped our conversations, the following were central: What do you think about the secret killings in Assam? Do you think the family members should have been killed just because their kin had decided to join the insurgent organization?

I met Srivastava at a time when I was still exploring the field, and that made me doubt if it was the correct time to meet him. However, my past experiences of getting consent for interviews at short notice convinced me to have a conversation with Srivastava. It was between these conversations that I realized all I needed was a careful selection of vocabulary to converse without implicating anyone. My conversation with Srivastava, I felt, was crucial for understanding the secret killings from the lens of the police, as well as for establishing the fact that recalling violence was an act of selective remembering that applied not just to the victims, but also to the state apparatuses. On the extra-judicial killings, Srivastava said:

Nothing was extrajudicial because to kill the enemies in disturbed areas is entrusted upon the armed forces. Which killing is not secret? Between

the right of defence and the right to protect the lives of others, which killing is open? All killings are secret except in war where both parties are on the battleground. I was examined under the Saikia Commission too but came out innocent without being convicted. People say SULFA killed, and nobody said they were killed too. It is considered violence when insurgents or their families die, but what about the families of security forces who equally lead vulnerable lives? Did anyone remember why the wife of Superintendent of Police A. K. Mallik was killed so brutally in 1989 when their children had a miraculous escape? Why could our children not stay with us? If the fight was with us, why was the security of our family members at stake? For ULFA, it was not revenge; it complied with their constitution. For us, it was in defence or retaliation. Mindless killings happened within insurgent camps. The cadres were in sheer fear of their leaders who played with guns. Violence begets violence. Terms like 'secret killings' are media constructs that are catchy.⁵⁰

Srivastava proposed to split SULFA in four groups.⁵¹ The first group continued to help the underground cadres by passing on information, arranging their food and shelter aboveground, and providing early warning of danger. He said, 'Authorities were elated as many surrendered, but they talked sweetly and shared little'. The second group killed their former colleagues as they threatened their lives. 'If any cadre killed militants and surrendered, they were welcomed as they had done our job and needed protection from forces, and some of them helped the forces with information', he added.⁵² The third group ceased to belong to either side and was motivated by profit through leveraging their past underground identities to threaten others. The fourth group wished to leave behind their past and lead a peaceful life without guns. While it made absolute sense to understand the surrendered cadres in their heterogeneous lives aboveground like the one perceived by the former DGP, the underground organization continued calling him an enemy. They often referred to him as the 'mastermind' behind the secret killings and the 'Hitler of Indian Colonial Rule'.⁵³

50 G. M. Srivastava, personal conversation with Dixita Deka in Guwahati, 9 July 2019.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 S. Kumar Deka, 'Former DGP G M Srivastava Hitler of India - ULFA', *Times of Assam*, 23 February 2012 <<https://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/former-dgp-g-m-srivastava-hitler-of-india-ulfa/>> [accessed 9 July 2023].

Srivastava's association with the secret killings presented me with a dilemma about how to interview him and whether interviewing him, as a state actor, would make sense for my research. This dilemma was rooted in how his image was constructed in social memory as an enemy or a dangerous man. Initially, Srivastava was not on my list of prospective participants for many reasons. First, I knew that state actors — like politicians or members of the police or the army — would not be accessible. Second, I thought the decision to meet him would be taken after meeting the survivors and the families of the victims who had experienced direct violence and held deep grievances. Third, part of my reluctance in talking to Srivastava was based on the controversies associated with him during his official tenure. Fourth, the idea that it was difficult to engage with people in powerful positions, given their capacity to mould the conversation in the way they desired, left me with doubts about my interview skills. However, when my intermediary talked to Srivastava about a possible appointment for me to meet him, he immediately asked the intermediary if I would politicize the interview. My intermediary said I would do research and not politics. The trust and assurance of my intermediary helped me meet him within two weeks.

By questioning the attribution of differential mourning, where one person's martyr is seen as another's enemy and vice versa, my conversation with Srivastava could draw attention to the complex nature of violence. It unveiled the vicious cycle in which, depending on one's affiliation, some killings were justified while others were condemned. In a way, it raised many questions about the nature of violence — about who qualified to be called a perpetrator or who deserved to be mourned. It pushed me to think through numerous other questions. For example, is violence legitimate or illegitimate and, in either case, who decides? Is violence associated with physical harm to the body, emotional scars, or the inaction of bystanders prompted by fear and anxiety? Is violence the absence of legal justice? Is violence a means or an end in itself? Can violence be categorized as good or bad? Does violence entail selective remembering? In any of these circumstances, terror may manifest itself through what Alan Pred explained as actual or threatened use of violence and through the 'construction of a collective enemy, through discursively displacing threat to one or more distant *others*, through scare stories and fear mongering'.⁵⁴ The complexities and involvement

⁵⁴ Allan Pred, 'Situated Ignorance and State Terrorism: Silences, W.M.D., Collective Amnesia, and the Manufacture of Fear', in *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence*, ed. by Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 363–84 (p. 364).

of multiple actors in designing, implementing, and silencing the secret killings cannot be easily understood. For instance, how could one frame the village headman as an indirect perpetrator in Harendra's case, when all the headman wanted was personal safety? Likewise, how could research on the extrajudicial killings avoid identifying state forces as responsible for human rights violations? The perpetrators here, including the police and SULFA, cannot be seen as an isolated entity. They worked together under a system of impunity created by the state, which calls for a focus on the multiple motivations behind their acts of perpetration. While my conversations with the victims' families or those accused of violence offered different circumstances leading to the abductions or murders, using the label perpetrator as Scott Straus had claimed would only focus on the actors of violence and thereby offer a bifurcated history of violence.⁵⁵ Framing an act as violence and categorizing it under the labels of armed conflict, insurgency, or terrorism determine the course of legal and military action. What is essential to look at is the process of perpetration and the grounds of its justification. For instance, Timothy Williams proposes the *complexity of evil* model, explaining the motivations (in-group, out-group, opportunistic), facilitative factors (ideological, moral disengagement, group dynamics, routinisation), and contextual conditions (political, economic, social, and cultural factors) pushing people to participate in acts of perpetration particularly in a genocide setting.⁵⁶ He further emphasises the multiple roles that surround violence: commanding, agitating, enforcing, assisting, encouraging, facilitating, witnessing, being disengaged, discouraging, inhibiting, rescuing, supporting, renegade commanding, and subversive leading. Williams argues that these factors and roles all need to be considered in order to understand the actions of people associated with perpetration.⁵⁷

I felt short of words while interviewing the police. My expectations were usually very low when I approached police officers, partly because they spoke from an authoritative position and could decline to answer questions on grounds of departmental integrity and secrecy. Most responded to my questions with brief answers, making it very difficult

55 Straus, pp. 29–30.

56 Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration and Genocide* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020), pp. 212–13.

57 Timothy Williams, 'Thinking beyond Perpetrators, Bystanders, Heroes: A Typology of Action in Genocide', in *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations, and Dynamics*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 17–35 (p. 32).

to extend our conversations. They were focussed on what was being asked and they would either answer or not. There was no in-between. Conversations were careful and intimidating. However, I found it comparatively easier to talk to former DGP Harekrishna Deka in the comforting environment of his home, where I also met his wife. Deka was also a former police officer who was tenured between 2000 and 2003 in Assam. He recalled the secret killings as:

Punjab style counterterrorism⁵⁸ entangled with a militaristic culture. The idea was quid pro quo: if terrorists are killing civilians, their families will also be targeted. But the experiences of armed conflict in Assam was different from Punjab. People were harassed on two grounds: firstly, if they were the family members of insurgents, and secondly, when police would get information about them sheltering insurgents. At times the information was right, other times, mere rumours. Such circumstances usually occur under counterinsurgency. Such things are not normal, it's abnormal and unusual, so the functioning is abnormal and the repercussions are abnormal too. Personally, I think such actions cannot control militancy as many innocent young boys who were harassed later go on to join the insurgent organization. There are two things. Firstly, operations are needed but very professionally, and secondly, dialogue is required.⁵⁹

Conversations with law enforcement officers could not only support engaged scholarship in navigating access, transparency, and anonymity in qualitative research, but also offer deep insights into people's perceptions of causing, justifying, or silencing violence. Limited interactions with police officers signified the absence of dialogue that further limits the scope for reparation and rehabilitation. However, I felt the chances of interacting with retired officers were higher compared to those still in service. In hindsight, centring survivors' experiences could partly initiate the process of healing when the judicial system had not only failed to recognise the crimes and secure justice, but had also used draconian laws to force their silence.

58 For more on counterterrorism in Punjab, see Patricia Gossman, 'India's Secret Armies', in *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability*, ed. by Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 261–86.

59 Harekrishna Deka, personal conversation with Dixita Deka, 24 March 2019.

Conclusion

This article offers insights on conducting fieldwork on sensitive episodes of violence, which otherwise would remain underrepresented. Writing about events like these, I believe, could help engage with uncomfortable topics like perpetrators of violence, and also map pathways for approaching people with questions about perpetration. While fear, frustration, or grief shaped the silences and hesitations of the survivors and victims' families, among the police, silences and hesitations emerged most from concerns about exposing the multiple levels of perpetration and tainting their careers, and a desire to avoid rehumanizing the victims. It was through the ethnographic narratives of survivors and victims' family members that I could comprehend the possibility and potential of interviewing the police. I realized how the families were immensely interested in finding an occasion to question the police and to listen to the replies they were always deprived of. While they were concerned for me, they were also curious to know if I met any police officer and what they said about the killing of innocent family members. That led me to explore the potential of interviewing the police. Likewise, it was also surprising for me when the retired police officers accepted my request to interview them on the counter-insurgency operations in Assam. This was because I was told by some of my gatekeepers that the police would not meet. This prompted me to think how the secret killings and the attempts at silencing and erasing them in the long duration of two decades might have played differently in the minds of my participants. As an academic, I let this fieldwork guide me in deciding what to ask, how much to ask, when to stop, what to censor, and what to publish. This was shaped by spontaneous fieldwork moments whereby families and police demonstrated trust in me as a researcher. I established verbal consent with the participants to clarify what could be written and published. Throughout, I constantly questioned and reassessed my needs in the field and if it had in anyway deepened participants' grief or dehumanized them. In this regard, intermediaries were also central for entering into the field and gaining the participants' confidence, thereby briefing me on the local context.

Journalistic accounts and legal archives on the secret killings date back two decades but are limited. As such, ethnographic research with survivors and victims' families offers much-needed everyday accounts of living with grief and without closure. These interactions unpack what was constructed to be 'secret' and create a conducive environ-

ment for conversations around grief and healing. It was only through developing a deep understanding of the impact of the secret killings on participants that I could grasp the associated fear and silences around the killings and be alert while making decisions in the field. The perpetrators had successfully unleashed a reign of terror. As the families could not secure a safe atmosphere to file and run their legal cases, as revealed in the story of Harendra's family, suspicion loomed large, and the families really struggled to trust anyone. Constant self-reflexivity as well as being empathetic in the field helped me to secure confidence in approaching both the civilians and police who witnessed the secret killings. It also deepened my understanding of the challenges faced in securing justice for the families of the dead and disappeared.

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