

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY: GENDER AND PUBLIC SPACES IN THE TIME OF A DISASTER AND A PANDEMIC

POOJA KALITA AND PRITHIRAJ BORAH





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

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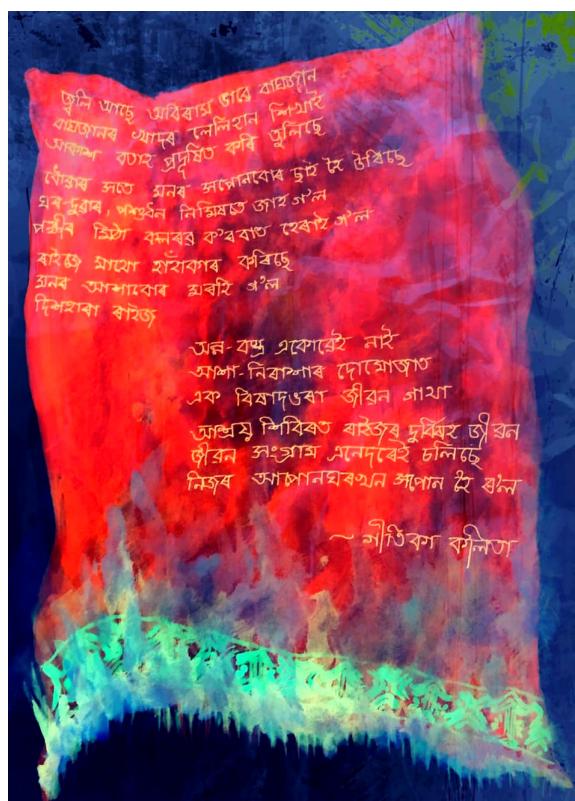
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THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY: GENDER AND PUBLIC SPACES IN THE TIME OF A DISASTER AND A PANDEMIC¹

—



Baghjan

BAGHJAN

A Poem by Geetika Kalita
(Translated into English by Pooja Kalita)

*Baghjan, burning in incessant flames
The roaring blazes from its well
Tainting the skies and waters*

*Dreams turning to ashes with the rising smoke
In an instant, faded homes and livestock
Birds composing a sweet noise, seem no more
Outburst of anguish, the only leftover for tormented folks*

*Dried up wishes and
Existence leading nowhere*

*The pursuit to meet survival needs
Straddling hope and hopelessness
The rest, grief-ridden life tales*

*Destitute lives inside relief camps
Survival does go on
One's home, lingers as an unfulfilled dream....*

For the two of us writing this paper, witnessing and experiencing various 'disasters' in Assam is nothing new. One of us has, as a woman, personally experienced what mass-scale disasters and tragedies such as floods do to women, as we have to depend on 'relief' offered by a patriarchal state, communities, and families. Public spaces, even in 'normal' times, evoke fears of harassment for women.

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, public spaces were declared unsafe for human interaction due to fears of 'virus' transmission. Prior to this as well, public spaces have hardly been kind to women. The 2020 Baghjan tragedy during the pandemic made us think of gendered aspects in relation to disasters and public spaces. We also wanted to explore the 'language' in which we can speak and write about it. How do we write about the tragedy of a place that is no more than a geographical dot on a map for most, if not all, people from the 'mainland' and the 'mainstream'? Hence, before moving forward, let us give a brief description of the topic we have laid out here. We would like to bring our readers' attention to the place, the tragedy, and the aftermath of the tragedy, as we are aware that the 'mainstream' national and international media has hardly considered such issues related to Assam or the 'Northeast' of India worthy of much attention.

Baghjan village is located about 8 km from Tinsukia town in the Tinsukia district in Assam. The Baghjan oil field is located near Baghjan village. Two important natural habitats, the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and the Maguri-Motapung *beel* (a wetland), are also



Location of the Baghjan Oil Well

Image Source: Jyoti Singh, 'Fire at Assam's Baghjan Oil Well: An Ecological Disaster', The Kootneeti, 12 June 2020, <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/06/12/fire-at-assams-baghjan-oil-well/>.

adjacent to the oil field. The aerial distance between the oil field and the national park is around 900 meters. The oil field was drilled by Oil India Limited (OIL) in 2006 (Agarwal 2020). On 27 May 2020, natural gas was oozing out from Well Number 5 in the Baghjan oil field. One of our research participants, a woman and a mother of one, told us,

After the first blast on the 27th, we found ourselves in grave danger. I was not able to breathe properly; the natural gas leak was so intense that my body and mind stopped working for days. First, I thought it was only happening to me, but later that evening, our neighbours and my friends discussed having the same problem. There was also a layer of oil on the vegetable trees and also on the tea leaves. Those days were horrible. All the villagers took the issue very seriously and started protesting at the Motapung-Maguri bridge. Most of the protestors were women and elders. At first, there were only villagers protesting near the site. Slowly, the news spread to Tinsukia town, and journalists and students' organisations joined our protest. A few newspapers published the news of the blowout.

I told my husband every night that we should leave the village, but it was not easy. One cannot leave one's home and land so easily. We also saw our trees and vegetables die because of the blowout. We saw a layer of oil on every tea leaf in our little garden. We lost all our chilli trees, which were very important for our income. I took care of our garden. It was difficult for me to witness such a horrifying incident happening in front of my eyes. The OIL authorities made a few attempts to stop the blowout, but they failed miserably. The breathing issue became a serious one for the villagers, and we were scared for the kids and elders. At last, on 9th June, the well exploded, and the situation became deadlier.'

On 9 June, in the afternoon, the well caught fire. The villagers of Baghjan, Notun Motapung Gaon and other nearby villages were sent to relief camps, which were mostly government and semi-government schools. The fire destroyed at least 50 homes and left four people

injured. On the next day two OIL employees, Durlov Gogoi and Tikheswar Gohain died fighting the fire.

In the aftermath of this grave tragedy, 'compensation' was provided to the people adversely impacted by it. According to Chakravarty (2020), OIL paid a compensation of Rs 2.5 lakhs to each of the 561 families whose houses and crops were destroyed by the blowout. One of the reports stated,

The district administration till date has released an amount of rupees 36, 900 crores as compensation to the affected.

"An amount of rupees 25 lakhs was paid to each of the 12 families whose houses were completely damaged and rupees 10 lakhs to 57 families whose houses were partially damaged during the fire,' said an OIL official (Chakravarty 2020).

During our ethnographic enquiry, our research participants also complained about the role of OIL officials during the compensation process. OIL made attempts to control the fire. It reached out to Singapore-based Alert Disaster Control experts. After two attempts, the team failed to control the blowout. Three experts even got injured while trying to control the fire. The local residents started protesting against OIL. They sought justice because of the ecological and economic damages caused to the area. Local activists battled and protested against the OIL authorities (Das 2020). Several questions and allegations were made against OIL for not following the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). According to news reports, OIL violated various rules and regulations by setting up a well near the eco-sensitive zone (Kalita 2020). The fire was controlled on 15 November 2020 (Special correspondent 2020), just as we were approaching the end of our fieldwork.

However, this was not the first time that Assam experienced such an oil and natural gas blowout. In 2005, there was a blowout an oil field in Dikom', as it is not the name of the oil field. The Dikom blowout is still fresh in the public memory of both Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts. In the past, there was also a blowout on 4 January 1967 at

Rudrasagar oil field in Sibsagar district (Bora 2020). The painful memories of such blowouts were again highlighted by the Baghjan blowout. Numerous articles were written by journalists and young academicians to consider the issue a global tragedy. According to anthropologist Dolly Kikon (The Swaddle 2020), one should not discuss the Baghjan tragedy on regional lines, as it is a global story. She explains that when we talk about Baghjan and the issues of the people who were affected by it, one should not limit it to Tinsukia or Assam. The issue of Baghjan is a global issue.

OIL, India's premier oil company, announced proudly that it took them six long months to extinguish the fire. The Baghjan tragedy killed two firefighters and an engineer on the site in September. Whether the 173 days of struggle, fear, and anxiety have come to an end or, whether they will continue to haunt the villagers both psychologically and medically, one cannot say or assume clearly. Currently, OIL is quite confident after 'killing' the fire, but some losses never get compensated.

Many residents and survivors of the Baghjan tragedy participated in various protests. It needs to be pointed out here that it was extremely difficult for women, particularly tea garden labourers to participate in the protests. Their employers instructed them to stop protesting and work. But control and surveillance are nothing new for women tea garden labourers. According to Sharma (2011), mechanisms such as protests have been there historically in the tea gardens of Assam. Generational indebtedness becomes key to keeping the labourers in post-colonial times. There is an added burden on women labourers who mostly do the job of plucking tea leaves. Their bodies are constantly scrutinised based on the primary parameters of gender, class, caste, and race.

Moreover, women's relationship with public spaces has hardly been a cordial one. 'Women's defined location in the private sphere at home, their prescribed roles and expected behaviour patterns, and male domination and control of women in the public areas of life, combine to generate social barriers which exclude unaccompanied women from public spaces' (Mazurkiewicz 1983). When it comes to

relations between gender and space, Doreen Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) interweaves the complex and dynamic relationship not only of space and place but also important social constructions such as gender with it. Gender, she argues, should form a crucial element of theorising space and place. The book brings forth the idea that space and place are not just about geographical representations, but rather the social meanings that they come to embody. Phadke et al. (2011) assert that even a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai is not able to uphold the promises of globalisation about democracy and equality. Public spaces are still male dominated, wherein women are seen only as 'misfits'.

However, spaces, including public spaces, do not just exist; they are being constructed with meaning and are loaded with human stories and narratives. There exists a dynamic and fluid human-space interaction. Human beings are not only dictated by the space that they are embedded in, but also by human agency, which is also capable of creating and imposing various meanings to spaces and negotiating with them through their spatial practices. During our ethnography, we understood that the meaning of the private space of home and the public space of the relief camps, many a times, fuse with each other, and a certain kind of private emerges out of public relief camps and vice-versa. Also, we realised that we need to find a medium beyond conventional academic writing to narrate the experience of the survivors, especially that of women. We had to find a 'language'.

HOW DOES ONE WRITE ABOUT A TRAGEDY?

How does one write about a tragedy? In what language do we speak about it? How does one put into words what was experienced by living, thinking, and breathing beings? These questions haunted us at the beginning of this project, and they have certainly not ceased in their intensity since then.

On the one hand, we knew that attempting a task based on shared grief is wrapped in a lot of responsibility, accountability, and collective guilt, and on the other, we were also aware that this has to be documented. On one hand, we knew that attempting a task based on shared grief is wrapped in a lot of responsibility, accountability, and collective guilt. On the other hand, we were also aware, that this task has to be documented in the most ethical way. The greater tragedy would be to let it be forgotten. We were strangers to our research participants, and we know that speaking of the personal with strangers is not easy. Despite that, we were humbled by their generosity. We are terming it shared grief because these accounts of survivors, especially the women affected by the Baghjan blowout, have been handed down to us with so much kindness despite the discomforting realities that we can only feel indebted to them and never fail to acknowledge our position as researchers in this project as that of the privileged 'other'. Even though we share a spatial affinity with those who continue to suffer in terms of the region where the incident took place, we are not amongst those who left their homes to take refuge in relief camps, nor have we witnessed any deaths and loss because of this incident, and nor are we burdened to cling to unfulfilled hopes of survival due to the blowout. It is crucial that we acknowledge our position in this project/paper/narrative.

In our engagements with the women of Baghjan, it did not take us much time to realise that we cannot simply put their experiences into a clinical display of trauma, hope, or resistance, either in words or in visuals. We also did not want to remain 'survey' people for them. After a lot of reflection and introspection, we decided on the format that is currently presented here. Academic jargon seemed alien to both our research participants and us. Visuals were as crucial as words. The doodles/art pieces were a natural outcome of our engagement with the narratives that we came across. We also wanted to make our paper accessible to our research participants. Words written only in English and specifically in academic language would have failed to do this. We have also put more emphasis on the words of our research participants

so that they get a chance to speak directly to the readers and viewers. Hence, we combined all three—words, photographs, and some art—that emerged out of the narratives.

Time was one of the biggest constraints along with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research was conducted from May to December 2020. Not exposing the identities of our research participants was of utmost significance. Even in the visuals we have been extra cautious of not objectifying bodies as a site of mere consumption. Nonetheless, in case it appears that we are exploiting our position as the ‘privileged other’, it was definitely not our intention and we are genuinely sorry for this. However, it is necessary to mention here that the women whose words formed the basis of this project are from marginalised communities, belonging to lower castes and class categories. There was also diversity in terms of marital status and age. In these present challenging times of the pandemic, we do want to admit that working ‘with’ our research participants in this project was more about learning from them and trying to empathise with them, though we do not know how close we came to being one in their struggles and broadly their lives. However, we do hope that this is a humble beginning, and that at some point in time, we will come closer to ‘justice’ in meaning and manifestation.

The image on the first page is an art piece on the Baghjan tragedy with a poem in Assamese. The English translation is given on the next page, though we recognise that much gets lost in translation.

The following sections include visuals along with accounts by our research participants/survivors. We hope that it will always find some space in our memories.

POOJA KALITA AND PRITHIRAJ BORAH

THE HORROR



Leftovers

'We went fishing in the evening. Now, we doubt there will be any fish. I just picture the wonderful times we once had in Maguri-Motapung beel. Now there is only heat and noise. I do not want to even look at the sky; it looks so scary to me. The red colour looks so dangerous.' (Interview with a female resident of Baghjan, 12 September 2020.)

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY



Flames

'The day of the incident will never be forgotten by the villagers. The sound was so loud and powerful. I thought that at least a few people would have died. I prayed at that moment because I was so scared of the sound.'
(A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)



What we see beneath the sk

'Everything happened so quickly that I did not get any sense of it. Suddenly, we were shifted to the camps. We did not get time to take or pack our belongings.' (A female resident of Notun Motapung Gaon near Baghjan, 14 September 2020.)



In between

'During the initial days of the Baghjan disaster, I did not want to stay in the camp. Who wants to leave their homes and go and stay in relief camps? I was worried about our cows, ducks, and my small flower garden. We also have a small tea plantation in front of our house, and also a few betel nut trees. I even fought with my husband. During floods, the government always shifts us to some nearby relief camps. I have experienced such difficulties for years, so I did not want to go to another camp.' (A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY



That night

'All the fears came at the same time, the fear of the blowout, then COVID-19, and recently the floods. We slept under the bridge, trying our best to maintain social distance. We were scared to even go to the crowded relief camps because there was no social distancing there.' (Interview with a female resident of Baghjan, 8 November 2020.)



Under the Bridge

POOJA KALITA AND PRITHIRAJ BORAH

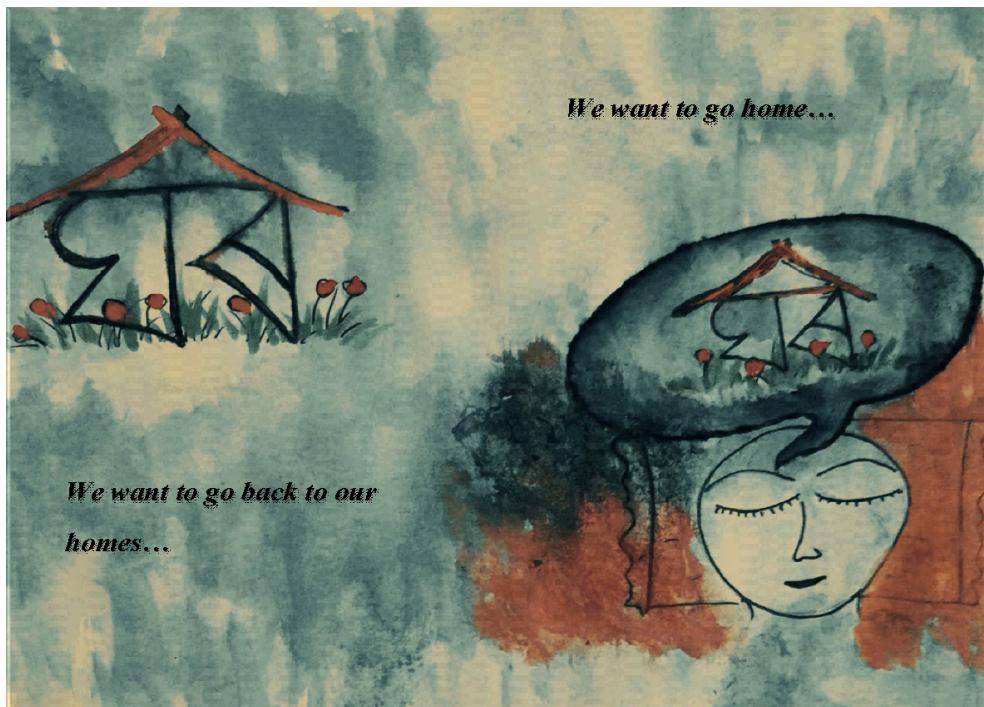
HOME

'We do not even have photographs of our homes, our earlier serene Baghjan.' (A female resident of Baghjan, 8 November 2020.)



A dream on walls

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY



Longing

'I go to the camp in the evening and come back home after having breakfast. I only stay for five hours in my home. So, you can say the relief camp is our new home. Because of the fire the village feels like a jolonto agniyogiri (ablaze volcano).' (A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)

'The floods made things worse. When we found our sense of belonging in that camp, the officials shifted us to another camp near Borguri. COVID-19 was already an issue. We became angry and agitated. Once we were settled, the authorities were moving us here and there. We are humans who lost our homes and villages because of the blowout. The authorities do not care anything about this.' (A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)



??????

'One young girl from our village fainted because of the heat. It was difficult for us to take her to the hospital because of COVID-19. Luckily, she became conscious after an hour or so. Everyone panicked and we were told to shift to a nearby school... A few days ago, one person came for some survey, but till now we have not got any news from the higher officials. I think, two times these officials came to our homes, but till now we have not got any notice from them.' (A female resident of Notun Motapung Gaon near Baghjan, 14 September 2020.)

'Most of the men in our village are staying at home. One has to take care of the home in difficult times. I go for the meetings in the camps. The ministers are visiting the camps because of the upcoming election.' (A male resident at Baghjan village, 14 September 2020.)

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY



Burnt, crushed

'When we reached the camp at night, there was no electricity. The power fluctuated. Candles helped us a lot. We received regular food, but the accommodation and toilet facilities were bad. There were at least 100 women and 70 men in the camp. Just imagine the situation we faced for more than a month. The OIL authorities provided cooks for several camps, but in our camp, there were no cooks. We had to cook three meals a day because the authorities just provided us raw food. Night time was scary for the women, because it was difficult to accommodate everyone in the two rooms. So, we decided that the women, children, and old persons would sleep inside and the younger men would sleep outside. At night the young men disturbed us; they wanted to come in the room. We complained to our elders but this continued... At night, we were scared that some men might disturb us, and they did quite a few times. We were not safe inside the camp. We could not even sleep at night...during the floods, the toilets overflowed. The smell was there all the time, and we had to cook in such a space. I wanted to go home, but I could not leave my parents in the camp. They need attention, so I stayed back. My brother stayed at home and visited us'.
(A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)

POOJA KALITA AND PRITHIRAJ BORAH



A burning Sky

'Anyway our memories about the place are destroyed. It was so peaceful and beautiful two months back. Look at it now. You can smell condensate4 everywhere.' (A female resident of Baghjan, 12 September 2020.)



Contaminated!

'RELIEF' SPACES

'We transformed the camp into a living place. I do not want to remember those days where we had to cook for at least 500 people, but later, OIL appointed a few cooks. Otherwise, the women were exhausted and unhappy with the conditions.' (A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)



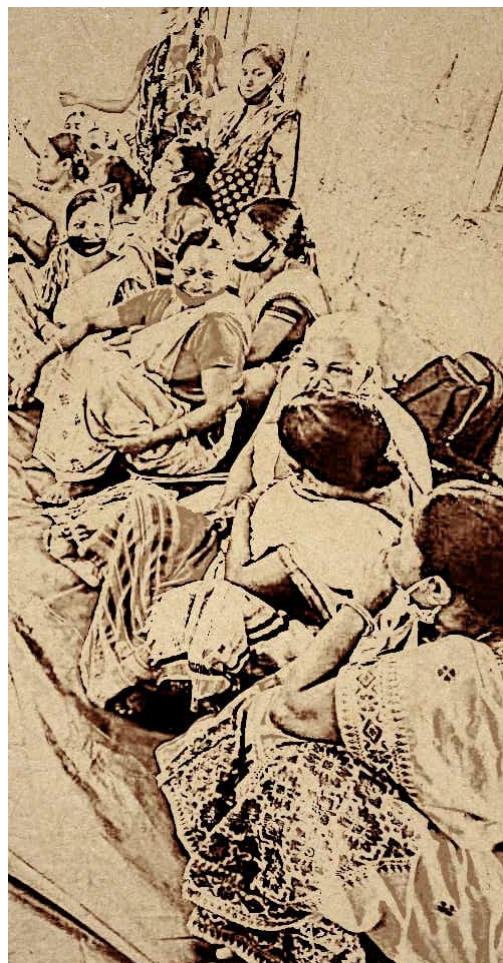
Seeking relief



‘Relief’ spaces

‘Apart from the floods, we are not facing any issues. There is electricity for 24 hours; we even get food on time. Back home, I have to do all the work. Sometimes, my daughters help me do household work. We also have the issue of electricity in the village, and in the summer we faced lots of problems. In the camps, because of the generators, we do not have power cuts. We are daily wage earners. In the day time I go and work in the nearby plantations, and in the evening, I rush to the camp. Since new people are coming to the camp every day, one has to be very cautious. It is becoming overcrowded. If you come late, there will be no space; we have to shift to another camp. So it is very difficult for us to stay in one camp. My sister just passed her matriculation exams a few days ago; our family is happy with her result. But it is depressing that we could not celebrate her result. We are yet to decide about her future; the Baghjan issue is not letting us think of anything else.’ (A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY



Bonding over words and smiles

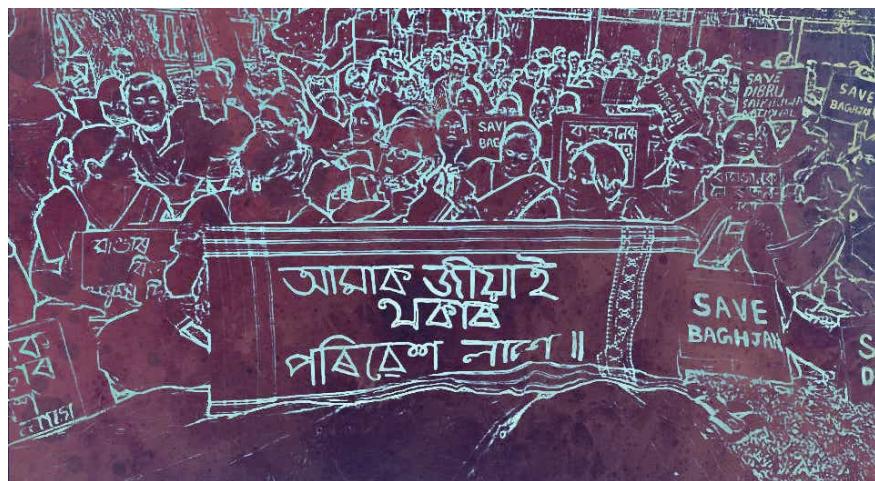
'The issue of the toilet is of primary concern for us. Even in our village, the toilet facilities are not good, but in the camp it is worse. Then there is a problem with electricity at night. We four to five women go together. Otherwise, we could risk our safety. The camps have become overcrowded, and the toilet situation has become worse because of overflow. Imagine, there are only six toilets for 500 women...there are at least 300 women and three toilets. In the morning there is chaos inside the camp. Everyone is standing in a line; we all have been feeling this helplessness for two months. Now the rain is not stopping, so the water is getting blocked inside the toilets.' (Interview with a female resident of Baghjan, 12 September 2020.)



Ladies Toilet

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY

HOPE, RESISTANCE, AND SURVIVAL



For Our Right to Live



...and it continues

'We are not from any political organisation. We all protest under the same banner of Milan Jyoti Sangha. It is one of the oldest organisations in Baghjan area...women are also taking part in the protests. We face police atrocities too, but no one cares.' (A female resident in one of the relief camps, 14 September 2020.)

'Most of the women in the camps are tea plantation workers. As they shifted to the camps, they could not go for work. We have to take care of the children as well as cook food for elders. We have made a schedule for cooking and washing; there are separate groups who work on different days. So, the women are not able to go to the plantations. One day Gelapukhri Tea Estate's manager visited the camp. He told the workers to come and join work again. He even said that without work they would not get any wages. After he left, we discussed that the women had to go for work, because once they go home from the camps, they need wages to sustain their families. Here, the adivasi student leaders are protesting with us. I took part in the protest organised by the All Adivasi Student Association of Assam (AASAA). We protested in front of the Barekuri police station, but immediately the authorities told us to go back because of the COVID-19 situation. The DC office protest went on for a month, but our protest did not even last for two hours. Our protest did not last long because the workers have to go for work. The workers are also afraid to protest because of COVID-19. One worker from our village told me if they test positive, they won't be able to work in the plantations. In plantations, no work means no salary. I cannot push anyone to join the protest.' (A female resident of Notun Motapung Gaon near Baghjan, 14 September 2020.)

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY

AMIDST AAXA (HOPE) AND NIRAAAXA (HOPELESSNESS)



Still standing

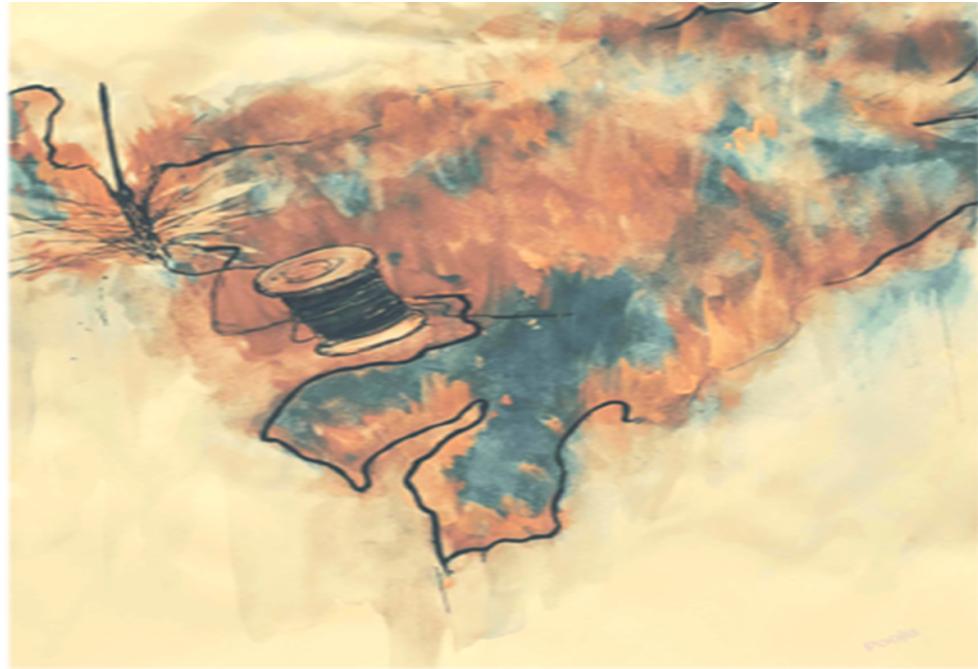


Barricades

POOJA KALITA AND PRITHIRAJ BORAH



Amidst the blues



As it goes on

THE BAGHJAN TRAGEDY



Never to forget

DECLARATIONS

All the art pieces in this paper have been created by Pooja Kalita.
All photographs were taken by Prithiraj Borah and Pooja Kalita.

NOTES

- 1 We dedicate this paper to all those who have to live with tragedies and traumas, of various kinds and degrees. We are forever indebted to the survivors of the Baghjan Tragedy, 2020, who have made it possible for us to write this essay, and Zubaan-SPF grants for seeing it through till the end. Rajashri Dasgupta, our mentor during this project, generously offered her invaluable wisdom, advice, and kindness.

- 2 Pooja Kalita is a Ph.D scholar, Department of Sociology, South Asian University (New Delhi).
- 3 Prithiraj Borah is a Ph.D scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay.
- 4 Condensate is a high pressure gas, which is extremely volatile and highly inflammable.

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