"What is the meaning of freedom
For her or for you or for me
What is the meaning for all of us?

Freedom is to love and share
Helping and looking after
Shake off fear and love all men everywhere"

(Safdar Hasmi)

Waking up at early dawn and moving the shuttle at her loom Numali’s wrist ached. Keeping the shuttle on the half done design of crimson thread she massaged her fingers. She looked bewitched at the replica of a Sarai being prominent over the white Gamocha. This Bihu her brothers will be surprised looking at the Gamocha woven by her. They always tease her as hopeless, ignorant, inefficient, but now they will see. She has woven patterns on her Gamocha from a design book brought by her sister-in-law from town and has not copied patterns from Gamochas woven by others. Flying her shuttles rapidly she completed the flowery pattern and started to adjust the beam of her loom. Then she paused and touched the design again, how the read Sarais are shining brightly over the white background. Keeping her aching fingers on the loom she shouted- oh Bouti! one more completed!

A mynah comes to sit on the bars of Numali’s loom, but shocked by the sound of her feet working on the loom she instantly flew away. Reeling with laughter she spoke aloud- ‘You are now scared. But yesterday sitting over the design
of Majudas Gamocha you only created so much trouble, now I know, I realize.” A
cuckoo bid shouted from the mango tree full of newly bloomed seeds where the
shallot was sitting. Numali kept looking at the mango tress and saw a Kapou orchid
newly blooming in between the twigs. Suddenly the red colour of her design spread
over the mango tree, over the birds voice and all over the sky. She again shouted --
“Mother! come and help me to unwind”.

Numali’s mother was busy cooking meal for her sons. The eldest will go to
school, the next will start for office and the youngest for college, responding to her
daughter call she attended her at the loom even with hands dirty from clearing fish.
Her eldest daughters in law is at her mother’s place for childbirth; so she has to
attend to all the daily chores from the drawing room to the kitchen. In such moments
she feels eager to get her second son married. But he has planned to marry only after
constructing a proper house. The youngest son has brought out his bi-cycle to go to
college. The fishes are yet to be done. “Why are your shouting like this” she was
about to scold her daughter but she stopped looking at the innocent face of the girl
observing her Gamocha at the loom. She has attained her puberty. It is time for her
to get married, and last week a proposal has come from her sakhi’s son. The healthy
boy settled in the new colony on the other side of the river. But the brothers are not
willing to tie her knot with a village boy. They occasionally scolded her, “You could
not even clear the Matriculation examination, only a ploughman will marry you.”
The mother’s heart aches at these reprimands towards her daughter. She failed to
enter college by passing the final examination, but how many girls of the locality
can compete with her in weaving skills? The melody of the marriage and bihu songs
she hums while working soothes the mind, the bras plates washed by her glitter like
gold, the fish curry cooked by her in as delicious as nectar, the coconut laddoos prepared by her is as white as togorflower, the Kholachaporia pithas made by her look like white pavda fishes. Her brothers are not happy because she is not smart and showy like other college goers. Looking at the churidar-kameez dress gifted by her youngest brother last Puja she blushed a lot- “Look mother what saruda has brought me. Where shall I wear them? The crimson red, azar flower like dress remained idle in her box. She used to wear hand-woven cotton Mekhla-Chadar at home. She was howling when her mother brought a pair of silk dress for her from a vendor from Sualkuchi- “Have you noticed the constraints of house-keeping suffered by my elder brothers after our father’s demise? And you have brought a silk dress for me by their heard-earned money. Oh, how the man took away ten hundred rupees notes. They could have brought a cow with that amount or a bundle of tin sheets.” What else is she concerned about except her home! She never goes out, not even for a walk, where will you find such a young lady sticking to her home. Numalis mother uttered a sigh from the core of her heart.

Holding on to her loom, Numali was sobbing, tears rolling down from her eyes like a doe. Her younger brother, preparing to go to college, was packing some books with newspapers and rebuking – “Why do you crave for these newspaper? Do you ever read a letter? Are you fit enough to read? Why do you interface with someone using a newspaper? What do you do with it?” Numali continues her sobbing. Their mother frowned at the boy—“Selling the collected newspapers at Ramu’s shop she buys things for you people? From hawkers selling three rupees items bought these soap cases and shaving kit stand etc. Hearing her rude voice and Numali’s sobbing the second son-said – “had she devoted her time to study instead
of looking after these things, we would have helped her to study in town. She took the daughter away to the kitchen—“Come my child! Please scale the fishes.” Wiping her face Numali followed her mother and started scaling the fish from the sieve. Seeing her eldest son enter the kitchen to enquire after the meal her mothers grief increased—“Why should she be scolded? She does not have the intelligence to go to college. God provides everyone with a mate—*Sashi for Indra* and a plain one to an ugly. She will also have someone by her luck.” The son has already spread the wooden plank and took his seat—“Mother! you have spoilt her by your indulgence.”

The daughter indulged by her mother was than oblivious to everything else by staring at a beautiful *veseli* fish. Keeping her scaling half-done she was bending on her knees by a vessel of water where she put the fish—“How charming is this! Mother look at it. Who has given its body red and silver stripes. Mother look the fish is breathing, it looks more charming when it swims.” Her mother took away the dressed fishes from among the half-done ones in the sieve dressed fishes from among the half-done fishes in the sieve and began frying it in the hot oil of the wok and frowned upon her daughter—“Its not for nothing that your brother reprimand you. Seeing a bird somewhere, a fly there, you forget everything. You are grown up enough to look after a household, but you are still childish.”

“Who is childish, *Khurideo*?”—all the faces turned to look at the direction of the loud voice and the sound of the heavy boots—Prasanta. He was putting on a loose jacket even in this midday heat of the month of April. As he sat dragging the stool towards him a sound inside the jacket was heard. He loosened the chain of the jacket and Numali clearly saw three revolvers inside the pockets of the jacket worn by her brother, the son of her father’s elder brother. She was about to shout at once
but controlled herself. Once seeing the revolver in his pocket she had said, “Why do you carry these things?” and got a shower of scolding from her mother and brother. Recently the boy has undergone a change. He was away from home for two years, but now he appears of and on. This time after an interval of six months. At Prasanta’s presence people remain silent. Her elder brother has already shut the door of the living room.

“Sarubap!” Prasanta talks to her youngest brother about some meeting, ‘Tomorrow there’ll be a meeting of our organization, it’ll be held at our place.” Saying so he went out. The aroma of the fried fish was overpowered by a tangy smell of sweat.

“Sarubap, what did he tell you to do”— the eldest brother was worried.

“I must remain alert. The army patrols the entire village. There malice towards our village is because of this Prasanta. Did’nt Prasanta kill two of their men in our village?”

“Don’t know what will happen again?” his mother sat dejected by the hearth.

Numali does not like such depressing moments. She consider such moments to be a curse when you cannot smile or talk.

Is it possible to live like this? At-this moment she has a desire to mimic the cuckoo on the mango tree, to taste a piece of Autegna thrashed in the Dheki and dried in the sun with salt and oil. Is it possible if the members of the family behave like this? All of them are now stunned like a Dove struck by thunder. Let Prasanta and his men do what they want, we are least concerned about it. Saruda has not associated himself with Prasanta after Barda rebutted him for mixing with him. Truck loads of military person surrounded the village after the two of them were
killed in the field. She could not find the pros and cons of the mother as she was driven away along with her sister-in-law to her mother's place by her eldest brother. Now the military is not here. Men have settled themselves at their seats, she has completed scaling fish, the fish swimming in half a bucket of water, looks like a silvery red flower. It must be kept alive in a bottle. She fails to get up and find a bottle. How can any one work if the situation at home is like this.

"Mother! where is the military now?" Unable to bear any longer she herself said to her mother.

All turned their heads towards Numali. She really looks like baby girl with her eyes like a doe.

"Majani! You won't understand. Go and wash the fish. You had been sitting at the loom since early dawn. It is almost ten in the morning, have some food."

Taking the fish in her hands, she looked at her mother. She could not keep gazing at her mother's face that was almost in tears. Her eyes moistened. Her mother talks to her brothers, she goes pale with fear - "That day I heard at the Namghar that these days the military do not come openly like before. At Bongaon several of them loitered in the guise of cultivators, clad in Gamocha and carrying a plough and a fish basket in their waist without the villagers knowledge."

"The time is out of joint". The eldest brother came out leaving his meal half finished and washing his hands on the dish itself. The younger brother who has a craving for food had gone out without his meal. The second brother's food was left untouched. She kept sitting on the outer edge of the kitchen with her head bent on her knees. Tears rolling down her cheek moistened her skirt. The youngest brother dragging his bicycle through the gate, and keeping it by the bamboo fence, stopped
sort looking at her sitting at the edge of the house and sobbing. All of them tuned their ears from the gate to listen to the sweet voice announcing—“Mother! Soruda has come.” Coming home they first look at Numali’s innocent face, pass some comments and only then they go on their errands. They miss something without her mumbling some sweet tunes. However, there is no trace of the army as was heard at the Namghar by their mother… His heart pumped heavily, the whole is like a dry thatch field, a single spark will burn everything to ashes. He decided not to attend college today, if something is amiss, in the absence of his brothers mother will be helpless, how will she tackle things with the sister. He was full of anticipation, and now seeing he sister sobbing his mind was saddened. Slowly he approached and reached his sister, “Numali, what’s the matter with you?” She was surprised at being addressed by her first name by her brother who always teasingly called her Bengi. She looked up and said “Saruda, did not you go to college?”

“No, I didn’t” He was about to say “there many be disturbance” but stopped short thinking no to bother her.

“It’s all right. How could you have studied in empty stomach after bi-cycling to college for ten miles?”

“Have you taken something? Mother told us that you have been weaving a lot even without eating anything” — he patted her back.

She wiped her eyes at this loving attention from her brother — “Let us take our meals. The dishes have gone cold. Just a minute, let me bring some mint leaves and prepare it with tamarind — it will be very tasty.”

She moved to the back of the kitchen to pluck mint leaves and sat there squatting, the Indian sarrel are growing among the mint plants. She plucked some
sairels with purple coloured flowers, the plant instantly went limp, its flower dropped down. So delicate are these sairels. She thought of removing the sairels from mint plants but decided otherwise, “Let it be! What harm will it cause to the mint plants?” As she was plucking the mint leaves stopped again as she saw some wild plants having yellow flowers. So beautiful they are! They looked like real gold. She paused to think if she could have worn it as earnings. She took two tiny flowers in her palm. Makan’s sister-in-law used to wear an earring a little bigger than this. She is a beautiful city girl; she looked dashing in silk dress with fine zari work and gold earring. If as a bride she is also…. Her mother’s friend took measurement of her bangles when she visited them last time. Will she be really her daughter-in-law? Mother tells her about the Sakhi Jethai’s household. The pond remains full of fishes, all kind of fruit trees are in the garden. The boy is very hard working. When the tall, dark and handsome son of Jethai came once, he brought three bunches of bananas, Malbhog, Jahaji and Chenichampa. How large in shape! How delicious. Tasting them her brothers tasted her – “Did the ploughman bring them to Bengi?” He cultivates in his own field why should he be called a ploughman? If everyone goes from white-collar jobs then who will do the farming? She also will go to the paddy field, sow the seeds and reap them. She has never been allowed to go to the field even to carry breakfast. Her brothers do not allow her. She opened her palms. The flowers are not looking fresh, but not yet wilting. A vision of a bride dressed in goudy silk and yellow colour golden ear ring surfaced before her eyes, near her the tall sun-tanned son of Sakhi Jethai. Shit! the combination will look like white rice and black gram. The womenfolk will tease them signing – “O Mon Tara, how
beautiful is our girl and your boy as black as thereju. She even voiced the song aloud – "O Mon Tora".

"Hey Bengi! Coming out to pluck mint you have kept singing. Come."

Hearing her brother's voice she covered her face reddened with shame as if she had been in the embrace of that handsome, sun tanned boy in a field of blooming mustard flower where she had been spotted by her brother. The voice of three cuckoo birds came from three directions as if to tease her.

"It has become late noon waiting for your mint preparation to garnish my food. I am terribly hungry now." At the words of her brother the young man disappeared from the field. Taking the mint leaves she ran into the kitchen – "mother, where is tamarind?"

Today she finds everything strange since the morning. The younger brother who asks for tea in the morning at 9am from bed got up today a little later than her. The boy was relishes his cup of tea like nectar left today towards the chowk pushing sway the carefully prepared cup. Coming back from the chowk he declared publicly. "No one should go to Barpitai's place today." She and her mother usually visit that household at least four times a day. What is the matter today? It is because of Prasanta's presence? What has he done that people cannot speak freely on his arrival. Why is the younger brother so excited. She sat still on the loom taking the shuttle in her hand. Those are Sarudas friends coming-- Ratul and Prabin. They usually sit in the drawing room or the porch but today they visited the backyard directly. She was about to go to the kitchen to make tea for them but heard them talking about posting different people at different points. They went back without taking tea.
The elder brother is not present. Though he is a sober person his presence in the veranda itself is reassuring for her. She glanced at the chair occupied by her brother in the morning. This awkwardness would have been dispelled by his presence at home. It is time for his sister-in-law to be a mother. He went the day before to inquire after her well-being after school hours, today he will return only after attending school. The second brother and the younger brother are sitting in the kitchen along with their mother. Again that uneasy feeling, an unusual solemnity. She feels afraid of sitting in the loom all alone. But why? Afraid in her own home. Everything is in order, the mango tree in full blossom, the water-gourd creeping at the roof of the kitchen, the people going to and for on the pebbled road, outside the lemon trees on the fence by Barpitai’s home – nothing has changed. She sat at a distance from her mother and took some flattened rice on a bamboo platter to clean and serve for breakfast.

Saruda, the jovial boy, is behaving in an awkward manner. Perhaps he is really scared of something. “Majuda, can you bunk office to day. If something goes amiss?”

“How long will they be staying”.

“Prasanta said yesterday – they will disperse immediately after the meeting that very right.”

“Have they kept something at our place?”

“They wanted to, but I did not agree.”

Listening to her mothers words she wanted to ask what they were taking about but did not say anything. How grave she appears! She will reproach angrily on being questioned. She washed the flattened rice on a bowl as big as an elephants
footprint and divided it into four smaller ones but kept one bowl aside. She has no appetite. How will she serve the flattened rice. The cow is yet to be milked, don’t know what’s happening today. Normally she completes her daily chores of milking the cow, cleaning the yard, keeping her shuttles flying at the loom would have been over by this time. Pausing sometimes with the bowls before her she said to her mother- “Mother, I am going to milk the cow, the breakfast....” The brother instantly retorted – “No, don’t you go to the cowshed. At Borpitai home on the room by the cowshed...” He checked himself: “Not you, but I’m going.” The second brother rose and towards the shed.

Their compound lying by the main road is shorter in width but longer in length. The house is close to that of their Bardeota’s. Their father built the house adjacent to the other thinking that it will be convenient to help each other particularly at night. The cowshed is in that direction. Their father constructed the shed nearer to the human habited for the fear of cattle thieves in the village. Their elder brother sold the shedful of cattle they had earlier during their father’s time, because all three of them go out in the morning, how will the mother and daughter manage them? They have now only one cow and a calf of the previous year. The shed and the drawing room of Bordeota’s house are standing nearby. Numali often nagged her brother to shift the shed to the backyard, because if they grow a flower garden in that spot their drawing room, newly constructed at the time of elder brother’s wedding, would look nice. They have been talking about shifting the shed, but none of them have considered it seriously. The younger brother planted a flower buying it from the town, she dose not remember the name, of course. Nourished by cow dung, it had a luxuriant growth. Orange coloured flowers blossomed in it the
previous year and the passers by stopped to have a look at it. That plot is quite fertile, the fragrant betel leaf creeper climbing the betel nut tree in that soil is not to be found anywhere else. One betel leaf is as big as the leaf of a teak plant.

She was pained to see the second brother going towards the cowshed with a basket for collecting cow dung. That neat and tidy boy will collect cow dung! She ran out and took the basket away from her brother- majuda! you need not clean the cow dung , I will, you fetch the cow and milk her. Her calf has been lowing all the time.

“No need of removing cow dung to-day, rather milk the cow”-- the brother dressed in white dropped the basket from his hand Probin and Ratul came in. The mother offered them two bamboo stools to sit in the yard. Ratul, the fair complexioned boy looks red in the face out of excitement- drops of sweat on his forehead- Will tell Prasanta this time, do whatever he wants outside the village, We are unable to suffer any longer, last time they fled away killing two military personnel. We had to suffer for that. Ratul utters the haltingly as if he is much scared, “It is only recently that we have started sleeping at home at night. We had to move in forests.”

Her hands milking the cow trembled at these words -- the cow raised her hind legs at this discomfort. What is he talking about- would that happen again? Staying a fortnight at her sister in laws place last year she found everything dishevelled. The paddy was lying trampled in the mud, youths go to the reserve at night, truck loads of army. The villagers could not wink for a long period of time. Those days again! She could not draw out sufficient milk with her shaking hands. She could draw only about seven fifty millilitres and then put the cow to tether at a short distance.
The second brother went in and said to his mother – “It seems everything is normal. I am going to office for half day, Sarubap will stay at home.” He decided to take his lunch on return and taking the flattened rice he went away. He went out early only to review the situation all around. The younger brother is digging earthworm in the garbage heap. He might go fishing. She collected the worms and packed it in an arum leaf.

“Saruda, go angling,”

“Yes”

“I’m also going. I don’t want earth-worm as a bait. Atta balls will do.”

She went running to the kitchen bring some wheat but the rude voice of her brother stopped her with heads drooping. “No need to go angling, I have no craving for fish. I’ll simply keep watch on the pitched road.”

Sitting at the bridge of their pond one can keep watch over the street, but who he would be keeping watch?

“Saruda! Whom do you want to watch on the street?” She could not stop herself from asking him.

“That’s none of your business. Mind your own business, and listen if someone enquires about Prasanta, reply in the negative and if you notice the police or the military, inform me, you need not come out.”

She was quite eager to squat by her brother and ask him, What have they done for which the police and the army chase them. Where do they come from? What meeting has been attended by Prasanta and his party. Why should Saruda keep watch over the main street pretending to be busy angling in the pond. Who is coming? Their village is at a distance of ten miles from the town, Borpitai’s house is
at Baruwachuk. Who would know who is he and which Prasanta, is holding the meeting there.

She was in a fix. With that disturbed mind she sat on the loom and the trace of it could be seen in the pattern, the picture of the sarai was halved in two against the white background as if someone had pierced a knife through it. The two halves of the red sarai fell scattered on two sides. As if someone had put a knife into her mind one pant among her incoherent thoughts, the other on the Gamocha on the loom. She sat dazed looking at the design of the sarai halved in two. The quiet noon seems to be haunted. Usually after finishing her work at the kitchen the mother comes to sit with her and help her winding threads in the quill or in Ugha and Chereki. Today her mother is unsteady, not yet able to finish cooking. She overfried the vegetables, once she dropped the vessel of water, the milk that she set to boil overflowed. Will she go in? Should she offer some help to her mother? She decided to go but remained sitting. She does not feel like going to the kitchen. All of a sudden the bush of Gadhuli gulap flower moved. Standing up she kept looking at that. Is the cat chasing mouse inside it? She clapped her hands and uttered a sound — a black poisonous snake hissed out and instantly disappeared. The snake generally moves around in this plot. She has noticed it several days, quite a long one. It disappears the moment it hears the sound of humans. It keeps a distance from man. But today it has come near the outer edge of their house. It perhaps comes to hunt frogs in the clam and quiet noon— scores of frogs are seen under the flower plants. The brother must be asked to clean it, not only one but five snakes may remain hidden in it.
The younger brother dropped the fishes on the sieve, Goroi, Magur, two small Rahu and some Puthi also were there. Looking at the fish on the sieve she jumped in pleasure. "Brother, where did you get so many fishes. Handling the fishes she shouted excitingly – "Saruda, these two are senduri puthi."

Skinning a betel nut of the size of a small gamboze fruit (Rupahi Thekara) and cleaning its inside with a knife the brother said – "you will deep fry these two fishes and give it to me."

"Alas! Her voice sounded so pathetic that her brother stopped and looked at her – "Yes, you will have it."

"Can you eat such a lovely fish? They are alive, not dead. I'll put them into water to keep them alive."

"The fish was caught in the fish-hook and this stupid girl will keep it alive."

"It will last, not yet dead".

"The betel nut tree by the pond is quite good this time"- opening the betel nut he finds it as white as coconut

She hears nothing .The silver Puthis with their bodies vermilion red kept her mind instantly preoccupied. The troubled thought, the broken sarai lying in the loom, the poisonous serpent in the Godhuligopal plants– all these disappeared from her mind like the skin of a betel nut. The vermilion on the white fishes looks so nice. As she had been peeping at the fishes her long plaits of hair fell on the dusty surface. She was unaware of it.

"Hey, Bengi, Bring me a betel leaf, garnish it with lime." He gently lifted her long plaits from the ground.
The members of the family send her on various errands. "Numali bring that, Numali, do this, do that, stupid girl." Her heart is filled with over brimming love, expressed in bringing in the betel leaf, the stool, the newspaper, the shoe-brush, the vest or the glass of water. No one has asked her for anything to-day. Her heart started beating having the opportunity to bring the betel leaf.

"Wait, Saruda! I'll bring it instantly." She ran towards the kitchen dangling her long plaits. Not a single betel leaf had been found in the broken cauldron where they keep the leaves. There was only a dark-coloured one.

She ran towards the cowshed to bring one betel leaf of this tree. Everyone relishes the sweet-scented betel-leaf of this tree. Those of the others are either sold or taken away by the neighbours on the occasion of weddings etc. The hooked pole for pulling down the leaves was kept at standing by the road – side the fence. Trying to bring in the hook she had a look at the flower plants brought by her brother from town. The tree is totally bare, not a leaf to be seen. Green shoots all around in other trees, but what about this one? Is it dead? She pinched its stem – juicy, soft and green like the foliage of a mango tree.

As she was busy looking at the unknown flower tree a man came forward to meet her. She could not remember having met that tall, rude, dark-complexioned man earlier. The man was wearing ethnic Assamese dress with a Gamocha on his shoulder. A heavily built person, hair cropped short, the man sports a prominent moustache. Who is he? Does not belong to this village? Whom is he searching for? Is he from Makan’s sister-in-laws side? He wraps around his body a butter-coloured cotton chadar with a Jari border. He advanced closer to the fence.
“Where does Prasanta Hazarika live?” The man’s loud voice is in tune with his sturdy physique. The tone is rather strange. Why does he inquire after Barpitai’s place. A proposal of marriage has come for Borpitai’s daughter Lata from a family in town, and it’s quite natural. She has been studying for Post-graduate degree at Guwahati. It seems that the man belong to that family. Otherwise who would have come so dressed up. She paused a little before pointing at the house. If a person from the would-be relatives family goes back being unable to trace the house, she would be blamed by all. They will consider her jealous as she herself failed to join college.

The features of her town-based sister in bobbed hair, red lips and floral patterned sarees surfaced before her eyes. She thinks well of others, why would she be jealous?” She pointed at the Borpita’s house.

“That one”

Instantly the man straightened. The thundering sound of bullets and the smell of fire filled the air. Before she could anticipate anything, the man wearing the chadar caught her. With her face towards Borpitai’s house the man kept her stuck to his bosom with one hand. The mane aimed his gun at the direction of Borpitai’s house and in reply volleys of gunshots like thunder showers have come from that side. The man has been jumping like a cat, goes forward then backward but keeps her fixed to his bosom like a shield. All of a sudden something pierced her chest on the left. She tried to shout. Bouti oi! (mother) but her tongue stuck. She only heard her mother’s voice once – “what has happened to my dear child!” Then a thundering sound at the back of the cowshed. And along with the sound the colour of Senduri Pnthi, voice of the cuckoo, smell of mango blossoms, mother’s love, brother’s affection and the red floral patterns shining in her loom and her tiny world fell silent.
Her head wilted and drooped like the sarrel flowers she plucked. Ugly stain the blood appeared on her white Mekhela-chadar. It resembled the red design woven on the white background by some unskilled weaver. The man put her body down, moving restlessly for sometime like the senduri puthi on the sieve, her body became still. The man set squatting by the body and fired a blank shot. Then he pulled out from his pocket the machine to transmit.

The smell of blood oozing out of her breast spread over the entire village. The smell of gunfire, sound of gunshots and the thundering sound of grenades made the village numb like her dropping head. The man on the street and on the field dispersed at once. Deadly quiet everywhere. The sound of drums and melody of pipes resounding at various corners fell silent. People went inside and closed the doors. The news of Numalis lifeless body in the grip of the army man who came in a strange attire to inquire about Prasanta circulated though the houses adjoining each other. Whoever heard about it sobbed. Should a simple girl, who never ventured outside without her mother, die such an untimely death!

The meal cooked remained untouched almost in every household. If some one started to take lunch it was thrown away as food for their cats and dogs. For the man shut horror-struck inside their homes another information came through their backyards – Prasanta and others have fled by the Namghar though the paddy fields. The sight of paddy fields trampled by the heavy boots of the military last time in the month of January came afresh to their mind. The wound is not healed yet, now once again!

Numali’s mothers had been straining the rice when she heard the first gunshot. Hearing it she called out “Sarubap! What voice is that! Have a look!
Listening to the sound of the volleys of fire continuously she froze with the Deksi in her hand. Putting it down she was about to enquire after her daughters whereabouts and then she heard the constrained voice of her younger son from the drawing room, “Mother! We have been doomed.” When she reached the drawing room she found her son crying. Looking through the window she saw a tall man holding Numali at his chest and firing shots. He had been trying to cover up himself by pinning down Numali like that. The mother could not clearly locate the girl hidden by the man’s body. Her voice is also not heard. In the smell and smoke of gunfire her long plait of hair resembling a black poisonous snake shook in the air, and then went out of sight. The youngest son closed the door when he saw that the mother was about to open it and run out and said – “Mother! father is no more and if now you too....” And that very instant the white chadar of Numali had been reddened with blood. Then the thundering sound. This time burning with rage Sarubap tried to open the door to go to Numali, but his mother held him back, how will she sacrifice one more along with the other. The women became speechless and she fainted in the embrace of her son. Putting her down on the floor he sprinkled water on her face and eyes bringing it from the kitchen. Opening her eyes she murmured ‘Oh! my child” Silence prevailed over Prasanta’s household. Looking at the army man communicating with his men he wanted to open the door and go to him but stopped, he looks like a wounded tiger protecting his kill.

He goes – if he- then what will happen to the mother. In her semiconscious state the mother recollects the innocent and simple face of her daughter who came sobbing from the pond, and the cry of panic. On a holiday the three brothers had been fishing at the pond. She had been running errands for her brothers like a small
girl and then a Singi fish pricked on her hand. She had been running to her mother, Bouti Oi, (mother). She cried so much at the prick of a fish. And on the chest of that girl! The mother tried to get up from the bed and open the door—Numali was lying upside down on the gravelled road, pools of blood around her. The tall and stout man was squatting by her side, rifle in hand. Blood stains on his body also. Like a wounded tiger he was roaring from time to time, “hat Jao” (go away), The line demarcating the conscious and the subconscious state of Numalis mother again disappeared.

A little after midday four truck loads of military surrounded the village. They barricaded the village, no one can go out, none can come is. The returning office-goers, students coming back from schools and colleges, the people coming back home free of their burden after their daily trade – all the them were pushed back at the very entrance of the village.

Raghu could sell his bunch of ridge gourd at a good price, he bought half a kilo of Rahu fish, he was coming back with a relishing flavour a fish and gourd dish on his tongue when he was surprised by the presence of armed militia at the entrance to the village. The girls coming back from college took shelter at the hospital. Most of the men folk decided to spend the night at the Ramu’s tea-stall outside the village. The people kept sitting the whole night.

The eldest brother of Numali attended his school directly on his way back from father in-law’s place, the bag on his bicycle was filled with various items the sister-in-law sent to Numali – a small amount of Kharicha, (bamboo shoot pickle), a packet of Kharali (mustard sauce) and two or three papers with floral patterns. He sat throughout the night among the crowd in front of Ramu’s shop. He came to
know of a girl someone’s daughter or daughter-in-law killed in the crossfire. His heart kept pounding heavily on that horrible, sleepless night thinking of his mother and sister.

As pre-arranged the second brother of Numali returned from office quite early. He listened to a report of a girl killed in crossfire. He felt uneasy hearing the news, they have assembled near their home, there is no girl at Borpital’s home. He was bewildered for a moment – what might have happened? As he tried to enter the village on his bicycle they barred his way. It is an order from the top, none can go out, none can enter. He wanted to enter the path leading to his village almost by force, mixing Hindi and Assamese he wanted to make them understand that he must go because his mother and sister are living all alone at home. They were of the opinion that the entire village is there, why should he alone be concerned. How would he tell them what is going in the adjacent house. Holding his bicycle he stood waiting but someone forcibly pushed him back. He then proceeded towards one of his acquaintance in the hospital to spend the night in his quarter. News of the girl lying dead on the gravelled road was pouring in throughout the night. At every report his heart pumped heavily. His friend had been inviting him repeatedly to spend a night at his place. On his unexpected arrival, the friend carefully prepared a meal for him, but he could not swallow even a mouthful.

They put the dead body of Numali on the van at about sunset. Then Sarubap had been fanning his mother’s head applying a paste of Aloevera. Glancing for a moment at the body of his sister sleeping among drawn rifles and olive-coloured dress he started howling by the pond. In order to suppress the sound from his mother he had bitten the lips so hard that blood drops came running out. Silence
everywhere, the mother almost unconscious, The still body of his sister driven away — in his twenty years of life he never encountered such distress. His father died of a pressure-stroke two years ago in this very home. He does not remember who came to protect mother, Who came to console them affectionately, who cooked food, where they cooked and served at intervals the meager meals they had taken during the fast. In those days of total misery the people of the village kept them wrapped in love and comfort like the female Hornbill incubating its egg protecting it from outside air. It gave them and their mother the healing touch to the injury. The picture of people going in and out with packets of food and fruits brought to them during the period of fasting came before him and he felt very lonely. He is not a town lad, he is a boy brought up with a whole village. The hunted atmosphere broke his heart and the sound of his hushed sobbing rolled over the banks of the pond.

The sun was then hidden in the reserve forest, the silent village was covered by darkness. In the ensuing darkness the military people began intruding into every house of the village. They assembled together all the men folk at the yard in front of Namghar. Rajat Barua, a professor in a city college came home on two days leave to look after his ailing mother. They served him with more blows learning that he was a college teacher- for allowing the terrorists into the village even when he was an educated man. For the similar reason they showered blows on the village head man who had been suffering from rheumatic pain. The old, the young, the teenagers- all of them sat shivering in silence on the courtyard of the Namghar. The army men then started searching vehemently for the bird that have already flown away in the containers of rice and salt in the kitchen of those homes in the absence of men-folk.
When Sarubap was dragged to the yard from the bank of the pond— all heads turned to him. The colour of his swollen eyes was in tune with the colour of the blood that thickened in his lips. Looking at his own people he started sobbing again bending his head between the knees.

The jawans who entered Sarubap's home to search for terrorist knew only one thing — the terrorists have escaped from a place nearer to this house. They entered it at midnight. The doors were wide open. When they entered the drawing room after searching the whole place the mother of Sarubap was almost unconscious. To ascertain whether dead or alive they nudged her with the butt of the rifle and went out. She regained her lost sense at the sharp light, the sound of heavy boots and the unaccustomed smell. She quickly came to a sitting position on the bed. The long plait of her daughter like the black serpent started moving in to her senses. Shouting— "O my dear child!" she was about to rise but saw a number of army men moving around in her yard. She wanted to call out Sarubap but her voice was muffled by something and she sat like dumb on the floor itself. She sensed as if some of them were advancing towards her, she crept under the bed like an animal. A sharp light came searching in. She cramped further in. Then the sound of heavy steps went out. The middle aged woman sat shivering and weeping silently in a horrendous fear she never felt before. The night of the month of Bohag seemed to sob with her biting its lips.

Numali returned to the village at early dawn. Her virgin body was then split open by the doctor's knife and stitched. The road was opened after her return. The scared villagers who spent the previous night here and there saw on their return the familiar girl lying in the trailer attached to thee jeep. She was also jumping along
with the car on the uneven path. As if she would sit up instantly and smile-
"Raghukai, you have come back from the market" - Raghu would stop for sometime unloading himself - he will show to her a paper bag - "I've brought a chadar for your aunt- it costs is twenty five rupees." She will scrutinize it - "Good but the hand-woven ones are far better, this is somewhat loosely woven." Raghu would have a sigh - "What to do? She woman who had woven cloths for the entire household is now crippled with pain " On that particular Bihu wearing green bordered chader made of five cotton by Numali, the ailing wife of Raghu so bleed a lot. That is Numali. Raghu sat by the roadside with his burden on the shoulder and started howling. Looking at him an army men biting his lips, reproached him - "your own people have become terrorist you have given them shelter your people have died in terrorists hands, and you started sobbing." Raghu has not understood a single word spoken in Hindi, and at that moment has felt blossomful of love stuck to the green bordered chadar. He kept on crying. The Jeep started moving in the village carrying Numali in it. Someone had been making announcements from he Jeep at regular intervals, the gist of which was- "Your own people have been killed by the terrorist it will happen if you give shelter to them, the villagers should co-operate with the police and the military to nab them. Someone understands a word or two, others not a single syllable. No one has been allowed near Numali when tried to jump over the jeep in a frenzy but stopped, biting her lips at their scolding

The people sitting on the courtyard of Namghar have been allowed to disperse to return to their house. The men who spent the night elsewhere have reached the village. No one has entered his home. The gate of Numali's home remains open the men are coming in silently. The women folk have come crowding
at her place. All the cattle are in their sheds, the yards are not yet swept clean, the hearth of the people on fast from yesterday are not lit.

Providing the infant and the sick with whatever they have, the housewives are crowding around Numali’s mother. No one bothers if stray cows have destroyed their garden – on one pays heed to the pets – whether the ducks, the cat, the goats have entered their shelter, whether they have been taken away by the fox or the weasel-- a feeling of horror in their mind, a deadly sense of terror. The two brothers of Numali have reached home. They have found their mother almost unconscious. And Sarubap! four or five persons together have not been able to hold him. He has been shouting – “Did she understand things like terrorists, army? Why had she been killed?” He tries to beat his head against the floor, several men are holding him back. He is about to stumble. Seeing his brother, Sarubap drops down on the floor like a tree felled by an ape – “I could not save her. Before my eyes………”

Exactly at that moment the military jeep reached their gate after roaming about the village. Numali came inside on the hands of two jawans and then lay down flat on the yard. Over Numali’s body, opened and stitched and covered with blood – stained dress, a military officer laid a round wreath made by skilled hands, took off his in respect along with the jawans who were making noise with their rifles and heavy boots. The polite, good looking stopped before Numali with bowed head, the jawans also joined him. A number of military people who had been following the jeep in a truck came intruding into the house and the yards of Numali. Searching for five minutes the militia went back to the truck making thumping sound with their boots. The officer saluted Numali’s body once again and started to go. Before going back to the jeep he shouted in English – “This will happen if you give indulgence to
the terrorists". Sarubap also shouted – "All of you terrorize the simple and the innocent. I’ll see you." This time Sarubap was held back by his two brothers. His Barpitai approached him – "My son! Don’t infuriate the bunch of wasp that lost their dwelling." The old man who continued to hear during the previous night the rumour about his six feet tall, stout and sturdy son who was in self-exile for the last two years that he was lying dead sometimes on the reserve, sometimes on the field and again on the bank of the river, howled putting his weight on the walking-stick.

Numali has been lying in the yard with the wreath of roses at her bosom. Her long plait of hair lies stretched on the lawn. The sleepless, fasting people surrounding her with reddened eyes are keeping mum. Not a single elder is talking of the last rites, not making arrangements for firewood and bamboos, even a basil is not planted by the body. There is not earthen lamp lit, no Incense sticks, no Incence placed by her head. The scared lot of people have been waiting like deers chased by tiger. Only hushed siblings are heard everywhere, cry of Sarubap from time to time – "I will see, I will see all of them."

Who will carry Numali on the bamboo bier to the crematorium by the river and how. She has spread herself over the entire village. She is there on the citron tree at Raghu’s place, she will sing out if you approach it –

"I am calling you brother, younger and elder, the cowherds of the village
Do not extend your hands, do not pluck citron, go back home."

Numali creeped along the wall as a water gourd plant, if you approach it, she will start weeping: "Do not extend your hand, do not pluck the gourd, wherefrom you old women are coming." Numali bloomed as a flower by the common water tank of the village –
"Do not extend your hands, do not pluck flowers, wherefrom you boatman are coming."

She will remain sobbing and waiting in the village in the guise of a citron plant, a creeper gourd, a lotus flower. One day some one will come and tell her, “If you are Numali, then take this betel nut chewed by me.” She will chew it and be transformed into a Shalika (a bird like myna). She will be told again – “If you have love within you, if you are the Numali, then wear this Gamocha and you will be transformed into a human.” Numali will be a woman. She has a bosom full of love, she will be waiting to become a woman once again.

* Numali- A proper name of a girl which means the youngest child(girl)