To the utter relief of everyone concerned Malati has given birth to a child.

A tiny being. A tiny human of pink colour. He started breathing, crying, pouting his lips just after his birth. He felt rested on being hugged. A pink face peeped through the bundle of clothes that came as gift. A beautiful face! - a lovely face! An innocent delicate face that makes you forget all worries, all sorrow all strain.

People started fancying about his looks. Someone found him resembling his father, others said that he would be like his mother. Some people, some old ladies had a glimpse of his late grandfather in the boys face. Many people, many observations. But Malati saw a burning fire in the boy’s face. She saw her household that was destroyed in that fire. She saw her husband who was still untraced. The cows that they lost, the two bulls, the goats, the swans, the pigeons, the red-bordered Gamochas half-woven in the loom that were burnt to ashes, the double bed in the bed-room, the hearth, the front yard, the backyard the place of worship – she saw all these.

Physical constraints overpowered her at that time. She had been suffering from physical as well as mental strain. [What’s the use of going on living, better bring it to an end- she thought.] She considered it useless to prolong her life and thought of bringing it to an end. But her mother-in-law protected her with utmost care like a young chick surrounded with concern by its mother. Forgetting her own sorrow and misery, she consoled Malati, and though she herself howled a lot, and when Malati cried, she said ‘Don’t cry’. She had no one of her own, no parents, no
brothers. Malati had been brought up by a distantly related aunt under constant hardship and humiliation – she understands misery, knows how to endure adversity. But now- getting the loving shelter and warmth of her mother-in-law’s bosom – she realizes that if you have desolation you should also have a bosom to rest upon and to shed tears.

On the fourteenth day, news came that Bhadreswar had been traced. He is an only child. Her mother-in-law rushed out like mad in frenzy. Several ladies dissuaded her by grabbing tightly. The remnants of Bhadreswar’s body, the shirt worn by him and a piece of the Gamocha worn as head cloth were brought in a bundle and cremated in public.

For what? For whose craving for power it happened like this? She does not understand politics. Neither does her mother-in-law nor Bhadreswar. And these people – such a large number of people frustrated by tribulations and suffering in relief camps – do they understand politics? No, they also don’t understand. And the others? Whenever she shuts her eyes Malati sees their faces in the midst of fierce shouting and fire and smoke. Those who set our houses to fire----- whose houses we burnt down – those who smeared their hands with the blood of our men----whose blood reddened our hands – is it the outcome of understanding politics, or not understanding politics?

Fire, fire, fire all around. Fire knows only to burn, keeps burning everything to ashes. Fire everywhere – on the living room, on the kitchen on the prayer room – burning flames – like the red tongue protruding from the idol of Goddess Kali. Burning flames, and some faces – hard, cruel like robber’s, their faces ruthless like butcher’s glittered red in the light of flames. Their long dao dazzled in the light –
the tip of their spears and arrows sparkled bright—as if those too were thirsty for blood and revenge. They brutally commanded Malati and others to leave their homes. People complied without a single retort. Then there was no respite, everybody started fleeing, the women started escaping over the dried stumps of the paddy fields, the men folk started fighting and escaping, murdering and being murdered. The heavy weight of Malati’s body deterred her from walking fast or running and her mother-in-law gently led her on. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast, they trotted after their village folk. Pausing at a safe distance she turned her head like other villagers and saw the flames as high as bamboo trees consigning her home, her life, her dreams to ashes.

Only after reaching the pitched road she realized that she keeps staggering, something is pressing her stomach as if it will overpower her. Pain—pain and pain—intolerable pain. Her stomach, chest, waist—all have been affected by some violent cramps. She sat down on the road itself. Her companions led her gently to a nearby home, and in a short while, without suffering a little more than her due, Malati become the mother of a pink coloured tiny person.

I am an ordinary person. An insignificant village woman full of merits and demerits. I do not have worldly wisdom, no one tells me anything, and who is there to ask? Still had there been someone to explain to me why it happened like this, and why did I lose everything. What’s the use if I could not realize anything. What’s the necessity of me being bankrupt? Of offering everything that was in my possession?

I do remember—very well remember. Malati had started tying her goats. Since midday she had not been feeling well—a sense of a nagging pain in her lower abdomen and the waist. Her mother-in-law was in the kitchen. She had been
hurriedly preparing some food for Malati. The twilight hasn’t deepened into an ash-grey colour till then. As she was dragging in the goats, she had noticed Biren Narzari’s mother rushing though the bamboo bars acting as a gate like a whiff of wind.

“‘Yes, mother?’” Malati came forward.

“No time to talk, call your mother-in-law, you also move out. Move out, flee immediately. They will kill you, burn your homes — already they have started burning from the other end”.

“‘Hey, what’s the matter? Her mother-in-law came out — taking the green leafy vegetables she tried to clean in her hands. ‘Biren’s mother, what happened?’”

But Biren Narzari’s mother was no longer there; she had already ran out of the gate.

Bhadreswar was not present at that moment. He arrived a little later. In a voice choked with fear, excitement and courage he said to his mother — “Go away along with the villagers and take whatever belongings you can manage to carry.”

“I...........

“‘Where are you going’”? asked his mother eagerly.

“I am going this way. With our people”.

Wearing a Gamocha ad head cloth, he moved out taking a long Dao in his hands. “Mother, I am going out — he said to his mother at parting. Giving a searching look at Malati from head to foot he said — “Take care I am coming”.

His words, “I am coming” struck her like thunderbolt. She can still reminisces those words. Her heart aches even now as she remembers it. “I am coming” — how rude! How cruel! Do people part like this? Did the people in ancient
days go to war wearing *Kabas Kapor* like this? Do people take leave like this while approaching death?

And then followed the gory sight of burning flames, burnt smell of crops, cry of people totally ruined, hushed moaning of people unable to howl in fear of death, noise of the cattle in panic and general confusion and chaos.

Bhadreswar has not been traced. Both of Aniram and his son had been slaughtered. Hali’s elder brother was killed, he somehow saved his own life. Biren Nazari’s brother-in-law had been hacked to pieces. Both the sons of Basumatary were gone. Several Bodo-Kachari villages had been consigned to flames. Malati heard all these news. She could visualize the faces of all these news. She could visualize the faces of all these people known to her. All are her acquaintances- very few of them are strangers. How dexterously Hali’s brother fixed her loom? Aniram was a relative from her father-in-law’s family. He had the habit of visiting them and taking some refreshment. And Renu’s husband. They had been married only for two months. How enthusiastically the entire family of Malati participated in that wedding? Didn’t she relish many a noon with Biren Narzari’s sister Renumai, the green mango salad garnished with salt and hot chilly? Renu’s husband was such a nice person! Addressing her as ‘Nobou’ he used to accept a pan prepared by her. He had been chopped to five pieces. And Basumatari’s sons. Don’t know how their mother endures it. She would inevitably turn up whenever she prepares for weaving in the loom.

Why this bloodshed, what has made people inimical to each other? How could they raise weapons against the people whom they lovingly addressed as uncle,
aunt, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather etc. Didn’t their heart break smearing hands with blood?

I am an insignificant woman. I don’t understand anything. What lies beyond Gohpur I not known to me. It dose not matter to me if Gohpur is the end of the world. Malati talks to herself. Something has been reported in the newspaper about our plight. Our photographs also have been printed- I have heard it. The world outside learns about us. But actually what have they learnt? Have they realized how we lived together, how we happened to be happy and miserable in each other’s happiness and despair? And how we have reddened our hands with each other’s blood today? I am an ordinary woman. Still, I request the people of the world with folded hands- “let us live in peace, We accept the loss, but we want to dream as before with the remnants of the past, We are not anyone’s foe, nor anyone ours. We never wanted bloodshed, never shall we.

Then whose enemy are we? Who are ours? How shall I face Ranumai. How would I tell her- would I be able to inform her that my husband had hacked her husband to pieces with a long Dao. I would never be able to. I never was their adversary – nor were they mine.

Hugging the baby Malati sleeps. Sometimes she is not able to sleep- sometimes she keeps dozing. People haggle over the foodstuff provided as daily ration. How these desolate people hanker for a handful of rice. Malati remains silent. Cursing her own fate Malati’s mother-in-law keeps muttering to herself.

But it is annoying. The vexation and depression is building up day by day. Living from hand to mouth like this –waiting for the daily ration of rice and dal, and
a pinch of salt people sometimes suffer from dejection. O god, how long! How long shall we remain dependent on others?

But a day of respite arrived. The people in the relief camps will go back. The prospect of going back to one’s own hearth and home, as warm as mother’s bosom, kept rolling on the mutterings of these people.

Bhadreswar is no more. So, some youths from the villages erected their hut on the old foundation itself. A tiny hut barely spacious for two women. She will have to enter a home bare of Bhadreswar – will have to move in a room where Bhadreswar is not living – will have to sleep in a bed not shared by Bhadreswar. A heavy uncontrolled burden on her chest.

Holding the baby to her chest the mother-in-law leads the way. She keeps crying for several days. So her face and eyes are swollen. Her steps uneven. Malati follows her with a bundle of their meagre belongings. She also has been blinded by incessant tears. But she was a girl who had been brought up amidst insult and reproach— the darker side of life was known to her. So she had the strength to endure misery.

The two women stood at the gate of their ancestral house after an interval of one and half months. Heaps of ashes here and there. There was no fence. Once she planted a jasmine tree at the entrance. It is now standing in a pathetic manner. The altar of Basil tree looks deserted on the yard. Her mother-in-law handed the baby over to Malati and sat on the ground like an insane person.

“What the matter, mother?” Malati approached her.

On that very instant Malati saw Biren Narzar’s mother coming in though the lane at the back adjoining the two houses.
"You have come?" she said.

"Yes, Biren’s mother" the mother-in-law replied.

"Go and put the house in order. I’ve thoroughly cleaned the interior. I’ll help you in coating the walls. You also shouldn’t sit here. Go inside."

No malice in her voice. No fire in her eyes. As she had been looking at the woman another Malati came to Malati’s view on the other end. Malati found her as destitute and harassed as herself.

"Nobou, you have come."

"Yes, I have"- Both the Malatis approached each other.

"I have kept your two goats tied at our place. The black one has given birth to a young one." Inadvertently Malati advanced further and it was seen that a woman who does not understand politics puts into the bosom of another like her, the tiny one and half month old baby of her own. And then both the women, stranger to politics heaved a sigh of relief that got mingled in the air.