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Death, Dying, and Everything that Follows in Assam

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In Assam's detention centre for suspected foreigners, the state wages an attritional assault against the lives of the detained. But that is only one part of a majoritatian fantasy to create a sinister ethno-racial utopia.

If death is a social phenomenon, then the act of dying itself is provisional. The afterlife of death is as important as death itself. *Who is mourned, and who isn't* are questions that offer vital clues to the nature of the society in which deaths occur. As Harriet Martineau, reflecting on epitaphs, wrote in 1838, "the brief language of the dead will teach him more than the longest discourses of the living".

On 14 September, after spending nearly four months in a foreigner detention centre in Assam's Goalpara district, 56-year old Amzad Ali died of cancer. He outlived his fatal diagnosis by merely a month. Detained from his home in Barpeta district's Rowmari village in May, Ali had no idea until the police arrived at his doorstep that a foreigners' tribunal had pronounced him an 'illegal immigrant' in 2021.

Despite being diagnosed with cancer and unable to eat anything, district authorities repeatedly refused to release Ali or move him to a hospital. By the time he was shifted to a hospital, it was too late and doctors could only administer palliative care to ease his suffering. Ali died three days later. No one, save for his family, mourned him. Barely anyone in the media, let alone in the mainstream Assamese media, covered his story. No minister announced his demise, no scholar analysed it. There was no public funeral for Ali.

But perhaps the biggest tragedy in the erasure of his story is that until his death, Ali was *at least something* – a detainee, a persona non grata, a Declared Foreign National (DFN). In death, he was quickly reduced to nothing.

In the eyes of the bureaucratic state, Ali died of disease. There was no foul play, not unlike in the case of Abdul Matleb, a 43-year old daily wage worker who died in the same detention centre in April. Matleb's family claims that he had no illness before being detained. Initially, they refused to accept his lifeless body, urging the administration to dispatch him to Bangladesh, which is where he belonged according to the foreigners tribunal that disenfranchised him in 2016. When 70-year-old Falu Das died in detention in October 2019, his family made a similar request.

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Ali, Matleb, and Das were, ultimately, quietly laid to rest in their home villages in Assam. According to the state, all three were all Bangladeshi nationals who had entered Assam illegally. Yet, the state allowed them to be buried or cremated by their families on Indian land. The state did not bother about this strange contradiction; it simply turned its head away in a silent admission of its own subterfuge – the fact that it unfairly disenfranchises Indians by foisting on them impossible documentary standards of citizenship determination.

In the forensic post mortem records of the corpses of Ali, Matleb and Das, the state is missing as a *cause*; it is present only *bureaucratically* as the entity that confirms their death for legal purposes. The death certificates convince the state (and others), through a carefully constructed rhetoric of officialdom, that 'natural causes' like disease or infirmity, not carceral state violence, killed them.

But we must call this deception out for what it is. Imagine the counterfactual to these deaths. Could Ali, despite his cancer diagnosis, not have lived longer if he was around family within the caring confines of his homestead or if he received medical care earlier than was offered to him? Would Matleb or Das have fallen sick if they were not detained? Is the very act of inflicting carceral punishment on a septuagenarian like Das for an opaquely adjudged 'crime' of illegal residency in Assam not an act of lethal state violence?

Ali, Das and Matleb were not the only recorded deaths of detainees in Assam. According to data compiled and reported by the Centre for Justice and Peace (CJP) and *The Hindu*, at least 30 individuals suspected of being foreigners had died in detention in Assam as of March 2024.

By medicalising these deaths, the state is able to individualise their plight. Death by disease serves as a 'natural' (and silent) exterminator of the undesirable, forgotten and dispensable 'other', a process in which the state is seemingly absent. But, is it really so? After all, the state, in a Foucauldian sense, exercises disciplinary power over these incarcerated bodies, creating conditions for illnesses and deciding when to provide or withhold medical care.

This was something that Matleb's and Das' families, even in mourning, recognised with precision. Their refusal to accept the dead bodies of their loved ones was an act of mournful resistance against an apathetic state, to tell the world that the government, and not an illness, killed Matleb and Das.

It is important to understand the precise nature of state culpability here. It is not that the state seeks to kill those it detains. Neither is the detention centre in Assam akin to the Nazi concentration camp in which, according to Giorgio Agamben, "the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized". Yet, through the detention centre, the state creates an institutionalised space where death by disease – both physiological and psychological – is more likely than usual. The space for a healthy life here is impinged upon by the lingering shadow of disease and death. In that sense, the detention centre mounts an attritional assault against the individual's right to life.

The City's Tomb

Until 2023, Assam had six detention centres, which were essentially auxiliary detachments within existing prisons. In that sense, they shared the spatial remit of the standard jail. But, the current standalone detention centre in Matia, which was purpose-built to replace the six preexisting ones, is somewhat different.

Surrounded by towering walls, the camp is located on fluvial fringes of the southern banks of the Brahmaputra river in a relatively isolated nook of Goalpara district in western Assam, adjacent to Meghalaya's East Garo Hills districts. A ride to the Matia camp from the nearest urban centres of Goalpara or Dudhnoi may give some the feeling of leaving the outer limits of 'core' Assamese society.

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The camp is adjacent to villages dominated by the Hajong community, a largely-Buddhist ethnic minority with origins in modern-day Bangladesh. In that sense, the Matia camp appears to be deliberately positioned along the geographical peripheries of Assam, as if to constantly remind its inmates of their own socio-legal peripheralisation.

More deeply, it reflects the ideological aim of the detention regime, that is, to comprehensively isolate the 'other' from mainstream society. In constituting a liminal threshold between legitimate and illegitimate society, the detention camp transforms individuals into members of neither. The inmates find themselves stuck in a strange limbo. When some of them die, they die in this limbo.

Many, like Mamirun Nessa, have spent an entire decade in a detention centre, cut off from their families and unsure of what crime they committed. For them, the detention centre becomes what Harry Hawser, a poet-inmate at the Eastern State Penitentiary in the US in the 1840s, once called "'a living tomb,' a site of living death". But, we cannot understand this 'living tomb' without getting a sense of the larger space – the cemetery – that it is situated in.

In a famous yet underdeveloped lecture on 'heterotopia' delivered in March 1967, Foucault argues that starting in the early 19th century cemeteries in Europe were moved out from the city centres to their suburbs to prevent the population, especially the bourgeoisie, from contracting contagious illnesses from the dead. The cemetery, thus, began to constitute "the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place."

In this Foucauldian reasoning, the Matia detention centre emerges as the "other city" of Assam's justice system. It may even be seen as a garbage dump that is usually located far outside the city limits, which grows as the city itself grows.

Deathscapes

The detention centre is is just one key node in a larger, racially textured "deathscape" in Assam. For Avril Maddrell and James D Sidaway, the term 'deathscapes' "invoke[s] both the places associated with death and for the dead, and how these are imbued with meanings and associations". They may not always be spectacular sites (like a detention camp), but also "quotidian spaces" that

"interpellate us, often unawares, speaking to us of loss and consolation."

Not everyone affected by Assam's torturous citizenship determination regime died inside a detention camp. Some died inside their own homes and in other public spaces. Many of them, unable to bear the burden of indignity inflicted by an ever-suspicious state, simply ended their own lives. They found it easier to die than to bear the burden of personal indignity or fear of seeing their loved ones inside a detention centre.

Some dropped dead while waiting in long queues to prove their citizenship. Yet others were killed in road mishaps en route to the queues. Abhishek Saha, who has extensively reported on the citizenship process, observes that the NRC left behind a "trail of suicides, deaths and sporadic violence in its wake". The state and the mainstream media attributed them to depressive episodes, weak cardiac health, and rash driving. Once again, the state was able to wash its hands off from these fatal events, even while deliberately carving a morbid landscape of human destruction.

Yet, almost no one in mainstream Assamese circles talks about these deaths and decay. In the case of the detention deaths, this is perhaps because they happen discreetly behind four (high) walls or sometimes, inside a hospital. The elite do not want to peek inside a sinister institution like the detention centre whose existence they otherwise support.

As Angela Davis wrote, societies "take prisons for granted but are often afraid to face the realities they produce", perhaps also because the majority views "imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the "evildoers," which in this case is the 'illegal Bangladeshi' out to occupy Assam.

A Chilling Apathy

But there must be something more to this nonchalance of the social elite.

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W.B. Du Bois, in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1889), argues that there have been "few other cases in the history of civilized peoples where human suffering has been viewed with such peculiar indifference" as in the case of disease-afflicted Black communities of America. He then makes a chilling observation, that "nearly the whole nation seemed delighted with the discredited census of 1870 because it was thought to show that the Negroes were dying off rapidly, and the country would soon be well rid of them". His conclusion follows from a detailed ethnographic study of Black deaths in the city of Philadelphia, which he attributes to the structural violence of racial segregation.

We can perhaps think about the general apathy around Assam's racially-textured deathscape with Du Bois. Going by the CJP list, Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus and members of other Bahujan non-Muslim communities form the bulk of those dead. Is this pattern perchance? Today, those who are thrown into detention in Assam are almost exclusively poor Bengali Muslims, who are widely regarded as bodies fit for complete removal from the Assamese public sphere. A cursory glance through some of the social media comments about the 'Miya' (Bengali Muslim) in Assam reveals this sinister ethno-racial utopia, which draws justification from a longstanding demographic fear among the dominant Assamese elite that Assamese society would soon be overrun by the Miya. Not only would no one within the dominant majority notice if the Miya were to slowly vanish from Assam's census registers, but a large chunk of it would in fact rejoice in it, not unlike in Du Bois' account of Blacks in late 19th century America.

As a sloppy substitute of a racially pure census register, the detention centre emerges as a prominent iteration of the majoritarian fantasy to remove the Miya from the Assamese public sphere. It is a legally mandated, politically permissible and socially acceptable site for this racial utopia. In reality, it is what Achille Mbembe called a "death-world" where some of Assam's poorest and most marginalised are reduced to a "living dead".

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