

# OTOLITHS



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## Blighted Land

Seated on the ground, Fatema pulled out the lice that have nestled in the bristly hair of her elder daughter, Salma. While her malnourished one-year-old infant daughter clung to her breast like a baby monkey, the other two daughters were playing in the dust beside her. In between their play they would often wail and complain to their mother of the constant hunger lurking in their empty bellies. Fatema looked at their starving faces through her wet eyes. The stack of firewood that she collected during the four days of lock-down still lay outside her hut. Her daughters' faces looked as dry as the firewood. She had not been able to go to the Laogaon Market to sell firewood for five long days. She felt for the bruises in her body — still raw and painful. Her face was still swollen from the smack on the jaw that she received from her husband, Rashid.

Like poverty and hunger, Fatema had become accustomed to the regular beatings from her drunkard husband. It was almost compulsory for her to pay at least three-fourth of her daily earning to Rashid to spend on his drink. By the grace of Allah, if she could sell all the bundles of firewood, she managed to earn three-hundred rupees at the end the day. But she had to run the house with only a hundred rupee as she needed to pay the lion's share of her minimal daily income to Rashid who would be waiting with predatory eyes to relish on his wife's income. With the money, he would set off to Laogaon Chariali to buy *sulai* (country liquor) and returned home at night like a monarch ready to assert his virility on his wife and abused her for not giving birth to a son. Fatema compared her state to the other two wives of Rashid that he had left. In a way, she felt that they were fortunate enough to have escaped from living the rest of their lives with this abusive man in such a wretched condition.

When Fatema last went to the Laogaon Market, she heard the folks discussing some lock-down. She had no idea what it was. Baffled, she asked one of her customers. From his explanation, she could decipher that there would be Assam bandh (general strike) for many days because of some dreadful disease. She could not draw any connection between the bandh and the disease. "Bandh for disease?" — she gasped. So far, she had known that any kind of upheaval or disruption in Assam such as bombings, attack, riot or Bangladeshi issue, would be followed by Assam bandh. Her body tensed up with the idea of Assam Bandh. She still remembered the plight her family had to undergo as a result of the prolonged bandh not very long ago. There was hearsay in the village that all the people of their faith would be debarred from voting and would be sent to Bangladesh. Shops were closed, markets were completely shut down, even Rashid stopped to visit the *sulai* spot. A pall of gloom and terror hovered over