

Understanding Women's Movement in Northeast India

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Abstract: *Women are an integral part of any society. The study of the role and status of women has assumed an indispensable place in the discourses of social sciences in India today. It has fairly been recognized as the true criterion to evaluate the status of its civilization. In the past, women in North-east India especially during pre-colonial period were not directly participating in the political process, however, the situation changed during the British period and after. Women started participating in political life especially working for the peace in the society. The violent conditions have been hampering not only their day-to-day life but livelihood too. Hence, women in general through various umbrella organizations and local level efforts worked for peace and prosperity. It is in this background this paper attempts to examine peace processes with particular focus on the contributions of North-east women. It chronicles the innovative approaches of women in the North-east who mediate among armed forces and mobilise for peace and reconciliation across conflict-torn situations. It also presents the contributions of women to sustain the ceasefire, strengthen the formal peace process and encourage the pursuit of long-term stability in the region while facing severe vulnerabilities in war-like situations.*

Key words: *North-east India, women's contribution, peacekeeping, exploitation.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

North Eastern region of India comprising of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura has come a long way from pre-literate, migratory stages to making gradual progresses in becoming a vital participant in the experiment of Indian democracy, more and less intellectually accepting its authority and benefitting materially. However, in the pursuing years, armed and unarmed homeland claims within the state, cross-tribe state boundary homeland claims resulted in the region becoming a fierce ethnic centre with numerous intersecting conflicts harbouring as many peace and conflict resolution overtures. The region has been dominantly troubled by insurgency, economic under-development, ceaseless ethnic issues, resurgent sub-national movements and severe immigration problems. It has thus, become a complex task to develop and support measures for strengthening the governance, justice, security and socio-economic capacities of the region in order to avoid insurgence of violence as war and internal conflicts do not simply end with the signing of peace agreements. In such situations, the local population has the greatest commitment to building sustainable peace.¹

A sector that had remained undeniably overlooked and their contributions underestimated would be that of women. Given the multi-ethnic heterogeneous cultural background, it is generally perceived that women in Northeastern region of India are comparatively much liberal than women from the mainstream homogeneous culture. The general presumption is that women of this region are unprejudiced and are equal partners with their male counterparts in different aspects of life. It cannot be denied that women in Northeast region have greater freedoms such as mobility as compared to the other regions. Sexual segregation remains unpopular and male-female interactions are not restricted. Unlike the other parts of India, the entire Northeastern region is almost free from social evils like sati, dowry, child marriage, female foeticide and female infanticide. Women also enjoy easier access to education and economic activities than their other counterparts. Hence, all of these promote women's greater visibility in public spaces leading to the impression that women of this region have attained exceeding empowerment and liberation much to the envy of their other counterparts across the country. However, this picture of women enjoying higher status remains largely as an illusion. Even though the discriminatory social practices are absent, yet in reality there is a strong discrimination against women mainly in the light of age-old traditions and customary beliefs and practices. The violent conditions have been hampering not only their day-to-day life but livelihood too. Hence, women in general through

various umbrella organizations and local level efforts worked for peace and prosperity. It is in this background this paper attempts to examine peace processes with particular focus on the contributions of North-east women. It documents the creative strategies used by women to resolve disputes between armed forces and organize for peace and harmony in areas devastated by conflict. It also documents the activities of women to sustain the ceasefire, strengthen the formal peace process and encourage the pursuit of long-term stability in the region. The first part of the paper reviews the available literature in brief on the role of women in peace process; the second part of the paper describes the role of Northeast women in peacekeeping and the third part is in the form of conclusion.

2. Works on the Role of Women in Peace Process :

In major post conflict societies, women consist of more than half the population and as peacekeeping has evolved to reflect the populations we serve, women have become increasingly part of the peacekeeping family. However, it is evident that women's role in society has not been adequately dealt with in most historical studies. Women have been delineated and have become the "hidden sex" in the pages of history. Most of the earlier writings have been mostly undertaken from patriarchal perspectives. Besides, women are often portrayed as passive victims and their efforts and potential roles in fostering peace and security are disregarded. In this regard, Charlotte Perkins Gilman rightly argues that based on sexual distinctions, history writing has ignored women and gave credit only to men for human progress in many spheres of life.² Hence, this paper attempts to bring out the role and contributions of Northeast women in peacekeeping which has been ignored over a long period of time.

The last few decades have, however seen a paradigm shift in social science researches which has consequently influenced the trends in historical writings too. This shift has affected the approaches in historical research by taking into account the question about women and their role in the society. The approach in the historiography of traditional male hierarchy and dominance has been questioned and critiqued by feminist scholars and writers which eventually brought the realization that the participation of women in movements have always been present, yet scarcely documented. The edited book *Coming out of Violence; Essays on Ethnicity, Conflict Resolution and Peace Process in Northeast India* is an effort to study the violence in a larger context in Northeast India where women though not in focus but their contributions have formed the parts of discussions in various articles and especially the article by Anuradha Dutta.³ Sajal Nag in his article "When Hens Crow: Women, Peacemaking and the Genderisation of Politics" has discussed the condition of Northeast India as a whole and had provided information on the writings of colonial ethnographers and the contemporary writers.

Hence, even before the concept of gender equality became a gospel beginning in the mid 1990's, the conflict ravaged hills of Northeast region had witnessed multiple women organizations that sprout out in defence reaction against the violent political conflicts. Women have been actively participating in mediating peace whether it is in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam or Meghalaya. Their incessant campaign against the violence of armed forces or the Indian Army/State have played a significant role in creating a sense of peace and security in conflict-torn localities. These isolated women groups basically struggling for their rights in the extreme corners of the country were strong enough to hold hands in solidarity with the national and global networks right from village levels to states and to the extent of participating in the United Nations Committee for Women's Rights. This region sent a strong delegation to the groundbreaking 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women,⁴ a beginning which changed the scenario of women's activism in the Northeast region. It served to legitimize the much-mocked women's voices against demands for basic rights or violence against women as matters of public importance and not the interest of a few 'misfit' females in the society. The efforts of these courageous women ensured that the message of equality was clear in the hills where patriarchal societies were dominant and applied through age old customs and traditions. In October 2000, for the first time in its history, the United Nations Security Council acknowledged that women have a key role in promoting international stability by passing Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It called on all parties to ensure women's participation in peace processes, from the prevention of conflicts to negotiations and postwar reconstruction. The Women Waging Peace Policy Commission was established to examine peace processes with a particular focus on the contributions of women.

3. Women's Movement in the North-East :

History is a glaring testimony to the valor of women in Northeast India in fighting the good war against discriminations, inequality and social evils. They have courageously risen up in arms against atrocities meted out towards them or their communities. Women have also contributed immensely in the freedom struggle of our nation. A

number of women freedom fighters have been at the helm of various revolts against the British rule. The region is home to some of the ablest revolutionary women figures of the country who have excelled in their respective fields. The message of equality brought revolutionary reversals as women's rights became the new politically correct stand to take for politicians, bureaucrats and other public personalities whether they personally agreed or not. Women have thus, time and again mobilized and devised social reforms in the form of movements and unions for the welfare of the society. Some of such movements are active even today, playing significant roles in bringing about momentous transformation in the society.

Some significant women movements that gained prominence in Assam were the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, established in 1926 under Chandraprabha Saikiani. This organization has a rich background of initiating various movements for violence against women, women's low literacy, gender discrimination in wages and workplaces and encouraging women's self-esteem in the society in general. They also conduct peace campaigns and have raised questions against women's invisibility in the society, challenging the patriarchy inherent in it. Assam also produced some profound women freedom fighters whose remarkable contributions remain a matter of huge pride to the region. Chandraprabha Saikiani was a social reformer, writer and freedom fighter and a recipient of the fourth highest civilian award for Padma Shri in the year 1972 from the Government of India. In 1921, she joined the Non-Cooperation Movement of Mahatma Gandhi and worked among the women of Tezpur. Pushpalata Das was an eminent social worker and an ardent Gandhian. She was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 1951-1961, a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly and a member of the working committee of the INC. She was honoured with the third highest civilian award Padma Bhushan in 1999 for her immense contributions to society. Kanaklata Barua also known as Birbala became a member of "Mri tyu Bahini", a death squad consisting of young people from the Gohpur subdivision of Assam. On 20th September 1942, while hoisting the national flag at the local police station, Kanaklata was shot dead by the police along with a female squad, Mukanda Kakoti. Their heroic deeds are eulogized till date.

The headstrong women of Manipur have been at the forefront in fighting against injustice and social discriminations. They are a strong and formidable force actively participating in socio-political movements. For instance, the Nupi LamLal meaning "Women's War" was recorded to have taken place twice. The first in 1904 against a British order of an act of "Lulap"(forced labor) which was vehemently opposed by over 5000 women and led to a week-long agitation. The British eventually suppressed the movement but at the cost of accepting the will of the women to take back their order. The second Nupi Lan was recorded between 1939-40, the reason being the indiscriminate export of rice from Manipur by Marwari businessmen who were supported by the British, resulting in "chak tangba" (inflation of food/rice) and a manufactured famine in Manipur. The womenfolk again revolted against the British and the Maharaja. The British then responded by deploying heavy army and police force against the unarmed women protesters, many of whom lost their lives. The movement was ultimately suppressed and it evolved into administrative and constitutional reforms in the state. This event of uprising against the artificial scarcity is still observed in Manipur on December 12. Later in the 1970's, a movement known as Nisha Bandis started as an activism of the Meitei women against alcoholism and drug abuse. This led to the passing of the Prohibition law in the state and also resulted in underground insurgency. The imposition of the AFSPA, however led to brutal dealings with insurgency resulting in high number of deaths among youngsters. The lantern carrying women involved in the movement later switched to flaming torches and were then called "Meira Paibi" meaning torch bearers. They patrol in protest seeking redress against human rights violations committed by paramilitary and armed forces units against the innocent especially crimes against women. By late 1970's, the Meira Paibis' movement primarily aimed at protecting the human rights of the community and to fight against the AFSPA. Meira Paibi, is at present an organized body that combats social evils and inequities. The organization regrouped to create awareness and raise voice against the Citizenship Amendment Bill. Another outstanding personality of this region is Irom Sharmila aka the Iron Lady who is regarded as the face of anti-AFSPA. As a mark of revolt against AFSPA, Irom Sharmila sat on a fast from November 2000 which lasted for 16 years. Amnesty International in 2015 designated her as "Prisoner of Conscience".⁵

The state of Meghalaya is home to some of the last bastions of matrilineal societies movements which were initiated for the welfare of the community. The oldest known women's union in Meghalaya, Mother's Union was started in the year 1941 at Tura in Garo Hills. It was founded on the principles of Christianity with its main objective to bring up children in best moral character, to provide proper clothing to children and to spread awareness of hygiene and wellness among Garo women. An association by the name Ka Synjuk Kynthei was established in 1947 which is the oldest welfare voluntary organization in the areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. This association aims at bringing socio-economic changes to the females in the society and has opened centres' which provide education in crafts, knitting, embroidery, cooking etc. In addition, they offer midwife services in rural areas, adult education, maternity and child welfare clinics. Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya known as Ka Synjuk Ki Kynthei Riewlum was established in 1979 with its main agendas of protection of tribal lands, foreign issues, unemployment and drunkenness. This association has

relentlessly worked for unity, strength and solidarity among women. Another association by the name Ka Seng Longkmei Laitumkhrah was formed on 28th August 1984 with an aim to bring women of the community closer, to infuse the spirit of love, unity, cooperation and understanding among the women folks. Apart from these, there are some other women associations across Meghalaya which works for various issues related to women and their communities,⁶ some notable ones being Ka Seng Kynthei Nongrim Hills and Ka Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei.

Traditionally, Mizo women have made a mark outside their homes as entrepreneurs, teachers and officers in the State administration. However, just as the State's history has been strife-torn, so has the life of its women, who have borne the worst consequences of the instability and violence that had marked the region. The state of Mizoram, over the years witnessed a collective fight against outdated patriarchal laws as Mizo women fought for legal reforms. In a historic victory for the Women's movement in Mizoram, the Mizoram Assembly passed The Mizo Marriage Bill, The Mizo Inheritance of Property Bill and The Mizo Divorce Bill, 2014 which took a path breaking decision for elevating of the status of women⁷ in the state. This is the result of a struggle that has gone on for over decades spearheaded by the women organization, the where the ownership of land and properties go to the females. The state has a rich history of women's Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) under its President Pi Sangkhumi. MHIP is an apex body representing several local women groups which has been demanding changes in Mizo Marriage Laws, especially in abolition of Mizo bride price in Mizo marriages. The organization has also time and again fought against violence against women, discrimination in workplaces and campaigned for 33% women's reservation in the political system among others.

Women have played a pivotal role in checking violence throughout Naga history. As socially sanctioned peacemakers, Naga women have historically intervened in the midst of battles and have appealed for peace and unity. This traditional and cultural role has enabled Naga women to protect their communities through informal mediation, to mobilize for reconciliation and to shape the formal peace process. There are multiple accounts of women who directly intervene in villages and in townships to become a human barrier between civilians and soldiers. They advocate for the removal of army posts in towns and villages as these posts often lead to skirmishes with the underground armed forces and generate terror among civilians. There had been incidents where village women also appeal to underground groups by walking to their camps and pleading with the leaders not to ambush army encampments, which would make the neighboring villages vulnerable to retaliatory attacks. In urban areas, tribal elders ask women to attend their meetings with the underground leaders in a strategic effort to keep the discussions peaceful. Women also expose human rights violations provoking the underground leadership to take corrective actions. Women work through the tribal network and sometimes enlist the support of women within the underground movement, particularly when sexual abuse occurs. Naga women also, in their attempt to defuse inter-community tensions open channels of communication with other communities and work together. They form coalitions with non-Naga women to rescue hostages, provide support to displaced persons and promote inter-community social integration. Though campaigns and events, Naga women spread the message that there can be no peace for Nagas without peace for all.⁸

The most prominent and established women movement took shape in 1984 in the form of Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) in Kohima against the backdrop of the Nagaland conflict, rampant alcoholism and drug problems. It is a civil society organization that consistently tried address problems of conflict, peace building and substance abuse by creating a platform for dialogue that brings together disparate voices. Ever since its formation, NMA has consistently voiced their opinions against fratricidal killings, violence between different Naga outfits such as NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) and the Indian Security forces. The 1997 ceasefire, which is renewed annually, has been a precarious one, strained by many factors and derailed at various points. Yet it continues to hold because Naga social organizations, particularly women are accepted by all parties as the main stakeholders in the peace process. Women also shape the formal peace process through their participation in consultations with the Isaak-Muivah group, such as in Bangkok in 2002. Civil society representation has made the official talks more representative and has expanded the agenda to reflect the concerns of the Naga people. The changes in policy demonstrated recognition of the needs of a broader peace that placed civilian security at the forefront of the agenda. Despite these significant contributions, there has not been systematic integration of women or civil society in the dialogue, nor has there been a concerted effort to use them to advance the peace process

Although neither consistent nor universal, it can be argued that women's participation in the peace process has led to a shift in social consciousness and a growth in the negotiating power of Naga women. Awareness of the importance of women participation to the Isaak-Muivah faction, after prodding by NMA representative, was evidenced by the participation of the women leaders in the third Bangkok consultation in 2002 and again at an assembly in Manipur in April 2003. Women in the NMA and NWUM (Naga Women's Union Manipur) organized a variety of initiatives to promote reconciliation in Naga and Non-Naga communities, the most well-known of which is the NMA's "Shed No More Blood Campaign." On 4 August 1994, 3000 mothers from various tribes assembled in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland to launch the initiative. In addition to public rallies, the campaign established a non-partisan Peace Team that conducted a

series of advocacy meetings with senior officials in State Government and well as Indian Military Officers. These public and private meetings have reduced the level of tension and violence, provided space for dialogue and created a broad desire for peace. It was also found that “the NMA has assumed enormous influence in Naga politics is borne by the fact that they are the only women’s group in South Asia who has participated in a Ceasefire negotiation.”⁹ Regarding this, the then President of NWUM, Gina Shangkhram noted “The space given to Naga women in the consultative meeting is highly appreciated and is a good beginning”.¹⁰

The social and political recognition of NMA’s and NWUM’s contributions has begun to translate into actions, as women are increasingly requested to participate in public activities and negotiations. NMA and NWUM facilitate communication among leaders of the underground factions, participate in Naga civil society’s advocacy campaigns and have been included in some high-level delegation and peace consultations. Yet there remains enormous untapped potential in the role of Naga women. NMA and NWUM must be provided with financial and technical resources to maximize the impact of their initiatives and their access to all major actors. Unlike most areas of conflict in the world, Naga women are recognized as traditional peace makers in Naga society. Given the long-standing ceasefire and little forward movement in the process, creative efforts to support and involve women systematically in the formal talks is a crucial yet simple way to bring the Nagas closer to peace.

The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Tripura haven’t seen major women’s movement in its history as compared to the other states. It is poignant to mention that the representation of women in the political leadership positions has been dreadful. More women leaders are needed to push forward the issues of women. To empower women, each of the members of the civil society needs to come forward and shun the stereotypical biases against the female gender. The unapologetic and unabashed stance held by premier institutions and institutional leaders only helps to perpetuate and justify sexual discrimination in the society.

4. Conclusion :

North-east region of India witnessed an ongoing low intensity armed conflict for almost more than six decades. While the entire populace of the region continues to suffer, women living in such conditions are most vulnerable. Sexual violence is used to intimidate, punish, demoralize, and control victims and their communities. During the armed conflict, even the state, which is supposed to be a guardian of their lives and rights, poses a threat to them. In ethnic conflict, women and children are easy victims and often the first ones to be killed. Even when they manage to survive from direct physical violence, they have to bear heavy economic responsibility. The reason is that the conflict in the north-east region has resulted an increased in female-headed households. Women had to cope up with these situations without any support. The effects of violence on women have different dimensions, including psychological traumas associated with sexual violation and with the loss or disappearance of family members last long after peace returns. The situations of armed conflicts, are accompanied by greater marginalization of women’s rights, as both the armed forces and militant groups reinforce patriarchal values. The conflict in the region, which has manifested itself as a low-intensity silent war and which in some areas have gone on for decades, has no frontiers, entering every home, neighbourhood and community. Normal social and economic life has been seriously compromised and the impact of the violence and the stress associated with the constant threats and anxieties of living in an atmosphere of unremitting aggression and fear has been substantial. Consequently, levels of sexual violence against women and girls have even been increased in the wake of some armed conflicts. Such is the situation in the ‘low intensity war’ found in states across India’s North-East.

The stark confrontations along gender lines are unavoidable features in societies or countries where women are shaking off such discriminations to seek justice and equality. Gender equality is at the very heart of Human Rights to quote the fundamental principles of the United Nations charter. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹¹ Whatever rights women have at this moment are the fruits of centuries of intense struggles to change the sexist mindset. Even something as basic as women voting rights came after highly charged feminist movements in the West. The situation in the Hills is different where tradition and modernity co-exist bringing about differences of opinion on the status of its women.

It is undeniable that modern democratic institutions brought about significant changes in the social relationships, education, economy, governance and entitlements of communities as well as individuals of this region. However, despite the numerous progresses, women in this region remain overshadowed under rusty traditions and continue to suffer under unfair customary practices without the right to get modern legal support. The Northeast women find themselves fighting discriminatory customary practices which deny them among other rights, the right to property, right to ownership of land, right to inheritance, right to maintenance after divorce or equal rights to their

children. It is true that they have been peacemakers but their presence is significantly missing at the negotiating tables. Folk-sayings, tribal lore and proverbs frequently exclaims the theme that females are brainless, that the wisdom of a woman does not go beyond the village well and that women are subservient and created to serve the menfolk. Such beliefs and practices have deeply impacted the minds of the people that even in the 21st century, women are debarred to participate in tribal councils whether at the apex level or at the village in any of the eight states. A controversial survey conducted by The Thompson Reuters Foundation in 2018 ranked India as the world's most dangerous county for women. The "Me Too" movement cracked open a pandora's box which in actuality is the general attitude towards women. Silence on this issue is no longer an option if justice is to be won or to put it mundanely, objectives like the Millennium Development Goals, which countries including India, have promised should be achieved. It's time that our societies re-evaluate the fault lines and join heads and hands to realize our idea of an egalitarian society.

On the basis of the above discussions, by way of conclusion, it can be said that Civil society representation has made the official talks more representative and has expanded the agenda to reflect the concerns of the Northeast people. The changes in policy demonstrated recognition of the needs of a broader peace that placed civilian security at the forefront of the agenda. Despite these significant contributions, there has not been systematic integration of women or civil society in the dialogue, nor has there been a concerted effort to use them to advance the peace process. Women have a peaceful way of negotiating and have a capacity to defuse a tense situation. In fact, it is expected of women to reach the warring factions, defuse inter-community tension, open channels of communication and build a dialogue of understanding and trust. Yet, since this is the traditional role that women play as peacekeepers in Naga society, their interventions are often categorized as "women's work" and taken for granted rendering it invisible. As peace and development are correlated phenomenon, an analysis of varied role played by women in the peace process need to be addressed which corresponds to the overall development of the region. By doing so, it would certainly open the way for a just and inclusive society for these women of the region need to close ranks among tribal communities and class lines and extend unwavering support to the many dynamic women who have dared to step out to challenge the status quo.

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