

Women, Violence and North-East India

PAULA BANERJEE

Events in the metropolitan cities of India in recent times have brought back interest in the evolving situation of women in north-east India. The discussions on everyday violence against women in India were triggered by the events of December 2012. These events have once again put the spotlight on the extraordinary violence faced by women in north-east India for over decades now.

The complexity of the situation was underlined by the J Verma Committee's inability to address the issue of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) and its effects on women in its report. Even the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 failed to address the question of rape with impunity by the armed forces. This was taken up in the recently circulated unedited version of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) report. Section 12 of the report stated

The Committee is deeply concerned about the reported high level of violence against women in conflict-affected regions.¹ In this special issue it is our contention that to understand the complexity of violence against women in the Indian mainland one needs to hark back to the violence faced by women in Northeast India under the garb of national security and see if there is a continuum from what is happening for decades to women in Northeast India to what is happening to women in rest of the country today.

Women and Marginalisation

North-east India is a region of myriad complexities. It can only be called a region because of its geographical location and consistent deprivation faced by the states in the initial phase of Indian decolonisation. In popular perception it is a peripheral geographic space but it shares international borders with countries that are extremely important to India such as China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The region shares a chequered history of divide and rule politics, suspect development paradigms and instigated resource politics. The regional leaders further intensified the problem by often replicating majoritarian politics.

Women's lives here are extremely complex. They are affected both by immigration as well as securitisation of the area, increased trafficking in women, children, narcotics and small arms and diseases such as HIV. The women share a common history of marginalisation both by the outsider or the state and the insider or their own community.

Amidst all of these the state initiates its "gender-just" policies whose efficacies need to be analysed since they in no way seem to decrease violence against women in the region. Within this scenario of extraordinary violence both the state and non-state military forces expect women to act

as agents of peace. What does agents of peace in conflict situations imply? Does it merely mean playing the role of negotiator or mediator to resolve immediate conflicts or does it entail engaging with the larger sociopolitical framework that produces conflicts? It is our contention that it would be simplistic and unjust to view women in the north-east Indian states as either mere "victims" or as agents of peace. In this collection of articles we hope to bring out multiple spheres of negotiations that women are undertaking in north-east India today.

Women as Peace Agents?

In the first article Ashild Kolas contends that since the late 1990s, women's organisations and especially the associations of tribal "mothers" have been increasingly vocal in calling for peace, despite sporadic response from the government. Kolas investigates the evolution of women's activism in a hill district of Assam, enquiring how and why the "mothers" have appeared on the political stage, and what the new appeal to "motherhood" means.

In the second article Purna Banerjee, Krishna Banerjee, Meenakshi Sen Bandyopadhyay and Jayanto Bhattacharya discuss the three-decade long conflict in Tripura and how women have fared. They explore how different conflicts in Tripura between state and non-state actors have always victimised women resulting in perennial bloodsheds. The third article continues this theme. Paula Banerjee discusses how women have fared in the conflicts in Nagaland and Tripura where the conflict has been extremely violent for decades. She attempts to find out how women evolve as political agents after they have played the role of mediators and negotiators that increase their visibility in the civilian sphere. Are they able to influence the state and renegotiate gender relationships or are they pushed further back from their positions of visibility?

The next article describes how in the struggle that has ensued for more than three decades between Assam's

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insurgent outfit, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), and the state, the lives of several key players and even ordinary participants have been transformed. Yet according to Rakhee Kalita, the gendered aspect of war and demilitarisation in conflict zones is something that has not merited enough curiosity in Assam. Her article discusses how women are affected by the rebellion in the state, what the nature of female participation in this armed conflict is and what do these women do when the camps are dismantled and ceasefire is declared.

Ranabir Samaddar and Anjuman Ara Begum point out that accounts of women in conflict situations are valuable because they give us a good idea of how the two vectors of gender and conflict meet and intersect in contemporary history. However, in the perspective of social dynamics, social change, and social transformation, it seems we are still unable to grasp what is at stake. We need a relational form of analysis that will throw light on two of the most crucial issues here,

namely, (a) the evolution of the form of rule over society in which the negotiation of the problematic of gender is becoming increasingly significant for governance and stabilising society, and (b) the incipient issue of social justice.

The articles attempt to bring back women squarely into the centre of negotiations for political space in the context of conflict-riddled north-east India.

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NOTE

[This collection is a product of the Calcutta Research Group's 20-year engagements with women's issues in north-east India.]

¹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding observations on the combined fourth and fifth periodic reports of India, advanced unedited version, 18 July 2015, CEDAW/C/INDCO/4-5.

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