

# Women as Activists and Agents of Peace and Change in the Northeast India with special reference to Assam

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## ABSTRACT

Peace and conflict are closely interconnected and inseparable. In the situation of armed conflict, the civilian especially women, children, the elderly and disabled are affected by various violations and discrimination. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was signed on October 2000. It calls for the women participation in conflict prevention and resolution initiatives, the integration of gender perspective in peacebuilding and peacekeeping mission and the protection of women in an armed conflict situation. The paper looks into the roles played by women in conflict resolution, post-conflict reconstruction and the peace process especially in Assam.

## 1. Introduction

Peace is the prerequisite for the exercise of all human rights and duties. It is not the peace of silence, of men and women who by choice or constraints remain silent. It is the peace of freedom and therefore of just laws of happiness, equality and solidarity, in which all citizens count, live together and share. Peace and conflict are not isolated and independent terms. Nor are they settled concepts of "once for all" nature. Rather they are closely interconnected and are inseparable. In the situation of armed conflict, the civilian population especially women, children, the elderly and the disabled are particularly affected by various violations and discriminations. To put corrective measures and affirmative action to change the ground realities, it is important to pay attention to how women play her roles to address the violations, e.g. Women's rights activists and women as a peace negotiator.

In 1995, the United Nation's fourth world conference on women held in Beijing, China created a rippling of new ideas and conversation among women involved in civil society around the world. The civil society campaign on women in peacebuilding led to October 2000 signing of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. Resolution 1325, recognizes the civilians, particularly women and children, are worst affected by the conflict and that is a threat to peace and security. It also calls for women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution initiatives, the integration of gender perspective in peacebuilding and peacekeeping mission and the protection of women in an armed conflict situation.

### There are reasons why women should be included in the peacebuilding process-

- Because women are half of every community and in the task of peacebuilding women and men must be a partner in peacebuilding.
- Because women are central caretakers of families and everyone suffers when women are oppressed, victimized and excluded from peacebuilding.

- Because women are excluded from public decision making, leadership, and educational activities.
- Because women and men have a different experience of violence and peace.
- Because the UN Security Council resolution 1325 created a mandate to include women in peacebuilding.

## 2. Objective of the study

- To look into an insurgency in Assam
- To look into the roles played by women in conflict resolution, post-conflict reconstruction, and the peace process.

## 3. Data and methodology

The study is made based on a descriptive way. It based on secondary sources like books, articles, and online materials.

## 4. Insurgency in Assam

Post-independence, Assam experienced a number of social movements related to different social issues such as demand for oil refinery, to make Assamese an official language of the state and also infamous "Assam Movement" of the 1980s, which was a protest against inclusion of names of foreign nationals in the voters lists and also Bodo Movement for the separate state of Bodos from Assam. During the Assam movement, All Assam Students Union steered anti-foreigners movement and ULFA steered armed struggle for Assam's independence. Nani Gopal Mahanta describes the transformation of Assamese identity as a journey from nationalism to secessionism. He argues that ULFA, which launched a war against the government of India in 1979 demanding Swadhin Asom (independent Assam), "represents a mindset, a suppressed voice which is deeply engrained in Assam's psyche". However, ULFA indulged in the indiscriminate killings and extortion. Similarly, one of the unresolved conflicts of northeast India is Bodoland movement for a separate homeland by Bodo tribe of Assam. The movement has undergone a paradigm shift from a democratic

and non-violent movement to armed struggle with the formation of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in 1986 which bowed to fight for the sovereign Bodoland through armed revolution. The entire Bodoland region in the lower Assam has remained on the theatre of frequent armed conflict. With the insurgency and counter-insurgency operation of both state as well as central government, the Bodoland movement became more violent in the latter part of the 1990s, resulting into loss of several hundred lives, ethnic conflagration, displacement of a large number of people, the disappearance of innocent youths and destruction of properties on Bodoland areas.

### 5. Initiative taken by for peace process in Assam

According to Udayon Misra, in the article written North-East India Political Science Association (NEIPSA), he compared the Naga and Assam peace process where he wrote that at no stage whatsoever did the ULFA consider it necessary to test the peoples will. Nor has it seriously considered it necessary to maintain any close liaison with the people. ULFA has always nourished a highly secretive militaristic set up which leaves almost no scope for establishing any rapport with the people. It has progressively alienated the masses from the policies and programmes of the organization, so much that outfit stands discredited before the people.

But after the series of the bomb blast in 2004, a two day Mahasabha was organized in Guwahati under the auspices of the two Asom Jatiyabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP). The Mahasabha adopted two resolutions- to call for the initiation of talks between the ULFA and the central and the state governments while the second resolution called upon the ULFA to rein in its armed activities and enter into a dialogue for the greater cause of the people. It was against this background that ULFA came forward for a civil society driven approach to solving the problem between ULFA and Gol. It declared the formation of group called people's consultative group, where only Dr. Indira Goswami was a female member and the others were male members like Mr. Rebat Phukan, Mukul Mahanta, Arup Borbora, Dr. Brojen Gogoi, Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, Haidar Hussain, Hiranya Saikia, Dilip Patgiri, Lachit Bordoloi, and Diganta Konwer. People's consultative group (PCG) had three rounds of discussion with the Gol during 2005-2006. But this three rounds of discussions finally proved to be futile with the unilateral resumption of army operation by Gol on September 24, 2006. Such deceptive attitude of the government forced PCG to withdraw from the process of dialogue on 28 September 28, 2006. After PCG had withdrawn from the dialogue process, there was another attempt steered by people's committee for peace initiatives in Assam (PCPIA), an umbrella organization representing various civil society groups in Assam i.e. Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibarttan. In 2009 ULFA got divided into two houses, one led by its chairman Arbindo Rajkhowa and the other by the commander in chief Paresh Baruah. The Arbindo Rajkhowa engaged into the dialogue with the Gol facilitated by Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibarttan, to which Paresh Baruah completely opposed to who continues to assert for SwadinAsom. Thus, the Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibarttan initiative yielded some positive outcomes. The top jailed leaders were released from the jail by January 2011 facilitating the process of dialogue. However, the dialogue is opposed by the ULFA faction of Paresh Baruah.

The peace process with NDFB was never an easy task. The Bodo Women Justice Forum (BWJF) and Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples to bring NDFB into negotiating table for a peaceful solution of the Bodo people. However, it could not bring a positive outcome. It was with the formation of Bodo Peoples Forum for Peace and Rights (BPFPR) in April 2004, the NDFB showed its eagerness to seat for formal peace talks with the central government for amicable solution for the long-standing demands of Bodos. The peace effort of BPFPR failed due to the split of NDFB in 2008 between founding president Ranjan Daimary and general secretary Govind Basumatary.

In 2010, the Bodo National Convention was formed. Some of the member organizations are Bodoland Peoples Front, All Bodo Women's welfare Federation (ABWWF), Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), Dularai Bodo Harimu Afad (DuBHA). The primary objective of the BNC is to work for greater unity among civil society and also to work for peace and expedite the peace talks with the anti-talk faction of NDFB. Though in a limited way BNC has been seeking to prevent, reduce, transform and helping people to recover from armed violence. The outfit under the Ranjan Daimary for a second time declared a unilateral ceasefire on July 8, 2011. The general meeting of NDFB decided to cease all the violent activities indefinite to find a durable political solution to the conflict through political dialogue. On July 2012, the member of BNC, led by BTC chief Hagrama Mohilary met the representatives of Gol to urge them to hasten the peace process with the anti-talk NDFB. Again, Peoples Joint Action Committee for Bodoland Movement (PJACBM) formed by 45 tribal and non-tribal organizations was also formed to bring long term solution to the Bodo conflict. The recent violence that took place July 19 to 20, 2012 in four districts of lower Assam between the indigenous tribes and illegal migrants settled in Bodoland areas have come to shock to the peace efforts of the PJACNM.

### 6. Role of women in conflict situation

Women, children and suspected men of being linked with militant are the most suffered person in conflict areas. However, armed conflict does not only bring negative impact on women. The women of the northeast have made an effort towards peacemaking in the region on account of which they have spearheaded several movements. In countries around the world that have been stricken by protracted conflicts, women have been actively involved in the campaign for peace. The massive protest by women in recent Manipur is Meira Paibis, Naga Mothers Association in Nagaland, Mahila Shanti Sena, Bodo Women's Justice Forum, etc. in Assam. All these protests are working for resolving conflicts and disputes and resolving peace for the different regions of the state.

#### Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS):

Shanti Sena was made up of Gandhi's followers in India. Inspiring by the concepts of Gandhism like nonviolence, peace, this organization was formed at Kumrikata in 2001 under the guidance of Tamulpur Ancholik Gramdan Sangha under erstwhile Nalbari District and present Baska area under BTAD. The main aim of this organization is to bring peace in the society. The women in Mahila Shanti Sena act as an agent of conflict transformation in Assam. Their technique also includes

trying to bring to surface explicitly the rational fears, hopes, and goals of the people involved in the conflict. Peace, however, is a process and sustained the effort to resolve conflict non-violently by addressing the root cause of the problem through negotiations and dialogue which has been rightly propagated by Shanti Sena.

The Mahila Shanti Sena's present strength is almost seven hundred that it was formed with the help of Dr. Rama Shankar Singh, who belonged to the Peace Centre of the McMaster University of Canada. The organization aims at empowering women to build peace, raise mass awareness among women about their power and strength, focuses on the problems that women are facing like poverty, negligence, illiteracy, and unemployment.

#### **Northeast Network (NEN):**

North East Network is a women's rights organization working for women irrespective of their diversity and regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, disability, culture, and space. NEN also connects to different civil society organization on development and social justice issues within northeast India.

#### **All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF):**

The All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation was formed on July 14, 1986, with the objectives of establishing equality between men and women addressing the problem of concerning women and empowerment of weaker sections. The All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation mainly took two different activities-

a) On the face of all the atrocities carried out against the civil population during those days, activists from the organization went about the house to house to spread the message of peace.

b) They extended legal help to those who could not redress their grievances. During the ethnic clash between the Bodo and Adivasi communities in 1996, representatives from the Federation visited the affected areas and submitted memoranda to the district administration and the state government.

#### **Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF):**

There was a huge protest on Udalguri demanding National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) chairman Ranjan

Daimari's early release after the special court of the Central Bureau of Investigation sentenced Daimari to life imprisonment. The protest rally was organized under the aegis of Bodo Women's Justice Forum and Bodo Peoples Committee for Peace Initiative and society for Indigenous Peoples Rights. NDFB chairman Ranjan Daimari was found guilty in the October 30, 2008, serial bomb blasts in the state were convicted life imprisonment by CBI special court. Chairperson of Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF) while speaking to media person stated that several organizations in Assam killed people but all were excused. the NDFB which is in peace talks with the Government had to face the biased, the partial attitude of the government. She alleged that the leaders of United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I) received a grand welcome upon landing on the country while on the other hand Ranjan was brought to India from Bangladesh tied in Iron chair. She added that life imprisonment verdict would harm the harmony and peace that Bodos want in the region. She also said that she had never seen any leader of the rebel group arrested when the peace talks with the center are in underway. She added that revolutionists may get life imprisonment or penalty but it is a part of a revolution.

#### **7. Conclusion**

Thus if we analyze the women's participation as an activist and in the peace process, we find less direct women participation in the peace process, while on the other there was a chronological presentation of civil society both in the peace process talks with ULFA and NDFB. But the women in Assam had contended itself acting as an activist and organized themselves in groups and discuss instances of their rights and possibilities of their redressal at the local level. They must conceptualize in a manner in which they can take responsibilities of their protection and seek information about legal and non-legal provisions related to the protection in a conflict situation. Thus the actions of women as helping hand, as activists during the conflict situation reveals the capacity of women in society through civil society and organization like BNC and PJACBM engaged in the peace process. Though the resolution of inclusion of women peace building process adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1325, the number of women in decision-making positions remain small in the context of Assam.

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