



**The Mothers and the Militants:**

**An analysis of Women's roles as Combatants and in Women's Collectives in the conflict zones of Assam and Manipur**

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# List of Acronyms

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AFSPA- Armed Forces Special Powers Act

PLA- People's Liberation Army

PREPAK- People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak

ULFA- United Liberation Front of Assam

UNLF- United National Liberation Front

UNSCR- United Nations Security Council Resolution

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“Tumhara Saath Milne Se Ehsaas-e-Quwaat aata hai

Nayii Duniya Sajaane ka Junoon Phir Hum pe Chaya hai”

(Your solidarity has given me hope, this solidarity between us women has given me passion to create a new world)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A song by Kamla Bhasin created with women from India and Pakistan to move beyond the political disputes the countries had and to establish bonds of friendship between women from the two warring countries

# Abstract

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Most research on women in conflict zones tend to concentrate on the idea of women as victims or as peacemakers. This Paper questions this essentialisation of women and points out the various diverse and dynamic roles women occupy in situations of armed conflict.

This research paper examines the roles women play in the conflict zones of Northeast India, specifically in Assam and Manipur, how much agency they have in this engagement and whether this participation results in a confrontation of patriarchal norms and leads to social and political empowerment for the women involved. The paper investigates women's agency in this engagement using secondary literature from various sources.

Through the cases of the Manipuri and Assamese women, this paper has established how important it is to have a nuanced understanding of women's agency and empowerment in armed conflict and how having an essentialised understanding of these roles exclude women from peace processes and is harmful to the women and a lasting peace.

Keyword: Women, Conflict, Agency, Empowerment, Resistance,

# Chapter One: Where are the Women?

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## *1.1. Introduction*

Gender issues are prevalent throughout society in diverse contexts and these are even more pronounced and articulated in situations of armed conflict and violence. Although there has been extensive literature on armed conflict and on political violence, most of this work, unfortunately does not address gender concerns resulting in an “under- or misrepresentation of the gendered causes, costs and consequences of violence” (Moser and Clark 2001: 3) and “insufficient recognition of women’s involvement and participation, both unavoidable and deliberate, in violent conflicts, and of the delinking of women from passive peaceful stereotypes” (Moser and Clark 2001: 3). More recent analysis recognise some degree of women’s participation but again sees simplistic division of roles portraying women mainly as victims and crusaders of peace while men were portrayed as perpetrators or as heroes. (Moser and Clark 2001: 3). This Research Paper contributes to the analysis of women’s roles, agency and empowerment in conflict zones, focusing on their roles in armed conflict and peace processes.

The paper deals with two cases where women have exercised their agency in contexts of long-term conflict, participating in struggles and developing strategies to defy state violence. The first is the role of woman combatants in the guerrilla group- The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) – a separatist group that resorted to armed struggle from 1980, focusing on the period from the late 1980s till 2010. The second case concerns the Meira Paibis or the Mothers of Manipur- a state-wide group led by the women in Manipur- in 2006 who adopted unconventional strategies to challenge state power and patriarchal norms.

## *1.2. Contextual Background: Separatists Struggles in Assam and Manipur*

After India gained Independence from British colonial rule in 1947, the new demarcations drawn up in the region were, in some instances, contested by groups who took up armed resistance and separatist struggles as they felt that their integration into the new country had not been fair. In particular the North East of India has seen ongoing separatist struggles in 6 of its states for the last 50 years on the grounds that the new demarcations of states created artificial borders between people, and these decisions were made by “bureaucratic and political mandarins in national and state capitals, far removed from the realities of the customs and beliefs that govern the thoughts and lives of indigenous peoples” (Hazarika 1995: xviii). These struggles have included the resorting to guerrilla tactics and armed resistance against the state, which in turn were countered by legal and military measures to control and suppress these groups. The following sections highlight some of the key features of the history of these struggles.

### *1.2.1. Assam: The United Liberation Front of Assam*



The ULFA was founded on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 1979 as an armed militant outfit to articulate the demand for an Independent Assam, outside of the Indian Nation state. To understand the basis for such a demand, one has to go back to 1825 when the British signed the treaty of Yandaboo and annexed Assam into the wider British empire. Geographically Assam was a frontier state sharing borders in 1947 with what was then East Bengal but the partition of British India into Pakistan and India led to the inflow of migrants from 'East Pakistan' (now Bangladesh since 1971). India's independence from British rule and subsequent partition did little to change its frontier character. Although the borders had now become international, migration from the densely populated areas of the subcontinent into Assam could not be stopped (Baruah 2009: 957). This migration became a concern for the indigenous population of Assam for a long time. Moreover, in the past decades, the young people in Assam realised that states which had been in the same economic conditions in the early 1950s had forged ahead "and the lag between Assam and the rest of India widened with relentless tempo" (Gohain 2007:1013). This coupled with crippling economic situations and the non-response of India's legal and political institutions "was at the core of a powerful six-year-long protest movement", which provided fertile ground for ULFA's radical brand of regional patriotism". (Baruah 2009: 962). "The sense of injustice festered as younger Assamese who went to study in metropolitan universities felt the galling difference and were sometimes treated like backwoodsmen." (Gohain 2007:1014). Uddipan Datta also mentions how "a wide range of instances in history, ranging from the placement of Assam in the Group C states by the Cabinet Mission to the alleged surrender of Assam to China" left the Assamese with a sense of being wronged (Borah 2012: 49).

These circumstances provided a fertile ground for the Assam movement<sup>2</sup>. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), although born in 1979, only found more widespread support after the government started using force on the peaceful protestors of the Assam movement. Although it can be said that the movement was chauvinistic in many ways and only catered to caste Hindu Assamese, it caught on so quickly because there were many legitimate concerns that the Assamese people had. The Assam Movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Indian government and the leaders of the movement. The Accord led to an incomplete resolution on the question of foreigners and prominent cultural and economic issues that the central government promised to address. The Central government agreed to take steps to create and preserve cultural and educational institutions in the state and allocate more resources for the state's development. They also agreed to setting various cut-off dates for entry of immigrants, based on which immigrants were either to be disenfranchised, deported or made citizens (Baruah 2009: 961).

It must be noted that although the United Liberation Front of Assam had deep roots and relations with the Assam movement, citizenship and immigration issues were not something the outfit was concerned with very urgently. "Instead, ULFA takes the view that the gradual political marginalization of the "indigenous" population of Assam—because of immigration from elsewhere in India and Bangladesh, and the enfranchisement of non-citizens—is

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<sup>2</sup> The Assam movement or agitation was a popular movement in Assam against illegal immigrants during the years of 1979-1985.

symptomatic of Assam's subordinate status in the Indian constitutional-political order" (Baruah 2009: 954). The outfit has tried extensively to distance itself from this rhetoric of foreigners and Bangladeshis and has a more inclusive and non-ethnic idea of what the term Assamese means and it appeals to all inhabitants of Assam. Moreover, their recruitment strategy has also been reflective of this stance by adopting an inclusive strategy. (Baruah 2009: 963). The idea remains that the relationship of Assam to India is that of a classic colonial nature where natural resources of the state are exploited to develop the rest of the country. It has also been pointed out by Baruah that usually more often than not both Indian security troops and also the top governmental officials to whom they answer are Hindi speakers. (Baruah 2009: 970). The ULFA was triggered by a "logic historically justified along the lines of the central government's discrimination against the Assamese state and the cultural hegemony endorsed by the Bengali elite through colonial agencies." (Borah 2012: 49). In these ways, it could be argued that Assam experienced a form of structural violence, as conceptualised by Johan Galtung, which in turn triggered social struggle by the local people. (Galtung 1969: NP)

In the early years (1970s) the ULFA had great public support and were running a parallel government in the state. As Gohain writes, they were said to have built local infrastructure like roads, bridges, made sure welfare programs worked, punished thugs and corrupt officials etc. Soon though they were also running extortion rings, killing journalists and social workers and conducting indiscriminate bomb blasts. "It would also be nearly incomprehensible to those without a close-up of the historical moments of the 1980s and 1990s of Assam, how nearly every village or little mofussil town, particularly in Upper Assam identified with the 'boys' of the now banned outfit who left their homes or colleges in search of a 'freedom' they believed such a revolution might bring, however romantic, in retrospect, the notion may have been." (Moral 2013: 8). Today, it is difficult to explain the popularity that the ULFA achieved and why even in 2018, ordinary Assamese laymen find it difficult to wish the extermination of the outfit in spite of the loss of credibility (Moral 2013: 8).

Even though it had already been active for quite a few years, as Gohain writes, it was only after the harassment of employees of major tea estates owned by Hindustan lever and the subsequent pressure that several other powerful corporates who had interests in the tea business in Assam, put on the central government, that the centre decided to intervene. This intervention though, was in the form of encounter killings, torture, unfettered rampage by the security forces, killing and humiliation of innocent civilians. In response, the ULFA took to planting bombs which also led to innocents being killed and injured and led to an entire people living on the edge for a long period of time (Gohain 2007: 1015).

Women have participated in the ULFA as combatants and guerrilla fighters. Their roles during the struggles and the peace process (late 1980s onward) will form an aspect of this research in the third chapter of this research paper. It is useful to note that Assam has a long history of women being involved in social movements and in agitations in the public sphere including the Independence movement. The Assam agitation that took place 1979 onwards also had a large female presence- "girls and women swelled the large protests, processions and satyagrahas (a form of non-violent resistance) organised in various phases of the movement

across the state. Female picketers at the oil installation in Narengi, Guwahati, for instance, as reported by local press, outnumbered the men in the move for an oil blockade and their overwhelming presence made obvious that they were at the forefront of the agitation (Moral 2013: 5). It is in this context that the paper will be examining the women combatants in the ULFA.

### *1.2.2. Manipur*

The history behind the merging of the Manipuri kingdom into the Indian Union and later on the creation of the state involves a long drawn out battle between the various factions in Manipuri Society and the Indian state (Choudhury 2016: 35). Manipur has a very strategic geographic position. It had important trade connections to Southeast Asia. After British conquest and the subsequent independence of India, the local tribal economy of the region was destroyed because of closing of routes and the invasive establishment of rubber and tea plantations which destroyed traditional resources and displaced the indigenous population. After independence there has also been an escalating deindustrialisation of the region. Historically a part of the opium trade route, it is still relevant to international drug trafficking and thus a huge rate of HIV prevalence (Chakravarti 2010: 52).

The first separatist faction in Manipur was formed on the 24th of November 1964 - United National Liberation Front (UNLF). The separatist groups' demand for independence from India were based on the reasoning that Manipur had been a documented independent kingdom even before the first century A.D. As of now there are around thirty-four insurgent groups active in Manipur including mainly- the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), and PLA (People's Liberation Army) of Manipur. Moreover, there is an active Naga insurgency which calls for some areas of Manipur to be handed over for the creation of a greater Nagaland. Thus, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN I/M) is also a part of the outfits in Manipur (Choudhury 2016: 35).

Bisweswar, the leader of the insurgency in Manipur infused Marxism to the movements of the Northeast. He declared himself the chairman of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a reaction to soaring unemployment rates and under development in the state (1964). Another group which only demanded the ouster of all outsiders from the state was the PREPAK group (People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak). The usual response from the State (local and national levels) was assaults on villagers, curfews, presence of troops etc. Thus, this retaliatory action by the Indian government, whether proportionate or not, further complicated matters in the region with extensive human rights violations which led to the growth of further insurgencies (Hazarika 1994: 111-132).

The one important way in which the government of India dealt with the insurgencies was to apply the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act on the affected areas of the conflict (AFSPA). The Armed Forces Special Powers ordinance was passed on the 22nd May 1958 and it gave infinite powers to the army with almost little or no accountability involved. The AFSPA can be applied on any area that has been labelled as disturbed. Until 1972, it was only the state's prerogative to label an area disturbed but after an amendment in 1972 the power to do so was usurped by the Centre. Moreover, the way in which a disturbed area is defined by

law is very vague and is completely dependent on the particular government official (Hazarika 1994: 111-132).

The AFSPA gives most army men license to commit such actions that should be unheard of in a democracy. “The army can shoot to kill, under the powers of section 4(a), for the commission or suspicion of the commission of the following offenses: acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force in the disturbed area prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons, carrying weapons, or carrying anything which is capable of being used as a fire-arm or ammunition. Moreover, they can arrest, enter and search without a warrant and can keep prisoners without a trial as well as declare curfew. And to make matters worse there cannot be any judicial proceedings initiated against them.” (Hazarika 1994: 111-132).

Imposition of the APSFA has led to massive violations and abuses of human rights. There has been widespread outcry – both national and international against this act including censure from international organizations. The Act violates many international laws like International customary law and International Humanitarian law. The AFSPA also violates many Laws in the Indian constitution itself- Article 21(Right to Life), Article 22(Protection against arrest and detention), Indian Criminal Procedure Code etc. In fact, the AFSPA is problematic taking into context the idea of an emergency state too as it bypasses normal constitutional procedures (Hazarika 1994: 111-132). This state of affairs has led to even more economic under development and also to the physical and mental torture of an entire population. While this has led to an increase in insurgencies and thus to stricter enforcement of the AFSPA thereby leading to a vicious cycle. The government and the army do not tolerate dissent very well and try to curtail it as best as it can. This level of government control has led to the emergence of some unique kinds of protests and a very imposing and subversive articulation of dissent (Hazarika 1994: 111-132).

This paper will analyse a unique protest undertaken by a women’s collective, referred to as the Meira Paibis, who used a form of body politics to challenge both patriarchal norms and state violence especially in response to the AFSPA.

### *1.3. Research Objective*

The overall objective is to analyze the role of women in the guerrilla struggles and anti-state protest in Assam and Manipur.

### *1.4. Research Questions*

How have women in the conflict zones of Assam and Manipur exercised their agency against state violence and responded to and participated in violent conflict? To what extent has this engagement promoted their social and political empowerment during the conflict and in the peace processes?

*Sub-questions:*

1. How has women’s participation as combatants and in collectives challenged conventional notions of women’s roles in society both during the conflict and in the deliberations and outcomes of the peace process?

2. In which ways have the tactics and strategies of women confronted state power and traditional notions of resistance?
3. How have women's agency in these different spaces led to their empowerment in society?

### 1.5. Methodology

My positionality in this analysis needs to include my exposure to state violence and social injustice as a person born and brought up in Assam. As a feminist, I highlight themes of injustice that has been excluded from public knowledge and view with regard to role of women in armed conflicts in the region, using a gender-based social justice lens. As such the research approaches these themes and problems with a feminist view especially in debunking essentialist myths about women in conflict and at the women's agency in the actions they take. Most of the literature reviewed for this paper is from feminist authors with a feminist approach. While this paper does not state or attempt to prove that the women in the case studies are feminist, the lens that is used in the analysis is a feminist one.

The research has relied mainly on secondary qualitative data analysis for several reasons. First, was the lack of time to generate adequate primary data. Second, there was no surety that the women, some of whom speak a language that this researcher does not speak, would be willing to spend time giving interviews. At the same time, this paper used some very insightful and detailed secondary literature including two ethnographic studies by Rakhee Kalita Moral on the Women ULFA militants- *'Living and Partly Living: Notions of freedom, the politics of violence and the women of ULFA'* (2013) and *'The Woman Rebel and the State Making War, Making Peace in Assam'* (2013). It is however regretted that because of the above, the research seems extractivist and one sided.

### 1.6. Relevance to Development studies and Social Justice Perspectives

In 2018, the world has become increasingly militarised and there are instances of armed conflict everywhere. These armed conflicts, unlike traditional wars, do not follow any rules of warfare and makes no distinction between the armed and civilian population. Most spaces of conflict are male dominated and do not include women in processes of negotiation and in formulating policies during or post conflict. This is especially problematic because women are often the most disadvantaged in any situation of armed conflict. It must however be pointed out that women engage in conflict in a variety of different roles either in enabling the conflict or the peace processes. They are important stakeholders in these situations but are rarely recognised as such. Thus, there is a complete erasure of their participation, engagement and needs during situations of armed conflict.

It is therefore essential to development studies and especially to studies on social justice to document and investigate women's needs and participation to better human security and work on the possibility of a sustainable peace.

### 1.7. Chapter Structure

The structure is as follows-

1. Introduction

2. Theoretical Review
3. The Armed Women of Assam
4. The Mothers of Manipur
5. Conclusion

# Chapter Two: Theoretical Review

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## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the relevant concepts and experiences of women under armed conflict and peace processes, focusing on their agency as combatants and collectives, the forms of resistance in challenging patriarchy and state power, and the impacts these have had on the social and political change. The issues covered include analysing women's agency as combatants and as 'victims', the forms of resistance assumed by women against state and patriarchal power, and how processes of securitization influence priorities in the struggle and in peace processes and the implications these hold for women. These discussions inform the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of the case studies of Manipur and Assam. In the process, the chapter considers important concepts such as militarized masculinities, securitization and the exclusion of women from peace processes.

## 2.2. Militarization and Securitization and Women

To understand the conflict and the state violence that is perpetuated and the circumstances that make this violence go unchecked, this paper will use the concepts of securitization mostly from Megan Mackenzie's work on post conflict Sierra Leone. This paper will argue that men's involvement in conflict in India's Northeast is securitized while women's involvement and participation isn't. Mackenzie's theorizing of the same in the case of women combatants from Sierra Leone will be used in this process. The paper will also argue that there is a securitization of the public sphere in relation to the domestic sphere of which women are considered permanent participators. The arguments in this paper can find resonance in Rita Manchanda's essay- *Redefining and Feminising Security* which explains that the security discourse needs to be feminised and democratised so as to bring the different women involved in peace building into the formal processes.

Rita Manchanda places a lot of emphasis on redefining and feminising security. Many feminists agree that it is important to understand the modern idea of human security in opposition to the idea of national security (Manchanda 2001: 1956). Manchanda argues that the onus of providing everyday security in armed conflict often falls to the women and they are disproportionately disadvantaged in these situations and thus have a more comprehensive understanding of what security is. Thus, she argues women are more likely to oppose military expenditure at the cost of draining resources from other policies (Manchanda 2001: 1956). The chapter on Assam deals with how men are securitised in conflict zones and women are not. This results in only men occupying spaces of negotiation and post conflict processes. This also means that women do not benefit from post conflict processes.

It is thus important in this context to analyse what securitisation means and how national security is in opposition to human security especially in a militarised post-colonial state. "An amenable attitude towards militarism among the general public is maintained by a two-part strategy: on the one hand, defining the ideology of national security by delineating national

identity in contrast to the 'other' (Neocleous, 2008: 108), and on the other, obliterating 'the distinction between military practice and the everyday political administration of civil society, thereby "securing" a general willingness among the citizenry to submit to wartime discipline and emergency powers on a permanent basis' (Neocleous, 2008: 117)" (Parashar 2018:125 ). This sort of militarism, now prevalent in India especially with reference to the ongoing conflict in Kashmir, India's northeast and the central states with a Maoist rebellion, tries to change the fundamental nature of the constitution by imposing draconian laws appropriate for war like emergency situations. This can be seen in the way the Indian state uses the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in the states of Manipur and Assam. It also tries to conflate all local and global issues with a threat to the nation's sovereignty (Parashar 2018: 126).

"Another argument that IR scholars (feminists included) often make is that women's concerns are within the category of what constitutes 'non-traditional' and 'soft' issues that have little bearing on the 'harder' issues of statecraft and political decision-making. Women are often labelled as inherently peaceful and their violence is explained as the consequence of male victimization and manoeuvring. Their agency expropriated, women are portrayed as having neither political ambitions nor nationalist/ religious aspirations" (Parashar 2009: 251). This research paper disagrees with the above and attempts to prove that women are capable of and have political as well as nationalist ambitions.

### *2.3. Women in Conflict and Peace*

Before discussing the strategies that women use in opposition to violence in armed conflict, it is necessary to situate the role women are usually perceived of as playing, how these roles are represented by various groups, including feminist scholarship and key stakeholders in the conflict. Anuradha Chenoy's *'Militarism and Women in South Asia' (2002)* which has critical analysis of women's roles and dynamics in conflicts in South Asia. Chenoy looks into how women and especially feminist scholarship and activism have actively participated in opposing the ideology of militarism. Chenoy traces various movements especially ones where mothers have come together to form associations to help and initiate peacebuilding efforts and how it is thus essential that they be involved in decision making and peacebuilding processes. This research paper, however, goes beyond the idea of feminism and militarism as opposites of each other and believes this is an essentialist reading of women's participation in conflict.

There is no denying that women face many parallel oppressions and violence in armed conflict. Sexual violence is one of the main ways in which women are victimised. Moreover, in the south Asian context, the stigma of sexual violence and the notion of honour prevent women from seeking redressal. Thus, sexual assault is also used in armed conflict to dishonour or insult a community (Chenoy 2004: 36). Chenoy gives the example of Bangladesh, where after the war in 1971, women who had been victims of sexual crimes were even rejected by their own families while the men were honoured (Chenoy 2004: 37). Apart from sexual abuse, there are also many war widows and relatives of disappeared men who are targeted.

Many Feminists theorise an essentialist view of women as peacebuilders. There are others who take away agency from woman combatants and perpetrators by questioning their



motivation to participate in conflicts. Parashar in her introduction to her work- *Women and Militant Wars* strives to prove otherwise and argues that women's agency cannot be taken away from them. This paper will try to prove Parashar's point about women's complex motivations for joining combat or resistance movements in conflict zones by analysing various examples from India's Northeast.

## 2.4. Women Combatants

Gonzalez-Perez defines the term guerrilla as warfare that harasses the enemy, usually a state actor, without resorting to traditional military tactics, especially using the element of surprise and using unorthodox means to attack the state or military apparatus. They make a distinction between guerrillas and terrorist by defining terrorists as a group targeting civilian populations for the purpose of creating chaos and fear. Nonetheless they do not say that they are mutually exclusive and either might target civilians or the state for strategic reasons (Gonzalez-Perez 2006: 314). It is this broad understanding of guerrillas that this paper will place the women combatants of ULFA in.

Legends of women warriors have existed in many societies throughout the years and this idea of women warriors has been venerated and glorified. Often for women to be worthy of being considered brave, they need to take on masculine qualities and one of those qualities is that of wielding arms and being courageous (Parashar 2009: 250). In South Asia, in recent history there has been an increasing number of women joining anti-state groups as militants. Although there seems to be increased awareness and challenge to patriarchal norms, according to Chenoy, the reality remains the same. Most women combatants, Chenoy argues are subservient to a macho leader (Chenoy 2004: 39). Many reasons affect the increase in women combatants, according to Chenoy, including but not limited to myths of the Valiant Mother, raped women seeing this sort of participation as the only way out of a shameful existence, personal and family motivation, revenge etc (Chenoy 2004: 41). She claims that militant roles have not given women any agency. "The supposed liberation that women may achieve in situations of armed combat is often a temporary one, in which they are required to take on roles traditionally reserved for men. Often, women have to revert to household and private roles once the conflict is over." (Chenoy 2004: 41).

In her work, *Gender, Jihad, and Jingoism: Women as Perpetrators, Planners, and Patrons of Militancy in Kashmir*, Swati Parashar, argues that although militancy may have been a way for women to articulate their agency, this did not result in the automatic subversion of patriarchal roles. In the case of Kashmir, she theorises that in the wider struggle for liberation from the Indian state, women's concerns were further forced into the background. Women have been systematically excluded from the politics and discourse on militancy although they have provided key support in different roles to the same. This denial of women's role in the militancy is what is keeping women out of the negotiating tables in the peace process. This analysis of Kashmir, will further this paper's arguments about how female combatants are often kept out of the peace process in Assam. There is a privileging of woman's image and narrative as victims in conflicts.

This paper will also use Rakhee Kalita Moral's essay- '*Demobilised, Dispossessed.... Disappeared? in Search of ULFA's Female Ex Combatants*'. (2018). Moral provides instances and examples of various ex-ULFA women cadre who have not been recognized as combatants and the various disadvantages they face because of improper categorisation. This paper will also use several perspectives from M. Makenzie's '*Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone*'(2009). Makenzie theorises on the many ways in which women cadres in militias are often robbed of proper rehabilitation and reconciliation processes as they are not categorised as combatants but as victims and camp followers. Chapter three will try to analyse how and in which ways women engage in different roles in the conflict in Assam, specifically on women combatants/ guerrillas in the insurgent outfit, and will attempt to move beyond the discourse of victimhood of women. "By denying women any role in the militancy and thereby legitimacy and credibility as political actors, it is being ensured that women are kept out of political negotiations and peace talks, when and if they take place. Cynthia Enloe may have asked several years ago, "Where are the women?" but it never loses its significance even today as feminists struggle to make sense of war, conflict, and militancy in several local contexts" (Parashar 2011: 312).

Many authors who write on the conflict in Assam, and about women in particular, like Dolly Phukon and Rakhee Kalita Moral situate this participation of women as a result of the social ethos of India's Northeast that has traditionally seen women move more easily between the spheres of Public and Private than in the rest of India. As Moral asks- "Were they simply care givers, companions and comfort women as is the general impression about the female cadres of ULFA? Or do we look at them as actual rebels with real autonomy or aspirations for it? More importantly, are they women who truly represent the Assamese ethnos?" (Moral 2013:7).

Gonzalez-Perez also points out that in domestic guerrilla groups like the ULFA, because of the revolutionary nature of the outfit in challenging forces of oppression, provide more space for challenging the traditional norms connected to women and their roles (Gonzalez-Perez 2006: 315). They also point out that it has been proposed that women in these movement are more active and have much more space and freedom than in the traditional military. They write- "that such 'anti-state nationalisms are more likely to be receptive to women's non-traditional involvement. . . than institutionalized state nationalisms'. This study agrees that non-traditional combat forces are more open to women's participation" (Gonzalez-Perez 2006: 315). It is also pointed out that these movements as a result of rising women participation tend to become more responsive to issues of women. (Gonzalez-Perez 2006: 325-326)

Chenoy argues that women in the countries of South Asia join active combat for many different reasons including but not limited to political motivation, family associations, revenge etc. "Clearly, militant roles have not given women full equal rights, agency or leadership positions in any of these militant movements. The supposed liberation that women may achieve in situations of armed combat is often a temporary one, in which they are required to take on roles traditionally reserved for men." (Chenoy 2004:41). Parashar counters this by saying "Conventional prejudices (also supported by some feminists) have

held that women should not have a physical or intellectual space in discourses (like wars and terrorism) that are male in orientation. Many feminists, on the other hand, have argued that gender roles should be deconstructed so that women can claim the same privileges and powers men have enjoyed in patriarchal systems.” (Parashar 2009: 251).

## 2.5. *Politicised Motherhood*

Parashar writes about how in Kashmir in India, the concept of motherhood in armed conflict is intertwined with that of sacrifice. In South Asia, motherhood is idolised concept, with stories of mothers sacrificing their sons to battle capturing the regional imagination. A woman’s power, authority, and to a large extent even identity is realized through her role as a mother and hence the social norm and expectation of every woman is to have a male child, which elevates her to a higher status (Parashar 2011: 309). This narrative is crucial to giving legitimacy and justification to the armed movement especially in Kashmir. In this case, although mothers are encouraged to politically involve themselves as mothers of martyrs, these roles are very much within the constructions and norms of femininity. Issues of women’s needs and rights are pushed to the background to maintain cohesiveness in the movement (Parashar 2011: 311). This however is not the case with the Meira Paibis of Manipur.

Roma Dey reiterates the point that the idea and notion that motherhood has an appeal that is universal in trying to prevent violence, is very much relevant in any nation. “Fraught with political upheavals and violence, the naked protest by the Meira Paibis brings to focus counter narratives that destabilize hegemonic notions of womanhood and citizenship, creating spaces for women to negotiate their rights as citizens” (Dey 2018: 174). The mobilisation of women as mothers does not challenge the roles and designated space they occupy in society.

## 2.6. *Agency, Victimization and Accidental Activism and Ambivalent Empowerment*

This paper tries to analyse the concepts of agency and victimhood and also of what Manchanda and many others maintain is a sort of accidental activism and Ambivalent Empowerment. Manchanda, Sharoni and Chenoy refer to how women find themselves embroiled in activism because of several reasons including most importantly everyday survival. Moreover, Manchanda in her work *Women's Agency in Peace Building: Gender Relations in Post-Conflict Reconstruction* keeps emphasizing on how even the empowerment and agency that women show and gain in situations of armed conflict are often temporary and ambivalent. Parashar (in *Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury*), however, engages in a more nuanced idea of what agency means. This paper argues that although it might seem that the women of the ULFA might seem to not have much agency, there is agency in their choices and their political and ideological growth within the space they choose. In terms of the Manipuri Women, the non-agency of the women is completely invalid. Moreover, there is a duality of being victims and agents in both the Assam and Manipur case. Throughout the world there are numerous cases of women engaging in peacebuilding activities and movements either in collectivised forms or as individuals. “Experiences show

that women support peace processes in different ways during conflicts-from their homes, through their actions, and as active negotiators” (Chenoy 2004: 43).

Often women’s political action or activities are side-lined and considered peripheral to politics. Motherhood is often considered disempowering. Often women draw from the traditional gendered idea of what it means to be a mother and motherhood to engage with the state as it is useful in finding popular support and does not challenge the status quo. Kretschmer and Meyer say that this is not a transformative exercise as there is no questioning or restructuring of gender or societal relations. Manchanda calls this ‘ambivalent empowerment’ citing examples of how conflict conditions result in women stepping into roles traditionally not considered feminine. Many discourses speak of how conflict empowers women temporarily, but what happens when the conflict ends? In the absence of fundamental structural and cultural changes, this role reversal might not mean much and that a return to peace, usually means a return to the gender status-quo that existed pre-conflict. As Manchanda writes- ““Why do women regress post conflict?” As the peace table is set, women who had been so visible - at the community level managing survival, building peace and reconciliation - are marginalised. Violence is a major variable that determines whether women will be able to consolidate wartime gains. Meredith Turshen, in a study of the aftermath experience of African conflicts draws attention to the social, political and economic violence that is used against women to reassert control” (Manchanda 2005: 4743). Rajasingham-Senanayake suggests that resistance to this return to gender roles may come not so much from ex women combatants and cadres but from civilian women who have had to occupy gender roles in times of war that they never expected to occupy (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004: 145). “Concepts such as empowerment and liberation are not static abstractions. Liberation is not a destination, but a life-long negotiation and struggle, perhaps without an achievable end. A female combatant may have been able to transcend various gendered roles on the battlefield, and may well be expected to regress to her former role in peace times. That, however, forms part of her negotiation with feminism.” (Parashar 2009: 243).

Manchanda’s *Women’s Agency in Peace Building: Gender Relations in Post-Conflict Reconstruction* also gives various examples of women in conflict zones, who have participated in various different roles. She argues that there is a need to bring women into the peace process because war is gendered and women have different needs and responses which is often ignored by policy makers. This paper will also use Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake’s work *Women’s Agency in War and Post-Conflict Sri Lanka* to analyse how women who have carved new roles for themselves in conflict will adjust to post conflict scenarios and if a post conflict scenario will affect women’s empowerment. Rajasingham-Senanayake suggests that post conflict scenarios may not essentially lead to a return to pre-conflict gender relations and roles. This helps this essay’s foray into ambivalent empowerment of women in conflict zones.

This exclusion of women and their erasure as participants in conflict in the northeast of India is a result of the Public-private divide and the considering of spaces of Armed conflict as dominantly male. This is extremely non-conducive to lasting peace processes and accords.

Rajasingham-Senanayake argues there is a “need to conceptualize a substantive peace that recognizes and legitimizes new spaces of civilian women’s agency in conflict situations and post-conflict reconstruction” (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004:148). She also suggests that women’s agency or empowerment is a very complicated, dynamic, non-linear and ambivalent concept and requires structural changes and a new understanding of gender roles and identities in peacetime. Thus, it is essential that women have an important space at peace tables. Post conflict arrangements and reconstructions around peace may have different consequences for people. Women’s needs will not be prioritised or safeguarded without proper representation.

All of the above concepts and themes have been used in the following chapters to understand, examine and analyse the cases of the women combatants in Assam and the activist mothers of Manipur.

# Chapter Three: The Armed Women of Assam

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## *3.1. Introduction*

This chapter deals with the agency of female combatants in the United Liberation Front of Assam (or the ULFA) in the state of Assam and their role in the self-determination struggles and peace process. This section of the research paper will focus on how women have participated in the armed conflict in Assam, especially in their roles as combatants and guerrilla fighters, their agency and if this participation has challenged and transformed traditional patriarchal norms and values.

## *3.2. Involvement of Women*

As noted in Chapter 1, the ULFA has a large support base across all sections of the Assamese population, including women, many of whom also actively joined the outfit. The women members of the ULFA however do not have a separate wing but are understood to be regular members. Women first started joining the ULFA in 1989, a decade after it was first constituted. Most of the women who joined initially were members of village organisations that left to enlist formally. ULFA enlisted women because they were efficient networkers, and emissaries; and were less liable to be suspected and detained as militants. The women made up a small percentage of the outfit- around 12-15% at any given time. Moral says a random survey into the background of most ULFA women find that they belong to families and communities that were loyal to the ULFA and had in some ways been involved in either hosting the ULFA cadres in their homes in villages or assisting them in a variety of ways. Many had family members who were already part of the group. Most women also attended Xakhas or clubs/groups where a lot of the radicalisation of these young women happened and often were hosts to speeches etc by members of the ULFA. Most saw this as a sacrifice towards their nation. Sometimes the women were supported by family members and other times they ran away from home after secret communication with the men in the jungle (Moral 2013:7).

Including women was a tactical move for the ULFA. Unlike the men who were under constant surveillance, women were better emissaries and more adept at going unnoticed and spreading the mission of the ULFA as well as in connecting communities and the camp (Moral 2013: 8). Young collegiate or school dropout, semi-urban women of all ethnicities found a place in the ULFA. Most of the women were in their early twenties. They were moved to camps in Myanmar and later Bhutan where they were given intensive training in combat and other necessary skills. It is important to note here that unlike the chauvinistic Assam movement with its anti-non-Assamese rhetoric, the ULFA were far more inclusive in their processes. “Further, the mix of ethnic groups and various indigenous communities in the ranks of ULFA’s own cadres is evidence of the non-partisan and non-discriminatory attitude it

at least began with which they drew a huge and crucial support base from cross sections of people” (Moral 2013: 13).

In Ibanez’s account of women Guerrillas in El Salvadore, she writes about how urban and rural women joined the movement. In urban areas it took the form of political motivation and because they believed they would count in these organisations. In rural areas the women were seeing their suffering not as something that was inescapable but as a circumstance, they would now have the power to change (Ibáñez 2001: 120). This is something that is also reflected in the optimism surrounding the ULFA in the initial years.

In Journalist Rashmi Saksena’s work- *She Goes to War*, she speaks of Pranati who is an educated middle-class professional who joined the group not because of any desperation or familial ties but out of a sense of ideological commitment (Saksena 2018: 147). As Parashar stresses in her work on women and militarism in South Asia, the complete absence of research and theorising in relation to women in armed militias has led to common misconceptions and deprived women of any political motivation and agency. Parashar writes, “women do negotiate new spaces for themselves and articulate their political voices that can disrupt as well as conform to the existing socio-political order” (Parashar 2014: 49). In the case of Pranati, this is evident when she chooses to associate herself with the pro-talks section of the ULFA rather than to follow her commander- Paresh Baruah who was against the ceasefire (Saksena 2018: 144).

### *3.3. Life as a combatant*

The women combatants talk of contradictions within the camps and the many difficulties they go through. Many of the women have written or spoken about wanting to leave after they realised that the male members of the outfit were given certain information that the women were not. Although over the years the number of women in ULFA have increased, very few found places in the top leadership of the outfit. Most who found places in the leadership were usually related to high ranking male members (Moral 2013: 16).

Many women in the outfit married fellow comrades. “In the outfit’s social structures too, the marriage laws framed by ULFA’s constitution grant autonomy to the woman and her prior consent and desire for marriage is mandatory. There are no cases, as combatants themselves report, where women have been bullied into partnership or forced sex by men in the outfit and where there has been report of such assault or ‘rape’ the permanent council has ordered severe punishment and in one case, executed a cadre in the Bhutan camp in 2001” (Moral 2013: 19).

The ULFA had certain constitutional bylaws that encouraged inter-tribal and inter-community marriages. It also encouraged cadres to marry “destitute women cadres, raped or assaulted women and widows of insurgency’ who have sacrificed much for the liberation of the ‘nation’” (Moral 2018: 77). The worst that the women cadres faced was after the dramatic raids in the Bhutan Camps by the once friendly Bhutanese Royal Army. It was a raid that they were completely unprepared for and resulted in widows, rapes, missing men and women etc. (Moral 2018: 75). Compared to other insurgent outfits in South Asia, the percentage of women in the ULFA was not a very big share, but the systematic mechanisms that the ULFA’s

constitution maintained were largely women friendly. More autonomy was granted to them and the bylaws maintained equality between male and female members. Rape and sexual assault were also treated as serious crimes with at least one documented case of an execution in a camp in Bhutan after a cadre raped a woman (Moral 2013: 18). It is however important to note here that according to Moral's many interviews, women's rise in the outfit's hierarchy or increased military participation was not encouraged (Moral 2013: 21).

### *3.4. Women in the post-conflict phase*

The Pro-talks faction of the ULFA declared unilateral ceasefire on 12 July 2011. Since then ceasefire camps have sprung up in various parts of Assam like in Nalbari and Tinsukia where men and women await the ceasefire talks to end (Moral 2013: 26). Since then no Truth and Reconciliation commissions or Disappearance commissions have been set up. No closure has come of the series of secret killings from 2006-2008, estimated at 35 murders officially (Moral 2013: 28). Many of these ex cadres were still locked in camps while the pro talk leaderships deliberate about the peace talks. More often than not these camps are nothing but prisons. "While Delhi is in locked rounds of ceaseless negotiations over the last four years with the moderate factions of the outfit eager to find a political resolution, the camps are in severe distress with little food and even less inspiration or faith. And once again women bear the brunt with children and other exigencies that trap them" (Moral 2013: 27).

Although women have been active members of the United Liberation Front of Assam, after peace negotiations and cease fires, they have been handled very poorly by the state. The female combatants who have either surrendered personally or been demobilised have been processed shabbily by the institutions of the state (Moral 2018: 68). Therefore, it is also important to point out here the way most women cadres are left out of the post conflict reconciliation process. "In the absence of many of the frameworks of transitional justice and reintegration, ULFA's former women Cadres have thus remained, in the aftermath of war, a disorganised band of rebels, mostly sucked back into an ethos that has kept them in the social and economic margins" (Moral 2018: 73).

Moral points out that often ULFA's women cadres are booked not as combatants but as accessories or camp followers by the state. Thus, they miss the processes of rehabilitation etc that all their male counterparts go through and which provides them with monthly monetary security among other benefits. As Mackenzie in her work on Sierra Leone points out, the image of women as war victims has severely limited the ways in which female combatants are addressed by DDR and this often leaves them out of the post conflict peace processes. "The impact of this categorization has been that the reintegration process for men has been securitized, or emphasized as an essential element of the transition from war to peace. In contrast, the reintegration process for females has been deemed a social concern and has been moralized as a return to normal" (MacKenzie 2009: 241). These women have been survivors of rape in police custody and attacks, they have partners who were part of the organisation and have now disappeared, many of the women themselves have disappeared and many have court cases registered against them. In the absence of any official framework it is women's organisations often made up of ex combatants themselves who show solidarity and work together (Moral 2018: 85). Organisations like the Nari Adhikar Suraksha Samiti and



Asom Mahela Sachetan Manch are constituted of ex women cadres as well as others and work for the same (Moral 2018: 79).

Many of these women are also facing severe frustration at what is now considered their own wasted youth and their failed efforts. Whether they have been disbanded, surrendered or demobilised, most often feel restless in their now domesticated roles which is far removed from their earlier roles as revolutionary (Moral 2013: NP). Many no longer think of armed revolution as the best possible way of redressal. Moral gives examples of women like Chayanika who live with constant frustration at what they consider a wasted youth. Shyamolee, another 'half widow', has been pursuing leads to look for or seek redressal for her missing husband for the past 8 years (Moral 2013: 22). The raid on the ULFA camps based in Bhutan in the December of 2003 was one of the deadliest attacks ever, surpassing Operation Bajrang and Rhino.<sup>3</sup> The raid left many women raped, disappeared, killed and missing their partners.

Many of these women had formed activist groups to look for the missing women or their partners who went missing during the Bhutanese raid of December 2003. Some of them went on an indefinite hunger strike but had to stop it halfway in between. What was most concerning was that these women who have been struggling to get any information about their spouses were not involved in the peace negotiations that took place after the ULFA's Ceasefire. They have also asked for this to be included in the charter of demands that the ULFA has for peace talks with the government.

"Alone they remain vulnerable, having lost their former sense of rebellion and are reduced to lonely struggling widows who do not have the bonafide status of even claiming widowhood" (Moral 2013: 24). Ibanez also points out that in situations of demobilisation, guerrillas who only knew how to fight, had no skills or qualifications to re-enter civilian life (Ibáñez 2001: 126). Most of them were separated from their comrades who they considered family and lacked the friendships of the camp life. Moreover they had become de-familiarised with civilian life (Ibáñez 2001: 127). This was also evident in a lot of ways that women from the ULFA struggled after demobilisation.

To add on to all these woes, most of these women struggle economically in leading their post conflict lives. Many are single mothers struggling to bring up their children. They often live a double life pretending to be someone they are not. Many live lives as half-widows, with husbands and partners who have been missing for more than 9 years. In Saksena's work she speaks of Santana, another woman who was an active member of the ULFA. She urges the author to mention the grassroot women who have been part of the ULFA. Most of them, she says are in dire economic situations. A few who surrendered are paid a pittance of about Rs3000 per month by the government. As part of the peace process, they are demanding jobs for these women (Saksena 2018: 160). With hardly any representation of the women in the peace talks this is not a topic that comes up very often during the conversations with the government and the outfit. As Mackenzie writes- "it is crucial to take note that securitization in post-conflict reconstruction and development is selective and political, and that the

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<sup>3</sup> Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino were planned Indian army operations against the ULFA

ultimate success of peace-building efforts relies on appropriate recognition of security threats and peace potential” (MacKenzie 2009: 261).

The women who were so involved in the ULFA have been forgotten. The men are still considered heroes, but the women’s participation has been all but dismissed. They have been lost in anonymity, domesticity or death. “Transitional justice for women who donned the uniform and held guns alongside the men once is almost an unheard concept in the state and the men who matter in ULFA’s political tangle with the Centre have relegated these women to an inconsequential position that will perhaps someday get footnoted to the history of Assam’s thirty-year long insurgency” (Moral 2013: 29).

What enables this sort of a situation is the fact that there is not even recognition as officially deemed conflict. For the UNSCR 1325<sup>4</sup> to be implemented and worked on there has to be acknowledgement of the existence of conflict which there is not.

As Parashar writes, “To not accord due recognition to these women as militants and warriors for political and religious causes and to always question their motives is an inherently gender biased position” (Parashar 2014: 52).

### *3.5. Women in Other roles*

It is also interesting to note the other roles that Assamese women have played in this 40-year-old conflict. Apart from actively being involved with the ULFA as combatants and ground

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<sup>4</sup> **UNSCR 1325**-There is also a need to contextualise the participation of women in armed conflict in the context of global associations founded to prevent peace. The UNSCR 1325 is lauded as highly significant for women’s role in activism and peace. The resolution among many other firsts, recognises the way women suffer differently from men in situations of armed conflict and also recognises the way in which women participate in peacebuilding and mobilising against war. However it is important to understand that even in this resolution there is an essentialising of women as victims and peacebuilders (Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011: NP).

It is at this point very important to acknowledge India’s issues with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Although there are many issues with the resolution itself, which is beyond the scope of this paper, it at least provides a basic guideline on how to handle and prioritise issues of gender in armed conflict.

Although it has been 17 years since this resolution was passed, India refuses to admit that there are armed conflicts within the nation and therefore maintains that these resolutions are not relevant to the context. Basu and Shepherd also point out India’s non-multilateral approach to conflicts. India’s absolute disregard for the gendered dimensions of the conflicts in Kashmir, the Northeast and the central states, and the continued use of the Armed forces special powers act are a testament to the same (Basu and Shepherd 2017: NP).

India takes great pride in taking credit for the creating initiatives that have engaged with the WPS(Women, Peace and Security) agenda and female peace keeping and peace building forces. The main reason for this initiative was that there was a need to curb sexual exploitation and the abuse of women in conflict zones (Basu and Shepherd 2017: NP). This has been seen as a great initiative towards changing the situations that women find themselves in, in conflict zones.

“Importantly, however, the CRPF pages on the “Liberia Mission” list a range of responsibilities that go beyond this “protection” mandate, including “food patrol”, “anti-robbery back up patrol”, “special operations including cordon and search” and “crowd/riot control support to LNP [Liberian National Police]/LEA (Law enforcement agency)” Thus, secondly, their work was clearly intended to keep peace and prevent recurrence of conflict. Their “potentially transformative” role went beyond curbing sexual exploitation and abuse in Liberia.” (Basu and Shepherd 2017: NP). In its domestic context however, this sense of forethought is completely missing and concentrating not on transformative peace building but only on conflict management. There is an overarching dependence on military solutions and complete ignoring of peacebuilding efforts by local women.

workers or women who have hosted and networked for them, there are many other roles that women have played in this conflict.

Assamese women have been actively involved as peacemakers. In fact, the person who initiated the peace process between the ULFA and the government of India was renowned author Mamoni Raisom Goswami who reached out to both the government and the ULFA without associating herself with anyone. Moreover, many different organisations of women throughout Assam who have been involved in various processes and stages of the conflict. The Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, the Kasturba Trust and others have been involved in citizen protests against the violence committed by the army. Other groups like Matri Manch and Sajagota Samities, Mahila Santi Sena (MSS) and Bodo Women Justice Forum etc are involved in the peace process usually at micro levels (Phukon 2018: 61).

### *3.6. Conclusion*

Being a part of militaries, especially of non-state actors is often advertised as being liberating and empowering for women. It is seen as overcoming the idea of conventional women's roles. This is not a view held unanimously by all feminists. Most consider this quite problematic. As Manchanda (2005: 67) points out- "because it posits the possibility of an emancipatory politics through participation in authoritarian and violently destructive struggles. There is the agentive moment produced by women transcending traditional social roles and joining the fighting ranks. But what kind of a rights-based vision of the women's question is possible when embedded in ideologies of militarism and militarised politics?" (Manchanda 2005:67).

Women have been part of this conflict not only as peacemakers but also as agents of violence. They have been networkers, recruiters and emissaries and have often been invaluable. Young women of all ethnicities were part of the ULFA. That said, it is equally true that the men were given more importance in the camps than women. There has been very little representation of women in the decision-making positions in the outfit unless one was a relative of the men who were in top positions. Being a part of active combat might not necessarily be liberating but it is important to acknowledge that women have agency in joining this life. It is important here to also note that the way these women are processed by post-conflict reconciliation processes is pretty shameful and lacking. The image of woman as only a war victim severely limits the way in which her concerns are treated and leaves them out of the process.

## Chapter Four: The Mothers of Manipur

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This chapter will be looking at the Meira Paibis (also known as the Imas or the mothers of Manipur) and their collective organising and mobilising. This section will also focus on their unique means of protest against state violence and the way they have politicised motherhood, their understanding of body politics and the dynamics and nuance of their collective. It will also focus on how the image of the mother is used by the Manipuri women to organise into a strong monitoring and resistance unit against armed violence by the police and analyse the unique naked protest performed by the Imas of Manipur and if and how they subvert traditional ideas of masculinity and state protection.

### *4.1. The Meira Paibis Of Manipur*

Women in Manipur have historically enjoyed a much-respected position. This translates into the kind of roles they play in the social, cultural and the economic milieu of the state. The Manipuri women have always been very active in both the domestic and public sphere of life in the state. Even when it concerns any sort of action against authority or unlawful disruptive behaviour they have always been at the forefront. This sense of involvement and participation can be traced back to the Nupi Lan or the women's war of 1904 and 1939 where the women of Manipur protested against price rise and the Maharaja's (King's) administrative and economic policies (Devi 2018: 151). Economically also, the Meitei women have been very active. This can be traced back to the days of the Lallup Kaba in the 1800s. Lallup Kaba was a kind of voluntary unpaid conscription into services towards the Raja, of males from ages 17 to 60 for a certain number of days. During these times the burden of financial responsibility would fall on the women of the house. They would thus have to get involved in trade etc to make sure the family could get by. Slowly a section of the market came to fall into the hands of the women which persists till today and is the Women's Market or the Ima Keithel in Imphal. It is a market completely and absolutely run by women (Devi 2018: 151).

The Meira Paibis are a collective of women (mostly mothers) in Manipur who organise at different levels-local, village and state- against social and political issues. They are unique in their organisation, composition, leadership, history and protest and identify themselves as mothers who have "approached motherhood beyond child caring and speaking the language of democratic rights and dignity" (Devi 2018: 147). The Meira Paibis meet regularly and their membership is universal although participation varies. They identify themselves as mothers of a people who have been systematically killed and abused. Although historically dealing with social issues as a collective, they have become a much more political unit recently, protesting against state violence and the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act).

The Meira Paibis were originally traditional groups of women which developed into a more organised form under two different organisations of the women- The Nupi Samaj and the PLMPAM (Poirei Leimarol Meira Paibi Apunba Manipur). The Nupi Samaj was registered in 1978 and the PLMPAM in 1986. In the 1980s the Meira Paibis emerged as a movement with

the leadership of these two sister organisations, who had local and district level branches as well. This formalisation led to the setup of monitoring cells throughout the state and increasing networking at the grassroot level (Devi 2018: 148). Initially, and traditionally, the Meira Paibis have been concerned with mostly social ills and trying to redress those whether they be rampant drug abuse, alcoholism or domestic violence. Soon, however they became a politicised unit, taking on state violence.

#### *4.2. Unique ways of Protest in Manipur*

Responding to decades (1970s onwards) of sexual abuse at the hands of the armed forces and the complete disregard for their fundamental rights, the Meira Paibis staged a unique protest in 2004. The catalyst for this was the rape and murder of a young woman called Thangram Manorama. On the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> July 2004, around a hundred women calling themselves the Mothers of Manorama marched up to the Assam Rifles' 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion headquarters screaming slogans and shouting- "We are all Manorama's Mother, mothers of a raped daughter". Among the hundred or so women 12 were completely naked. Most of the women were middle aged and all of them were Meira Paibis or the Imas (Mothers).

After Manoramas's body was discovered, about 50 older Imas had a meeting on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2004. They went to the hospital to see her body and felt frustration and humiliation. The next day, 12 of the many gathered women performed the naked protest outside of the historic Kangla fort in Imphal. They were holding long white banners that read- "Indian Army, Take our flesh", "Indian Army Rape us". Among the ones who were nude, were Ima Nganbi, Ima Memma, Ima Ramani, Ima Momonleima and Ima Gyaneshwari (Devi 2018: 154).

The Meira paibis exhibited a unique type resistance that was aggressive without being violent and outed the violence of the Indian state. There was a mirroring of the repression enforced by the state. The nakedness of their bodies, which was unnatural in that setting, shocked the country into realising the extraordinary non-constitutional situation in Manipur because of the AFSPA (Chakravarti 2010: 48). Chakravarti emphasises on how there needs to be an acknowledgement of these extraordinary circumstances as abnormal for peace to be imagined. This is what the Imas hoped to and succeeded in doing. They also re-engaged the discourse of how women and gender issues can engage in wider social movements and re draws the boundaries between the private and the public (Chakravarti 2010: 48).

Here it is important to mention that the Meira Paibis do not seek or call upon legal measures to address their situation. There is a rejection of the state and its judicial and legal apparatus and this is what makes it a unique sort of resistance. It therefore departs from India's long history of the Autonomous Women's movement which relied heavily on the legal system (Chakravarti 2010: 49). Moreover, by recognising the limits of legal activism they are also challenging the frameworks of international human rights.





Image of “Indian Army Rape Us” (Outlook India)

Another form of protest that has been seen in Manipur is from Sharmila's. On the 5th of November 2001, Sharmila declared a fast unto death until the AFSPA was repealed. The government of India was quick to act, soon arresting her under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) accusing her of “attempt to suicide”. She finally broke her fast, 16 years later in 2017. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the dynamics of Sharmila's political fast, it is important to note that when Sharmila started her fast senior members of the Meira Paibis were there supporting her and calling her their daughter. Although Sharmila has been booked under a criminal law, she maintains that she is not committing suicide and that she has no interest in being a martyr. This is not a criminal activity but a political protest. By repeatedly arresting her for attempting to commit suicide the Indian state is undermining her ideas and views and her political declaration (Mehrotra 2009: NP).

#### *4.3. Colonial and Neoliberal Impositions of the Indian Nation State*

The violence faced by women in times of peace is not the same as in times of conflict especially in a region like India's Northeast which has traditional matrilineal tendencies. Thus through the process of colonialization and constitutionalised laws, the original custom laws of the region has been eroded away and the violence women face from the security forces are alien to them in many different ways. So, in many ways the Imas are challenging both Indian imperialism and patriarchal society. It is thus necessary in the face of the Ima's dissent and protest to ask how they challenge the gendered notions of statehood and politics by defying the cultural ethos and morality imposed on them.

The Meira Paibi's resistance arises from activism and experiences that is rooted in the local as can be seen from the earlier part in this chapter dealing with their origin. Thus, Chakravarti argues that it opens up the possibilities of challenging the very structure of the state and global paradigms (Chakravarti 2010: 51). “These international instruments also leave unchallenged, or even support, larger systemic inequities like the uneven flow of global capital, the violence of unequal development and the need for political change. The Meira

Paibis are committed to a model of community development that is just and based on gender equity, albeit within certain limitations. Their movements thus can sustain a longer and more meaningful peace that is linked to justice rather than a mere cessation of violence. To do this, they must reject a repressive state, but also take the Indian government to task for not fulfilling its duties to its citizens, particularly in light of the changing role of the neoliberal state” (Chakravarti 2010: 51).

Chakravarti maintains that the violence is deeply connected to the Indian state’s development policies. Due to the post 1991 opening up of the economy and liberalisation, the state is spending less and less on social security and the public sector thus shirking its responsibilities regarding the welfare of the people. The Indian government’s new policy regarding development for the region- calling it the ‘Look East’ policy which is technically capital driven for corporates and has no benefit for the average person in the region (Chakravarti 2010: 52-53).

“As the state moves from its ‘welfare’ and developmental role, it intensifies its repressive powers through the law and army to protect the interests of the global market. In these circumstances it is unlikely that the AFSPA will be removed. It might even be strengthened to protect the needs of the new neoliberal economy. This inaugurates a new stage in the discourse of the state, the nation and of multinational commerce. There is a new legitimisation of state violence in the name of development and progress that gathers strength from the rhetoric deployed in the U.S. invasion of Iraq, justifying violence as a legitimate means of ensuring democracy, even peace and development. Women’s bodies become again one of the arenas on which this development agenda and violence play out. It is in this larger context that Manorama’s killing and the Meira Paibis’ protest should be read” (Chakravarti 2010: 52-53).

#### *4.4. Motherhood and Political Dissent*

Women in Manipur approached motherhood beyond the essentialised image of being a woman and a mother and raised it to one of defending and demanding human rights and dignity for all for all of the sons and daughters of the state and does not let the idea of motherhood limit the scope of their dissent and ways of protesting. “The term carries the meaning and identity of the mother of a larger mass of people are allegedly tortured, killed and raped. Motherhood is a means through which women are mobilised across various age groups” (Devi 2018: 152). The identity of the mother itself has been politicised. And this politicisation has been the result of the anti-state stance that the leading Meira Paibi organisations have taken (Devi 2018: 152).

Motherhood is a role that has been prevalent in armed conflicts in a variety of different roles. Mothers have taken initiatives to stop conflicts that have killed their sons and daughters, while they have also raised children to be soldiers and fight (Manchanda 2001: 1960). Thus, motherhood is a complex symbol, and can be used by peacemakers or war mongers to suit

their own agendas. There have been numerous cases of mothers' collectives in India's Northeast rallying for peace and finding alternative ways to negotiate.<sup>5</sup>

#### *4.5. Foregrounding of Gender issues and challenging Patriarchy*

Often in times of social resistance and movements, it is noted that issues of gender justice are not even a remote priority and can be understood to lead to internal divisions. Women's struggles have always been seen as secondary and women are usually used to mobilise for 'greater' issues and very little space is given to the articulation of their rights. Often while fighting for what is seen as the hegemonized culture, women's bodies and clothes are the first victims of censure. "This has effectively meant the ghettoization of women's concerns and a limited conceptualization of what a truly gendered peace and post-conflict reconstruction process may mean, largely due to flaws in the structure of the Sri Lanka peace process itself" (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004: 144). However as can be seen from the way in which the Meira Paibis have articulated their dissent, this is not the case among them. They have in that moment reversed the patriarchal male gaze and question the patriarchal notion of protection. In this way there has also been a transgression of the public- private divide. They have taken on their private identities as mothers to claim political deliverance.

Although their actions can be seen as one where they are asking for male protection and appealing to the protector by using tactics of shame, it was actually a rejection of such a narrative and a promoting of one that visibilises the violence that the masculine state has inflicted on them. They retain their agency as political actors and do not appeal to the chivalrous masculinity of the state (Misri 2011: 620). As is pointed out by Misri, an appeal to good masculinity and manliness cannot be a way in which to challenge or destabilise patriarchal state (Misri 2011: 624).

"Rather than staging women's bodies as the grounds of essential feminine vulnerability, the Meitei<sup>6</sup> women's protest staged women's bodies as sites of violence and their vulnerability to custodial rape as the historical, legitimated, and legislative product of a state in which gendered and castebased (as exemplified by Mahasweta's Draupadi) modes of power converged in the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. While the women's positioning of themselves as Manorama's mothers certainly established a feminine relationship of care, protection, and nurturance, the maternal here also symbolizes the bonds of political solidarity with the dead woman rather than a natural care-giving femininity. It possibly also represented a claim to respectability that may have provided the women with a strategic legitimacy" (Misri 2011: 620). The Meitei women frame the protest not as a taunt but as a challenge. There is no resorting to symbolic castration and thus undercuts the effect of female shame. The unmaning is that of the violence of the masculine state (Misri 2011: 621). They thus subvert

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<sup>5</sup> The Naga mothers' association in Nagaland, next to Manipur, uses the symbol and narrative of motherhood in a very different way from that of the Meira Paibis. Although there is political mobilisation and they have become essential to civil society mobilisations for peace, they still need male legitimisation and do not sit in the village council (Manchanda 2001: 1961). There is no questioning of their traditional roles as women.

<sup>6</sup> The term Manipuri and Meitei are used interchangeably in this paper. Meitei refers to the ethnicity of the women.



the gendered narratives that enable rape by representing women as bearers of shame and fear and the men as aggressors.

The Ima's understanding of rape is one that concerns a woman's rights and integrity and has nothing to do with the patriarchal view of seeing rape and sexual assault as shameful for the woman and her community. "It is important to note that the body presented in the protest is the body of the community at large" (Devi 2018: 157). The Imas and their motherhood have come to be associated with activism that is pro- people and autonomous. They emphasize on how we all live in a colonised state of mind. There is no shame and hiding of the raped body as there is a subversion of prudish values of the Indian Nation state that places the honour of women in their bodies.

The protest itself was not meant to be a sexualised image for neoliberal world market but one meant to shock society out of complacency through the ageing naked bodies of the Imas. "It was a public act of transgression and defiance of social norms, publicly challenging the so-called protectors (masculine) to show their true colours and rape them (trying to hit the protection-rape binary)" (Dey, 2018: 186). The body was not hidden or invisible and there was no shame invoked. The women were not going to passive victims but agents who would not let the perpetrators have power over their bodies. "The shaming is not emasculating them, using patriarchal rationale but in asking them to acknowledge their misdeeds and challenging the very premises of the act of rape" (Dey 2018: 188). It was very clear that the Imas were not inclined to pander to the objectified gaze of the media. Their age, and their rage provided a contradictory sense to the visual of availability that naked bodies of women usually represent in mass media (Misri 2011: 617). It was an image that "evoked violation without suggesting victimhood" (Misri 2011: 618).

This act of dissent and protest challenged the very analytical structure and framework through which women's political demonstrations are understood because of "its radical deployment of bare female bodies in a public space as well as its bold redefinition of the discursive construction of rape and of the realms of the public and the private. While Indian feminists and leftist intellectuals have long criticised the capitalist media's exploitation of female nudity, they have not elaborated a vocabulary which could be used to describe the Meira Paibis' extraordinary nakedness. These were bodies that were not sexually inviting nor offering themselves for the male gaze. Rather, they sought to deconstruct the very politics of objectification on which the codes of the presentation and representation of the female body is premised" (Chakravarti 2010: 54).

Misri on her work on the Meira Paibi's naked protest juxtaposes it with a scene from an iconic play by Mahashweta Devi called *Draupadi*. In the play a Naxalite woman who has just been raped and violated by the nation's armed forces, refuses to put her clothes back on in front of her perpetrators. Misri writes about how there is a contradiction between how the naked body of the raped woman looks and how it acts. The woman looks like a victim but acts like an agent. "the binary of victim and agent falls apart as *Draupadi* effectively separates violation from victimhood. As she stands insistently naked before her violators, *Draupadi* manages to wield her wounded body as a weapon to terrify them. Refusing the self-evident testimony of her victimized body, she enacts a new testimony that contradicts the installation of her

injured body as evidence of her total apprehension—her state of being apprehended as well as her fear” (Misri 2011: 608).

The Meira Paibis in their protest made use of the most personal of all things- their bodies - as a political instrument. This took on a phenomenal collective form, making the personal political and thereby blurring the lines between public and private. There is a refusal to treat the act of rape as a private one that has to be dealt with legally. They are considering an act of state terror and a systematic institutional issue (Chakravarti 2010: 55).

“By using the intimate and personal language of their bare bodies rather than the impersonal discourse of justice and law, the Meira Paibis compelled the army, and by extension the Indian state to gaze upon the human consequences of its violence. By confronting them directly as men, not merely as agents of the State, and offering their vulnerable female bodies to them, the Mothers of Manorama forced army men to recognise a fundamental shared corporeal humanity with them, which had been violated through Manorama’s rape, beyond questions of insurgency and national sovereignty” (Chakravarti 2010: 57). In a similar way the Meira Paibis ask the armed forces to confront their bodies, but not their individual bodies but that of the violated bodies of all Manipuri women.

#### *4.6. Reactions and Efficacy*

Many ask of the protest whether anything significant actually came about after the protest. The way to judge the efficacy of such a protest are many including the level of notice it receives nationally and internationally, the discourse and narrative and the conversations it gives rise to, and most importantly as Misri puts it- “not least, by what the performance reveals about the thing it stages” (Misri 2011: 615). She argues that what was on stage was the vulnerability faced by women in the face of the state’s intrinsic patriarchal violence.

There were some immediate responses to the protest- a committee was set up by the central government to review the Armed Forces Special Powers act. This resulted in the recommendation that the act be repealed. This recommendation was however not followed (Misri 2011: 616). Moreover, the performance protest garnered an increasing amount of media attention that was usually absent in the case of Northeast India. Although there was a lot of press coverage given to the protest, there was no real in-depth discussion about the way the protest was performed. There was an inability to engage with this unusual protest and unpack it properly (Chakravarti 2010: 53).

Moreover, the feminist movement in India has not really engaged with state violence against women. Although the 11<sup>th</sup> conference of the Indian Association for Women’s Studies passed a resolution against the AFSPA, there is very less feminist scholarship on issues of India’s Northeast. The naked protest forced Indian feminists to reckon with and evaluate their own activism and their terms of engagement with the state and its liberal tendencies that the Meira Paibis rejected (Chakravarti 2010: 50).

The government has been increasingly trying to steer these women and collectives into social government programs. There has been a lot of effort by the state to involve these collectives in work that is not political. Therefore, the Meira Paibis are going through a strict

identification phase to resist state appropriation. The resistance from the Imas stem from the fact that this involvement would mean an inability to criticize or hold the government accountable and in being used as political pawns in the elections. Many Manipuri women are now involved in government programs and take government grants (Devi 2018: 166). The Imas believe that this has led to a depoliticization of the same groups.

#### *4.7. Conclusion*

The protests by the Meira Paibis are an important demonstration of how women's collectives which rose to battle social ills have been transformed by trying times into political units of organised mobilised women who have political goals and demand political changes. The Imas themselves also recognise a need to stop and resist the appropriation of these associations by the state into de-political units.

It must be noted that whatever the result might be, women peace makers are crucial actors of civil society. "They are the ones who are ultimately able to bring liberation and change patriarchal structures at the grassroots level and are the agents for demilitarisation of civil society. They are able to blend social, economic and security issues into a combination of the human security perspective" (Chenoy 2004: 44). It is evident now that women don multiple hats in situations of conflict and peace. However, their many contributions are often not acknowledged. They remain symbolic representations and repositories of honour and identity of/from the community. They are either seen from a protectionist viewpoint or as the property of the enemy, to be violated. More often than not, even as an active part of struggles, they are seen as lacking agency. Thus, borrowing from Rajasingham-Senanayake as mentioned in chapter two, there is a need to acknowledge the complicated and complex concept of women's agency and empowerment in conflict. This is the only way that spaces for civilian women can be created in negotiations and post conflict processes.

The mothers have questioned their apolitical roles and created a discourse that has undermined and challenged the understood notions of womanhood. In performing this protest and through their various acts of resistance, they have questioned the role of women's bodies as mere instruments for procreation, violence and honour and made it into a site of protest.

The Meira Paibis are asserting the importance of considering women as equal stakeholders in conflict zones. This process is also simultaneously pushing a narrative that changes notions and ideas of gender justice and of how peace and gender justice cannot be exclusive of each other. The protest was never just about one rape but about the state of patriarchal militarisation that enables systemic violence and made it clear that issues of violence against women need to be addressed for any lasting or credible peace process.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

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This paper has used case studies of women's resistance against state violence to demonstrate the different ways women participate and show agency in conflict. It has analysed women's empowerment and agency in situations of armed conflict, dismantling essentialised notions of women as victims and peacemakers, and their subsequent erasure from discourse on armed conflict. It has demonstrated how women challenged the dominant discourse that views women as victims and peacemakers. It examined their agency and participation in conflict and their erasure in the peace process. This chapter responds to the research questions on how women in the conflict zones of Assam and Manipur exercised their agency against state violence and responded to and participated in violent conflict and the extent to which this engagement promoted their social and political empowerment during the conflict and in the peace processes.

### *5.1. How has women's participation in conflict challenged conventional notions of women's roles in society both during the conflict and in the deliberations and outcomes of the peace process?*

The research shows that women in conflict zones respond in various ways to state aggression and violence. Whether as armed members of guerrilla groups or as part of women's collectives organising and protesting against state violence, women fulfil a number of different roles in situations of armed conflict. Both Manipuri and Assamese women have been active participants as perpetrators, or as resisters in the ongoing conflicts of their state. They have engaged in armed combat against the state forces as well as been part of collectives that use unique methods to protest against state violence. Women who have supported the ULFA, do not do so solely as armed combatants. They have engaged as networkers, emissaries, carers, shelter providers, recruiters etc.

This understanding of the roles that women play in conflict also requires an examination of the agency in their actions. For both the Manipuri and Assamese women, often this participation in conflict has risen out of a basic need to survive. The Meira Paibis have been frustrated at the continued violence perpetrated by the state and the complete impunity that the perpetrators enjoy. The women in the ULFA, whether as part of the combat forces or as supporters, were also desperate because of their dire economic situations. It is true that these women are a product of the circumstances they find themselves in and as Sharoni says- women's activism is a result of sudden experiences and situations of injustice rather than a woman's political beliefs (Sharoni 2001: 92). However, it must be understood that political belief and activism resulting from immediate circumstances cannot be mutually exclusive. A very apt example of this is the work that the Meira Paibis do. Political activism can be and often is a transformative experience and goes a long way in redefining womanhood (Sharoni 2001: 92). Conflicts often have great scope and evidence of political and personal development and growth- for both men and women. To deny this development in women

while appreciating the same in men is problematic. As evidenced in the earlier chapter on Assam, many women who initially joined the ULFA for reasons other than the political, underwent changes and growth in terms of their personal politics and ideology.

There is thus a need to not construct unnecessary binaries of agency and victimhood and understand for most women in armed conflict their reality lies somewhere in between. Women have aspirations that are nationalistic when they participate in politics but these may differ from those of men. Moreover, women have various motivations to join armed conflict and political violence and those motivations are ideological as well (Parashar 2009: 243). As can be seen in the third chapter of this paper, women join armed combat because of a variety of reasons. Women joined the ULFA because of political and ideological beliefs, because of relatives who were in the ULFA, because of a sense of revenge against the government, because of economic desperation etc.

## *5.2. In which ways have the tactics and strategies of women confronted state power and traditional notions of resistance?*

It is now important to ask whether these women- in their multiple roles, with or without agency, have challenged the patriarchal roles and conventions. It seems evident to this author, that the women of Manipur seem to have foregrounded issues of gender and women in their activism against state violence. Through their activism it has become increasingly apparent that the Meira Paibis are a formidable force in this situation of armed conflict. They have made prominent and crucial, women's issues in Manipur's conflict. The processes which they have followed and their ideological and political beliefs are also challenging patriarchy in various forms. Their refusal to assign shame to raped bodies or to invisibilise these bodies, their rejection of essentialised understanding of women, of asking for masculine protection and of resisting the colonial Indian state are all ways in which this challenge to patriarchy is evident. Their very use of their bodies in performing a naked protest and the many nuances in this performance is testament to their challenge. In understanding the Meira Paibis as women who have subverted and challenged patriarchal ideas, their effect on other women in Manipur and enabling and supporting these women should be noticed. Irom Sharmila who is situated in the same context as the Meira Paibis and benefits from the same culture had many examples of women like the Meira Paibis. Sharmila has stated many times that she has been inspired by the Imas. This creation of a space for younger women to be unapologetically political and radical and a possibility to occupy roles that are usually not seen as women's is a testament to how much impact the Meira Paibis have had.

The Meira Paibis also understand the linkages between the patriarchal state and the militarised violence they go through and know that they cannot fight the state in isolation. As seen in chapter four, the Meira Paibis and their efforts are challenging the notion that women are not equal shareholders in conflict and how gender justice and lasting peace cannot be mutually exclusive. Another interesting aspect of the political roles that the Meira Paibis play is their origin as women who worked on social ills. There has been a strategic and conscious choice to become a more political unit. Thus, it is important to note the change in roles and how the Imas have become a more formidable unit because of this change. This choice is partly because of their circumstances but the agency used in making this choice has been

their own. Their strict adherence to this choice and their refusal to be co-opted by the government and focus on social issues is an important sign of their proactivity in choosing what roles they wish to occupy.

The very act of breaking out of the private domain is a challenge to patriarchy. This move and the subsequent changes in perception and narrative of what women are capable of is a way to normalise the role of women outside of the home. Even though there were comparatively less women in the ULFA than other guerrilla groups in South Asia, their representation and the progressive way the ULFA devised its policies is a way in which a more progressive discourse on gender roles is enabled. The women were considered equally if not more capable than the men. The presence of these women in the cadre also pushed the ULFA to be a more progressive unit (as evidenced in Chapter 3, there were strict anti-harassment and anti-rape laws). Many of the women grew politically during their time in the ULFA. After demobilisation, women who were ordinary members banded together to form organisations and collectives that helped other ex-women cadre. Most of the women who were demobilised, had with them a sense of independence and capability. Also, it is important here to note that as perpetrators of violence, the women cadre of the ULFA have dismantled essentialised notions about how women are intrinsically suited to peace and can only be peacemakers.

It is however important to acknowledge that in the case of Assam, the foregrounding of gender and women's issues was not as prominent as in Manipur. While the collective in Manipur was an entirely female space that took no orders from men, in the case of Assam, the women were occupying a part of the space that was originally men's. The leadership in Manipur is made up entirely of women, while in Assam, the women take their orders from a primarily male leadership. For many of the ex-cadre, who stepped back into anonymity, it was also a step back into domestic roles. Whereas these domestic roles might actually give the women a greater deal of agency, many often complain about this and are not able to readjust to civilian life. Also, there is hardly any conversation in the state about the women cadre of the ULFA. The outfit is still referred to as 'the boys' and the women seem to have been erased. It is important to note that militarisation of women does not necessarily lead to empowerment. This militarisation questions the essentialist understanding of women's roles and the space they are usually confined to.

In both Manipur and Assam, there has been some subverting of the stigma that survivors of sexual assault and widows go through. The Meira Paibis have very explicitly rejected the shame and stigma that comes with sexual assault and emphasise that women are not merely victims and can have agency and be empowered in spite of being assaulted. Although not similar to the Meira Paibis, the ULFA in their policies actively encouraged the cadre to help, marry and engage the so called 'destitute women' who were widows or survivors of rape. This also led to a kind of de-stigmatisation. As Gonzalez-Perez has written, in domestic groups like the ULFA, there is more space for progressive policies and space to challenge traditional norms and practices.

### *5.3. How have women's agency in these different spaces led to their empowerment in society?*

While it is clear that women have exercised their agency in different ways, there is on the whole a lack of acknowledgement of their participation reflected often in are left out of formal peace negotiations and the signing of peace treaties As illustrated in chapter three, this is a recurring exclusion of women combatants from the reconciliation process as well as an absence of women in the peace processes that include the central government and the ULFA leadership. Even in the case of Manipur, where the Meira Paibis are a much more formidable force to be reckoned with, any processes of peace hardly include any women and are completely focused on ceasefires etc.

As it has been shown in the third chapter of this paper, there is a tendency to securitise the men in any conflict zone, and the women are not included in that securitised realm. This is increasingly evident when women combatants of the ULFA are not seen as active cadres, or when the issues of sexual assault raised by the Meira Paibis of Manipur are not seen as crucial to the discussion of peace. The lack of women in these processes and the absence of discussion of issues beyond that of a ceasefire is evident of such a securitisation. The domain of armed conflict is seen as a male one and excludes all but the warring armed parties from negotiations. As mentioned in the second chapter, Rita Manchanda's suggestion that there is a need to redefine and feminise security is extremely relevant to the case of Manipur and Assam.

One of the problems with acknowledging women's participation and activism in building peace is the fact that most women who are a part of this often see their own work as informal and non-political (Manchanda 2001: 1961). Women who have been part of the support to the ULFA, rarely see their work as political and important. Added to the above, this leads to women's perspectives being completely absent in the formal structures of political negotiations. "An ungended map of peace accords would show no women at all. Peace accords are structured to exclude as 'marginal' social movements, women's groups and civil society associations that were active during the struggle" (Manchanda 2001: 1961). This complete disregard for civil society and informal mobilisations results in a compromise or solution that is usually not practically viable.

A reasonable explanation for this exclusion is the way in which the public- private dichotomy has been constructed. The public sphere is understood to be essentially male and one where politics takes precedence. The private sphere which is considered female is one where matters of the domestic nature take precedence. There is thus an overlooking of women's agency and participation in the public sphere which is where armed political conflict is situated according to common understanding. "While the public-private dichotomy was originally invoked to challenge women's exclusion, its uncritical use across cultures and contexts may reinforce the view that women have no power or political agency and that they are totally dependent on existing social and political structures" (Sharoni 2001: 86). Thus, the women who have been part of the ULFA are not seen as active agents in the political sphere and this leads to them being perceived as camp followers instead of combatants in their own right. It is usually the case that most military spaces have been male dominated. However, in

recent years women have increasingly been part of military forces- both formal and informal. This lack of recognition of their participation means their exclusion in reintegration processes as demonstrated by the part in one of the earlier chapters about women in the United Liberation Front of Assam. Even in post conflict situations, as seen in chapter three, women militants continue to thrive in other roles where they band together to form groups and collectives to fight for missing women cadre, or helping ex ULFA members find their missing partners, lobbying the state for better policies etc.

Here it must also be noted that the Meira Paibis of Manipur, transcend this divide by performing an act that is seen as private in the public realm. Women's starting point as peacemakers or participants in conflict often flow from their own experience. Therefore, they often use the narrative of mothers in mourning, using actions like cursing, etc. Their mourning and anger becomes a public spectacle and therefore transforms their individual motherhood into a collective one. "Women's strategy of protest often uses the symbols of mourning and motherhood both for moral authority and political mobilisation as for example, the Jaffna Mothers Front, Naga Mothers association, Association of the Parents of the Dis- appeared in Kashmir. The 'Mothers' Front strategy of protest is articulated through the process of taking the private act of mourning into public space" (Manchanda 2001: 1961).

#### *5.4. Conclusion*

These two cases of the Manipuri and Assamese women seem diametrically opposed. The Manipuri women eschew state violence and perform non-violent protest. The Assamese women however engaged in perpetrating violence and believed in a violent means to an end. These cases are testament to the fact that women engage in roles in situations of armed conflict that are not only limited to that of victims. In their different ways, these women have negotiated with the space around them, ventured into roles and territory alien to them and have thus in many ways changed the discourse around them. They have been important players in the social and political realms they inhabit. Involving themselves in these processes have not been easy, have not always had desired results and have resulted in many a disappointment and a sense of disillusionment. Often their choices have been made or forced upon them, but they have been engaged with these situations and have changed the perception around these conflicts.

To refer back to the original research questions for this paper, the cases of Assam and Manipur have demonstrated that women exercise much agency in a variety of different ways while engaging in violent conflict. This engagement has led to confrontation with patriarchal norms and conventions and has led to the social and political empowerment of women. While this may not be very obvious, one cannot deny the evidence of agency and empowerment, although nuanced and dynamic, in the cases of the women in Assam and Manipur.



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