WOMEN IN CONFLICT SITUATION:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NAGA MOTHERS'
ASSOCIATION AND MEIRA PAIBIS

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the Award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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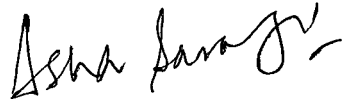Fax : 011-26717603
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To,

My Dearest Mom "Ai"
For your unceasing love and inspiration

Acknowledgement

Ripamchi A. Sangma
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Introduction

"In giving primacy to women's voices, we have to learn to listen to women's language of resistance encoded in their cultural space of being."

Rita Manchanda[1]

India has witnessed long drawn out armed conflicts and widespread violence against its people in its northeast region. The region exhibits ethnic complexities and politics that a composite culture would possess. Critically located bordering with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and China, this region portrays that processes of democratic state formation may not lead to social justice for all. This region can be characterized as "the theatre of the longest state vs. community conflict in South Asia."[2] The situation of northeast to the Nation-State of India has been what Giorgio Agamben has famously called 'perpetual state of exception'.[3] The regional specificity, such as strategically important geographical position and its ethnic composition need not be focused here though it has a significant role to play in the present impasse. What is significant to my study, however, is the specificity of women's status as historically conceived in the region and its significance for the roles expected and possible for them in the present situation of violence and conflict. Conflict and violence have to be seen, therefore, as a part of the nature of social change itself, and as such have important effects on changes in social relations and on gender relations in particular.

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[1] Rita Manchanda (ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), P.20.

[2] See P. Sahadevan, *Coping with Disorder: Strategies to End Internal Wars in South Asia* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo Policy Studies Paper 17, 2000). He shows that compared to most internal/civil wars in the world, those in South Asia have been unusually protracted. Using Roy Licklider's definitions (Licklider, 1995), Sahadevan shows that while of the 84 wars included in the Licklider's study only 18 or 21 per cent were protracted in the sense that they went on for more than ten years, 63 per cent of the wars in South Asia belonged to this category – three times higher than the global average. The nearly five decades old Naga war, undoubtedly qualifies as one of the longest wars in the world. Available online: http://www.rcss.org/Publications/POLICY/ps-17-5.html

[3] Prasenjit Biswas, 'Peace without Peace: Metaphor without a method in the 'State of Exception' called 'North-East India' in Prasenjit Biswas & C.Joshua Thomas (eds.) *Peace in India's Northeast- Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment* (New Delhi: Regency Publication, 2006), P.263.

A legitimate question at this juncture is why privilege women's experience? Do women's experiences represent the possibility of alternative ways of negotiating conflict and the construction of conflictual identities and nationalities? As has been pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu, reality is also the site where permanent struggle to define reality goes on.[4] Paula Banerjee opines that, the reality of the State vs. Community conflict in the northeast, 'given' to us is a male reality, in contention with other realities.[5] This is also evident from other commentaries which are male centric that are constructed on the basis of male power compulsions. Women have lived through, reacted, suffered and been victimized by these conflicts. At the same time, they have viewed and resisted these conflicts in different ways and developed agencies and strategies within these militarized and gendered structures. Such interventions have not only redefined gender stereotypes but have redefined democracy, nationalism and peace. This necessitates an examination of women's involvement in all political conflicts not merely in understanding how women negotiate in conflict situations but also in understanding the nature of conflict itself.

Rationale of the Study:

Most of the works analysing intra-state conflicts in the Northeast do not deal with women's engagement with it. My research work is an attempt to address this lacuna and focuses on women's negotiations with conflict. It is guided by the postulate that women's experiences represent an alternative reading of history with the possibility of non-violent ways of negotiating conflict and agency for reconciliation and peace. There is a need to understand the role of women beyond victimhood with women's variegated negotiations with conflict and their capacity to emerge as agents of social transformation. In particular, at community level, it entails recognition of the ways in which lived experiences and responses have been shaped by violence and how they in turn have

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[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*; translated by Raymond and Adams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
[5] This view is given by Paula Banerjee in her work *'Women's Interventions for Peace in the Northeast'*, P.1 (Source: The NSCN-IM Official Website): http:www.nscnonline.org/webpage/articles/women's-interventions-for-peace-.html.

'reconstructed' new meanings and new survival strategies. Bringing in the gender questions helps provide a more nuanced understanding of conflict and is valuable in working out strategies of reconstruction. Also the diversity of women's interventions for peace in the Northeast gives new meaning to Joan Scott's contention that "politics constructs gender and gender politics."[6]

Even as mainstream women activists were dealing with questions of identity, citizenship and human rights in the eighties and nineties, similar questions were being raised elsewhere too. In the northeastern part of India, trouble was brewing, which had profound implications for women, bearing the question of violence against them. Because of the sensitive nature of these conflicts – the northeast region being located at the most volatile Indian borders – information about the impact of terrible violence of these struggles and the resulting state suppression on the lives of people and particularly women, was hard to come by in the early days. This could be the reason why women activists who saw themselves as part of a wider movement were barely aware of the massive and ongoing violence against them, both at the hands of the state and its machinery, and at the hands of the militants in the Northeastern part of India.

Women mediating in war and conflict ridden spaces are not as rare in modern world as is made out to be. In countries around the world that have been stricken by protracted conflicts, women have been actively involved in campaign for peace. In Northern Ireland, feminists' writers have documented the efforts of women's groups from both sides to organize on working class lines while men were negotiating a settlement. Similarly in one of the most striking peace campaigns, 'Women in Black' is active in the Israel-Palestine conflict as well as in ethnic conflict ridden zone of former Yugoslavia. In Peru, women's organisations have persistently lobbied with the State to end the war and establish democratic process in the region. In South Africa, women campaigned actively against measures that restricted their mobility in addition to the struggle against apartheid. The Sri Lankan women too have been involved in peace initiatives in their

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[6] Joan Scott quoted by Sarah A. Radcliffe, 'People have to Rise up – Like the Great Women Fighters'- The State and Peasant Women in Peru' Chap. 9 in Sarah A. Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood (eds.) *"Viva": Women and Popular Protest in Latin America* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), P. 217.

trouble torn country from the early stages of turmoil. Despite the multiple ways in which women have initiated to bring order in their respective societies, they have been excluded from all official peace negotiations. It goes on to show that women in northeast India were not alone in their endeavor to resolve conflicts in their society.

My research will focus on Naga and Meitei women belonging to the states of Nagaland and Manipur respectively. However, some of the features in the region have certain relevance that makes them symptomatic for most people living in conflict areas in South Asia. There is a rationale behind selecting Nagaland and Manipur. Both states have a long history of state vs. community conflict in the region. In both conflicts there are evidences of involvement of powers hostile to India so that we may address nationalism. Although the literacy rate of women in Nagaland and Manipur is very different, as is their sex ratio, there is one common phenomenon which plagues women in both areas and that is a lack of women's voice in formal politics. Due to this, it is said that women are generally unable to influence the course of the conflict and yet, they are its worst causality. I have ventured to analyze the effects of conflict on women and study whether women affect conflict in the Northeast. My work will put stress on the two women's organisations – Naga Mother's Association and Meira Paibis in the 'spaces' created by situations of political crisis. In an otherwise conflict situation in India, these women in northeast India have been playing an important role, that of peacemakers, to bring order in their conflict ridden societies. That they have been allowed to play such a role itself assumes great significance. It is peace making not between families or clans or tribes but underground insurgents, called national workers and the Government of India. It is not only unique but also unparalleled in the entire South Asian region. These women's movements have used protests, consciousness-raising campaigns, and have increased political participation to express grievances, gain influence and direct public policy.

A particular concern of this thesis is with the way gender relations impact and act upon in situations of conflict, whether of large scale violence or much more localised ones. Rather than concentrate on the event of violence per se I wish to focus on how such violence reconfigures women's experiences, how it 'facilitates' the formation of

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particular identities and how it positions women vis-à-vis their communities as well as the State. Violence as an issue has occupied the attention of women activists in this region but the forms in which it has made itself apparent, and the soil from which it takes root, have undergone constant change which has necessitated changes in modes of resistance among women activists. Therefore it is pertinent not only to provide major insights into problems faced by women in conflicts but also reveal ways in which they negotiate their day to day lives and make different kinds of interventions. The three main conceptual ideas – empowerment, participation in informal groups, and collective agency – are central to the framework that I propose. In this region, a woman in formal structures of power is still in the germinal state of praxis negotiating issues of 'security'. Therefore my focus will be on women's experience of negotiating peace and 'security' in informal structures of power, especially in conflict situation. It questions assumptions of women's deference while recognizing multiple and varied expressions of agency. We can gain insights into how they are denied the expression of grief, made victims of sexual violence and detect a new sense of feminist awareness among many of the women. The exclusive focus on women enables a different reality to surface- more non-political daily aspects of conflict.

Feminist Scholarship on Women and Conflict:

Feminist scholarship challenges the exclusion and marginalization of women's experiences and perspectives of conflict and women's agency in conflict transformation. Challenging the centrality of men's experiences and theories and paying attention to the women's experiences, it is argued , sheds light not only on the gendered aspects of social and political life but provides acute insights into other forms of structural inequalities at the heart of conflict. Women's multifaceted experience of war is being made visible by largely feminist scholarship which demonstrates women's capacity to emerge as powerful agents of social transformation in conflict and peace making. In perspectives of feminist theorizing, security is not real and sustainable without social justice for the oppressed,

especially women.[7] Women having been structurally excluded from having power have particular insights into understanding structural inequalities and discrimination. Further, women with their historical experience bring a consensual approach negotiating skills of compassion, reconciliation and accommodation.

Contemporary feminist peace historians and peace studies scholars have contributed substantially to a growing body of empirical and theoretical studies on women, war, and peace over the last few decades. An analysis of women groups provides an opportune moment in women's peace history to develop further feminist analysis in peace studies around the significance of 'maternal thinking' (Ruddick, 1989), especially in the context of women's diverse class, ethnic, and political positioning within structural, cultural, and interpersonal frameworks of violence. As feminist scholarship has recently indicated women's relationships to peace, nationalism, and militarism are gendered and deeply complex.[8] We can look to feminist scholarship[9] and the women's movement to oppose the forces, processes and beliefs that construct the ideology of militarism and a militarized state society. In *Gender and Nation*, Yuval-Davis emphasizes the need to deconstruct the viewpoint of 'women as a homogenous category', with careful examination of the positioning of women from 'certain collectivities'. The experiences as well as responses of the women groups to the conflicts are clearly marked by their geo-political and class locations, as well as their ethnic and cultural identities.

> National, ethnic, race, class, age and ability divisions are crucial in the positioning of specific individuals and groupings of women – as that of men in the militaries and wars, and, without exploring these specific social relations, our understanding of how women or men would affect and be effected in these major social and political arenas could only be partial and misleading.[10]

In recent times, the theme of 'Women in Political Decision Making and Peace' has received increasing attention. For example, in the build up to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, this theme became prominent with the various

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[7] Betty Reardon, 1999; Carolyn Stephenson, 1999; Anuradha Chenoy, 1998; Rita Manchanda, 2001.
[8] See Aretxaga, 1997; Yuval Davis 1997, 1998
[9] Enloe, 1989; Jayawardena, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1991a; Yuval-Davis, 1980; 1993, 1997; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989.
[10] Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1997), P.115

reports on the impact particularly of conflict and violence on women in conflict ridden societies and the lack of decision making on such issues. Drude Dahlerup in 'Women and Decision Making'[11] develops an argument for women's participation in decision making institutions not only as a matter of justice, but having the potential to change. This attention to the need for women's increased participation in political decision making and role in conflict resolution which have become major areas of interest and research in women's studies has emerged out of two reasons. The first has to do with the isolation of women from the processes of decision making in these areas due to stereotyped perceptions of women by men involving larger issues of the practice of gender discrimination and patriarchy. The second has been the deliberate non-recognition of the position and status of women and the inadequate opportunities in these processes for women. Feminist researchers have been in the forefront challenging the gendered notion of 'power over' and emphasizing the notion of shared power of transforming power into a medium for the exercise of responsibility and capacity. In South Asia, at this unofficial level of people-to-people contact, women's organisations have played a pioneering role. The implications of women being excluded from power and decision-making in the public sphere, argues Dan Smith (2001), may be what make for the women and peace connection. Their work can be read as an outcrop of the second generation discourse on gender, nation, conflict and politics[12] which builds upon 'feminist standpoint' theory premised on women's differentiated ways of knowing and doing.

Integrating a gender perspective is to recognize the multidimensional nature of the conflict, the multiple sectors of society which are involuntarily drawn into the conflict. It calls for a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of politics privileging democratic values and in particular, re-inscribing the dimension of human rights critical for the marginalized including women. It was revealed that although vulnerable to institutional power, women are not without power in their non-public roles and nor are they non-

[11] Drude Dahlerup, 'Women in Political Decision making: From Critical Mass to Critical acts in Scandinavia' in Skjelsback, Inger and Dan Smith, *Gender, Peace and Conflict* (New Delhi: Sage publication, 2001), pp. 104-121.
[12] The first generational discourse was characterized by the question – where are the women? It was predicated on an equity and democratization argument and policy prescription of 'add women and stir' into the agendas.

political beings. Therefore, gender perspective should be taken seriously in understanding and resolving internal and inter-state conflicts.

Statement of the Problem:

The persistence of sharp gender inequalities in many different forms is one of the most striking aspects of Indian society, and it yields disparities in well being as well as differences in power and decision making authority. While considerable progress has been made on understanding women's rights as human rights and women's equality at the conceptual level, the question still remains as to how these concepts are realized practically and so a great deal of work needs to be done. This task is particularly difficult in contexts where there is an ongoing struggle and women's needs and rights are either grossly violated or marginalised in view of the struggle. In situation of violence and insecurity arising out of ethnically based identity movements and the Indian state's military intervention to control them, women have been the worst sufferers at the hands of state agencies and warring groups. While the state agencies have violated the rights of women as a means to "punish" the rebellious sections of society or to suppress a whole population, various groups embroiled in conflict situations, working at the level of the society have also encroached upon the rights of the women in the name of protecting the identity of the community. 'Be it acts of insurgents or raids of the security forces…women of perennially disturbed states suffer the most.' [13] It is a truism that in the modern forms of organized political violence, women are the worst sufferers.

The experiences of women in areas of armed conflict present an alarming scenario in which they are at the receiving end of armed ethnic violence, cross-border displacement, state engineered conflicts, and poverty induced trafficking. Since most contemporary conflicts – happen in the middle of communities rather than clearly demarcated battlefields, women and children constitute the majority of the causalities, addressing the question of

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[13] Paula Banerjee, 'Between two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland' in Rita Manchanda (ed.) *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage Pub., 2001), P. 144

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gender becomes a basic normative necessity. Conflict produces women-headed households in a patriarchal society where women are structurally and socially disadvantaged. At the same time, conflict increases women's vulnerability to sexual violence and rape. If we were to take the specific example of the northeastern region of India, we would note that the violence is multi-layered and nuanced. There is "armed conflict" and resultant state repression, inter-tribal, inter-group conflicts and there is the general violence in society caused by the growing inequities of uneven development and unequal opportunities. At the intersection of all this female management of survival assumes crucial importance. As in other armed conflict zones, here too the body of the women is used to establish control and take revenge. It is pertinent to understand the nature of the women's experiences of political violence as direct and indirect victims of physical violence, economic violence and cultural violence. Arguably, the common experience of women across the region is that their activism, grounded in the informal space of politics does get undervalued and marginalised as the struggle gets more militarized. The emphasis, however, is on how it shaped women's responses.

The gendered subject of these regions has experienced exclusion both in the process of nation formation and from the discourse of ethnic resistance. As Rita Manchanda asserts:

> History has little or no space to record women's experience of war, as if it was undifferentiated from that of men; it carries no chronicles of women's resistance and peace making efforts, as if it made no difference.[14]

Women from these region remained conspicuously absent from the visible spaces of the emerging public spaces of politics and administration. In institutional politics they have little space and electoral politics have in no way empowered women in other areas in the public sphere. Tribal customary laws are gender discriminatory and women are not represented in their village councils and the spaces of politics. The extremely low participation in decision making bodies – whether it is the traditional bodies or the modern democratic institutions, has largely contributed to the impasse in the conflict

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[14]Rita Manchanda, 'Redefining and Feminizing Security: Making a Difference in Security Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 27, 2001), P. 4105.

resolution process. It is in the informal spaces of politics that they are able to negotiate some spaces of action in the women movements. In this region, women in formal structures of power are still in a germinal state of praxis negotiating issues of 'security', therefore my focus will be women's experience of negotiating 'security' in informal structures of power, especially in conflict situation.

Perceptions and attempts at understanding Northeast India have traditionally been conditioned by factors – such as its geo-strategic location that lent readily itself to identification with national security paradigm and the prism of underdevelopment viewing the economic backwardness of this region. A long history of colonization and a highly militarized society with deeply flawed political apparatus and profound social divisions are all material conditions contributing to deep divisions in women's movement. Prasenjit Biswas asserts that the Post-colonial Indian State has merged this colonial space of exclusion with the project of inclusion of its internal other as a part of a pathology of the dominant centre that simultaneously constituted conditions of suspension of sovereignty ... as well the presence of the Indian state in an alien and hostile territory like the Northeast."[15] Some observers feel that the basic democratic, humane and secular values which have the potential to mediate the social relations and sustain social equilibrium are being eroded in the states of post-colonial Northeastern India. That in a 'modern democracy', 'sovereignty resides with the people' is often forgotten. What follows, is the denial of alternate voices and interests and the homogenizing tendencies of the Indian nation state that lead to the justification of the use of violence while dealing with ideologies or movements inimical to national sovereignty. That in recent, times there is a constitutive relationship between politics and violence has become more glaring.

The struggle of the certain northeastern ethnic nationalities for political space within or outside the Indian Union has taken on ever-new dimensions, with the state

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[15] Prasenjit Biswas, "Peace without Peace: Metaphor without a Method in the 'State of Exception' called 'North-East India" in Prasenjit Biswas & C.Joshua Thomas (eds.) *Peace in India's Northeast- Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment* (New Delhi: Regency Publication, 2006), P.264.

devising newer strategies to either suppress or accommodate these demands.[16] Demands for autonomy or rights were often perceived by the state as threats to internal security, or as law and order problems. The insurgency and counter-insurgency operations by the army and surrendered militants have led to a structural pattern of state backed violence and a vicious circle of counter violence. The history of military occupation and the use of armed forces to contain civil unrest are replete with instances of abuse, uncalled for violence and human rights violations. The binding constraints of this region that act as stumbling blocks include factors such as certain initial conditions linked with the disruption of economic practices, infrastructure deficiency, insurgency and indifferent governance. Given this historicized rendering of the very working of politics and governance, what we can at best do for the northeast is neither a pathological diagnosis of what went wrong nor a discreet attempt at recovery, as both these moves would entail a sense of deciding, which actually suspends the performance of peace to its opposite, 'that is' quietism or violence. Hence, how peace should be achieved depends on how it is worked out.

While much has been recorded of the northeast conflict and peace processes, the story of women's 'unofficial' peace-building efforts has remained invisible, often ignored and dismissed. Many feminist scholars have devoted considerable attention in analyzing the gendered impacts of the contemporary conflict. However, few have examined in any serious way the mobilization of women's peace groups as response to such conditions. As a result, a lack of serious analysis around women's peace activism in the Northeast conflict compels further interrogation of the subject. The marginalization of women's peace history in the academe seems commonplace but the reasons for such a critical omission in the history of Northeast may also mirror the complexities of the conflict itself. It is in this context that the two women's groups – Naga Mother's Association and Meira Paibis, particularly in the early volatile years of the contemporary conflict, should be understood as violent conflict opens up for women the public sphere predominantly controlled by men. The purpose of my research, therefore, is to sketch the geo-political

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[16] The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 applied to Manipur, Nagaland and parts of Assam brings out this suspension of an unusual exchange between the Northeast and the rest of India.

scene onto which the two women groups emerged, along with exploring some implications of this conflict for women's peace activism. The central theme of this work will revolve around women's attempt at participation, through their organisations, in political decision making on equal terms with men, which must be regarded not only as a matter of justice but as a potential for change in the two politically unstable and conflict ridden societies.

Methodology:

In order to understand the historical and political specificity of the construction of social movements and of the agency and practice of actors, I am looking at the political context of the conflict and compare women activist movements in Nagaland and Manipur. I have taken up two regions from the Northeast, Nagaland and Manipur, because of the length and intensity of the conflicts as comparative studies. In both situations, women have been in the forefront of a kind of politics which has helped to limit the impact of armed conflict on the fabric of society. The comparative study will closely examine the circumstances under which movement's issues, styles and strategies come to be selected by participants and to understand concretely the making of each social movement. The differences in the two women's movements emerge from their being embedded in two kinds of political fields.[17] Pierre Bourdieu's[18] use of the term fields are understood both as configurations of forces and as sites of struggle to maintain or transform those forces.

The comparative study opens up the possibility of developing a generalized framework for analyzing women's experience of conflict across political units and typologies of conflict in the region. This perspective guards against tendencies towards

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[17] Within political fields, lie localized political fields (critical and oppositional subfields called protest fields). Protest field consists of groups and networks that oppose those who have the power in the formal political arena. Thus social movements that are oppositional to the state or the present government are embedded in a protest field which is in turn embedded in the wider political field. See Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000), pp. 6-9.

[18] Pierre Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), P. 101.

over-simplification and generalization in what are diverse historical and cultural situations. Still, in the mosaic of women's experiences of conflict, a pattern of generalizations can be picked out. Thus, a comparative study brings out the differences and yet, also shows the commonalities of conflict zones and their implications. Drawing upon literary sources and documentary, my work will examine the emergence of the two women groups at the height of the conflict.

Objectives of the Study:

My research has **three primary objectives. First,** it will provide a theoretical perspective to the study of locating women as victims of conflict and go beyond the conventional images of women as simply victims and instead explore the multiple ways in which women exhibit agency through experience. **Secondly,** it will position the origins of NMA and Meira Paibis within some critical historical and socio-political frameworks. **Finally,** in dealing with women activism in these two regions, it will compare the two women groups to explore their potential contributions to peace in the Northeast region. The overall objective of this study therefore, will be to study women's critical consciousness of a continuum of violence by narrowing down the focus to role of women in Naga and Meitei societies for political objectives, directly or indirectly related to their attempt at creating a larger political and social space for their well being.

Organisation of the Study:

The research work is divided into three chapters preceded by a preparatory introduction and ends with a conclusion. In the **first chapter, 'Women in Armed Conflict and Political Violence: Victimhood to Agency',** I identify several major areas in which the issue of gender and crisis situations is important. The first is the issue of violence against women, which is now recognized as endemic in most societies; some is sexualized and most has a gender dimension which involves the explicit acts of bodily

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harm that occurs but also the more subtle forms of violence perpetrated by the institutions of the state. Another relevant aspect of this area is the relationship between gender relations and the evolution of new forms of ethno-nationalism and the ways new nationalist ideologies use and redefine women's role and status which have important ramifications for their position, rights and definitions of citizenship in that society. After locating women as a victim of conflict, this chapter will be an attempt to understand the role of women beyond victimhood, women's variegated negotiations with conflict and their capacity to emerge as agents of social transformation.

Second chapter, **'The Political Context of the Conflict and the emergence of Women Activism in Nagaland and Manipur',** is an attempt to appropriately contextualize the emergence of women activism and women's experience within the specific militarized, gendered and political contexts. First, it examines briefly the socio-political implications of the process of state formation in India. In addition, in order to tease out the gender implications and potential for enhancing the role of women in conflict situation, it is necessary to examine what the conflict situations reveal about the societies and communities, and in particular, how these impact upon the situations and position of women. For this, there is need for an understanding of the nature of conflicts prevalent in specificity of the place, which has their setting in the specific historical background. This will help to position the status and the role of Naga and Meitei women as peace makers in their traditional societies. An analysis of conflict and violence reveals a number of ways in which these women groups have responded to and coped with the material consequences and loss of livelihood as well as the consistency and persistence of violence in their every day lives.

In the **third chapter, 'Naga Mother's Association and Meira Paibis: A Comparative Analysis',** after studying women experience and critical consciousness of conflict and violence, my work will make a comparative study of two women organizations in the state of Nagaland and Manipur. These two women organizations – Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis are unique examples of women collectivities, which are active both socially and politically, fighting against oppression

on two fronts – State action and Insurgency. In the process I will compare and contrast their roles and their structural social and political efforts and strategies in negotiating conflict which portrays their immense creativity by which they try to redefine politics. The larger emphasis will, however, be placed on their role as peacemakers and their attempt at a gradual recognition of their role as essentially political in nature within the larger political issue confronting both societies. It interrogates further whether women have been able to sustain this activism and use it as a means of achieving genuine empowerment and representation in formal politics and thus to the remaking of a culture of peace and democratization of politics.

Chapter One

Women in Armed Conflict and Politics of Violence: Victimhood to Agency

Women are often victims in the humanitarian front of war but their activism in conflict situations is undervalued. It is important that we move beyond the conceptualization of women as simply victims of war, towards one that embraces and encompasses female agency in war and peace, since in situations of protracted conflicts, women have become more visible as victims and active as agents. Though violence is the focus of discussion here, particularly violence perpetrated by the state and community, and women's role in negotiating with it, the issue of violence cannot be discussed in isolation, as something sporadic or temporary in which women's agency is minimal. My contention is that the violation of the rights of women by state agencies and the ideological control of women through nation building exercises has strengthened patriarchy and even created patriarchal structures. These structures legitimize and delegitimize certain types of violence and marked out the political spaces for women. It is here that the role of women comes in. By continuously drawing attention to the gender aspects, women activisms demystify the ideological moorings of patriarchal structures.

My analysis is predicated on an exclusion of women as perpetrators and supporters of violence in both inter-personal and inter-group relations. I will not deal with women who take up arms as members of military and insurgent groups and acquiesce to the use of violence in civil unrest and armed conflicts. In many versions of the argument, victimhood and agency appear to reside solely in the actions of the violator, and thus the position of agent for women is confined to being the perpetrators or supporters of violence. The agency which women exhibit not only in resisting and coping with personal victimization but also through collective opposition to violence is often disavowed. This is because of a muscular discourse which provides continuity to the principle of patriarchy and privilege especially during times of threat and conflict. This restriction of the meaning of agency does a profound injustice to survivors of violence and to feminist research and practice and

to women activism which have consistently sought to make visible the actions involved in surviving, coping with and resisting victimization.

This chapter is an attempt to engage with some of the pertinent themes that run through the studies on women and conflict. I begin by looking into the nature of the conflict to get a picture where women as victims are situated and go on to deal with the issue of political violence and its ramifications, especially for women. The actions of the State and what it means for women and the ethnic cultural community's treatment of women in conflict situation is interrogated. Here, the discourse of the state's notion of security and feminist understanding gets unfolded further. The next section reflects an attempt to go beyond the conventional images of women as simply victims of conflict and instead explores the multiple ways in which women interact with both war and peace. This brings us to a discussion of women's agency which is exhibited through experience and manifested through resistance and protests.

Nature of Conflict:

The distinguishing feature of conflicts in South Asia over the last 50 years[1] is that they have been a) predominantly ethnic or communal, and b) protracted and increasingly violent. It bears repeating that prolonged conflict heightens, and further entrenches, the communalization of all parties to the conflict, whether the state, civil society or armed groups; the impact of this on women is simultaneously dispersed and specific[2]. The predominant kind of conflict in this region has been between the State and a section of people or representatives of a community, who oppose the authority of the State. In some areas, the conflict is between a powerful and a dominant section of society and a marginalized minority and in some areas between two equally marginalized groups.

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[1] Struggles that remain unresolved or festering for too long get exacerbated into situations of conflict, which in today's context are armed and invariably violent. See Ritu Menon, 'Doing peace: Women resist Daily Battle in South Asia', in Coomaraswamy and Fonseka (eds.) *Peace Work: Women, Armed Conflict and Negotiation* (Women Unlimited: Delhi, 2004), pp. 54-72.

[2] A variety of accounts are to be found in Urvashi Butalia (ed.), *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002).

Through the decades, the conflict in the region has become extremely complex. In a situation of violence and insecurity arising out of ethnic-identity movements and the Indian State's military intervention to control them, women have been the worst sufferers at the hands of state agencies and warring groups. It is a violence or power trust for the hegemony by either the state or by insurgent, because both have statist agenda in which women are conspicuously absent.

When conflict occurs, it is always embedded in a society and, it cannot be separated from ongoing political and social processes. Thus, conflict is not the irrational breakdown of societies or economies; rather it is the reordering of society in particular ways. However, conflict becomes problematic when it takes the shape of an armed conflict. Armed-conflict can be understood as a contested incompatibility, which concerns government or territory, and in which there is use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state.[3] Any attempt to make sense of state or community sanctioned violence in armed conflict which fails to include and take account of sexual violence in war does a profound injustice to women, further silencing their voices, experiences and insights and reinforces the stigma which accompanies being a victim of sexual violence. It can be pointed out that bringing in the gender perspective helps provide a more nuanced understanding of conflict and incorporating the experiences of women is valuable in working out strategies of post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction.

In her analysis of recent conflicts, Cynthia Cockburn has developed a succinct and useful classification of gendered power relations in what she calls the four moments of armed conflict.[4] They are:

1. The period before armed conflict breaks out which is often characterized by economic stress and impoverishment, militarization, and the presence of increased arm dealing i.e. the marketisation of violence and identity politics.

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[3] Peter Wallensteen and Margaret Sollenberg, 'Armed Conflict, 1989-98'; *Journal of Peace Research*, (Vol. 36, no.5, 1999), P.605.

[4] Cockburn, Cynthia, 'The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence,' in Caroline O. N. Moser & Fiona Clark, *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), pp. 13-28.

2. The period of war and repression itself - the entry of armed forces, the escalation of communal conflict, the disruption of everyday life, and the brutalization of the body, male and female.

3. The period of peace-making or refusing the logic of violence.

4. The post-war or post-conflict period, in which displacement or return, rehabilitation and sometimes reconstruction and reconciliation take place.

Recently, feminist writers like Cynthia Enloe have analyzed the trend that when a country promotes military institutions as a solution for stability, security and development, the result is deeply gendered.[5] At such junctures, patriarchal privileges dominate while women's voices are lost, and issues like rights are not debated and are placed on the back burner. With this, women's voices are silenced and join those of the marginalized. Thus, the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) highlights the special impact of armed conflict on women, pointing out that although all sections of society are affected, "women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex".[6] According to preliminary findings in the Northeast of India, for instance, the long period of violence has had an adverse impact on the sex ratio, not in favor of women but against them. Paula Banerjee, working on Manipur, reports a decline from 1015 women to 1000 men in 1961 to 961 women per 1000 men in the 1990's. In Nagaland, it is down from 933:1000 to 890 women per 1000 men.[7]

Veena Das and Arthur Klienman[8] claim that the violence in these areas belong to a new moment in history for its most disturbing feature is that it has occurred between social actors who lived in the same local worlds. While some see this violence as a remnant of long-standing primordial conflicts, others see it as a sign of the distortion of local moral

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[5] See Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), Enloe, *The curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (California: Univ. of California Press, 2004).
[6] This statement is borne out by available data. Women constitute a major portion of the reported 85% civilian victims of present-day conflicts. See Radhika Coomaraswamy and Dilrukshi Fonseka (eds.) *Peace Work: Women, Armed Conflict and Negotiation* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004), P. 2.
[7] Quoted in Ritu Menon, 'Doing Peace: Women resist Daily Battle in South Asia' op.cit, pp.60.
[8] Veena Das, Arthur Klienman, Mampelhela Ramphele & Pamela Reynolds (eds.) *Violence and Subjectivity* (New Delhi: OUP, 2000), pp. 1-18.

worlds by forces which originate outside those worlds and over which local communities can exercise little control. In either case, it becomes necessary to consider how **subjectivity**- the felt interior experience of the person, in this case of women and which includes their positions in a field of relational power, is produced through the experience of violence. The study reveals that larger social actors such as the state, as well as ethnic cultural communities, are all implicated in the actualization of the violence that transforms the everyday life of local communities.

Politics of Violence

"Opening the door on the subject of violence against the world's females is like standing at the threshold of an immense dark chamber with collective anguish, but with the sounds of protest throttled back to a murmur."

Shivali Agarwal [9]

Violence is the most critical element of disadvantage suffered by women in situations of conflict. Empirical and analytical research in India has established that violence against women is both systematically and incidentally engendered. Patriarchal power and privilege operate through socially and culturally sanctioned institutions and structures that tacitly endorse the practices of violence in order to remain dominant. However, within all those general structures of violence, women suffer violence in a gender-specific way and patriarchal violence permeates and promotes other forms of violence. The interlocking of public and private patriarchies means that women experience connected forms of violence that extend from the home to the street and on to the battlefield. In a situation of armed conflict, there is increased violence against women, and this violence can ultimately be underpinned to the existing discrimination against women in the social structures of the society or community. As highlighted in the PFA 1995: *"Violence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination and discrimination against women*

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[9] Shivali Agarwal, 'Media and Crime Against Women', *Third Concept*, (April 2007), P. 23.

by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement."[10] The passage cited below demonstrates this view:

> Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed, women whose children and husbands are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and unity. And for every fire that is lit, it is women whose job it is to painfully build a new future from the ashes…We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more. Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protectors of no-one and nothing (Women Against fundamentalism)[11]

In today's conflicts, 85 per cent of victims are civilians, of which the majorities are women.[12] Women in conflict environment are at risk from multiple forms of violence. The experiences of women in areas of armed conflict presents an alarming scenario in which they are at the receiving end of domestic and economic violence, armed ethnic conflicts, cross-border displacement, state-engineered conflicts, and poverty and unemployment induced trafficking. At the intersection of all this is the woman who must maintain a livelihood, and sustain the family as well. They are the first and worst affected by the economic hardships wrought by war and are often compelled to become primary breadwinners and economic agents in changed environments Violence against women across the board has been affected by the larger conflict here which has blocked development, hampered normal living, led to anti-people policies and to high levels of discontentment.

Sexual violence:

In exploring the relationship between gender patriarchy and militarization, women's experience of sexual violence in conflict can be focused. Sexual violence against women is constitutive of social and political disorder in India. For example, MacKinnon has argued that "…sexuality is a set of practices that inscribe gender as unequal in social

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[10] Cited in Roshmi Goswami, *Women in Armed Conflict Situation* (Guwahati: A study by NEN 2005), P.2.
[11] Urvashi Butalia, 'Confrontation and negotiation: The women's Movement's Responses to Violence against women' in Karin Kapadia (ed.) *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender and social Inequalities in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002), pp.225-6.
[12] Coomaraswamy & Fonseka, 'Introduction', *Peace Work: Women, Armed Conflict and Negotiation,* op.cit. P. 2.

life"[13]. She furthers says that 'sexuality' to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal an activity yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind.[14] For the women's movement in a conflict between the state and non-state actors, the most intractable form of violence against women is the collectivized sexual violence by agents of the state as well as cultural communities who think of themselves as being above the law. They are deliberate targets of sexual violence.

Violence in armed conflict situation is different from violence against women in normal times for the state which is supposed to be the guardian of protecting the lives of the citizens are very often the reason for their death. Kannabiran and Menon argue that the ideological, de facto and tacit complicity of the state in violence against women is compounded by its own crimes of sexual violence committed by its agencies – the armed forces or custodial institutions – especially in situations of conflict, insurgency or civil unrest.[15] In the period under review, exhaustive documentation is available of the most brutal rapes and sexual violation of women by the armed forces in Kashmir and North-east. Sexual violence against women by the state then, is not only criminal and genocidal; it shares prevailing social and psychological prejudices and becomes communalized and ethnicized[16]. The state agencies have in fact used rape of women as "...part of a systematic attempt to humiliate and intimidate the local population during counter-insurgency operations..."[17] The state claims legitimacy by virtue of being extra-legal, by exempting itself as the "protective" state from being liable for sexual crimes against women. However, sexual violence against women by agents of the state can by no means be justified as being necessary to maintaining law or order.

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[13]Mackinnon, A. Catharine, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), P.126.

[14] Catherine Mackinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An agenda for Theory,' in Diana Tietjens Meyers (ed.) *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), P.65.

[15] Kannabiran & Menon, *From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence Against Women in India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007), P.28.

[16] Ritu Menon, 'Doing Peace: Women resist Daily Battle in South Asia', op. cit. P. 192.

[17] *Human Rights in India: The Updated Amnesty International Report* (New Delhi, 1993) P.21.

Embodied Violence:

The female body has always been a special object in regimes of torture and repression, and especially so in instances of ethnicized violence. Veena Das argues that the bodies of women become political signs and territories on which political programmes of the communities of men in conflict are inscribed[18]. Even within Foucault's essay,[19] the body is figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription: "the body is the inscribed surface of events." Women are seen to be the repository of tradition and their 'inviolability' has been a powerful tool of cultural defense against modernization and westernization[20]. Nonetheless, the control of women's bodies as the symbolic space of the nation or community has often involved women's oppression. The consensus around the overt and dramatic violence of "suicide" and honour killing and rape, and the state's ready consent to engaging in the similar violence and ensuring women silence lends piquancy to a notion of patriarchal consensus. For instance, during India's partition, large numbers of women were forced into death to avoid sexual violence against them, to preserve chastity and protect individual, family and community "honour".[21]

Women have resisted this 'construction' as it has often been accompanied by their subordination. As many feminists have pointed out, women are constructed as 'Mothers of the Nation' where their biological role as reproducers of the nation is highlighted. This instrumentalises women's reproductive functions and their bodies in the interests of the state[22]. The most predictable form of violence experienced by women is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the other by "dishonouring" their women. Women are systematically targeted for rape in times of war because women's bodies are

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[18] See Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: OUP, 1995.

[19] Michel Foucault, " Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault, Cited in Judith Butler, *Excerpt from Gender Trouble*, in Diana Tietjens Meyers (ed.) op.cited., P. 114.

[20] Jayawardena, Kumari and Malathi de Alwis (eds.) *Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women's Sexuality in South Asia* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), pp. ix-xxiv.ss

[21] For various accounts of extreme violence and suffering faced by women during India's partition see Menon & Basin's (eds.), *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

[22] Jayawardena & de Alwis, Op.cit, P.x.

sites on which men imprint their identities and exercise their sexual and political power. Women's bodies therefore become the sanctioned sites of revenge, retaliation, and humiliation. Women are reduced to their bodies to become (sex) objects in the possession of a male national collectivity. As property of the national collective, the women-mother symbolizes the sacred, inviolable borders of the nation.

Thus, the connection between the brutal and deliberate communal sexual violence against women and the equally deliberate and no less violent actions of the state in its apparently benign programme is a powerful consensus around the subject of violence against women. Thus, the violation of one of the most basic rights of the women is evidence that women as independent entities have received scant respect in the system and that they have become both victims as well as weapons of violence[23] in a conflict situation where their individual rights have been violated to far greater extent than the rights of other sections in the society. More recently, the growing understanding of different forms of violence has led not only to a fracturing of the belief in the overarching, supposedly unproblematic identity of 'women', but also to a hesitant understanding of how women are invested in the project of the nation, and of the continuing ambivalences in their relation with the state.[24]

State Action: What it Means for Women:

Given Weber's classic formulation of the state as 'a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory', the state positions itself as the only legitimate authority to use absolute violence. In analyzing state violence against women, Wendy Brown cites Machiavelli as the one political thinker who most extensively treated the dynamics and configurations of state's prerogative power-"its heavily *extra legal*, adventurous, violent and sexual

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[23] See for further developments of this idea in Rita Manchanda (ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2001), pp. 42-50.

[24] Urvashi Butalia, 'Confrontation and negotiation: The women's Movement's Responses to Violence against women', Op.cit, P. 233.

characteristics".[25] According to Brown, he "theorizes political power in a register in which violence, sexuality and political purpose are thoroughly entwined". In most modern states, this instrument of coercion and violence is bifurcated into the police and the military. While the police are used to enforce law and order within the state, the military is left to deal with the business of war, and to defend the state from external aggression. When the military is involved continuously in internal affairs of the state, such situations represent an assertion of state's violence over the counter-veiling force of democracy.

Feminists' Dilemma:

Feminists have argued that a constitutionally-protected sphere of privacy shelters from state regulation a domain in which women have unequal power and are physically vulnerable. Therefore they argue that to ensure women's equality and security, the state must cross the private boundary of home and family and regulate the distribution of power within that sphere. Feminists have also attacked liberal definition of privacy on the grounds that, by equating liberty within the realm of the private with state noninterference in that realm, the right of privacy undervalues private inequality and overstates individual agency.[26] As Tracy Higgins puts it, "the doctrine of privacy has become the triumph of the state's abdication of women in the name of freedom and self-determination."[27] From a liberal perspective, this view leads to a paradoxical conclusion - that securing individual autonomy requires greater state regulation of that sphere in which that autonomy is exercised.

However feminist's wholesale rejection of the concept has to be questioned. The discredited concept of familial privacy might be reconfigured to serve the interests of women who have become increasingly vulnerable to state regulation in many aspects of their lives, particularly in conflict situation. Catherine MacKinnon asserts that state intervention on behalf of women invariably reduces women into abstract rights because its patriarchal ideology holds true. The central paradox for feminists lies with institutionalized

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[25] Wendy Brown, *States of injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 186-189.
[26] Higgins, Tracy, 'Reviving the Public/Private Distinction in Feminist Theorizing'. *Chicago Kent Law Review* (Vol. 75:847, 2000), P. 851.
[27] Ibid.

pursuits of justice. Even after identifying the state as being patriarchal, women still appeal to the state for sexual justice. Brown elaborates this further and extends her argument by asserting that

> The masculinism of state prerogative power inheres in both its violent and its transcendent features...Because prerogative power appears to its subjects as not just the power to violate but also the power to protect - quintessentially, the power of the police – it is quite difficult to challenge from a feminist perspective.[28]

The discussion on state responsibility gives us a pause to consider the construct of the state envisioned by women's rights activists. On the other hand, there is the view of the state as the perpetrator of violence or in complicity with those who commit violence against women. At the same time there is the view of the state as being an activist interventionist state extending paternalist protection to the battered, violated women. These views only proves the ambivalence we have toward the nation-state, and how, there is no escape, not only from state-directed violence but because of our necessary reliance on that state apparatus to protect the woman victim against non-state violence. Thus the *Janus* face of the state poses its own dilemma. It is really alarming that in situations of strife, even the security forces perpetrate such violence which unfortunately go unheeded as the state does not respond to it many times. Women are being subjected to acts of violence through acts of reprisals committed by the security forces following actions by the armed opposition groups. Such phenomenon has been ascribed by Mrs. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the special rapporteur on Violence against women "as a battle among men fought over the bodies of women".

Rethinking the Public/Private Divide:

In its ambivalent relation to the state, feminists criticize the state action requirement and argue that the negative formulation of constitutional constraints leaves states unaccountable for their action. Higgins argues that the simplest reason for maintaining the public/private distinction is that it may actually capture a difference that is meaningful to women's experiences[29]. For example, consider the critique of the emphasis on state action

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[28] Wendy Brown, op. cit., P.191.
[29] Ibid. P.861.

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in the context of international human rights. Although it is certainly correct that a human rights regime that focuses exclusively on harms directly perpetrated by the state fails to address important threats to women's lives and liberty, it may also be correct that state sponsored violence is qualitatively different from private violence. This view is consistent with the reports of victims of human rights abuses. When rape and torture are perpetrated by soldiers or police, however, those physical and psychological consequences are compounded by political powerlessness and vulnerability that often extend beyond the individual to the broader community[30]. This is not to deny that certain forms of private power such as that based on racial or religious hatred can have a collective and political impact comparable to state violence.

The "Male" in the State - A "Justified" System:

The state justifies the extraordinary powers vested in the police by claiming that it acts as "the responsible government of a civilized society",[31] in the women's interest, and on behalf of their families. In conflict ridden areas, the tactics and strategies used by the police or armed forces for cordon and search, or search and seizure, are the same whether they are recovering an abducted women or "flushing out" militants. In the context of insurgency or armed civilian conflict, as in the North-east, the state and its agents engage in "legitimate" violence against mutinous citizens, in which women who are caught in the crossfire. In the decades since Independence, successive Indian governments and the Indian state have routinely dismissed allegations of human rights violations as a "hue and cry" raised by human rights organizations. An official tally of human rights violations of the armed forces in Jammu and Kashmir and in the North-east over the 10 years period, 1993-2004 is instructive. Of the cases found true, 48 percent were cases of violations against women in Jammu & Kashmir; and in the North-east, they were 57 percent.[32]

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[30] See for example, Tracy Higgins et al., *Justice on Trial: state Security Courts, Police Impunity, and the Intimidation of Human Rights Defenders in Turkey 1999*. This describes the effects of state-sponsored rape and torture as reported by victims and linking such effects to the political community.

[31] The privilege of immunity has always been granted to the armed forces and to the law, order and security personnel of the state, on grounds of discharging their duty in the service of the society and in the interests of national security, example, APSPA of 1958, or the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2002) and the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Act (1985).

[32] Cited in Kannabiran and Menon (ed.), *From Mathura to Manorama*, op.cited, P. 184.

There is evidence of indifference by the state and state institutions, of their sometimes active collusion in the oppression of women, of prejudice and bias in the law and among the law makers and implementers. The process by which sexual and physical violence through the mechanism of rape gets 'normalized' in Indian society is articulated by Veena Das.[33] We see that at the same time that state normalizes its own violence against women, it also exempts itself from criminal liability. In Veena Das's words:

> While in the face of the disorder of collective violence the state seems to absent itself so that we cannot guess how the judicial discourse would have constructed pathological sexuality, we have evidence of how 'individual pathology' is constructed in the rape trial during normal periods. Further, in the dense discursivity of the state as it engages in separating the normal from the pathological, we get a production of bodies (male and female) that normalizes sexual violence at least for the purposes of the law.[34]

Subsequent years of violence have all produced the most damaging accounts of what is referred to as the "post-mortem practices" of the state; in other words, its response to the violence itself and the nature of the remedial action taken[35]. There exists the total fear in which women live – fear of reporting what they had experienced, fear of living with its consequences. Where the state is concerned, not only are its functionaries seen to be deeply patriarchal, but also the institutions that constitute it[36]. Within these institutions, according to activists, patriarchy work in complex and often contradictory ways, but it ensures that women remain at the receiving end of violence of different sorts. Compelling cases for further understanding how the pathologies of the state get unfolded into the everyday life are provided in the accounts of the destruction of the family under the terror of populations caught between the violence of the state and the armed groups in northeast India.

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[33] See Veena Das, 'Sexual Violence, Discursive Formations and the State', *Economic and Political Weekly* (Special number, September 1996), pp. 2411-23.

[34] Ibid, P. 2411.

[35] Upendra Baxi, "The Gujarat Catastrophe: Notes on Reading Politics as Democidal Rape and Culture", in Kalpana Kannabiran (ed.), *The Violence of Normal Times: Essays on Women's Lived Realities* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2005), pp. 332-383. The repeated failure of the Central govt. to check this scandalous abuse of power not only perpetuates violence, it seriously vitiates the state govt.'s authority and capacity to deal with excesses.

[36] Urvashi Butalia, 'Confrontation and negotiation: The women's Movement's Responses to Violence against Women' op.cit. pp. 207-234.

This implicates that if a "masculine" state (to use Catherine MacKinnon's characterization) subscribes to and endorses society's patriarchal attitudes; if its laws and regulatory mechanisms and procedures are inherently gendered; if it finds itself normalizing or naturalizing a range of discriminatory practices; if it does little to dismantle structural inequalities and institutionalized violence; if, in the matter of sexual violence against women, it is also participant and perpetrator, then the state–society divide begins to blur. This is the case happening in Northeastern India. It is the "women's question" that most sharply highlights the conundrum of the state as protector/perpetrator. Therefore the occurrence of what is euphemistically called the "exploitation" of women in regions under military occupation places the security and armed forces, as well as the state/government in an uncomfortable situation.

Ethnic Community: Differential Treatment:

The ethnic or communal dimension of South Asian conflicts has had all the well-known, and relatively more closely observed and analyzed consequences on society and polity. It is precisely at the time of dramatic shifts in gender roles, brought about by the societal upheaval attendant on conflict, that the impulse to promote women's social transformation and autonomy is circumscribed by the nationalist and communitarian project. For these projects need to configure women as the guardian of the community's accepted and acceptable distinct cultural identity and tradition, thus circumscribing the processes of desirable change and even pushing back women. The codes regulating gender relations then become bound up with notions of cultural authenticity, and then the defense of one's culture becomes in large part the defense of that culture's notions about what is appropriate for women. In this context, public authorities turn a blind eye to coercive practices that institutionalize women's subordination, strengthen the power of self-styled community leaders – almost always male- who represent a very partial view of "their"

community's most cherished traditions and leads to a paralyzed relativism that puts emphasis on cultural differences over the rights or needs of women[37].

Women as Symbols:

This kind of interface between women and the society brings to centre stage the issues of patriarchy, rights and the women. This is not to deny that when a community feels under siege, women, seen as symbolic and physical markers of a community identity, are under pressure to embrace identity constructs which undermine women's autonomy of being. Women in their 'proper behavior' and their proper clothing embody the honor of the collectivity and are seen as carriers of tradition.[38] The body as the site of cultural inscription has been developed in interesting ways by some feminists who stress that the cultural construction of the body is always gendered. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* suggests that any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instigating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies.[39] So powerful and general is the belief that safeguarding a women's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence comes into play, by men against their own kinswomen. This illuminates the ways in which the cultural norms of patriarchal society transform women into properly feminine bodies.

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias [40] identify three other ways in which women's relationships to state and ethnicity can be seen as different from men's: (1) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic or national groups; (2) as participants in the ideological reproduction of the community; and (3) as signifiers of ethnic or national difference. In the Northeast India where the conflict is also linked up with the whole

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[37] Anne Phillips, 'Dilemmas of gender and culture: the judge, the democrat and the political activist' in Avigail Eisenberg & Jeff Spinner-Halev (eds.) *Minorities within Minorities: Equality, Rights and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, c2005), pp. 114-5.

[38] Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Citizenship, Territoriality and the Gendered Construction of Difference' in Neil Brenner, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones & Gordon MacLeod (eds.) *State and Space: A Reader* (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), P. 313.

[39] Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, cited in Judith Butler, *Excerpt from Gender Trouble*, in Diana Tietjens Meyers (ed.) Op.cited. P.115.

[40] Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1989), P. 7.

question of identity and ethnicity, this has led to a control over women's mobility, control over their bodies and how they express themselves. Assertion of ethnicity is often over exaggerated and patriarchal and fundamentalist values and ideologies are reinforced. There is pressure on women from within the community to uphold culture and ethnic identities which inhibit the questioning of gender biased customary laws and practices.

Women and 'the Nation':

Ethnic communities are, almost by definition, paternalistic and patriarchal; they are rarely emancipatory for women, because they are rarely democratic. The business of reproducing the clan, the community and the nation, rests on the principle of mixture – the dilution of purity – which women's bodies signify. And so, though the 'nation' is the woman, the 'race' is the woman, men's lineage, their purity, is guaranteed only through controlling women. In a conflict, when the question of the ethnic or communal identity comes to the fore, women are often the first to be targeted. Rights to cultural self-determination are equally problematic insofar as culture is seen as 'private' and protected from legal regulation; they are frequently invoked to justify 'traditional' practices contributing to the subordination of women. The regulation of their sexuality is critical to establishing difference and claiming distinction on that basis. Then, as Ritu Mennon suggests, the question of where women 'belong', of whether they emerge as full-fledged citizens or remain 'wards of their immediate communities' is contingent upon how the politics of identity are played out, and how their resolution takes place between community and state[41].

Historically, women have been excluded from power and decision making processes, fostering ambivalence towards issues of citizenship and national identity. Women's problematic relationship with the politics of exclusion of national identity struggles is epigrammatically expressed in Virginia Woolf's assertion *'I have no nation'*. At a more pragmatic level, it is argued that women, because they are excluded from 'politics', have less stake in the ideological or political positions on which conflict thrives. The question is whether women do in fact feature as full members in a

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[41] Ritu Menon, 'Doing peace: Women resist Daily Battle in South Asia', op.cit. P. 70

community/collectivity or not. These questions acquire greater significance in a situation of ongoing conflict as women are much more vulnerable to discrimination and disparity. Recent feminist research has demonstrated how 'citizen' and 'state subject' are gendered categories, by examining how men and women are treated unequally by most states - despite constitutional guarantees of equality. 'The integration of women into modern "nationhood",' says Deniz Kandiyoti, 'epitomized by citizenship in a sovereign nation-state somehow follows a different trajectory from that of men.'[42] The sources of this difference, she continues, are various and may have to do with the representation of nation-as-woman or nation-as-mother to be protected by her male citizens.

National chauvinism exaggerates the negative aspects of nationalism, conflating as it does manhood, combat and militarism; it reproduces violence, glorifying it as a 'natural' expression of masculine and nation-state identity (Enloe: 1990). The separatist groups fail to take on the challenge of locating rape in gender politics, reinforcing the notion of feminization of honour, thus condemning the raped women to social ostracism in a patriarchal society. In the case of rape, the notion of family/community honour remains the dominant discourse, not the violation of a woman's body and her social being. The politics of rape imbricated in women's bodies becomes both a metaphor and the material reality of markers of the community/nationality.[43] The politics of the struggle for self-determination is internalized in their physical being, and their personal humiliation and harassment by the state security forces is experienced as the humiliation of the community. This explains the refusal to acknowledge the sexual violation by one's own armed groups.

Feminist critique is thus concerned with the diffuse and subtle constraints of culture. This critique begins from the assumption that cultural norms, including language, law, custom, and moral norms, are not merely products of human will and action but define and limit the possibilities for human identity[44]. They view the body as not simply given, but

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[12] Cited in Menon, Ibid. P. 69.
[13] Rita Manchanda, 'Where are the Women in South Asian Conflicts?' in *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency,* op.cit. P.23.
[14] *See for example,* Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

as culturally constructed as the "field of inscription of socio-symbolic codes."[45] Feminists have argued that this social construction of identity is gender differentiated contributing to women's subordination.

Notion of Security in Conflict Situation:

According to the understanding of modern day politics, security is the foundational value around which the political subject revolves. The basic political subject is violent by virtue of its composition.[46] This privileging of national security, like war, is a gendering activity because state activity often gets diverted to areas like national security and control of dissenting minorities and movements for rights, including women's movements. Bhagat Oinam and Homen Thangjam argue that security is not merely the main goal of the political subject of violence; it is rather the very principle of formation of that political subject[47]. In ethnicized violence against its citizens, the state summons up the incontestable logic of national security to grant itself immunity from judicial action. For the Indian state, violence is justified to maintain security of the 'Indian nation state'. Therefore, in the quest for national and military security we are jeopardizing human security,[48] at the very least its coequal.

The political subjects in the Northeast invoke ethnicity as the subject of security. To maintain security of the 'ethnic political subject', violence of various kinds are ignited and often justified. Emergence of many insurgent groups on the ethnic line only endorses this thesis. To elaborate, the issue of security in the Northeast comes up more elaborately in the

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[45] Marageret McLaren, 'Foucault and the subject of feminism', *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol.23, no. 1 (Spring 1997), P. 20.

[46] Campbell & Dillon, 'The End of Philosophy and the End of International Relations,' in D. Campbell and M. Dillon (eds.), *The Political Subject of Violence* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 1-47.

[47] Bhagat Oinam & Homen Thangjam, "Indian 'Nation State' and Crises of the 'Periphery' in Prasenjit Biswas & C.Joshua Thomas (eds.) *Peace in India's Northeast- Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment,* (New Delhi: Regency Pub, 2006), P. 10.

[48] The Human security discourse has come up from below, from people and groups articulated by civil society groups, social movements and marginal groups especially women. This discourse widens the notion of security emphasizing social justice, human rights, gender equality and democracy.

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security is not self-referential, but always relational in that it must be defined in terms of security for whom and for what. [51] Feminizing the security discourse,[52] not only brings in that half of the population which has been excluded, but also taps new perspectives located in women's experience of providing for day to day human security, and thus their more comprehensive and integrated perspectives on what actually constitutes security. A gendered notion of security and power is integrally connected with women's experience of structural inequality at every level, from the home to the public sphere. It is thus essential to the process of redefining security and power.

The Phenomena of Militarism:

Feminist scholarship and the women's movement oppose the forces, processes and beliefs that construct the ideology of militarism and a militarized state and society-ideology and practices which are intertwined with sexism and xenophobia. Drawing upon the leading feminist scholar on militarism, Cynthia Enloe, militarism is viewed not as an event but as a process and occurs not only in time of conflict and war, but more significantly in every day of peace time. It is kept alive by the active political decisions of the state. Anuradha Chenoy criticizes the state as a masculine enterprise and national security doctrines as legitimizing violence. [53] She affirms the significance of a feminist analysis of militarization that privileges gender and gender inequality as inherent in the construction of militarism. As women try and increase their agency, the perception is that when women accept militarist notions of power it is easier for them to become part of national security and state institutions.[54] This is a major challenge for feminist culture and thinking.

War critically affects civil society. However, perhaps even more than war, it is the phenomena of militarism that impacts the civil society. The threat stems commonly from three sources: state policy, the body politics, and the external exigencies. Intra-national militarization is visible in the promulgation of laws that give the army extraordinary powers over civilians in conflict situations; in the increased use of the army to resolve

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[51] Ibid. P. 4.
[52] See Betty Reardon, 1999; Carolyn Stephenson, 1999; Chenoy, 1998; Rita Manchanda, 2001
[53] Anuradha M. Chenoy, 'Gender and International Politics: The Intersections of Patriarchy and Militarisation', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 11: 1 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), pp. 27-42.
[54] Ibid. P.27.

civilian issues and suppress opposition movements; in the centralization of the state structure and justification of militarist ideology by the state; and the increasing use of military and paramilitary forces in domestic crises and conflicts.

Militarism is a context that has existed since the formation of the contemporary Indian nation-state. The issues of community, identity, and nationhood were raised. Rather than negotiate a settlement constitutionally – the State responded militarily[55]. The present day scenario of suffering in the Northeast India at the hands of policy- makers and the military establishment demonstrates the lack of political will to address the root causes of their discontent. Deconstructed, this has meant an excessive military presence in the region and the promulgation of legislation in the nature of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), which adversely affects the life and liberty of the people of the region. Naturally, such heavy-handed militarism has sapped the very notions of 'normal civilian life' and there are innumerable instances of violations committed against civilians.

Women, War and Peace:

In the interpretations of mythic traditions of the two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, we can turn the spotlight on Sita as protagonist, articulating her situation when she was abducted by Ravana, king of Sri Lanka and the battle of her recovery by Rama, and his army.[56] Sita comments not on the glorious battle but reflects instead on the timelessness of her experience.

Sita, bereft of peace by Rama's lust for power
Sita, of sorrow appropriated by Ravana
Sita, consummating my purity in the flames
To prove my virtue to husband
Swollen with the pride of victory.

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[55] Chenoy, *Militarism and Women in South Asia: Women and Civil Society* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002), p.123.
[56] Ritu Menon has dealt with the connection between myth and the violence of war while discussing the 'Ideology and the architecture of Performance' by Asmita, a women's resource centre in Hyderabad. See Menon, Chap. 3, 'Alternative Forms of Protest' in Kannabiran and Menon, Op. cit. pp. 96-105.

The examination of the situation of women even in Indian epics compels one to question if this myth was, in fact, the story of patriarchy. In the Mahabharata, Draupadi introduces the experience of disrobing and the public humiliation of women – an experience that women's movements had to confront time and again. The section of War & Peace dealt with in the Ramayana ended with Sita and Surpanaka speaking together as allies, of the untold violation of women in the war between the Aryas and the Dravidas. This inserts the need for women to build alliances across borders, boundaries and identities which implicate a critical element in feminist politics.

In times of violent conflict and the attendant societal upheaval, women are pushed into public space to manage survival or enter into negotiations of power. As I shall develop below, the emphasis is that the exclusion of women from the structures of power, and the exclusions which women face spanning from household to the public sphere, have particular insights into understanding structural inequalities and discrimination. Paula Banerjee in her analysis of the conflict politics of northeast India, shows that women denied space in formal politics creatively expand informal political space to negotiate and transform conflict.[57] Their activism is marked by a number of things. First, the perception of women as victims of violence, and second, the focus on holding the state accountable for the many ways in which such violence manifested itself against women. Arguably, the common experiences of women across the region in their activism, grounded in the informal space of politics, does get undervalued and marginalized as the struggle get more militarized.

Myriad Roles in Conflict Situations:

The women's movement and feminist work has established that women play multiple roles in the public sphere especially when it breaks down. Researches believe that in many countries women have not only proved to be extremely creative in developing survival mechanisms but have also played an important role in ending organized violence. Naga and Manipuri women are frontrunners in the peace process; in their quest for peace,

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[57] Paula Banerjee, 'Between Two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland' in Manchanda (ed.) *Women, War and Peace*, op.cit. pp. 131-170.

they have adapted various roles during conflicts and in post-conflict situations: bread winners, keepers of tradition and culture, militants, patriots, and finally, brokers of peace.

Women's myriad roles are inspired by their encounters with violence, in war, but also in every day life. Charlotte Bunch argues that women's motivations are part of their larger struggle to access and influence the public domain from which they are traditionally excluded.[58] Thus it is also the case that protracted conflict has made women more visible and active in conflict, both as victims and agency. In between these two extremes lie a host of actors and I will draw upon Roshmi Goswami's classification of six categories of women in conflict situation in northeast India.[59] They are:

1. Women relatives of armed activists

2. Women relatives of the State armed forces and state officials

3. Women militants and combatants

4. Women as shelter providers

5. Women as victims of sexual and physical abuse

6. Women as peace negotiators.

Women and Peace:

Feminist analysis has tried to move way from biological, essentialist and cultural arguments in favor of women's tolerance and non-violence, and has suggested instead, that 'if women have a distinctive angle in peace it is not due to their being "nurturing" but more to do perhaps, with knowing oppression".[60] As Ritu Menon argues, their historical exclusion from structures of power, both in the private and public domains, as well as their experiences of subjugation gives them a stake in working for peace and justice – as well as in keeping democracy alive, for it is only through social justice and democracy that they

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[58] Charlotte Bunch, 'Peace, Human Rights and Women's Peace Activism: Feminist Readings' in Coomaraswamy and Fonseka (eds.) *Peace work: women, Armed conflict and Negotiation*, op.cit. pp. 28-53.
[59] This is elaborated Goswami, Roshmi, '*Women and Armed Conflict: Ground realities in the Northeast,*' paper presented at the WISCOMP Symposium 'Human Security in the New Millennium', August 2000.
[60] Cockburn, Cynthia, *The Space between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1998), P. 129.

will be able to realize their right to equality.[61] According to this logic, a feminist culture of peace fundamentally criticizes unequal structures of domination and is built on learning to live with difference, without aggression. It is the combined experience of oppression and violence, plus the responsibility for survival and sustenance during and in the aftermath of the conflict that provides the strongest impetus to women's peace making. There is a need, however, to guard against sentimentalizing the issue of women and peace politics. Women have been known to actively support violent and sectarian organizations and have been guilty of perpetuating the 'them' and 'us' divide at the heart of conflict. And yet in the end, as Thandi Modise, an MP from South Africa observed, "For women, it does not matter which side you are on, on both sides children get maimed and killed and women get raped. It makes it difficult for women to choose sides and enables them to reach out across the ethnic divide. This is particularly so when the violence is perceived as illegitimate, that is violence for violence's sake."[62]

Women's capacity can be understood through different lenses[63]. First, it is through the hackneyed images of their biological identities and feminine traits. It is one thing to argue against this purely essentialist understanding of the nexus between women and peace. It is another thing however to disregard its rhetorical power and the manner in which this line of reasoning can and is used to mobilize women for peace. In fact a good number of anti-war movements organize around the emotive rhetoric of motherhood. Social constructivism offers a second lens for understanding the correlation between women and peace, and that is how women's psychological developments prepares them to be careful caregivers and nurturers, roles that are antithetical to the violence and destruction brought about by war. A third lens connects women's agency for peace to their exclusion from the public sphere and their constant struggle to gain access to the same. The fourth and final lens for better understanding women's agency in peace is one of justice. Women are motivated to fight for peace (even when they are not 'victims' of war), because of their experiences with their every day violence and injustice, which endows them with an aptitude for empathizing with victims of the same. This is a useful lens for understanding

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[61] Ritu Menon, op.cit, P. 64.
[62] Cited in Manchanda, 'Where are the Women in South Asian Conflicts?' op.cit., P. 19.
[63] Cynthia Cockburn, op.cit.

women's agency because it revisits the gendered nature of violence in war and everyday violence.

Women and Agency:

The problem of understanding women's agency in relation to violence has been of particular relevance to some feminist researchers and activists. Developing a complex and dynamic conception of female agency is essential for feminist knowledge, especially as it confronts the figure of woman as 'always already victim'. In fact the impetus for feminist politics has, for the most part, been its resistance to 'the oppressiveness of having to be a sexed being all the time'. Women as collective claim that, 'In this history, women are not spoken about but speak for themselves.' With regard to issue of gender, as Lois McNay[64] asserts, the conceptualization of a creative dimension to agency is renewed understanding to autonomy and reflexivity, understood as the critical awareness that arises from a self-conscious relation with the other. This is crucial to explaining both how women have acted despite constricting social sanctions or in the context of gender restructuring processes.

Dreze and Sen, stress the importance of women's agency for social progress and change and, provide reasons and indicators for the role of women's agency[65]. According to them, the first reason for the importance of women's agency is the persistence of gender-based inequalities of well-being, given the relevance of women's actions and movements in bringing about a change in the field. Women's empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men, and children. Furthermore, women's emancipation (through economic independence, political organization and related means) tends to have a strong impact on fertility rates. Finally, women's agency is important as a part of the agency of all people and women's decisions can have a profound impact on the policies that the government decides to pursue.

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[64] Lois McNay, 'Gender, Subjectification and Agency: Introductory Remarks' in *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the subject of Feminism and Social Theory* (USA: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 1-6.
[65] Jean Dreze and Amartya sen, 'Women's Agency and Social Change' in *India: development and Participation* (New Delhi: OUP, 2002), P. 17.

During conflict and violence, the rapid transformation in women's social status has all triggered the recognition that these celebratory accounts of agency which rely on a dualism of male dominance and female subordination do not adequately capture the complexities of agency. As Patricia Mann puts it, 'it is necessary to expand the vocabulary of political actions in order to make sense of individual agency in moments of discursive uncertainty and political change.'[66] The stereotypical essentialsing of women as 'victims' and men as 'perpetrators' of political violence and armed conflict assumes universal simplified definitions.[67] Such positioning in treating women as 'objects' denies their agency and associated voice as 'actors' in the process. Thus, importance of 'human agency' lies at the heart of a paradigm that recognizes the role of social actors. Drawing on Giddens (1984) theory of structuration, Long usefully clarifies:

> The notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints that exist, social actors are 'knowledgeable and capable' (Long 1992:23).

As critical agents, women are conscious of a continuum of violence. Arguably, women are capable of acute insights into understanding unequal power relationships and structural inequalities. For understanding women's agency during political conflict and violence, the idea of embodiment offers a more substantive account of the emergence of agency from the processes of bodily inscription. In an article on political violence in India, Veena Das has lucidly summarized agency as embedded in the body, "*The very act of violence invests the body with agency − not only on the body of the perpetrator of the violence but also of the victim and the survivor.*"[68] Women's lived experience and responses have been shaped by violence which women, in turn, have reconstructed into as new meanings in the interiority of their lives. For Butler, the performative construction of gender identity causes agency in that identificatory processes, through which norms are materialized and which permits the stabilization of a subject who is capable of resisting

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[66] Patricia Mann, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Post feminist Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), P.17.

[67] Moser, O. N. Caroline and Fiona C. Clark (ed.) *Victims, Perpetrators and Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (London: Zed Books, 2001), P. 4.

[68] Veena Das, "Violence and the Work of Time," Paper presented at the University of Edinburgh on the Conference of Boundaries, (October 5-7, 1996), P. 173.

those norms. This process of resistance takes place primarily as the boundaries of the corporeal norm, in the domains of 'excluded and delineated' sex. [69] Thus, agency is sedimented effect of the reiterative or ritualized practices, the repeated inscription of the symbolic norms of heterosexuality upon the body; and the living through of those norms permits the emergence of a stable bodily ego.[70]

Feminist philosophers (Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan) have proposed a self both social and capable of resistance. Seyla Benhabib, too, offers a view of social self capable of autonomy while recognizing that we are embedded in social networks:

> . The web of human affairs in which we are immersed are not simply like clothes which we outgrow or like shoes we leave behind, they are ties that bind; ties that shape our moral identities, our needs, our visions of the good life. The autonomous self is not the disembodied self.[71]

This feminist reconceiving of the subject gives weight to the network of relationships and social roles that constitutes subjects, while still allowing for moral agency. The feminists object that the omnipresence of power inhibits the possibility of agency and resistance on the part of the subject. They argue that while subjectivity is constituted through the discourses of truth that are imbued with relationships of power, this nonetheless does not automatically preclude the possibility of moral and political agency. Groups serve as "free spaces" within which women are able to discuss their perceptions of social issues and meet gender specific needs without customary inhibitions.

Women's Solidarity:

Solidarity among women strengthens resistance struggle. There can be mass-based feminist movement to end oppression without a united front in which women must take initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity. According to this feminist analysis, the basis for bonding is shared victimization, hence the emphasis on common oppression. However, bonding as victims create a situation in which assertive, self-affirming, women are often seen as having no place in feminist movement. They cannot afford to see

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[69] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), P.16.
[70] Ibid. P.14.
[71] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

themselves solely as "victims" because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. Therefore, they bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources which feminist movement should encourage. Thus when women actively struggle in a truly supportive way to understand differences, to change distorted perspectives, the foundation for the experiences of political solidarity is laid, which requires sustained ongoing commitment. Many feminist writers (MacKinnon, Rosi Braidotti, and H. Moore) argue that there are cross-cultural similarities in women's conditions and the way gender is constructed. Here we can accept MacKinnon's claim that women are "universal in their particularity" and as "collective singularity" which would support women's collective and particular struggles[72].

Women's Experience:

Women derive their agency from and through experience. The feminist critical consciousness "seemed to come out of reflections on our own, that is, women's experience, out of the contradictions we felt between the different ways we were represented even to ourselves, out of the inequities we had long experienced in our situations."[73] One of the significant things that marked women's groups was a belief that the commonality of women's experience made for an overarching solidarity among women, particularly those who saw themselves as part of the movement and that this solidarity was not easily affected by differences. Charlotte Bunch observes that in identifying with common experiences and common visions, women are also better able to reject the nationalistic rhetoric, and forge relationships and alliances across conflict divides.[74] Given the duality of experience – between what they see and understand about their experience or themselves and what the dominant patriarchal structures construe them – women sense the contradictions of a dominant order. That is why the women of these conflict torn areas "speak" genuinely about the tragedy of a deeply divided society.

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[72] Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).
[73] Judith Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism,' *Cultural Critique,* No. 9 (Spring 1988), P. 93.
[74] Charlotte Bunch, op.cit. P.2

This attributes an indisputable authenticity to women's experience and establishes incontrovertibly women's identity as people with agency. In addition, it literally equates the personal with the political, for the lived experience of women is seen as leading directly to resistance, to oppression, to feminism[75]. Indeed, the possibility of politics is said to rest on, to follow from, a pre-existing women's experience. Using women's shared experience for improving their immediate conditions and situations, opportunities can be developed for mutual assessments and mutual actions to remedy them. This in turn can help encourage marginalized groups such as women to become political actors, agents for change and thus effective citizens. The women's telling and sharing, exhibits what Daniel calls the "recalcitrantly ambiguous character of lived experience", and thereby challenges the normalizing discourse of the men.[76]

Women have not remained passive in this chronicle of extreme change and conflict. Foucault sees resistance as the odd element within power relations.[77] There is always at least some resistance to the imposition of any particular form of subjectivity and thus resistance is concomitant with the process of subjectification. He is willing to state that certain social movements, such as the women's movement, have had beneficial effects. Resistance can be productive, affirmative and even use the techniques of power. This resistance and protest by women is not because they are essentially peaceful, but because women have begun to relate domestic violence and gender stereotyping to state and inter-state violence.

While it is essential to emphasize the agential role of women in both the social and lived aspects of their embodiment, it is obvious that one needs to be careful, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan cautions in another context, to avoid stressing the 'romantic fiction' of resistance, however politically well intentioned it might be (1993:12).[78] Resistance and complicity then do not merely refer to types of agency but, as Henrietta Moore insightfully

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[75] This is one of the meanings of the slogan "personal is the political." Personal knowledge (i.e., experience) of oppression is the source of resistance to it.

[76] Val Daniel, "Mood, Moment and Mind: writing Violence", in Menon & Basin, *Borders & Boundaries*, op. cit.

[77] Brent L. Pickett, Foucault and the Politics of Resistance, *Polity*, Vol. 28, no. 4 (Summer 1996) pp. 445-466.

[78] Rageshwari Sunder Rajan quoted by Meenakshi Thapan (ed.) in *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, 'Introduction', op.cit. pp. 10-11.

remarks, 'to forms or aspects of subjectivity'[79]. The truth about agency is that the dividing line between compliance and subversion is thin and the women's body is often the conflicting site of both giving into, as well as resisting, dominant constructions. Thus it is the women's body which is central to understanding unequal gender relations; it is the site of violence and exclusion; it also has its celebratory aspects which are revealed in the consciousness of women. It is also the site for agency which allows for the possibilities of negotiation, intervention, contestation and transformation.

Conclusion:

It is one thing to acknowledge and account for the overwhelming difficulties faced by women in times of war. It is another thing, however to remain fixed to one-dimensional conceptualization of women as victims of war. During conflict and violence, the rapid transformation in women's social status has all triggered the recognition that these celebratory accounts of agency which rely on a dualism of male dominance and female subordination do not adequately capture the complexities of agency. The focus on women as simply victims draws attention to their needs as victims and less so to their potential agents of change.

The dichotomy of the male aggressor and the female victim continue to dominate our thinking on war. This conceptualization – though rhetorically powerful-as Coomarswamy and Fonseka[80] reiterates, is grossly inadequate and misleading on three accounts. Firstly, it does not allow us to seriously account for and explore the issue of female agency. To subscribe to the male aggressor/female victim dichotomy is to sidestep the issue of female agency in initiating and sustaining violence. Secondly, this conceptualization does not account for the ways in which women 'gain' from war by virtue of acquiring new roles, skills and positions of power. Thirdly, and perhaps most pertinent to our discussion, the tendency to see women as simply victims of war obfuscates their full

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[79] Ibid.
[80]'Introduction' in Coomaraswamy & Fonseka (eds.) *Peace Work: Women, Armed Conflict and Negotiation,* op.cit, P. 2.

potential for building peace. It is important that we move beyond the conceptualization of women as victims of war towards one that embraces and encompasses all images of female agency in war and peace. As mothers, soldiers, militants, caretakers, victims of bullets and sexual abuse, as survivors of female-headed households, the multiple roles of women in armed conflict are varied as they are complex and often defy straightjacket categorizations into 'victims' and 'agents'.

There is a tendency to view women in India as victims rather than agents of change even when gender interests are intertwined with collective action or movement protests. But beyond the passivity and powerlessness of victimhood, conflict has seen women come out and mobilize resistance, confront security forces, the administration and the courts. Women have formed Mothers Fronts and coalitions for peace, and women have emerged as agents of social transformation. Violent conflict opens up for women the public sphere predominantly controlled by men. In these conditions when the organization of survival becomes critical, men often have to abdicate their roles and female-management of survival assumes critical importance. Women use their traditional invisibility in the public sphere to create space for their activism.

A conflict situation requires new patterns for coping and organizing and this in turn has led many women to realize that they are capable of more than what traditional gender roles define. The generative theory of subjectification provides a more dynamic theory of agency through which to examine how social actors may adapt and respond in an active fashion to the uncertainties unleashed in an increasingly differentiated social order. Thus to overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed. Moreover, making visible women's experiences, their agency in managing survival and reconstruction in situations of violent conflict, is necessary to get due recognition for women's experiences as a resource and a space for mainstreaming gender in the whole conflict discourse and in the peace-building process. Thus there is need to understand the role of women beyond victimhood and their capacity to emerge as agents of social transformation, in other words, women's agency in war and peace.

Chapter Two

The Political Context of the Conflict and the Emergence of Women Activism in Nagaland and Manipur

There needs to be an 'informed' understanding of the nature of problems prevalent in specific to the place, which have their setting in the specific cultural milieu and historical background. Unfortunately, in the constructivist mechanism and rush for the completion of the nation state building enterprise with emphasis on integration and homogenization, these specificities are overlooked resulting in further complications. Here I will discuss the creation of modern Indian states[1] and the simultaneous identity building exercises and its relation to women in the northeast region. This chapter is structured in two parts. The first part deals with the synoptic history of the conflict in the northeast region and its impact on society, and the second part, highlights the status of women, their role as traditional peace makers and the stirrings of the Meitei and Naga women movements.

The violent phases of ethnic movements has to be seen in their structural relation to the other non-violent, peaceful, democratic movements for identity like the women's movement that preceded it or run concurrently with it. The implications of such movements for defining women's status and roles in a society under study is thus serious than it appears. This aspect was for a long time obscured in the northeast identity movements because of the libertarian potential sensed in them.[2] The interface of the ongoing identity movements of the region and the women's movement, silent but growing is the site for the shaping and the reshaping of gender identity. Therefore, it is pertinent that the emergence of women activism has to be seen in the context of women's

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[1] The modern idea of nation state was introduced in India through colonial intervention. The dilemma involved is that the Indian state appropriating the colonial character, which was questioned and rejected during the freedom struggle, has resulted into a situation of state-linked internal colonialism. See Bhagat Oinam & Homen Thangjam, Indian 'Nation State' and Crisis of the 'Periphery,' in Prasenjit Biswas & C.Joshua Thomas (eds.) *Peace in India's Northeast- Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment,* (New Delhi Regency Pub, 2006), pp. 49-78.

[2] Aparna Mahanta, 'Women initiatives for peace and Gender justice in Northeast India', in *Second Civil Society Dialogue on Peace* (Kolkatta: A Report, Mahanirban ResearchGroup: 2002), P. 15.

diverse ethnic and political positioning within structural, cultural and interpersonal frameworks of conflict.

I

Process of Nation-State Building:

The nation and the state in India have developed in distinct ways in terms of their historically created inner dynamics. The story of the political integration of India as a Nation State was through the logic of citizenship and the logic of economics.[3] In the 1950s and 1960s, it was widely believed in the Indian nationalist circles as elsewhere, that the making of a successful nation state was basically a matter of legal and political construction. The political history of India since 1947 shows that such a constructivist picture is misleading.[4] This state in India is much more a result of colonial experimentation with the needs of administering a vast and diverse society. In addition, the historical circumstances of Partition and the extreme political instability in the wake of the country's vivisection – the conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir, the integration of several rebellious states like Hyderabad into the Indian Union - led the state to rely heavily on the colonial legacy and the military and bureaucratic structures inherited from the Raj, in order to establish political authority over its diverse population and vast territory.

This state has become more and more a contested space. As Arjun Appadurai notes, the 'nation state' is a battle of imagination with 'state and nation' seeking to

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[3] The ideas were mainly borrowed from the (Western) modern paradigm of Nation State theory. In this enterprise, what was inculcated is the principle of individuating the individuals whose locomotion in life is propelled by self-interest and profit. The application of a western worldview of state formation in the developing countries with ideals of singularity presupposes that members of the state are all agreed in defining themselves primarily as individual citizens rather than as members of specific ethnic, religious or other communities. See Bhagat Oinam & Homen Thangjam. Ibid.

[4] Historical and economic structures which underlie political processes have had a 'parametric limiting' influence on what was possible in the political world. See Doornboos and Kaviraj, *Dyanamics of State Formation: India and Europe Compared* (New Delhi: Sage Pub., 1997), pp. 12-14 and Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Politics and the State in India* (New Delhi: Sage publications, 2000) pp. 27-31.

cannibalize each other.[5] From pre-independence times the secular-nationalist leadership has refused to even countenance the possibility that different people with varying 'national compositions' could have different notions of what it means to be an Indian.[6] The legacy of partition, ethnic divisions, fears for the survival of a particular identity and threats to the homogeneity of the nation state have generated conflict in pockets across the country. In the weeks before independence the Princely States which had never been incorporated directly under the British rule (but which had recognized Britain as the 'paramount power' over their affairs), were informed that they must join either the new India or Pakistan. In the face of integrating the princely states like Hyderabad and Junagadh and, in a different way in the case of Kashmir, the emergent state relied overwhelmingly on its coercive apparatus.[7] The communal violence and disputes over Junagadh, Hyderabad and Kashmir in 1947-8 highlight the divided nature of the subcontinent.

The post-colonial Indian state, as a social and political practice and as a system of inclusion and exclusion par excellence, had tried to solve the problem of conflicting identity claims by creating a coherent sovereign identity. In a region of such diversity, strong centrifugal forces emerge, and, there are calls for separate states to be created. The Nagas or the Tamils or the Malayalees or the Punjabis, and the different communities within the linguistic belts, may have very different notions of what it means to be an Indian. Any attempt to develop or sustain loyalties to their pre-modern identities, other than given by the state, is viewed with suspicion and hostility. For example when movements are initiated, demanding autonomy in the form of recognition of language, culture, or in more radical terms, self-determination, they are viewed as anti-national. The

[5] Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjunctures and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' in *Theory, Culture & Society,* 7 (2-3) 1990, P. 304.

[6] See Javed Aalam, 'Nation and the state in India: A Difficult Bond' in Zoya Hasan, E.Sridharan, R. Sudarshan (eds.) *India's Living Constitution: Ideas, Practices, Controversies* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp.83-104.

[7] Junagadh, a small state in the Saurashtra peninsula of Gujarat, hesitated in its decision to join India but was taken over by an 'army of liberation' of Hindu émigrés who had been armed by India after the Muslim ruler was bundles into an aircraft and sent to Pakistan after an economic blockade. The far larger state of Hyderabad was a more serious issue. The Nizam and his court were Muslim, but the state population was overwhelmingly Hindu, and, given its geographical position in the heart of the subcontinent, there was every expectation that Hyderabad would join India. India condemned the Nizam's quest for independence given the long history of the state as the 'whim of an autocrat' but was prepared to accept the decision of the Maharaja of Kashmir to join India.

suppression of the Naxalite (Maoist) movement, the Khalistan movement in Punjab, the Naga secessionist movement and the authoritarian interlude of the emergency Rule (1975-77) are all instances of this tendency to replace constitutional methods by extra-constitutional measures in resolving conflicts. Presiding over the transition from colonialism, the most important priority was to weld together a nation state from a culturally linguistic heterogeneous society and economically disparate regions. The Constituent assembly spent a considerable amount of time debating the rights and powers of the provinces or the states and those of the Union. The linguistic reorganization of states in 1956 proved to be a master stroke in sharpening the future institutional arrangement. To see the consequences of this ascendance of the state over the nation or of the governmental power over the autonomy of the society, let us now examine how the newly created state of northeast region in independent India was taking shape and how this conceptualization as it works itself out is going to be problematic.

In the mainland under the colonial rule, nationality consciousness as Tamils, Bengalis and Oriyas developed alongside pan-Indian national consciousness as Indians. However, in certain parts of the country and in the northeast region, some communities did not respond uniformly to the idea of forming Indian Union. Certain sections of the people in the northeast who were influenced by India's freedom struggle were favorably inclined to join the Indian Union. But others, especially the communities living in the hill areas of the northeast, which was untouched by the Indian nationalist movement, were skeptical about their future in the post-colonial India. In the Northeast and some parts of India, the logic of 'strategic importance' was given paramount significance. For example, Manipur was 'taken over' through a militaristic manoeuvre. The choice made then was to rely entirely on the inherited bureaucracy and police and the armed forces to contain upheavals and beat back popular agitations.

The politics of recognition is often an underlying theme in ethno national conflicts. Identities, as Charles Taylor puts it, are 'partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others'[8] . Prior to the signing of the Instrument of

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[8] Charles Taylor, 'Multiculralism and the "Politics of Recognition" ', in Amy Gutman (ed.) *Multiculralism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), P. 25.

accession with India, most of the states in the northeast today were independent principalities and chieftainships. The concept of Northeast India and the regional reorganization of this multi-ethnic setting have done colossal damage in social, political and economic parameters. As Tiplut Nongbri writes, "Keen to secure the integration of all sections of its populations into the political mainstream, the Indian state began its task of national consolidation...this step roused the spirit of tribes who perceived the state's action as an encroachment upon their rights and freedom".[9] Due to the process of colonial expansion and post-independent state reorganization, these hill communities were brought under different territorial administration and the concept of state territorial politics and segmentation was imposed on them. The region was reorganized for administrative convenience without considering ethnicity. The so-called 'administrative convenience' made some of the ethnic groups fall under different political units.[10] There were some in the Northeast India where a policy of exclusion had been applied to protect them from the encroachment of outsiders.

The monologue of the post-colonial Indian state's discourse of elevating the differences of identities to a common subject hood within a hegemonic space is a source of dissent, resistance and protest from the margins.[11] This production of India in the northeast amplifies a historical absence of India in the region whose 'official nationalism' inherits its form and content from the fallen regime (British rule) like any other colonial power whose presence was marked by a continuous absence of legitimacy. Manipur represents a theatre of a 'national' dialectics that was played out immediately along with the departure of the British colonialism in the form of combination of binary relations.[12] The king was allegedly made to sign the Merger Agreement 'under duress' on 21st September 1949 at Shillong marked the entry point of independent India into Manipur,

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[9] Tiplut Nongbri, 'Ethnicity and Political Activism in Northeast: Tribal Identity and State Policy', in P.S. Datta, (ed.), *The Northeast and the Indian State Paradoxes of a Periphery* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1995), P. 54.
[10] For instance, the contiguous Naga areas were brought under four administrative units, viz. Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.
[11] Nirmal Kumar Swain, 'The Post-colonial Indian State,' M.M.Agarwal (ed.), *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Indus, 1996), P. 83.
[12] The resistance of the Princes to the idea of joining Indian dominion coexisting with the demand for a responsible government. Another binary relation is the emergence of a political class favoring the idea of a United India challenged by a contesting mobilization for independence or autonomy or a restoration of a pre-British Indian status. See A. Noni Meetei, 'Multiple Nationalisms in Manipur: A Historical Time and its Reproduction', *Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 3 Issue IV, (Jan-March 2006), pp. 240-250.

but the dubious presence employed left a question mark on the legitimacy of the very presence. In the Naga Hills, the Nagas declared themselves as a distinct nation and expressed their desire not to form an independent state of their own. They began to argue that, since the Nagas were historically, racially and culturally different from Indians and were never occupied by the Indian rulers, the Nagas should be granted freedom as a sovereign country[13]

The process of state formation initiated by the Indian government following the attainment of independence generated disquieting trends in all the major hill districts in the northeast region. The national political leadership, in their eagerness to bring about the tribes integration into the political mainstream also ignored their time-tested institutions and sought to replace them with their own political model, the District and Regional Councils. Taking note of the wide cultural and structural divide that marked the relation between the tribal and the dominant population, the Indian union inserted the colonial concept of exclusion in the Indian Constitution in the form of the fifth and Sixth Schedules, under which mechanisms are evolved for the administration of tribal areas.[14] According to Nongbri, the error lies in the state's failure to appreciate the political and cultural sensitivities of tribes and in seeking to include them against their will within the state of Assam.[15] Ultimately, the state government unable to win the trust of the people "it never tried to integrate socially and emotionally" gave in to the demand, which resulted in the reorganization of Assam and creation of the state of Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura, and the elevation of the Mizo Hills district and the North-East frontier agencies (NEFA) into union territories, under a new political identity Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh respectively. The reorganization of Assam Act, 1972 also led to the establishment of the Northeastern Council to step up development activities in the region. Despite continuing discontent, the political situation in the hills moved towards full integration with the Indian Union and resistance was put down with a heavy hand while a policy of pacification and reward was extended to those willing to join the political mainstream.

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[13] V.K.Nuh (ed.), *The Naga Chronicle*, (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2002), pp. 65-66.
[14] The Fifth Schedule applies to tribal areas outside Northeast India, the Sixth Schedule is for the administration of tribes in the Northeastern region.
[15] See Tiplut Nongbri, *Development, Ethnicity and Gender* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003), P.114.

In the words of Sanjiv Baruah, the process of Indian 'integration' began with an 'authoritarian accent'[16] thereby producing a 'historical time'. Though the process of political integration has been a long and traumatic one, the struggle is not yet over. The *ad hoc* measures adopted by the state in dealing with this problem in the past and its inability to root out the source of this discontent in the present have converted the region into a centre of constant political turmoil. Though we find some commonality among the movements that emerged during the post-colonial phase in the various states of India, each movement has its own specificities and dynamics. We need to situate these movements in their socio-historical context, understand their complexities and their social transition.

Historicity of Political conflict:

The struggle of certain northeastern ethnic nationalities for political space within or outside the Indian Union[17] has taken on ever-new dimensions, with the state devising newer strategies to either suppress or accommodate these demands. The northeast[18] region exhibits the complexity of ethnicity and politics that a composite culture would possess. The region encompasses tremendous social heterogeneity and complex (traditional) political organizations. Numerous cultural groups with autonomous histories, conflicting claims, and different stages of development and political growth constitute the socio-political matrix of the region. The communities in the northeast, it is argued that they are culturally different from the communities in the mainland India and hence their movements have always been culturally defined and often demanded recognition for their 'way of life'.[19] In fact, this region serves as an example of a problem where demands for

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[16] Sanjiv Baruah, 'Generals as the Parallel Political Systems', *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Delhi: OUP, 2005), pp. 59-80.

[17] The struggle of the different nationalities of the northeast range from demands of autonomy within the Indian Union to outright separation with sovereign status.

[18] The North-east is an umbrella connotation used to club together the different states of the region. It is quite an illusive construct because it often fails to take into account the political, economic, and cultural complexities that are involved when one discusses the different nationalities and communities, which inhabit the region.

[19] Rajesh Dev, 'Identity Claims: Paradox of Recognition and redistribution in the North-East India' in Kousar J. Azam (ed.) *Ethnicity, Identity and the State in South Asia* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2001), P. 222.

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separatism and asserting micro-identities as political projects are constructed within the discourse of the nation state. It is in this complex northeastern mosaic of different nationalities at different stages of socio-economic and political growth that the Indian nation- state is today facing some of its gravest challenges.

In the case of the northeast, ethnicity has emerged as a 'historical' unit vying for space both within the mainstream politics as well as serve as canons of self-determinism. According to one analyst, the 'various movements in the Northeast have all to do with identity'.[20] The current turmoil has more to do with political aspirations, and the expansion of ethnic identity has captured political institutions and social movements. The ethnic mobilizations involve political, economic and cultural components locked with each other in a complex web of interaction.[21] The organic lives in the northeast region of India have not yet been able to shed the primacy of community identity over the individual identity as a 'citizen'. It is worth noting that the identity politics revolves around these structures, which are responsible for most of the violence in the region. The sense of alienation has always been there, not just because of what is perceived as Delhi's economic neglect of the northeast but because the predecessor state, the British Raj,[22] deliberately distanced administration of the Naga and Manipur hills.

The Indian State not fully equipped in handling the complex problems flowing from the history of the region quite often took recourse to repression giving rise to violence. Major governmental responses to Northeast relate to strategic security considerations. The state uses legitimizing core concepts like national security as justificatory ideologies of domination The agents of the state rather than approaching the affected people as citizens treat them as 'subjects'. Thus, military and paramilitary forces are deployed for the maintenance of 'peace and order' in the region. A significant

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[20] B.G.Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance and Development* (Delhi: Konark, 1996), pp. 280-311.
[21] The presence of various sets and sub-sets of authority have generated a contestation that imbricates culturé with the economy and polity contributing to indeterminacy and persistent violent movements.
[22] The British entered the region in A.D. 1826 during the Burmese invasion. Through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 they obtained political control over the region. The region was still considered as an 'excluded area' and British control remained 'shadowy' as described by Sir Robert Reid in 1941 on 'The Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam'. The British were not willing to accept the tribals as members of the political community of India.

dimension has been added to the complex political scenario of northeast India following the large scale presence of army and police personnel in various operations against insurgency in the region. At present the whole of northeast India comes under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958 by which the Governor of this specific region, and since 1972, the central government, can declare any region 'disturbed' and bring the act into force. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, that gives the armed forces extra-judicial powers, has led to human rights abuses and widespread alienation.

India, being a federal form of government, the central government exercises guidance over the states and provides support for them. The Constitution of India enshrined Article 19 (Fundamental Rights) which guarantees a set of 'fundamental rights' to all its citizens. However, large scale encroachments on the life and liberty of its citizen are visible in states that are under the AFSPA. In light of the constitutional guarantee of 'fundamental rights' to the citizens of the country, an unresolved question for northeast is the issue of the imposition of the AFSPA. While the Act specifies how it can be put into force, it fails to specify the conditions under which it can justifiably be declared. Naturally, such heavy-handed militarism has sapped the very notions of 'normal civilian life' and there are innumerable instances of violations committed against civilians. In the words of Lokendra Arambam,

"A cold, benumbing presence seems to prevail over the social and moral world due to the actions of the Indian state – the army, the paramilitary, the police with their adversary instincts....compounded on the other side by ruthless reaction by non- state actors on ordinary citizens whom they suspect as unwilling to obey their coercive dictates."[23]

The faulty governmental responses and policy measures dealing with conflicts has even provoke violence. With increasing state sponsored violence there is also a tremendous increase in sub national militancy. This is a fertile ground for local militancy to grow into secessionist movements for self-determinism. In those areas where the militants are strong they run a virtual government and collect contribution by way of "taxes". They challenge state authority and set up systems to counter the state meting out their own brand of 'justice' to perceived offenders. The Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) for instance, has its own parallel structures of governance in

[23] Lokendra Arambam, *Peace Process in Manipur: Armed Conflict, State Repression and Women,* (Guwahati: Peace Studies, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, 2005), P. 7&8.

accordance with their underground tactics. This sustained militancy and violence have effected the civilian population in predictable ways.

In situation of violence and insecurity arising out of ethnically based identity movements and the Indian State military intervention to control them, women have been the worst sufferers at the hands of state agencies and warring groups. The gendered subject of these regions has experienced exclusion both in the process of nation formation and from the discourse of ethnic resistance. The claims and counter claims that have become a part of the contemporary political discourse of the region demand an engagement with the social history of the region and the bases of traditional authority. Traditional institutions claim superiority in administration and are seeking constitutional recognition from the central government. But there is one area where traditional institutions have proved to be anachronistic and feudalistic. For one, traditional institutions have been exclusively male and women do not have a role in it. In a liberal democratic set up, such traits are not desirable especially when women are seeking more space in decision making bodies. One analyst argues, as the northeastern tribal societies emerged into ethnic groups, the public civic space and the private civic space got differentiated.[24] The emerging public civic space kept women out of it, assigning traditional and sex-specific roles to women inscribing ethnicity on sexuality and sexuality on ethnicity depending on the specific position of women in the hierarchy of a particular ethnic minority community.[25]

An engagement with the socio-political history of the region makes us aware of the fact that the proliferation of identity politics in the region in many instances has diverted from norms of democratic negotiations and sought to redefine the existing cultural and political contours often through violent means. Conflicts in Nagaland and Manipur exemplify the type of conflicts that plague the northeast. The politics and nature of the conflict in Nagaland and Manipur differ as does the culture and society in these regions. A brief background brings out the differences and yet also shows the

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[24] A civic space is a space for social associations and public responsibilities as distinguished from assigned domestic space. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, 'Feminizing the Civic Space: The Mizo Women's Federation and the Naga Mother's Association', in *Proceedings of Northeast India History Association, Twentieth Session,* Dibrugarh University, NEHU: Shillong, 2000, pp. 251-258.
[25] Ibid.

commonalities of conflict zones and their implications. In the two states of Nagaland and Manipur the long term and intense nature of armed conflicts remains unresolved, though in Nagaland a ceasefire agreement has been signed between the NSCN (Isaac-Muivah) and the Government of India.

The Naga problem:

In India's northeast, the people of the Naga Hills numbering about 40 tribes were the first to assert their distinct history as an independent people and challenge post colonial India's assertion of political control. Nagas[26] are an indigenous people whose life is integrated with their land, forest and hills. They occupy the mountainous country called the Patkai range. It lies between the Ningthi (Chindwin) and the Brahmaputra plains in the northeastern part of India. In the early part of the century, Nagas continued to live in mountain top villages with signs of fortification still intact. It is tribal society structured around secluded village republics with their own village lands. The units of households and different clans are interlinked in a web of social, economic and ritual ties and were constantly engaged in war like activities as inter-village head hunting[27] had a major ritual importance in the world of the Nagas. However, with the spread of Christianity, the Nagas left off these practices. Democratically[28] elected village and tribal councils continued to regulate social life. Traditionally women are excluded from participating in public life. The traditional structures of power remain more meaningful than the modern structures of representative government.

The Nagas were exceedingly conscious about their distinct ethnic identity which they vociferously articulated at the fag-end of colonial and postcolonial period. The more

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[26] The word 'Naga' commonly refers not to one but more than a dozen of tribes living in the Naga Hills. The Naga is their composite or larger identity. There are no precise official figures because the Indian census data do not correspond with the category 'Naga', and, whether or not some of these groups are to be considered Naga is a highly contested matter.

[27] The practice of head-hunting – an institutionalized form of inter-village warfare – was occasionally still taking place even though it was criminalized by the colonists. See Furer-Haimendorf, *Naked Nagas*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.), 1939.

[28] It is a consensual form of democracy with hierarchies and exclusions. It is dominated by the village elders and women are excluded from participation in public life.

recent *People of India* study finds that ethno-linguistically and culturally, the individual Naga tribes maintain internal uniformity and intra-community homogeneity. The conscious colonial decisions which did not change the land relations in the Naga Hills helped the Nagas to maintain their traditional economy on the one hand and their isolation and identity on the other. The single most important development that made the imagining of Nagas as a collectivity possible was their conversion to Christianity (Eaton 1997:245). The Christian missionaries introduced western education, modern medicine and a new way of life to the hill tribes. As a result of certain endogenous and exogenous factors, ethno-nationalism emerged among the Nagas and this emerging Naga nationalism successfully blended the traditional and the modern elements.[29]

The idea of "one nation" which gathered strength during the freedom struggle, and which was buttressed during the years immediately following independence, received its first major jolt in the Naga Hills district of undivided Assam. The Nagas were the first ethnic group to have successfully mounted a challenge to the process of nation-building and political process in the post-independence India.[30] The historical roots of the Naga political movement are in fact as old as colonial expansion in the region; Nagas fought against the colonialists for intruding into their "way of life". Their struggle is committed to unification of the Naga people divided internally and internationally for an autonomous Naga homeland where the 'Naga way of life' would be ensured. This claim was made by a conglomerate of ethnic identities that made claims in conjunction with one another.[31]

The social-political unrest in the region has a long history. Nagas have developed a strong sense of themselves as a collectivity. In 1929, twenty Nagas came together to form the Naga club and submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission that was

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[29] While the traditional leadership looked after the internal affairs, the modern educated leadership tried to look after its external affairs. Monirul Hussain, 'Big State-Small Nations: The Experience of Ethnic Nagas in Colonial and Postcolonial India', chap. 3 in Kousar J. Azam (ed.) *Ethnicity, Identity and the State in South Asia,* op.cit., P. 262.

[30] They seem to be a classic case of different ethnic tribes developing into a community and then eventually into a nationality. It was through their common struggle against the Indian state that the Nagas developed a corporate will necessary for national identity.

[31] This was done by utilizing the identity markers that were external to the collectivities, for e.g. the use of the word 'Naga' as an umbrella identity was used to consolidate the cohesion among disparate groups.

considering political reforms in India, not to include Nagas in any reform scheme.[32] The memorandum interpreted the pre-colonial past of the Nagas as that of an unvanquished people. 'Before the British Government conquered our country in 1879- 80', said the memorandum, 'we were living in a state of intermittent warfare with Assamese of the Assam valley to the north and west of our country and the Manipuris to the south. They never conquered us, nor were we ever subjected to their rule' (Simon Memorandum 1999:165-6).

The armed wing of the Naga militia emerged under the organization of the Naga National Council (NNC). The NNC (formed in 1946) was the first political organization which represented all the Naga tribes, articulating the collective anxiety and advocating self-determinism for the Nagas. To put the historical record straight, it was in the early 1940s that the idea of Naga nation emerged as a discourse in the Naga political movement. The leaders of the Indian state were suspicious of other identities (i.e. collective identity), and, therefore the Naga people demand for autonomy and self determination has been met with brutal state repression which flared up an armed insurgency. Since then, fifty years of the Indian state's strategies of military subjugation and divide and rule, have failed to vanquish the armed struggle.

By the time the Government of India carved out a separate state for the Nagas in 1963[33] and took steps to ensure their political and cultural autonomy, the breach between the Nagas and the Indian government had been widened by prolonged human tragedy and violation of human rights by the security forces. The Indian government approved the proposal to place Nagaland under the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India. However, no commitment was given with regard to the proposal for the inclusion of the contiguous areas inhabited by the Nagas as a part of the state of Nagaland.[34] The

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[32] See Sanjiv Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, op.cit. p. 108.
[33] The Thirteenth amendment of the Constitution by which the state of Nagaland was created, has certain special provisions regarding the way of life of the Naga people. Clause 371A states that notwithstanding anything in the constitution, no act of Parliament in respect of (a) religious and social practices of the Nagas (b) Naga customary laws and procedure and (c) administrative, legal and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary laws; (d) ownership and transfer of land and its resources shall apply to the state of Nagaland unless the Nagaland Legislative Assembly by a resolution so decides.
[34] H. Srikanth and C.J.Thomas, 'Naga Resistance Movement and the Peace Process in Northeast India', *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol.1, Issue 2, 2005, P. 65.

creation of Nagaland signifies that the formation of a state in the Indian Union does not depend on its economic and demographic credentials alone but also on the distinctive identity of the people.

As a result of the conflict, the entire Naga areas experienced militarization and wanton violation of human rights. The Naga Hills faced enforcement of draconian law since 1953 one after another giving sweeping power to the security forces, bombing by security forces and regrouping of Naga villages which led to displacement from their village and economy. The generation which lived through the period of 1953-70 experienced at first hand the violence and insecurity whereby normal fabric of life was destroyed. Kamal Mitra Chenoy observes -

> The Indian Armed Forces...appeared to have little knowledge or acquaintance with the customs and culture of the local people. Intelligence was poor, and the counter-insurgency forces had problems of communication with the people. With these forces armed with sweeping powers, often without civilian control, with sympathetic governments and an uncritical media, there were in the initial decades in the Naga Hills and Mizoram, little check on excess by the armed forces.[35]

The Indian Government and the NNC signed the Shillong Accord[36] in 1975, which deeply divided the Nagas, who broke into factions. Of these the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) contested the Accord. This group also broke into factions in 1988, one led by S.S. Khaplang (NSCN-K) and the other faction led by Isaac C. Swu and Th. Muivah (NSCN-IM) and both have parallel governments in different parts of Nagaland[37]. With this, while there have been elected governments the parallel governments of NSCN and the Naga underground struggle also continued. Since 1991 inter-factional conflict has escalated in Nagaland. The factional feud not only caused loss of life and bitterness but also was deeply gendered, as women became victims of rival

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[35] Kamal Mitra Chenoy, 'Militarism, Civil Society and Inter-group Relations in Northeastern India', in Kailash Aggarwal (ed.) Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in Northeast India, (Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999), P. 69.

[36] The Government of India obtained, under duress acceptance of the Indian Constitution by some underground Naga leaders whereby they were made to sign the Shillong Accord on 11 November 1975, whereby on their own volition, accept without condition the Constitution of India and promised to surrender arms. The Shillong Accord proved to be a temporary settlement. See 'Naga Resistance and the Peace Process', published by The Other Media, Bangalore: 2001, pp. 12-13.

[37] The Khaplang faction gets its support from the Ao region of Mokokchung and the districts of Mon and parts of Tuensang. The rest of Nagaland is dominated by the Isaac-Muivah faction.

forces. Women become subject to parallel patriarchies, those of the state, the underground and the community.

The history of the Naga conflict is threaded with various peace initiatives involving the institutions of the Baptist church and the 'Naga social organizations'. The latter encompasses the apex body of the Naga tribal councils: Naga Hoho[38] and its counterpart in Manipur- the United Naga Council (UNC); the Human rights organization Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) and the student bodies: Naga Students Federation and the apex women's organization in Nagaland, NMA (Naga Mother's Association) and in Manipur, NWUM (Naga Women's Union of Manipur). What is significant is that most of these NGOs draw their legitimacy from the traditional structures of authority in Naga tribal society and have acquired greater social acceptability and strength. The political field of the Naga people is characterized by the parallel structures of authority in which the modern Nagaland state structure and bureaucracy is but one and in many ways subordinate to the authority claims of the traditional structure. While many of these Naga social organizations draw strength from roots in a traditional structure, the current *avatar* of the apex body of the Naga tribes, the Naga HoHo, is a reinvention of tradition. We can locate activism of women's groups within this outcrop of civil society organizations engaged in peace work.

We can explore the enabling role of Naga tradition in validating women's peace activism and the limits of that validation when one of the armed protagonists – the Indian state is an outsider to the Naga social value system. An index of the shift in social consciousness is the greater space for women's profile in public life across the board. Moreover conflict opens up spaces for what gender studies literature terms ambivalent empowerment of civilian and militant. Over the years, Naga women have formed associations to voice their concerns and to mobilize their community.

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[38] The Naga Hoho is akin to a Panchayati Raj for every tribe. Under the traditional Naga ruling system every tribe nominates its Hoho leaders. It exercises traditional constitutional powers according to their customary law and represents the entire tribe.

The Manipur Conflict:

Manipur offers a vast storehouse of an ancient civilization disintegrating and bursting at the seams through the phenomenal occurrence of both 'epistemic'[39] and political violence. Identity formation by more than thirty communities and tribes harping on exclusivity, integration and dominance within the state resulted in several forms of conflict. Here the politics of recognition has been a persistent theme in Manipur's troubled politics. The creation of a state brought into conflict the diverse ethnic groups of Manipur, all of which sought to dominate the others and garner resources and power for themselves. The situation in Manipur began to deteriorate in 1978 when some dissatisfied youth took up arms against the government of India, all had the same objective: to organize support from the people and wage an armed struggle against the government of India for the separation of the state of Manipur. Armed-opposition movements in Manipur are grounded in ethno-nationalism and have a historical setting. In the last decade ethnic conflicts too have proliferated and overtaken the secessionist war.[40]

Ethnic solidarity which was a way of life of the pre-colonial state was shattered by the new imperialistic interventions, and ethnic division and consciousness was aroused in conflictual terms. The circumstances of Manipur's merger with India in October 1949, when it was stripped of the autonomy it had enjoyed, has haunted the post-colonial politics of Manipur. Before the advent of the British, Manipur was a sovereign, independent state, frequently at war with its neighbors like Assam and Burma. The royal chronicles of the state (known as *Puyas*) show that till its merger with India in 1949, seventy-six kings ascended the throne of Manipur. In the plains there is a distinctly different insurgency movement that believes that the Maharaja of Manipur was coerced into signing the instrument of accession. The people of Manipur believed that the merger was forced upon them and that they were denied democratic self-government which resulted in an armed liberation movement. The centre responded with legislations like Disturbed Areas Act 1976, National security Act 1980, and the Armed Forces (Special

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[39] It is about creating violence to well set knowledge cultures by creating violence over other knowledge culture by constructing or distorting their virtues and values which paves the way for varied expressions of the culture of a particular society

[40] In 1992, Manipur saw its bloodiest ethnic conflict between the Kukis and the Nagas, a conflict that is referred to as the 'indelible black spot' in the history of the state.

Powers) Act, 1958. Since 1988, this state has had to live with the draconian law called the Armed Forces Special Power Act which gives unfettered powers to security forces to arrest, interrogate and even eliminate suspected militants. There has been a strong demand to remove this act, or at least to review it.

In Manipur, which was a princely state till 1947 and then given the status of a state, women fought alongside men for representative government. In 1954 and 1959 they played an active role in the demand for a responsible government in Manipur, and in 1960 formed a Women Assembly Demand Committee to urge the central government of India to form a responsible government in Manipur.[41] Women were also active participants in the Statehood Demand Movement, a significant agitation of the late 1960s. Despite their influences as pressure group and their active participation in protest movements, however, they have not been given due recognition in formal institutional politics. The failure of the women of Manipur to play a significant role in state politics despite their sometimes spectacular achievement vis-à-vis their own men folk in other fields, as well as their considerable work participation, has been analyzed.[42] The increase in terrorist activities in almost all of these regions can be cited as a further constraint on women's participation in politics, particularly if the violence factor is taken into consideration. The situation of conflict creates a sense of insecurity and uncertainty for them.

Qualitative accentuation of state security measures vis-à-vis intensification of the struggle by the non-state actors reveals the dynamic implications of political violence in the state. In Lokendra Arambam words, "the inherent logic of internal war groups took place, when the groups who were in opposition to the powerful state faced sheer abrasion and suppression through the unusual force, and played in weaknesses of the struggling groups, the breaking up into factions and mutually antagonistic and the insurgent outfits became divided."[43] There are more than twenty armed-opposition groups in the state. [44]

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[41] Bimola Devi, 'Manipuri Women-A Study,' in Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.) Manipur: Past and Present, Vol 1, (Delhi: Mittal Pub., 1998), P.169.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Lokendra Arambam, op.cit, P. 20.

Manipur society has become divided along narrow ideological lines, with competing allegiances dividing and sub-dividing the populace. The state's economy and infrastructure have collapsed leaving a deep impact on women.

What has brought Manipur to its present state of chaos and incoherence is the demand by leaders of the Naga resistance movement (the NSCN-IM) that all the hill areas of Manipur inhabited by the Nagas should form part of the proposed sovereign state of *Nagalim*.[45] The Meiteis[46] are determined to protect every inch of their territory. Similarly, the Nagas are as determined to break away from Manipur and join the Naga confreres in the ideal state of *Nagalim*. In June 2001, Manipur went up in flames when the ceasefire between Government of India and the NSCN (IM) was extended to the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur. The Meiteis strongly oppose the extension of Naga ceasefire to the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur. The opposition is based on pre-conceived speculation that the extension of Naga ceasefire to Manipur would mean a loss or changes to the present political boundary of Manipur. This uprising left a bad scar in the ethnic relationship between the Nagas and the Meiteis. Such insecurity has bred diverse forms of ethnic assertions.

Since the beginning of 2005, the agitation against the Bengali lettering has intensified which led to the burning down of the Central library in Imphal containing hundreds of rare manuscripts which was a repository of ancient history and tradition.[47] A movement was launched to introduce this script in place of the established Bengali script. According to Lucy Zehol, this was a reaction to a strong revivalist movement which re-

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[44] The insurgent groups stem from different ethnic backgrounds – Naga, Meitei, Kuki, Pangal – which to a large extent, determine their demands. The Meitei outfits are demanding separation of Manipur from India; the Kuki outfit wants a Kukiland and the Nagas want Nagalim or Greater Nagaland.

[45] In recent years many Nagas have begun using the term 'Nagalim' to describe the Naga homeland too distinguish it from the state of Nagaland. 'Lim' is a word in Ao dialect that refers to land. The new term distinguishes between the state of Nagaland and what is seen as the territory of the Nagas without the expansive connotation of the term Greater Nagaland used by the Indian media. Sanjiv Baruah, op.cit, p.112.

[46] The Meiteis, an ethnic term that distinguishes the Manipur's lowlanders from the hill people, are proud of the long history of their state in the Imphal valley. Meiteis, who live mostly in the Imphal valley, number about 1.4 million, and they constitute 57 per cent of the state's population

[47] The incident occurred on April 13, 2005. Hundreds of rare manuscripts, including texts in Meitei Mayek were lost as a result of the arson. Activists from organizations like the Metei Erol Eyek Loinasillon Apunba Lup (MEELAL) or the United Forum for Safeguarding Manipuri script and language have set schools books on fire and issued instructions to language newspapers to print their front pages in the *Meitei Mayek* script.

emerged in the 1960s as a response to the Naga insurgency.[48] The Meiteis were animists who followed the *Sanamahi*[49] faith. However, between 1890 and 1930, Hindu Vaishanavism was firmly established among the Meiteis.[50] The *Meitei Mayek,* or the original script of the Meiteis was also replaced by the Bengali script.

Indian State Military Acts and its Repercussions:

Independent India enacted several pieces of legislation after the British left, among them the Assam Maintenance Public Order (Autonomous Districts)Act of 1953, the Assam Disturbed Areas act of 1955, the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act of 1958, and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1972.[51] The major act governing military action in the northeast of India is the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 and 1972. It is intended specifically for use in "disturbed areas", though no precise definition of such an area is given. All theses National Security Acts have highly draconian features that give the military and paramilitary wide ranging powers with little accountability, grossly restricting civil liberties. The act has been in force in the whole of Nagaland since 1995; and in selected districts (those characterized as "insurgent") of Manipur since 1980. Some estimates claim that, numerically, there is one security personnel for every 10 civilians in the region. [52]

Of all the acts legislated by the Indian government to curb extremism or militancy, the AFSPA is probably the most draconian in its provisions. *Once in force, the*

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[48] See, Lucy Zehol (ed.), *Ethnicity in Manipur: Experiences, Issues and Perspectives*, (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998), pp 80-84.

[49] The Sanamahi faith is an ancient animistic form of religion associated with the belief that *sanamahi* is the creator of life on earth. According to story it is also known as the liquid of life spreading in all directions like the rays of the sun, so also the Sun God.

[50] In the early eighteenth century, King Pamheiba (alias Garib Niwas), under the influene of Shantidas Gosai, a preacher from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh), declared Hinduism to be the state religion. In 1729, he burnt all the holy books and the *Puyas* (the Royal chronicles are called the *Puyas*) relating to the *Sanamahi* faith. This event is called the *Puya Meithaba* among the Meiteis. See Gunjan Veda, *Tailoring Peace...The Citizens roundtable on Manipur and Beyond (*North East Network, 2005), pp. 4-5.

[51] Though the AFSPA has its antecedents in British India, there are significant differences. The British granted special powers only to a commissioned officer, not below the rank of a captain; by contrast, the Indian AFSPA grants this power to all security personnel, irrespective of their rank.

[52] Khatoli Khala, *The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and its Impact on Women in Nagaland* (WISCOMP Perspectives 5, 2003), pp.26-27.

Armed Forces Special Powers Act gives unbridled powers to personnel in the armed forces and also guarantees near total immunity to them. It grants unrestricted and unaccountable powers to the security forces. The enforcement Section (4) of the act, for instance, gives members of the armed forces, down to the rank of non-commissioned officer, the power to shoot and kill, to arrest without warrant any person against whom there is reasonable suspicion of either having committed, or intending to commit, a cognizable offence. The construction of Section (6) which requires prior sanction of the central government makes it almost impossible for anyone to seek redress for grievances or legal protection against violation(s) of fundamental right(s). The Indian Parliament has enforced this law for indefinite periods, without review, in large parts of the northeastern region.

The history of military occupation and the use of the armed forces to contain civil unrest are replete with instances of abuse, uncalled for violence and human rights violations. The Indian experience in northeast is no exception to this, and the protracted nature of insurgency in these regions has exacerbated the situation as violence begins to replicate itself. In low intensity conflict, armies use counter-insurgency tactics designed to destroy infrastructure. Security personnel conduct body searches, storm homes at night on the pretext of search and seizure, hold families of suspected militants' hostage, and otherwise humiliate and intimidate women. By forcefully entering the household, the army was not only invading women's physical space but also violating their psychological and effective space. The military enactment of state power in a space culturally defined as feminine created a gendered colonial dichotomy (Aretxaga: 1997:69). This escalation in militarist strategies to the conflict produced some devastating gender-specific effects, in addition to the daily threat of violence.

The heavy handedness of Indian military policy in northeast, as evinced by the routine nature of government surveillance is well documented. In Nagaland, the roster of sexual crimes against women stretches back to the mid-1950s. In 1960, A.Z. Phizo, the first Naga revolutionary leader of the Naga national movement, submitted an appeal to the United Nations in which he enumerated dozens of cases of sexual violation by the armed forces and security personnel, between 1954 and 1957. They include the full

repertoire of violence from rape and mutilation to rubbing chilli powder into women's genitals; forcible fondling, kissing and biting; stripping and flogging; beating pregnant women's stomach with boots and rifle butts; brutally raping minor girls; gang raping; and of course, killing in the presence of family members.[53] A WISCOMP team that visited the districts of Wokha, Zunheboto, Mokokchung, Dimapur and Kohima in 2000 corroborated the ghastly Yaukeli Baptist church rape of four young girls (aged 17, 15, 12 and 11 years) in the church pulpit in 1971, by officers of the First Maratha Regiment. It also confirmed the Akuluto firing incident of 1995; the Mokochung firing and arson incident of 1994; and several others, in all of which women were sexually violated by the armed forces. [54]

The repeated failure of the Central government to check this scandalous abuse of power not only perpetuates violence, it seriously vitiates the state government's authority and capacity to deal with excesses. In the case of Assam Rifles, for instance, the latter virtually took over the district of Oinam in Nagaland in1971, ran a parallel administration, and forbade the then Chief Minister from visiting the area. Human Rights lawyer, Nandita Haksar, who worked with the civil society organizations in the Northeast during the 1980s and 90s, cited the 1987 Oinam counterinsurgency operation in which two pregnant women were forced to deliver their babies in a school playground, surrounded by jawans.

> We presented 10,000 pages of evidence of atrocities committed by security forces during the Oinam operations...but till today (2004) there has been no judgment . . . Where is the space for justice for the people of Northeast? [55]

However, it would be hard to justify such violation of women as being necessary either to the maintenance of law and order or to the curbing of "terrorism", so the authorities have done the next best thing – denied that any such offence ever took place. In a prevailing climate of conflict, there is practically no guarantee to life. During 1992-2001, 3006 persons died in insurgent related killings in Manipur. From 2002 to May 2005, the number stood at 729.[56] In addition, there are the interrelated problems of human rights

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[53] Ibid, pp. 49-59.
[54] Ibid. pp 55-57.
[55] As reported in *Tehelka*, August 7, 2004.
[56] South Asia Terrorist Portal, 2005,
http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/India/states/Manipur/data_sheets/index.html

violations. Women withstand the worst of conflict directly in terms of threat to life, sexual harassments, rape and restrictions upon livelihood means.

The occurrence of what is euphemistically called the "exploitation" of women in regions under military occupation places the security and armed forces, as well as the state/government in an uncomfortable situation. This enables us to examine some significant aspects of sexual violence against women by the state. The first is a tacit (but unacknowledged) acceptance that the sexual violation of women, even by agents of the state, is only to be expected when insurgency, communal violence and armed conflict occur. The rhetoric of denial and denunciation thus takes place at the same time as the violation, and the two are neither inconsistent nor irreconcilable. Moreover, the simultaneity of both helps in normalizing such violence, as well as ensuring a kind of social silence around it. At the same time, the state cannot be seen as being guilty of criminal assault and is often dismissed as rare instances of "aberrant" behavior. Since independence, successive Indian governments and the Indian state have routinely dismissed allegations of human rights violations as a "hue and cry" raised by human rights organizations, "because they don't know what the ground reality is." Of the cases found "true", in the Northeast, they were 57 per cent.[57]

Social and Economic Implications:

'War and terror have the effect, sometimes deliberate, sometimes incidental,' says Cockburn, 'of rendering the fine fabric of everyday life, its interlaced economies, its material systems of support and care, its social networks, the roofs that shelter it.'[58] Addressing the original sources of grievances that led to current conflict does not necessarily address the dynamics of the conflicts generated. In other words, there is a need to look at what kind of impact conflict itself has produced over a period of time. Existing scattered studies note their specific impact on women: the high number of civilian

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[57] See Kannabiran & Menon, *From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence against Women in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2007), P. 184.

[58] Cockburn, Cynthia, 'The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence,' in Caroline O. N. Moser & Fiona Clark, *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), pp. 13-28.

casualties and the very large numbers of refugees and female-headed households; a serious dislocation of social and economic life and a much higher incidence of daily violence. According to preliminary findings in the northeast of India, for instance, the long periods of violence has had an adverse impact on the sex ratio, not in favour of women but against them.

The women constitute less than 48 per cent of the total population in the northeast. The northeast poses central paradox, its female-male sex ratio is decreasing, even though the percentage of female literates is much higher than the national average of 39.4 per cent and all the more surprising because of the matrilineal character of many of its societies. Paula Banerjee, working on Manipur, reports a decline from 1015 women to 1000 men in 1961 to 961 in the 1990's and in Nagaland, it is down from 933:1000 to 890.[59] The decline is thus indicative of a situation that may be even worse than the one reflected in the abysmal Indian average of 929 women to every 1,000 men. There is one common phenomenon which plagues women in both states and that is a lack of women's voice in formal politics. Due to this it is said that the women are generally unable to influence the course of the conflict. Yet they are its worst casualty. 'Be it acts of insurgents or raids of the security forces .... Women of perennially disturbed states suffer the most' [60]

In such kind of situations women suffer most. They are in constant fear of being assaulted, raped by the security personnel or their men being picked up for interrogation. So the whole responsibility of meeting the needs of the family, their survival, falls on the shoulders of the women. In conflict areas, women's spaces become restricted and their mobility severely hampered. They can no longer move around freely because of the constant fear of molestation and extortion. Daizy Mezlur, Secretary, Social welfare advisory Board, Kohima, says:

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[59] Paula Banerjee, 'Between two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland' in Rita Manchanda (ed.) *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency,* (Sage: New Delhi), pp. 139-141.
[60] Ibid.

Our society is going through a transition period which is too fast for us. ..In the whole process women are caught in the web. Atrocities against women are growing. We live under extreme tension and pressure everyday. If we hear a bang we crawl under the table...We live in constant fear.[61]

Economic life and movement is disrupted due to emergency orders, economic blockades, curfews and restrictions. Women already unequal are unequally affected. Most women feel there is restriction on economic activities. Unemployment is very high in all regions of conflict. In Manipur of the four hundred thousand registered unemployed in 2003 of which one hundreds thousand are women but there is vast under employment and women do not go to employment exchanges to register.[62] The successful initiation of cease fire in Nagaland has removed some of the earlier restrictions but 80% of the women in Manipur argue that they are restricted physically and this has a negative impact on trade and economic activity. [63]

The per capita income of Manipur in 1998-9 was only Rs.7132 and in Nagaland Rs. 10,287, making them the lowest amongst Indian states.[64] Further, surveys confirm that while there is high literacy and enrolment in these states compared to the national average, there is low per capita income, low consumption levels and inadequate health care systems. Women's role in the decision making process is minimal. In fact in ongoing modernization, participation of women in productive work has been falling as compared to their participation in traditional productive activities. The reasons are that the scope of employment of men in traditional productive activities has fallen and the burden of maintaining family, through earning in traditional activities is on women.

The most worrying aspect is the fear of the unknown as the women puts it. 'Any time, any of your relatives or even yourself, or your own house or locality,. can be a target. We cannot sleep until all the family members return.' The situation of conflict creates a sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Restriction is the most disturbing outcome. Our understanding of the term encompasses the complex network of human realities

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[1] Cited in Preeti Gill, 'Women in the Time of Conflict: the case of Nagaland,' in *ICC Quarterly* (Mon-winter 2005) Where the sun rises when Shadows fall: The Northeast, P. 221.
[2] Homen Thangjam, 'Armed-Conflict and Women's Well Being in Manipur', Eastern Quarterly, Vol. 3, issue II (July-Sept 2005), op.cit. P.120.
[3] Cited in Anuradha M. Chenoy, 'Resources or Symbols? Women and Armed Conflict in India', (unpublished paper), P. 6
[4] Ibid.

imaginable in a situation of conflict, starting from circumscription of one's physical mobility to threats to life and affects one's livelihood means. The cases of the *Keithel Phambis* (Women vendors in Manipur) and women traders highlight this reality.[65] Militarization of the civil spaces and military occupation of places denies one's access to resources around them.

The emergence of the institution of women organizations has made participation mandatory for every woman in Manipur valley. The investment of women's energy into economically non-productive activities, in addition to earning a livelihood, is a direct outcome of conflict. During the daytime, she is someone engaged in some form of productive work. By nighttime, she has to take up the social responsibility of keeping vigil over her locality for which she is not paid. In between these two sojourns, she has to perform the domestic chores. Thus, health, nutrition, rest and child care of these women are invariably affected. The potentially negative impact that the collective endeavors bears on the individual well-being, in terms of livelihood questions, health consequences and family life, calls for an urgent need to end armed-conflict in the state. Homen Thangjam analyses the well being of Manipuri women in armed conflict. He argues that the perpetual engagement of the women collectively is a case of misplaced capital. According to him,

> The disturbing feature about women's response to the ongoing conflict is their perpetual engagement in fighting against conflict and the multiple roles they up. Both features affect their well-being and disturb the contours of social capital.[66]

The experiences of women in areas of armed conflict presents an alarming scenario in which they are at a receiving end of domestic and economic violence, cross border displacement, and poverty –and-unemployment induced trafficking. At the intersection of all this is the woman who must maintain a livelihood, and sustain the family, as well. In many places women are the sole bread winners but they are losing their source of livelihood. 'All these factors have accelerated the process of impoverishment, inequality

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[65] As A site for launching any form of protest, agitation or movement by women, *Keithels* are affected in a number of ways. The government follows wanton imposition of market bandhs whenever women undertake agitations. Curfews, general strikes, and shoot-out in the market places are other incidents, which affect the *Keithels*.

[66] Homen Thangjam, op.cit., pp 117-127.

and hardships'.[67] Absence of livelihood options exposes them to violence and exploitation at the hands of anyone with the slightest control over their lives. In addition, growing drug abuse and alcoholism have resulted in increasing violence against women. Living under constant fear and dread is the kind of violence that has a lasting impact on the minds and bodies of women. Violence against women across the board has been affected by the larger conflict here which has blocked development, hampered normal living, led to anti-people policies, and to high levels of discontent and resentment among the youth.

II

Position of Women as Traditional Peace Makers:

The viewpoint of 'women as a homogenous category' needs to be deconstructed with careful examination of the positionings of women from 'certain social collectivities'.[68] In order to understand and audit the nature of women's activism in these regions, we need to locate it in women's place in society and track the emergence of women consciousness and activism. In perspective, it should be kept in mind that social movements such as the women's movement emerge out of the internal contradictions of the dominant moral discourse at any historical juncture. It will enable us to socially contextualize our profile of the two Women's organizations – the Naga mothers' Association and the Meira Paibies and the contrasting cultural dynamics of their interventions for peace in a conflict ridden society.

In the rest of India, there prevails a misconception that women in Northeast India are free, liberated and privileged to enjoy a relatively high social status. However, we should not go by such conceptions as it tends to blur the real position of women in these regions. Women in the northeastern region do have an edge over women in other parts of the country, in terms of visibility and mobility. The tribal culture of the region is relatively egalitarian. Concepts of solidarity are fairly strong and this is often seen in

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[67] 'Women in the Hills', Himalaya Today, Sept-November 1997.
[68] Nira-Yuval Davis, *Gender and Nation State*, (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1997), P. 115.

traditional cooperative systems, women's market and forms of cooperative village action, which seem to sustain and perpetuate an order of social cohesiveness. Women's collective work pattern is well-embedded in the social fabric through traditional and conventional value systems, which is often reflected in the functioning of groups and village organizations. Unlike other communities, women in some of these communities not only contribute physical labour but also enjoy some amount of economic autonomy. Aparna Mahanta expands the analysis of patriarchy in northeastern states of India and links it to state formations from the fifteenth century.[69] She theorizes that the favored form of religion of the worship of the *devi* in various manifestations, though mainly as a mother goddess associated with fertility and as a virgin goddess is perhaps because of the recognition of women's predominant role in the tribal economies. However, Mahanta warns that it should not be assumed that the worship of the goddesses implies any actual role for women, whether in state affairs, rather it symbolizes the actual delegation of women's power, derived from the economic weight they carried in society.

The exclusion of the tribal people from the legal structures in the name of protecting the customary laws has on the whole had detrimental effects on women. While the traditional political institutions of the tribal people were democratic in character with equal male representation and therefore highly lauded by the British administrators, they totally excluded women. The taboo on women's participation in politics, whether at the level of village administration or wider inter-tribal and later state institutions, is almost universal in tribal societies. This adversely affects women's participation even when the modern state has introduced representative institutions. They are debarred from taking in political decision-making. Besides the inherent gender biases of the traditional systems, greater contact and exposure with other cultures have resulted in acculturation and dilution of some of the positive and women-friendly aspects of the indigenous cultures.

There was incipient valorization of men's work over women's work which was evident in the solemnity of the tribal council from which women were excluded where great decorum was maintained. Agriculture, in the tribal mode is considered to be

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[69] See Aparna Mahanta, 'Patriarchy and State Systems in Northeast India: A Historical and Critical Perspective' in Kumkum Sangari & Uma Chakravarti, *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishing & Distributors, 1999), pp. 342-367.

'women's work' both because of women's greater work participation and because it is closer to nature and involved with fertility rituals centered on women. Among the hunting tribes of the Nagas who follow patrilineal system, the greater dangers involved in hunting and the constant inter-tribal warfare completely overshadowed the women's contribution to the subsistence economy without which neither warfare nor hunting would be possible.

Naga Women:

Furer-Haimendorf, the chronicler of the 'Naked Nagas', wrote about the high status of the Naga women in relation to other women in South Asia. His writing on the Naga women says, '[m]any women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and the personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages"[70] . According to the Hindu caste centric perception tribal women are regularly presented as 'liberated' possessing the freedom to move beyond the four corners of the house and unashamedly partake in the social activities alongside the men. Coupled with the lack of exhaustive study, the tendency among social scientists to perceive the tribal women as the fixed alter ego image of the Hindu caste women alienates them and the issues facing them. Probably it is in this light that Furer-Haimendorf had made the above statement. It needs to be noted that any scholarship pertaining solely to a narrow comparative analysis with the caste Hindu women is only quarter the picture of the tribal social reality.

To make a generalized statement about the status of women among the Nagas is extremely difficult. Different tribes have set different standards for women. Naga society practices patrilinial system, where descent is traced through the male line. Clans are headed by men although some women wield a lot of influence as consorts. Naga society is characterized by a marked sense of egalitarianism based on community interdependence for survival and this transcends gender. Codification of the customary laws of the Nagas by the 'colonial' rulers further disadvantages women. Both men and women have equal right to divorce but it is the women who must leave behind the house,

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[70] Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1939), P.96.

children and take only the 'bride price'. Over 70 percent of the Nagas are still engaged in agriculture. Women bear the brunt of the work in the fields such as hoeing, transplanting and weeding. They are also engaged in weaving, knitting for their family and also for earning some cash.

Women in Nagaland have taken to education with great fervour. There is also an increase in the number of professional women. In Nagaland female literacy is about 61% and male literacy about 72% and is much higher than the national average. Despite women being highly educated and occupying important positions, political parties and organizations are still dominated by men. There are no women in traditional village councils and only two women in the city council of Kohima nominated by the governor and not elected. Naga feminists like Dolly Kikon and Khatoli Khala, are critical of the continuing gender bias in present day Naga society. While women have an important status in Naga social and ritual life, equality does not extend to economic and political power. According to one observer, 'participation of women in decision making body has been a taboo for women since time immemorial'. Women here are excluded from the decision-making processes both in traditional and modern Naga society, from the traditional village councils and tribal parliament, as well as elected bodies. In contemporary Nagaland, women continue to be excluded from the representation in the village tribal council, the basic unit of the traditional political authority and consequently the Naga HoHo and the United Naga Council (UNC). Naga women are organized in the women's wing of the different tribes but these organizations merely follow the directives of the patriarchal village. Women are marginalized in political decision making not only by the state, but by the rebel groups as well. The two most important rebel groups are the NSCN factions, NSCN-IM and NSCN-K but none of which are led by women.

Traditionally Naga society was structured in readiness for war and women, for whom touching a weapon was taboo, were relegated to the private sphere. Among the Ao tribe, women were not encouraged to pass by the public meeting space of the elders lest some information waft into their ears and they garble it in the re-telling. Naga women are not entitled to ancestral property; only male members inherit, though parents are increasingly apportioning acquired property to the daughters. However, women's role as

ambassadors of peace during the frequent inter-tribal wars may indicate the actual importance given to them.

'Pukrelia' and other traditions

Women played a vital role in stopping the violence during the inter village head hunting days. She was the socially sanctioned peacemaker, the *'pukrelia'* of the Tangkhul tribe or the *'demi'* of the Zeliangrong tribe. In the bygone days, when head hunting was practiced, these *pukhreilas* played vital roles saving lives of men"[71]. The tradition of Pukreila or the 'neutral lady' among the Tangkhul tribe entailed the marriage of a woman from one tribe to a man from another. She is also referred to as the 'Peace maker', the 'bearer of the torch of peace and the 'Red Cross bearer' of Naga inter village war. For instance, when feud or war broke out between her husbands's *shang* (*Khel*/clan) and their enemy she acted as the peace emissary. The marriage signified a truce of sorts between them; the woman would intervene by stepping between the two tribes, stretching out her arms and declaring, "Stop, stop fighting. You on my brother's side and you on my husband's side, stop fighting and let peace prevail for my sake."[72] Rita Manchanda recounts how in another version of Pukreila "if two villages are at war and the death toll is rising, a wise woman has the prerogative to step forward and shake or whip open her *mekhala* (sarong),[73] and by this shamming intervention stop the violence and induce negotiated compromise. They carried the authority to stop the violence. The *pukhreila* could not be harmed as a rule. It is the *pukrelia* and the *demi* cultural traditions that provide the legitimizing social framework for the Naga women's peace activism.

However, one should be careful not to put undue emphasis on the role of the *pukhreila* for it can ignore or conceal the fact that the Naga women cannot inherit the land, cannot participate in the decision-making processes and suffers other similar forms of discrimination in the day-to-day affairs of her existence. Perhaps by considering the perception and the role of the women in the everyday affairs of the society it would become evident that her wartime duty is a reflection of being at the receiving end in a patriarchal society. And the continued insistence on the *pukhreila*'s high position only

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[71] Lucy Zehol, Women in Naga Society (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1997), P. 23.
[72] Aram Pamei 'Naga Women and culture' in *Raisunriang* 1996, pp. 27-32.
[73] Unstitched attire worn to cover the lower part of the body in this part of Indian region.

points to the patriarchal ideology at work which hinders the *pukhreila* from claiming equal position in a society. In an ethnic Naga society, Naga women have struggled to carve out the space for themselves. The patriarchal forces and the structures have excluded women's participation in large scale social processes although women played a commendable role of mediators during village feuds. With militarization, it has resulted in legitimizing the processes of exclusion or marginalization of women from decision making and political powers. On the other hand, women have developed alternative strategies as part of a resistance struggle. In Naga inheritance laws, women have no share according to tribal customary laws. As such, political mobilization of women is seen as a challenge to the Naga tribal concept of women's participation in politics.

Meitei women:

In analyzing the status of women in Manipur, what stands out is the fact that, the state has a rich legacy of women's uprising. There is a paradigm for which Manipuri women are known is that the Meitei women's status is very high. This paradigm came into being starting from their fight for independence from the British. Manipur women have been in the forefront in spearheading peaceful protests against injustice and they realize their collective potential as a strong pressure group. It is well known that women in Manipur enjoy a better social status and more economic freedom than their counterparts in the rest of the country.[74]

Women in myths and legends enjoyed a lot of freedom because their actions were sanctioned by the traditions of that time. Until the 17th century, men and women shared social and political responsibilities. But with the myth of *Pakhangba*[75] taking root, and with the advent of organized Hinduism in the 18th century, women started to lose power and they protested this strongly. Manipur women today are caught between the liberal traditions of pre-Hinduisation and the conservative traditions of post-sanskritization. The submissiveness of mythical Hindu women like *Sita* and *Savitri*, is idealized in society, as a conservative tradition of the Vaishnavite Hinduism was imposed on the traditionally independent women. So it is hard for the Manipur women of today to find inspiration

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[74] See Gunjan Veda, *Tailoring Peace: The Citizens Roundtable in Manipur and Beyond*, op.cit.

[75] A Meitei myth which literally means "one knows his father" gained prominence after which the matriarchal society became patriarchal.

from the female myths and legends and to assert their traditional liberty and independence, especially their role in the administration of the state. But in the public domain, the inheritance of the pre-Hindu women of myth is still very strong, as the numerous women's uprisings indicate.

Over the last century, the women of Manipur have risen together to battle the problems they faced in society. The state's women movements have been both focused and wide ranging, with uprisings against local powers, the monarchy, colonial forces and the Indian government. In the historic movements called the I^{st} Nupilan and the 2nd Nupilan (Nupi means woman, lan means battle or uprising) the women came out spontaneously in large numbers. The first Nupi Lan 1904, was against imposition of forced labour upon the male population. In the 2nd Nupi Lan, 1939, the women campaigned against economic policies that permitted rice to be exported out of the kingdom at the cost of the ability of its own people to access food. The women controlled the marketing of produce in this largely agrarian economy, came out in protest. Manipuri women were also actively involved in the freedom movement under Mahatma Gandhi and Hijam Irabot.[76] It has been said that the Nupi-lan was a great landmark in the colonial history of Manipur, for it brought about a drastic improvement in every aspect of the people's lives, particularly in the administrative system.

There are opinions which point out gender biases of the time in the domestic sphere. Dunn writes, 'With their industry and usefulness women hold a very inferior position and are considered more in the light of goods and chattels than as persons to be treated with honour and consideration'.[77] Women were also victims of polygamy and other forms of male oppression. However, these deviances unknown before, originated once a conservative religious ideology crept in and the traditional society was replaced by a colonial society. The acceptance of Hinduism as state religion and Hindu ideology in the beginning of the 18th century led to emergence of patriarchal social system. This

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[76] Eventually, the nature of the movement shifted from the export policy of the colonial government to the freedom movement. Armed liberation n in Manipur started under the leadership of Hijam Irabot. Rani Gaidinliu served one of the longest uninterrupted prison sentences due to her role in the freedom movement. See Dr Lucy Zehol (ed.), Ethnicity in Manipur: Experience, Issues and perspective, (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998), P. 6-7.

[77] Capt. E.W.Dun, gazetteer of Manipur, (Delhi: Manas Pub.), (first published in 1886) 1992, P. 23.

abolished institutions and political system that was gender sensitive which resulted in the loss of women's status.

The very curious situation of Manipur, which is a culture where the male is a superior in women–dominated 'traditional' economy, has been studied extensively.[78] Functional occupation of the males in the service of the state, the *Lallup* system[79], left the trade and economic space, other manual works and professions to women. Their role in society can be best observed in the market. *Keithel* (market place) solely belonged to women. The concept of economic independence came up in terms of *Ima Keithals* (Women's market) and it is the elder women who generally used to acquire ownership in such *Keithals*. In addition to the *Lallup* system, depopulation of males during the 'Seven years Devastation'[80] was responsible for women taking up trade and economic activities.

Ima Keithal: What is significant is that Manipuri women have been able to strengthen their dominant position in the 'traditional' economy (by adoption of modern technology, power looms, bicycles and rice mills) and preserved it from the inroads of men protecting it as 'women's work.'[81] That economic role has meant that despite the deterioration of the position of women that came with the advent of the Hinduism in the mid- 18th century, Manipuri women have an important role not only in the subsistence economy, but also in marketing and trade. *Ima Keithal* – literally Mother's Market, also referred to as *Keithal Nupi* or Women's market of Manipur is one of the largest markets in the country to be managed exclusively by women. The *Ima Keithal* or the women's market of Manipur is not just its distinguishing feature, but also the birthplace of most social movements. These institutions are the mainstay of earning a livelihood for women and for supporting their families. The Ima Keithel alone hosts more than 7000 *keithel phambis* (shops) on a daily basis. Besides being a centre of trade, it is also a forum for women to meet and discuss social and political issues and make collective decisions

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[78] See Chaki-Sirkar, *Feminism in a Traditional Society* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Ltd. 1984).
[79] Compulsory labour and military services were demanded for ten days in a month. In return, lands were given from which tax was appropriated in kind. When husband died, half the land was withdrawn until a male issue started contributing state services.
[80] The period between 1819-2 is known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* in the history of Manipur. During this period, there was continuous war between the then kingdom of Manipur and Burma.
[81] A case in point is the *Tangal* Bazaar women's resistance to the building of a modern market place, from which they were likely to be driven out by upcoming male traders.

about various matters and boycott of keithel is one of the strategies followed by women. In fact, *keithals* has been the facilitating space for women's activism in the state of Manipur. In both cases, Manjushree Sircar opines that women belong to a wider extra-domestic world, and exert political power that arises out of their socio-economic roles.[82]

Women Courts (Pacha Loishang): Manipuri women have made a commendable contribution in the political sphere. Historically, the state played an important role to protect the well-being of women. This is evident from the institution of *Pacha Loishang* (Women's Court), the women's right to appeal.[83] Until the colonial period, there was a separate women's court, *Pacha Loishang*,[84] with formal judicial authority vested in women. Even the king consulted the authority of the *Pacha Loishang*, though mostly on religious matters. While social justice informed the state, at the societal level social relations were governed by principles of collective endeavors, reciprocity and sharing.

Subsequent changes brought about by British colonialism and Manipur's integration to India has brought in new dimensions. While the *Pacha Loishang* (Women's Court) and women's right to appeal has disappeared over time, the institution of *keithel* and women's economic role have persisted. The abolition of *lallup* system (replaced by tax system) and monetization of the economy by the British in 1892 added more burdens on women in terms of running the family.[85] Women are usually in a more disadvantaged position because of their low skill (technical) and low educational attainment. There are educational differentials with female literacy at 59.70 percent and male literacy at 77.87 percent as per the 2001 Census.[86] Social norms are based on patriarchal structures and the joint family system is common, increasing women's dependence on the larger patriarchal family. Women depend on husbands even though Manipuri women historically have had positive economic roles. Women are carriers of

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[82] Chaki_Sircar, Ibid, P.8.

[83] Run by women, *Pacha Loishang* looked after cases related to women. Women could appeal against injustices and were heard by the authority. By virtue of this right even capital punishment were pardoned by the kings. See B.Kulachandra Singh, 'The High Status that the Law of Manipur Accorded to Meitei Women', Manipuri text, *Macha Leima*, No. 15, December 2001, P.5.

[84] Manipuri women trace their decendence from legendary women such as Laisana, the wife of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, who came to the throne in Kangla of 33 AD. She presided over the Patcha, or the women's court that dealt with women related crimes.

[85] See Homen Thangjam, 'Women's well-Being and Armed Conflict in Manipur', op.cit. pp. 117-127.

[86] Ibid, P.120.

cultural symbols, and values and family rituals like *Mangba-sengba* (pure-impure) are to be carried out by the daughter-in-law under strict supervision of the mother-in-law. By tradition women are prohibited to eat the offerings of the ancestral god (*Apokpa*).

TorchBearers: The great spirit of the women is evident today in the *Meira Paibis* or 'Torchbearers'[87] Movement. Its genesis has been the impact of crises on women. Started in the early 1970s initially, as a women's movement against alcohol abuse-related public disorder, the Meira Paibis focus is the community as a whole and they have in a sense taken over the arbitration role of the women's courts. In 1980, 26th April, the CRPF shot dead a pregnant woman along with three other persons in Imphal. On the next day, a woman vendor was killed being hit by the stray bullets fired by the CRPF. These two incidents can be said to have activated once again the women of Manipur to start the movement what we know today as "Meira Paibis". Thus, the *Meira Paibis* have a longer history in the name of '*Nasha Bandi* uprising' that began around the mid 70's.[88] Women's involvement in the historical anti-colonial movements has clearly influenced women's activism in the region and Meira Paibis can be seen as a logical outcome of the rise of insurgency and counter insurgency policy of the state.

In the socio-political sphere we have the *Meira Paibis* and in the economic sphere we have the *Ima-Keithel*. We tend to get a picture of Manipuri women's status being very high because of their visibility in the public sphere. But if look closely, we will realize that the Meitei woman lives simultaneously in two different worlds, the inside and the outside. According to Vijaylakshmi Brara, "their 'outside' image is that of an aggressive, organized force fighting for justice, the caretaker of society while in the inside world the traits such as submissiveness and subservience are the accepted behavior."[89] But this is not to deny that there are indeed certain progressive elements in this society. Women are given space to earn their living, as they have full ownership of their land which is

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[87] The term 'Torchbearer' have a gender connotation, as it is associated with women putting up a vigil, for protection of their communities.
[88]*Nasha Bandi* was against the sale and consumption of liquor and in the early 1992 their efforts finally paid off. The then government of Manipur passed the prohibition order on the sale and consumption of liquor.
[89] N. Vijaylakshmi Brara, 'Breaking the Myth: The Social Status of Meitei women', in Fernandes and Barbora (eds.) *Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast* (Guwahati: Northeastern Social Research Centre, 2002), P.199.

returned after divorce, she is given landed property by her natal home. In a conflict situation, women in trying to save their children's and men folk' are too engrossed with the atrocities committed on them by the security forces; they have not been able to focus their attention on such finer forms of discrimination.

A Legacy continued:

In the northeastern India, women activists are playing a positive role and draw their strength and resilience from history and the tradition of collective action. In places like Nagaland and Manipur, women groups like the Naga Mothers' Association and the Meira Paibies are unique examples of women collectivities in the informal sphere fighting against oppression. These women organizations do not view their role as only political but they look upon themselves as custodians of society and their political role is marked by an extension of their social role. The role of women in identity movements in the northeast and the way women are being constructed through the ideologies developed in these movements is very important. Their participation is often downplayed. Yet, all the women organizations which consider themselves part of the Indian women's movement have as their starting premise the belief that women are an oppressed section of society.[90] These ethnic associations of women are activated in the deep social and political turmoil created by armed conflict and violence, with their varying degrees of interventionist role for the security and safety of ethnic citizens, for removal of injustice and as peacemakers and peace builders within the communities. However, due to the ethnicization of politics and due to the historical reasons of cultural differences, women often work in narrow ethnic lines.

In a society that traditionally was locked in endemic war cycles (involving head hunting) male values was marked by the physical prowess to fight. The Naga story is full of narratives of hundreds of women at the clarion call of traditional drums, rushing forward in villages and in townships to set up a human barrier between the men and the

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[90] Gandhi, Nandita and Nandita Shah. *The Issues at stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992), P. 23

soldiers.[91] The women unthinking of their own safety would ceaselessly agitate and physically prevent local boys from being taken into custody to face certain torture and execution. "New spaces were created for women" says Manchanda because "the protracted experience, of living under the virtual rule of the Indian security forces, has emasculated Naga men's self perception of their role as protectors."[92] There is crisis of masculinity that is reinforced by the opening up of new roles of agency for women. While these women also aspire for Naga Nationalism, along with the men, they were looking for alternate methods of negotiation that would not involve bloodshed and societal misery.

Arguably, women's historic exclusion from politics (interpreted as partisan politics of political parties) makes the Naga women (and other women) trusted across the conflict divides. From the head hunting days to now, the Naga women have used that exclusion as a resource for protecting their communities in situations of violence, of mediating between factional groups of the Naga underground and in negotiating inter community violence. The many traditions of the women of the Naga Hill tribes as a peacemaker take root in the past that is a *Pukreila* appealing for an end to violence. In Naga tradition, it is the *Pukreila* and the *Demi* cultural traditions that provide the legitimizing social framework for the Naga women's activism. Naga women have used the language of motherhood and the tradition of '*pukrelia*' as strategies of empowerment and mobilization in peace making. These traditions have provided the social sanction in the tribal structure of Naga society for women's work. Thus, we find the enabling role of the Naga tradition in validating women's activism. However, this validation can be limited when one of the armed protagonists – the Indian state is an outsider to the Naga social value system. However, the social framing of women's peace activism as an extension of women's traditional role argues Rita Manchanda, tends to reinforce woman's primary identity as care giver and nurturer. And the cultural legitimation of women's new public roles by reference to a traditional (*pukrelia*) context has problematic implications for challenging traditional constraints and articulating emancipatory politics. We cannot read women's role as simply that of a peacemaker like the *Pukreila* among the

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[91]Manchanda, Rita *We do More Because we can: Naga Women in Peace Process* (Katmandu: South Asia Forum for Human Rights, 2004), P. 38.
[92] Ibid.

warring Naga tribes of yore whose status derived from the fact that she was a non-combatant. Such a reading can bypass the issue of women's complicity as a communal subject as well as object.

The traditional intervention of Naga women in cases of inter-tribal violence has gradually evolved into social activism manifest in the Naga Mothers' association (NMA) formed in 1984, is a significant case of a women's body asserting itself in the broader framework of the Naga civil society for socio-political transformation. NMA is the apex organization of all the Naga tribal women organizations in Nagaland which emerged as a direct response to women's mobilization against atrocities by the security forces. They have taken the responsibility of clearing their own homes and repairing the moral codes of the fractured Naga society. Its major contribution has been in keeping open the channels of communication between the warring factions and across communities, in defusing tensions and paving the way for reconciliation.

In Manipur, the non-tribal Meitei women of the Imphal valley have produced the Meira Paibies. Women's involvement in the historical anti-colonial movements has clearly influenced women's activism in the history of the state that was once ruled by a king. The Meira Paibis draw upon a hallowed tradition of women as peacemakers of Manipur as historically evinced in the 1904 and in 1939 *Nupi Lan* women's revolt. Its modern successor is the Meira Paibi which is a phenomenon of collective response to the excesses committed by the Armed Forces fighting against state repression and Human rights violation. The high participation of women in Manipur in the issues of nationalism is nothing new. It is a historical process even dates back to the times of myths and legends.[93] Though spontaneous, the state's women's movements have been wide ranging and organized with uprisings against local powers, the monarchy, colonial forces and the Indian government. Starting with their struggles against authoritarianism and exploitation during the British rule, the Manipuri women have been in the forefront in spearheading peaceful protest against injustice. Now in the midst of a violent insurgency marked by frequent ethnic clashes, women have emerged as a major force in Manipur through the

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[93] See Bhabananda Takhellambum, *Women's uprising in Manipur*, (WISCOMP Perspectives 2: New Delhi, March 2003)

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Meira Paibi uprising – a grass root movement against violence. Meira Paibis or the women 'torchbearers' started as a small group which has evolved out of the *Nasha Bandi* Movement of the mid 1970s. To counter the menace arising out of the dialectic of insurgency and counter-insurgency policy in the state, the women started spending nights outside the comforts of their homes. They took up the "Meira" an improvised bamboo torch, and it became the symbol of their movement. Today, all the localities have their own *Meira Shang* (A shed to spend the night).

The socio-cultural and political tradition of Manipur has legitimized the women of Manipur in whatever task that they may take up. The legitimacy is based much more on social and moral approval than on legal sanctions. The strength and courage necessary to face any adversary was born from these social and moral obligations of the society towards women. The women's movement in Manipur is distinct, because unlike other women's uprising in India and around the world, here women's uprising in Manipur is never about uplifting their own status in society. Moreover the importance of women in the economic activities of the state brings them together in the market place which has become a centre for social and political discourses.

There is no doubt that some women in the region have historically played the role of peacemakers in their traditional societies. But with the advent of British rule and decline of inter-tribal or inter-village warfare, this role ceased to exist as an institution. A conflict situation has opened up spaces for what gender studies literature terms 'ambivalent empowerment of women' (both civilian and militant). They were able to legitimize their position and space of negotiating between tribal groups and also overtly challenge the gender structures of their society because of their cultural traditions which provide a legitimizing social framework for women activism. In this milieu of ethnic strife, women utilized the confining spaces available to them to create a voice in the political set up.

Chapter Three

Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis: A Comparative Analysis

A world can be thought of as structured, unequal and socially constructed environment within which organisations are embedded and to which organisations and activists constantly respond.

Pierre Bourdieu[1]

A conflict situation entails recognition of the ways people's lived experiences and responses have been shaped by violence which in turn have opened up 'spaces' for new roles and have forged or 'reconstructed' new meanings and new survival strategies. Women have not remained passive in this chronicle of extreme change and dynamics. They have survived and coped with these adversities by creating and 're-imagining' new forms of existence, new alliances and networks in order to 'subvert' destruction. Thereby, it is important to consider the notion of women as active agents of change and creativity in conflict situations because their engagement with and responses to the everyday nature of violence can be a significant foundation for recovery and social reconstruction. That being said, it is also possible to make some general observations about women's responses based on their gendered experiences that create their own political realities.[2]

This chapter will examine the parallels and differences between the Naga women and Meitei women movements and the various ways in which they have responded to the prevailing situations in their own contexts. I will look principally at activism of these two women groups, what are described as 'autonomous' or non-party affiliated women's groups and compare their structural social and political efforts in combating conflict in their day to day lives. The larger emphasis will, however, be placed on their attempt at a gradual recognition of their role as essentially political in nature and within the larger political issue confronting both societies. One important factor that distinguishes the two

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[1] Cited in Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movement in India*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000), P. 10.

[2] Susan Geiger has spoken of gendered experiences leading to 'situationally specific, social, cultural, national, and racial/ethnic realities', in 'What's so Feminist about Doing Women's Oral History?', in Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel, eds., *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History: Essays on Women in the Third World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), P. 306.

women organizations from other women's bodies in India is that both have come into existence as a consequence of conflict and subsequent militarization and the impacts these have had particularly on women in their societies. Through comparative analysis, I seek to discern the varied meaning of gender identity and politics through time, by location and according to political context and analyse women's complicated expressions of resistance within and against conflict.

Women of northeast India have traditionally played a commendable role in resolving conflicts both as a matter of custom and as a response to more recent upheavals in their societies. The current role of women as peacemakers is a part of that historical role. Women have always responded to the crisis of their respective societies by either participating or even leading the movements to resolve social crisis. In the past, organisation was more spontaneous and mobilisation horizontal.[3] In modern times they use the liberal democratic principles of organisation, institution and representation in enacting their role. It also stands out as the modern day women prefer to work in a civil space outside the domain of active politics. Making the connections between politically motivated violence and violence against women within the community has been amongst the most critical of the advances made by the women groups in these regions.

While examining women's capacity to organise resistance, I will trace the work of Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) and Meira Paibis who have come to symbolise the 'women of Peace' in the region. The two women groups – Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis are unique examples of women collectivities in the northeast fighting against oppression on two fronts – state action and ethnic resistance. Their operational styles provide a study in contrast. I will study and interrogate their strategies, language or concept of protest, space and scope of activism by building upon women's differentiated ways of knowing and doing. They themselves strategically appropriated gender to achieve social change through an interest in lived experience.

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[3] See Sajal Nag, 'Her Masters' Voice: Women, Peacemaking and the Genderisation of Politics' in Prasenjit Biswas & C.Joshua Thomas (eds.) *Peace in India's Northeast- Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment* (New Delhi: Regency Pub, 2006), P. 213

Women's Movement:

We know that women's movement do not occur in a vacuum and that they have emerged out of generalised political instability, circumstances that have both encouraged and constrain them. As such, women organisations are outcomes of situationally and historically specific processes (Ferree & Martin 1995:2). They emerge out of the internal contradictions of the dominant moral discourse at any historical juncture and draw on historically specific and contextual moral discourses of society as a struggle for freedom of the excluded groups in society. Kumari Jayawardena in her path breaking commentary on 'feminism and nationalism' stated:

> Women's movements do not occur in vacuum but correspond to and to some extent are determined by, the wider social movements of which they form a part. The general consciousness of society about itself, its future, its structure and role of men and women entails limitations for the women's movement; its goals and its method of struggles are generally determined by those limits.[4]

But there is also another reality. Women's initiatives are not just determined by but also determine wider social movements. At the core of their societal culture lie contradictory concepts of women that provide a space for empowering women as guardians of culture, revolution and moral values. Central to the women's movement, has been the issue of violence against women, around which have cohered consciousness-raising, analysis and activism in the form of demonstrations, protests, campaigning and lobbying for reform.[5] Within the movement itself, there is no single, common thread that binds it, nor an agreed theoretical analysis. However, a minimum consensus has evolved over the past three decades in the autonomous women's movement, that rejects any rationalisation of violence against women and recognises the complexity of the field of violence but are seen together as cumulative and intersectional tools of patriarchal power.[6] These complex, interlocking fields of violence have resulted in extremely significant shifts in the methods and fields of organising and reviewing within women's

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[4] Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), P.10.
[5] See Kalpana Kannabiran & Ritu Menon, *From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence against Women in India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007), pp. 5-6.
[6] Ibid.

movements and a critical expansion of their scope, as women's groups ally with other social movements working on issues of social and economic justice. As Omvedt says, "They are doing so in context of growing social violence, economic polarisation, political degeneration and ecological destruction, with the tide of religious fundamentalism threatening a reasserted patriarchy."[7]

The early years of women activism were marked by a number of things. First, the perception of women as victims of violence, and second, the focus on holding the state accountable for the many ways in which such violence manifested itself against women. While violence as an issue has occupied the attention of women activists over the years, the forms in which it has made itself apparent and the soil from which it takes root have undergone constant change, necessitating changes in modes of resistance among women activists and they became increasingly involved in responding to demands on their time and to the urgent needs of particular campaigns. Secondly, the primary target of women's demands or grievances was the state. The belief was that the state had failed in its duty, indeed its promises, to make the lives of one half of its citizens- women safe and free from violence. As Urvashi Butalia says, while the state remained the primary target of the demands made by the women's groups, they did not hold any simplistic notion of the state as a benevolent institution which took account of civil society's needs and demands.[8] Many issues are understood in all their complexity today because of concerted campaigns by women's groups.[9] The method and agency of women is culturally driven, flexible and changing with the increased flow of information and greater politicization.

According to Cynthia Cockburn (2001), women form separate organisations because they find the male leadership style pre-figurative of violence and therefore went on to

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[7] Gail Omvedt, *Violence Against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000), P.16.

[8] See Urvashi Butalia, 'Confrontation and Negotiation: The Women's Movement's Responses to Violence against Women' in Karin Kapadia's (ed.) *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequality in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002), P. 225.

[9] Such issues as the continuities between rape and death in custody on the one hand, the shared immunity between state actors and non-state dominant actors; the baffling situation of the impossibility of full redress against any form of violence that women are subjected to; and the ways in which patriarchy and violence coalesce.

develop their own expressive forms of transformative non-violent direct action. This is true in so far as the Northeast is concerned. In the Northeast, from within the cultural system which has metaphorically erased their identity, women have asserted a new subjectivity through activism manifested in women's organisations. Further, the roles, episodes and mobilisations of these two women organisations – Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis, are indicative of an evolving feminisation of the civic space which is going beyond ethnic identity and imposed subjectivity.[10] It is what Elizabeth Grozz, a feminist philosopher would describe as "liberating a thousand and tiny identities that a male biased ethnic construction of identity subsumes under one."[11] This suggests a viable alternative to state hegemony and ethnic insurgency. According to Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, their discourse projects the violation of human rights that an ethnic woman suffers, and how a fractured subject could gather herself to celebrate her rights.[12] However, we cannot negate the fact that, women's organisations may limit themselves to organising on the basis of ethnicity. Within this understanding we can explore the dynamics of Naga and Meitei women activism. The political implications of the gender/ethnicity divide relate to whether a unified women's movement is possible.

Organisation and Functioning of Women Organisations:

The Northeast has witnessed many strong women's movements both historically and in the present day. In both Nagaland and Manipur, the two grassroots women organisations are active socially and politically. Drawing upon Raka Ray's study of women's movements in India,[13] the difference between them may lie in the nature of two very different political fields. Within political field, lie localised political fields (critical or oppositional subfields) called protest fields which consist of groups and networks that

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[10] Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, 'Feminizing the Civic Space: The Mizo Women's Federation and the Naga Mother's Association', in *Proceedings of Northeast India History Association, Twentieth Session,* (Dibrugarh University, NEHU, Shillong, 2000), pp. 251-258.
[11] Elizabeth Grosz: 'A Thousand tiny Sexes "Feminism and Rhizomatics". *Topoi, An International Review of Philosophy,* (September, 1993).
[12] Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, op.cit.
[13] Raka Ray co-relates the nature of political fields with the nature of women's organisations in her *Field of Protest,* op.cit. pp.6-9.

oppose those who have the power in the formal political arena. The political field in Nagaland is more homogenous and vertical as opposed to a much more fragmented and horizontally dispersed political field of authority in Manipur. Both the two women groups have many interests, some of which are gender interests. Gender interests can be seen as a subset of human interest that women have in common and that "may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes."[14] The contrast between the NMA and Meira Paibis and their strategies of mobilisation provide valuable insights of different 'protest fields'. The emergence of a common leadership through the women organisations viz. Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis produces two alternatives; one an alternative to the faction ridden nature of male leadership and secondly, an alternative approach to the menaces affecting the society.

The two women's organisations are significant cases of women's bodies asserting themselves in the broader framework of their civil societies for socio-political transformation. Like many other women's organisations in the country, the NMA and the Meira Paibis too started out as groups of mothers dealing with social problems, in particular alcohol abuse,[15] drug addiction and AIDS, formed in response to more than three decades of violence, armed conflict and social upheaval in their states and intended to be a forum where issues of concern to women, in particular, and society in general could be raised. Through these, the mothers were able to mobilise women on a large scale and achieve considerable mass awareness.

The Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) which is one of the most significant women's organisations in the region was born as a result of the protracted confrontation between the Naga militants and Indian state and has since been working to end the bloodshed and bring peace into the region. It came into existence on 14th February 1984 based in Kohima out of a concern for the increasing problems in the Naga society. It was established as a voluntary organisation open to all Naga women with a preamble which stated, "Naga mothers shall express the need for conscientising citizens towards more

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Through their persistent efforts to reduce alcoholism and drug addiction, Nagaland and Manipur have been declared a 'dry state' in 1989 and 1992 respectively by their State Governments.

responsible living, human development and the eradication of bloodshed and violence through the voluntary organisation of the Naga Mothers' Association."[16] Membership of NMA is open to any adult Naga women and its membership is organised through the apex women's organisation of each tribe. It has 10 office bearers – a president, three vice presidents, a secretary, three joint secretaries, a treasurer and a vice treasurer, elected for a tenure of four years. Although its core group consists of elected members, the organisation itself has no rules for membership: all the district tribal women's organisations are its members, and through them it reaches the grassroots; it also supports local women's organisations in their efforts to stop violence.

Beginning with the objective of "upholding womanhood", the Naga mothers first attempted to serve as an agency for Naga women's concerns, their stated goal was "to fight against social evils prevailing in the state". Women from Nagaland had earlier written: "Women here are excluded from the decision-making processes both in the traditional and modern Naga society."[17] As activists of the peace initiative, they have summarised their own movement as "the Naga Mothers' Association with its motto 'Human Integrity' has been consistently working with; the objective to upheld womanhood, human values and rights and has been surviving as a channel of communication for Naga women's mutual interest and welfare in particular and the Naga people at large."[18] . They have been working for peace, human rights issues, environment conservation, women's empowerment and on health issues. The NMA has set up a drug rehabilitation centre called the Mount Gilead Home in the outskirts of Kohima and an AIDS care hospice, among other charities which was the first of its kind in the Northeast region.[19] They collaborate with the Kripa foundation of Mumbai for rehabilitation of drug doers.

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[16] Constitution of the Naga Mother's Association, Reprinted in Kohima, 1992.

[17] Monalisa Chankija-Longkumer, " A general Look at Naga Society – Women's View", Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, Conference on Human Rights, The Official Report, Kohima, (November, 2-3, 1990), P. 24.

[18] Gina Sangkham, Naga Women and Peace Process, cited in Sajal Nag, op.cit., P. 210.

[19] Shimreichon Luithui, 'Naga Women: A Struggle for Human Rights', in Diana Vinding (ed.) *Indigenous women: The Right to a Voice* (Copenhagen: IWGIA), 1998, P. 129.

The Naga Mothers' Association is a unique organisation of Naga Mothers, who have taken upon themselves the task of projecting themselves as effective citizens. The members of the NMA also collaborate with the Naga Women's Union of Manipur. The rallies organised by the NMA are always attended by other Naga women's groups. However there are few Naga women organisations that do not collaborate with the NMA. The Watsu Mongdung which is largely an Ao tribe women organisation functions autonomously of NMA because of traditional Ao and Angami antagonisms. The members of NMA comprise largely of Angami tribe women and major posts have been held by them. In recent years, NMA has come to be more involved in political issues. The NMA initiated intervention on issues like correcting electoral rolls and assisting the election commission in enumeration. It mediated between the Government of Nagaland and the Naga Student's Federation over the age limit for jobs and came to an equitable settlement. Clearly, the NMA was also moving out of purely social issues to more directly political ones. Accordingly, the NMA has been working closely with the other Naga organisations to reduce the violence and brutalisation in the Naga society which are mainly caused by atrocities committed by the armed forces and factional fighting.

Meira Paibis or the women 'torch bearers' is a phenomenon of collective response to the excesses of the armed forces in Manipur. They draw their strength and resilience from history and tradition of collective action.[20] Formed in the late seventies by a group of forty-plus women in response to increasing violence and substance abuse in the north eastern state, over the years this collective has fought it all- drug, alcohol, army atrocities, sexual exploitation of women. Meira Paibis patrol the neighbourhood late into the night with torches in their hands.[21] This aspect is unique to the Meira Paibis. They are always identified as 'Torchbearers' not only symbolically but because they really have a

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[20] Historically, Manipur women have fought two wars against the British in 1904 and 1939. In the post independence period, women played active roles in the public arena and displayed high political consciousness. In 1954 and 1959, women took active part in the demand for a responsible government in Manipur. See Bimola Devi, Manipuri Women: A Study', in Naorem Sanjaoba (ed.), *Manipur: Past and Present, Vol. 1,* (Mittal Pub: Delhi, 1998).

[21] On an average, a common Meira Paibi spends three to four daily with her group keeping vigil over the *leikai* (Locality).

torch which they carry around[22] which differentiates them from the Naga women in a striking manner. Their presence is found in every village and locality in the Valley area of Manipur and they form their own groups. The Meira Paibi has taken the form of an organisation in every locality and act as a registered society. Every women of the locality automatically becomes a member of the association and has to contribute to it. However, it has no apex organisation like the apex body of NMA and functions only in Meitei dominated regions of Imphal and Kakching areas of Manipur. It has no written rules, no regulations and no constitutions. Its actions and programmes are a reaction to the day-to-day situations. Membership is restricted to women volunteers and married women in the age group of 18 years to 80 years are the usual members. There are not many working women or unmarried women in the movement. They are called mothers or *'Ima'* out of respect given to them even though some of them may be young.[23] Women in their twenties take part in rallies but do not hold active positions.

Their role expanded rapidly especially after December 1980 when they campaigned for the release of a youth from the army, held on charges of insurgency related violence. Anytime they hear of rape, torture, or death or a disappearance of a person, they gather in their hundreds and sometimes keep vigil all night. Whenever an incident occurs, the observer bangs a stone against a lamppost to sound an alarm, summoning all women from the neighbouring houses into the street and the alarm is passed to other Meira Paibi groups in a similar fashion. The importance of women in the economic activities of Manipur brings the Meira Paibis together in the market place, which has become a centre for social and political discussions. This is distinct to the women's groups in Manipur, unlike the Naga mothers which operate as an apex body for the different tribes. The *Ima Keithel* is the biggest women market in the whole of South Asia which serves as a space for the mobilisation and functioning of Meira Paibis.

Women groups in Manipur society in many instances run parallel systems. They work closely with the Meitei students Unions and have confronted the Army on several

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[22] It is a three-foot long bamboo piece and they keep vigil armed with torches at night – kerosene sticks topped with a burning piece of cloth.

[23] Sumita Thapar, 'The War of all Mothers' in *Femina* (September 13, 2006), pp. 104-105.

occasions. These multiple Meira Paibi organisations are each rooted in various localities and in many instances these groups have got caught in the various factional and group tussles in the Manipur conflict. They staged protests and roadblocks along with local committees to release jailed All Manipur Students Union leaders. Meira Paibis participated and organised public rallies when riots broke out in Imphal on the issue of a 'Greater Nagaland', a demand of the Naga movement, thus involving themselves in this inter-ethnic dispute. They condemn payment of double taxes, extortion on the highways, confiscation of goods and money by the conflicting parties[24] as ultimately those affect them. They work to check excesses, random detention and harassment of men, especially youth at the hands of security personnel. They have taken up rape cases and volunteered legal help; they have even mediated with the army on occasion and organised public meeting with them and they have intervened between civil society and underground groups.[25]

The Meira Paibis have through these multiple roles become effective in the art of intervention in situations of violence. Among other things, the Meira Paibis have consistently opposed the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA); they have demonstrated, fasted, held protest meetings and systematically brought abuses by the armed forces to public notice. Their demand for the repeal of the AFSPA led to turmoil with frequent strikes, bandhs and protests and demonstrations.[26] In addition they have also had to defend themselves against human rights abuses by the Indian security forces and ethnic tensions which threatened to disintegrate their state. The Meitei women have been fighting against the growing menace of alcoholism; drug addiction and HIV infection among their men folk which devastated their family and society. The women's groups have responded to the drug abuse amongst the youth by rounding them up and putting them in the de-addiction centre. They raid cinemas and video parlours screening

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[24] Surash Kr. Pramar, 'Rumbling on the Northeast States: Insurgency, Parallel Governments and Wielding Powers', Asian Tribune, July 26, 2004.

[25] Kannibaran & Menon, op.cit. P. 178.

[26] The Chief Minister of Manipur, Ibobi Singh, was under heavy pressure to withdraw the Act in the weeks that followed Manorama's killing. However, the Centre remained unmoved, both Home and Defence Ministers were adamant that the AFSPA would remain in operation. In the aftermath of Manorama's killing in 2004, the state government took the extraordinary step of defying the central government and withdrawing the AFSPA from selected parts of Imphal.

pornographic films. The Meira Paibis are determined women and in their collective strength there is extraordinary power. Initial actions against the state, soon gave way to support for the victims, demands for speedier justice, for rehabilitation and psychological support for the victims. Throughout this time, work continued apace on setting up legal centres, taking on case work, organising demonstrations and protest marches, spreading awareness through street plays and responding to the ever increasing range of issues that seemed to be opening up.

As all-women's group, the NMA and the Meira Paibis are two of the most important social organisations in the region to resist a wide range of social ills and have gained due recognition through their organised struggles in their respective societies. During conflict, they are very organised and this has become their goal. Unlike the Mizo Women Federation which subtly contests the discourse of the traditional and civil society, they have deliberately kept themselves outside this contestation. The role of Naga women is within the tradition of a Naga society whereas Meitei women do not encroach upon their traditional role and separates their public role from the private sphere of the home. Women's groups in Nagaland and Manipur have reported, documented and presented detailed accounts of the violence, generally at variance with official versions of the events. They have exposed the violence and its perpetrators through the media and its own publications. From army atrocities against innocent civilians to rights of AIDS widows to domestic violence fuelled by alcoholism, they tackle all issues affecting women. Both the women groups started as a group taking up social issues which turned political.

Politics of Motherhood:

The women's organisations phrased their activism in the vocabulary that was most available to them through their primary positioning within a patriarchal structured

society – that of motherhood.[27] Motherhood as a historically constructed ideology provides a gendered model of behaviour for all women and this ideology is referred as the "mother mandate." [28] The "mother mandate" socialises women to develop "sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care".[29] This "ethic of care," as Gilligan labels it, leads women to define themselves in a context of human relationships which encourages all women to do "mothering" both in and outside the community. We can explain the emergence of the women's movement as rooted in the discourse of the moral status of women as mothers and explore how the women's organisations created a space for themselves within a predominantly patriarchal landscape by articulating their protest through the available, familiar, emotive discourse of motherhood. Indeed, motherhood has sometimes been a very effective vehicle for women's political mobilisation. In regions ravaged by violence, maternal symbols of peace were much more appealing than the state's promise of restoring order through force.

Yet, feminists surely need to be cautious, for the roles and images bound up in motherhood are ambiguous. According to Jeffrey, legitimate power embodied in motherhood can frame women's activism. Moreover, mobilising women around motherhood restricts the space for negotiating the conditions under which women become (or choose not to become) mothers.[30] We can agree with the argument that maternalist women' peace groups project essentialist views of women that reinforce the notion of biology as destiny and legitimise a sex-role system that, in assigning responsibility for nurture and survival to woman alone, encourages masculinized violence and destruction.[31] Nevertheless, we need to consider carefully the reasons that "motherist

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[27] Malathi de Alwis defines motherhood as encompassing women's biological reproduction as well as women's signification as moral guardians, care givers and nurturers. Chp. 11 'Motherhood as a Space of Protest: women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka' in Patricia Jeffrey & Amrita Basu (eds.) *Resisting the Sacred and the Secular: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia,* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), P. 186.
[28] See Hays, 1996; Russo, 1976; Taylor, 1996.
[29] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), P.16.
[30] Patricia Jeffrey, 'Agency, Activism, and Agendas', chp. 13, in Jeffrey and Basu, op.cit., P.225.
[31] This view has been theorised and supported by: Enloe, 1989; Hardstock, 1982; Houseman, 1982; Lloyd, 1986.

movements" adopt the strategies they do, and what effects they have. In the light of such a project, I would like to consider here the contingent usefulness of maternalised protest for the two women groups in Northeast India.

The case of NMA and Meira Paibis provides an opportunity to develop further feminist analysis in peace studies around the significance of 'maternal thinking' especially in the context of women's diverse ethnic, and political positioning within structural, cultural and interpersonal frameworks of violence. Both the groups revolve around the conception of motherhood as a historically constructed ideology that provides a gendered model of behaviour for women. Women's resistance, which spiritedly confront their marginalisation in an increasingly militarised society riven with ethnic and class hostilities, nevertheless cannot escape "investing in the persona of the Mother, the totality of a women's identity"[32]. The Naga women and Meira Paibis have organised themselves on the basis of such identities. For them, motherhood politics is a defining framework for their activism. They have privileged the term "Mothers" largely because there are very few entry points for women in state versus community conflicts where ethnicity is given primacy over their gender. But once they make their entry they constantly negotiate their spaces and expand motherhood into potential mothers which encompasses the category of all women. In times of crisis, they appeal as "Mothers of Nagaland or Manipur society". As Sara Ruddick argues, *the image of the mother, who mourns the sufferings of war and loss of her sons, and holds lives together despite pain, is a mediator in civil society and between conflicting sides is the identity rooted in the daily lives of women, who take responsibility for violence and counter it.*[33] These women have a unique way of doing politics, of taking the private act of mourning and the character of motherhood into the public sphere and politicising it into a formidable tool of moral protest against state injustice. The protest is directed not only against the state violence but against armed rebels.

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[32] Kumari Jayawardena & Malathi de Alwis, *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia* (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1996), P. xxi.
[33] Sara Ruddick, "Women of Peace", A Feminist Construction, in Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (eds.), *The Women and War Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 213-226.

The Naga mothers' peace initiative turns on the moral authority and socially sanctioned space available within the Naga tradition of women activism for peace in the informal space of politics. The NMA makes individual mothers address the community as social mothers, enlarging the space of the tradition specific roles. It is precisely as mothers that women have this space to appeal to the powerful and move them to compassion and shame. But these mothers, unlike the Meira Paibis and many others in the region, have reached the negotiating table, primarily because they did not hesitate to intervene as mothers of the land. Dr. Gina Shangkham and Khatoli Khala, speaking on Naga women's role of peace state: "The role of the Naga women, like the mother earth and like the Shakti belief can be fundamental to the peace process." [34] In their appeals to organisations to stop factional killings they have often made emotional appeals based on such sentiment: 'stop or else turn the guns on the mothers.' As mothers, they are trusted by all sides, Neidonuo Angami claims: *"We appeal to them as mothers that we should all work for peace because if a child dies, it touches us, it grieves us. Because for a mother anybody's child is our child."* [35] The mother's ability to muster emotion is then seen as an equivalent and even alternate to male power. On the face of it, appealing to women as mothers has facilitated their mobilisation across the state among the different Naga tribes. The NMA celebrates the 12th of May each year as the Mother's Day and renew their appeal to peace.

The Naga mothers' initiative represents the use of motherhood for women's political mobilisation, but also has its limitations. Naga mothers still do not sit in the village council of elders where decisions of formal politics are made. Women are excluded from electoral politics deliberately because they are mothers. Another Gender scholar working on the NMA herself agreed that "the emphasis of motherhood not only imposes cultural dynamics in their intervention but also crimps their social acceptability to assert claims to be in Naga Hoho (Tribal Council) or engage in political agenda of the

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[34] Khatoli Khala, Women and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, WISCOMP Perspectives, New Delhi, 2001.

[35] Niedonuo Angami is the former president of NMA and works for the cause of peace and women related issues. See Rita Manchanda, *We do More Because we can: Naga Women in Peace Process* (Kathmandu: South Asia Forum for Human Rights, 2004), P. 62.

peace table."[36] They have to constantly reiterate that their role is only as mothers and have no political overtone or ambition for the future. But they did not realise that by engaging in peace initiative they have already made a significant political intervention.

The Women's organisations of Manipur use their status as mothers or 'Imas' (means mother in Meitei) to intervene at times of crisis and conflict. As killings by insurgents has increased, it is not uncommon to hear the women appealing as "mothers of Manipuri society" asking sometimes for peace or information of killers. These women use the attributes of a mother in dealing with society ills. Ema Ibethoi, member of a Meira Paibi says they are now changing their approach towards drug users. "The drug user will not stop because of a beating or if we tonsure his head as punishment. The only way we can help them is by love and affection which a mother can give."[37] Here they have assumed the responsibility of taking care which is an attribute of a mother. This has proved to be successful. As Imas, the Meira Paibis dare and confront the military might of the Indian State and, on may occasions, the intimidation and violence of the non-state forces. With increasing violence on women, the Imas instinctively sense the naked truth of the "body politics" of oppression, suppression and subjugation. In Bimol Akoijam's words, "The colour of the violence that the mothers see in these tragedies is very different from the appropriated hues of the same testimonies, often of 'peoples struggle'".[38] It was resolved that May 28 would be 'Meira Paibi Day' in remembrance of a woman who became the first victim of the women's uprising against the excesses of counter insurgency.[39] Here they link the personal experience of motherhood with movement discourse viewing it as a source of empowerment. However, the Meira Paibis have to behave less like mothers and look at things objectively in order to gain trust of all sides

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[36] Rita Manchanda, Ibid. P. xii.

[37] Cited in Sumita Thapar, Femina, op.cit.

[38] Angomcha Bimol Akoijam, 'Colonised Mind and its Naked Truths: Postcolonial revelations by the Imas of Manipur.'

[39] The Meira Paibi movement organised mass rallies in response to the atrocities committed by the Central Reserve Police (CRPF) in May 1980. There was a huge turn out of almost 10,000 women from different parts of Manipur which was a direct challenge to the government. The police crack down heavily on the protestors and bundled the protestors into a lorry. On the way, a 25- old pregnant woman, fell out of the truck and died. She became the first victim of the women's uprising against the excesses of the counter insurgency. This incident can be taken as the flash point of the Meira Paibi uprising. See Bhabananda Takhellambum, Women's Uprising in Manipur: A Legacy Continued, WISCOMP, Perspectives 2, March 2003.

involved in the conflict. They perceive their roles to be that of mothers and this is perhaps the reasons why they haven't challenge their position and status within a patriarchal set up.

The role of NMA and Meira Paibis as mothers illustrate how their maternal concerns can become the basis for political action in communities and national movements. Both the groups adopt the conception of motherhood as an act which aligns with the idea of the ethic of care but employ it differently. Here, NMA framed mothering as an apolitical act, connected with cultural feminism, and as a social issue because of societal gender roles and expectations. In other words, they are engaged in "activist mothering", a term Naples[40] defines as extending motherhood and an ethic of care into the community. The Meira Paibi members linked the personal experience with movement discourse, viewing motherhood as empowering for them in the public sphere. While NMA has been able to balance motherhood, family and the ethic of care for community for the construction of an activist feminist identity, the Meira Paibis have been accused of neglecting their responsibilities of a mother in their own families and not providing adequate care and attention to children's welfare.[41] However, both embrace the view that "mothering" each other strengthen commitment to feminism and is a mandate to care for all members of society that can bring about political and social change.

Women's successful translation of their role as mothers into the role of morally responsible actors in a society enables them to gain status of legitimate actors. Therefore women demand the right to participate in the political scene in the name of mothers. On a general level, it is evident that the use of motherhood is an effective strategy of mobilisation for women to gather public support and legitimacy for their cause. Women's strategy of protest often uses the symbols of mourning and motherhood both for moral

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[40] Naples, A. Nancy (ed.) Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender (London: Routledge, 1998).

[41] The situation of conflict and women's engagement in Meira Paibi movement has affected their responsibilities of the performance of children in schools and socialization. The increasing number of school dropouts, tendency to join the armed-opposition groups among teenagers, among other factors can be blamed to the conflict situations which have taken way a mother's time from the family. _
See Homen Thanjam, 'Armed conflict and Women's Well-Being in Manipur', *Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 3, July-September, 2005, P.124.

authority and political mobilisation. This strategy is not unique to women in Nagaland and Manipur alone; women's movements in other places have also employed this strategy[42]. Both the women groups emphasise their position as women and mothers, as a primary driving force behind their call for peace and they speak on behalf of the community unlike certain women organisations who works for their own cause. The struggle of the women's groups for inclusion into the public sphere can be understood through the motherhood discourse.

Alternative Forms of Protest:

The vibrancy of the women's movement derives from the rich tapestry of protest that has been created over the years. The fashioning of protest in ever new ways is largely responsible for sustaining struggles against violence. The history of women's activism in India has, by and large, been one of non-violent protest.[43] The range of protests that women have used in situations of armed conflict and violence have varied in form and content, from conventional demonstrations and rallies to vows of silence, hunger strikes and the more extreme fasts unto death. Gandhi and Shah characterise this as the "process of politicisation"; the collective use of forms of political protest like street demonstrations, anti-state slogans and dharnas, they say, transform these social issues into political ones, the "private" into public, thus holding state and society responsible for atrocities on women.[44]. In her work on the women's movements in India, Raka Ray observes that protest movements are influenced as much by local cultures, histories and political institutions, as by other social movements.[45] Unconventionally, women have also protested and marked their resistance, in more individual and symbolic ways. We can explore the kinds of protests adopted by Naga and Meitei women, whether they are confined to the conventional form or taken on creative and innovative forms driven by

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[42] For e.g. the Jaffna Mother's Front of Sri Lanka articulates protests through tears and mourning. See Jeffrey, Patricia & Amrita Basu (ed.), *Resisting the Sacred and the Secular...*, op.cit.

[43] Urvashi Butalia, 'Confrontation and Negotiation: The Women's Movement's Responses to Violence against Women', Op.cit, P. 226.

[44] Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*, (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1992), P.94.

[45] Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest*, Op.cit, P.8.

the changing situation and context, which will help us to distinguish between them with regard to intent and strategy.

'Tears ..... are common to all. Yet, there is nothing more powerful on earth that can wring tears from others than a mother's tears.[46] The organisation symbol of the NMA is very significant, projecting a human eye from which tears of blood are dropping down and a four word message – "Shed no more Blood". The Naga mothers' message challenges the state and armed rebels in a voice inundated in a pool of tears and blood. A mother's tears are a familiar, emotive trope in the arts and a part of the public practices of grieving. It is interesting that, where feminists have criticised the notions of honour and shame for the habitual identification of women's proper conduct within the community, the Mother's organisation employ notions of honour and shame to question state authority by articulating protests through tears.[47] Such a campaign was launched at the Fifth General Body Meeting of the NMA in Zunheboto. The immediate cause for this plea was the growing number of unclaimed dead bodies lying in the bazaars and streets of towns and cities across the state. The NMA came forward to honour the Naga tradition of giving every unclaimed body a dignified funeral, draped in the shawl of the tribe to which the deceased belonged.[48] It was an extension of NMA's original mandate inspired by the motto of 'human integrity' which held that every life was sacred. This is a symbolic gesture of condemnation and rejection of violence whosoever the perpetrator be: the NMA was persistent in covering body of every victim of violence with a black shawl. This silent yet eloquent statement has not gone unnoticed or unheeded and demonstrates a mediating message to the Indian state and the insurgent sons.

Meira Paibis adopt creative initiatives and take up multiple roles to fight against violence and injustice in the state. The Meira Paibis use the medium of theatre and women's market at the same time adopt creative initiatives to fight violence. The women artistes are mainly the market women who release their creative energies through this

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[46](Lankadeepa, 28 June 1992) Malathi de Alwis, 'Motherhood as a Space of protest' op.cit. P. 186.

[47] Amrita Basu, *'Resisting the Sacred and the Secular'* Chp.1 in Jeffrey and Basu, Op.cit, P.11.

[48] August 4, 1994 was designated Mourning Day by the NMA and more than 3,000 mothers from various tribes attended this memorial meeting. Rita Manchanda, op.cit, P.45.

medium. Their street plays called the *Sumangleelas* are a fertile ground for generating peaceful coexistence among the people of Manipur. Manipuri theatre has often worked towards the unification of the society and has led to the assertion of a communal feeling. If awareness raising can be said to prefigure protest, then the scope of theatre, which is an innovative medium is expansive. The theatre or performative tradition is used by the women's groups as an alternative representation to great effect in raising awareness to highlight violence. Their concern centres on two issues: human rights violations by both the armed forces and the increasing use of drugs and the subsequent emergence of HIV/AIDS amongst the youth of Manipur.

In Manipuri society, men see themselves as 'protectors' of women, whom they honour as long as women conform to the patriarchal patterns set for them. On the other hand, women are raped and abused by other men when they want to 'dishonour' the entire community. Women's bodies thus determine their values and undermine their roles. *Thangjam Manorama's*[49] alleged rape and killing by the security forces has to be seen in this context. It was this blatant violation of a woman's right to life that threw the Meitei women into a fury. They staged their dramatic protest on 15 July 2004, in Imphal, four days after Manorama was killed, by barring their bodies in front of the Kangla Fort[50], headquarters of the 17 Assam Rifles, and displayed cards such as 'Indian army take our flesh'. The entire country was stunned to see photographs in the national press of a most extraordinary protest – 15 middle-aged women demonstrating naked and daring the army to come and rape them, offering their bodies, using them as weapons, not to harm but to shame and humiliate. Seventy-five year old *Thockchom Ramani*, Secretary of the Women's Social reformation and Development Samaj said, "Our anger made us shed

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[49] On July 11, 2004, at 3:30pm, Havildar Suresh Kumar in Imphal (Manipur) signed a memo stating that he was arresting Thangjam Manorama Devi, 32 years old, "a suspected insurgent, explosives expert and hardcore member" of the banned People's Liberation Army (PLA). Three hours later she was found dead, having been raped and shot in her vagina.

[50] In a major concession to popular sentiment and state compulsions, the Central government finally handed over the Kangla Fort to the government of Manipur on November 20, 2004. The Fort earlier owned by the royal King of Manipur was seized by the British and later taken over by the Indian army. The protests by the women of Manipur were largely responsible for the handling over of the Kangla fort to the people of the state.

our inhibitions that day. If necessary, we will die, commit self-immolation to save our innocent sons and daughters."[51] Urvashi Butalia writes,

"Women join in these protests in full force and create their own methods of protest. The best known of these are the torchlight processions at night: hundreds of Manipuri women will take to the streets, shattering the dark of the night with flaming torches held high in their hands. They've become a common sight, and they are an acceptable one. But naked women? . . . . When women protest the use of their bodies as commodities the world knows what they are talking about...But when women themselves turn their bodies into commodities, people don't know how to react." (4 January 2006, Sangai Express)

The July15, 2004 protest by 15 Meitei women was a radically, and profoundly, different kind of challenge to the state, and in sharp and shocking contrast to *Irom Sharmila's*[52] fast unto death. *Irom Sharmila* has been on an indefinite fast unto death, refusing to eat a morsel since November 2000, in protest against the promulgation of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, and has become a symbol of non-violent resistance against the Armed Forces Act and the militarization it leads to. As a Sacrilege, the rape of the mother is the most unpardonable violation. Yet, as Ritu Menon reiterates, the 15 women exposed their naked bodies as the ultimate in self-abnegation, and in symbolic recognition of the threat of rape as the power of all men over all women.[53] Women had also expressed their frustration against the frequent call of bandhs, general strikes and economic blockades in 2005 during the Meitei script movement in the state. In a symbolic gesture, a large number of women placed their kitchen utensils on the road, inviting the vehicles to run over them stating that the frequent impositions of bandhs and blockades have dealt a hard blow on their economy.[54]

The discussion of alternative forms of protests adopted by the Naga mothers and Meira Paibis helps to distinguish between their strategies and campaigns in their fight against violence. As the multi-dimensionality of violence against women, began to

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[51] Cited in Chapter 1 in Kalpana Kannabiran and Ritu Menon (eds.) *From Mathura to Manorama*...op.cit, pp. 3-4.
[52] Irom Sharmila has been on a fast since the Malom Massacre in 2000. Since then she has been arrested several times. Known as the AFSPA Heroine, she is being kept alive by force- feeding her Reported in *The Indian Express*, August 1, 2004. In September-October 2006, she was brought to the capital, Delhi and hospitalised against her wishes.
[53] Kannabiran & Menon, op.cit., P. 181.
[54] Homen Thangjam, op.cit, P.123.

unfold, both the women groups became increasingly involved in responding to demands on their time and to the urgent needs of particular campaigns. However, though both the groups reject violence, the forms of protest they adopt is different. The Naga mothers· continue their protest against violence and bloodshed within the cultural ethos of Naga tradition. The symbolic crying eye and the motto adopted by the NMA is a message of a promised disposition towards a negotiated order of peace. It is the poetics of counter insurgency that does not debunk insurgency, but projects an area of hope to the Naga people. In this sense, the NMA performs the symbolic authority of motherhood. In the context of violence, the symbolic message of tears shamed the government and the armed rebels. In addition, the fact that they take responsibility in covering the dead bodies with their traditional shawls is in keeping with ethnic tradition. This signifies that Naga mothers are traditional and operates within a socially sanctioned space.

On the other hand, the myriad forms of alternative protests demonstrated by the Meira Paibis assert radical politics which is in contrast to the traditional Naga mothers. The Meira Paibis have taken on a radically different discourse of protest, unheard of in India. The deeply disturbing yet liberating act of disrobing themselves in public unmasks the pathos of an oppressive order. Meenakshi Tapan's view holds true for Meitei women. According to her, "*Women's body is central to understanding unequal gender relations, it is the site of violence, exclusion and abuse, it is also has its celebratory aspects which are revealed in the consciousness of women. It is also the site for agency which allows for the possibilities of negotiation, intervention, contestation and transformation*"[55] Their position as women in a conservative Hindu society contradicts with their mode of demonstration and protest in the public against state action. As they say "Ordinarily, Manipuri women don't even take off their shawls but there was so much of pain and anguish in our hearts that we forgot our shame." These are ordinary women, by no means radical or even subversive, yet they remain undeterred in their demand for the withdrawal of the armed forces.

[55] Meenakshi Tapan (ed.), *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, (Delhi: OUP, 1997), P.3.

In a context of violence, the space of protest of the Naga mothers is within the Naga tradition through mobilisation of feminised repertoires of protest such as tears and giving decent burials. This suggests an alternative avenue of protest that was not merely emotive but powerful. Although, the form of protest adopted by the Naga mothers falls under the conventional kind and did not depart significantly from others, however because of the consistency of their campaigns which embraced society as a whole, their transition from protest to intervention has been far more clearly articulated and realised. Whereas the protest of Meitei women has to be seen in the context of a sense of despair and as a creative initiative of peace. It was also a mode of shocking the world into taking notice of their oppression. Perhaps that is why they were forced to resort to this unique form of protest despite their fairly conservative society. The Manorama episode has led to an increased attention towards sexual violation of women by the state and the issue of custodial rape (i.e. rape while under the care and in custody of state agencies and institutions) as a more serious campaign among the women's movement. Moreover, this protest led to a resurgence of the demand that the Indian government withdraw the Armed Forces special powers in Manipur which gives the army sweeping powers to arrest, hold and interrogate.

Negotiation with State and Non-State Actors:

"When the Indian army came, it was the women who stepped forward between the villagers and soldiers; it is only women who can intervene. We constantly had to talk to the army. We mothers would go to the warring factions, walk to their camps and plead with them not to kill each other and not to harass the villagers. We mothers can't stay quiet."

— Jotsoma village women[56]

The two women organisations, like mainstream feminist movements, are engage in exploding the interior of the patriarchal symbolic order by confronting the state and non-state actors.[57] It is stated by a member of one women's group that "worst crimes are

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[56] Quote cited in Manchanda, op.cit, P. 38. Jotsoma village is located near the state capital Kohima in Nagaland.

[57] Not every woman's groups in Northeast India works against the state. The Mizo Women Federation strategically (consciously and unconsciously) avoids confrontation with the state.

perpetrated by the state machinery such as the army. But even the rebel groups are no better. They sensationalise state sponsored rape cases and make political mileage out of it. But once the incident loses its news value they do not care for the victims at all."[58] Thus both the State and rebel groups are not supportive or sensitive to their plight.

In a domain of women peace groups there are those who negotiate with both the army and the insurgents and yet are able to carve out an independent space for their actions. According to Paula Banerjee, the best known among these organisations is the Naga Mothers' Association and are called 'The Negotiators'.[59] When warfare between factions in Nagaland escalated alarmingly, the women's group worked tirelessly to keep the channels of communication open between them. "The Naga Mothers' Association's former president *Neiduonuo Angami* stated that the NMA were critical of "... the amount of human rights violations in our society both by the Indian security force and the different factional Naga national workers." They feared that "underground factions are likely to take full advantage of the absence of security forces in all their efforts to capture power by way of increased extortion and elimination." In a pamphlet released on 25th May 1995 the representatives of NMA wrote that "the way in which our society is being run whether by the over-ground government or the underground government, have become simply intolerable."[60]

Arguably, women's historic exclusion from politics (interpreted as partisan politics of political parties) makes the Naga women trusted across the conflict divides. Leaving aside the balance of power to the confronting agencies the Naga women cognise the intricacies of the situation and take a radical non-conformist stand. The singular and startling contribution of the NMA lies in its assertion that the whole of society is a victim of violence in Nagaland, that as mothers they cannot be partisan in their condemnation. Interestingly, the insurgents and the Indian State both resist any subversion of the

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[58] Interview with a member of Sajagota Samiti, 26 December 1998, cited in Paula Banerjee, Interventions for Peace in the Northeast, p. 5. (Source: NSCN Official Website): http:www.nscnonline.org/webpage/articles/women's-interventions-for-peace-.html.
[59] Ibid. P.7
[60] Ibid.

symbolic authority of the mother because neither can manipulate it. This reflects the NMA's continuing support for the Naga cause but convey too their conviction that the rebels are accountable to the people. Women's role is to reach across divides to stop the violence and create the space to enable the growth of understanding and consensus.

It would be fair to say that it was women's groups – all groups, including local organisations, the NMA and the Naga women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) - who first protested large scale human rights violations in the whole Naga territory, by both the militants and the armed forces, especially cases of sexual assault and abuse. In a public demonstration of this work the NMA organised a peace rally in Kohima in November 1995 on "Human Integrity and the Consequences of Killing". Ten members from each tribe participated, and representations were made to the Governor, the Chief Minister and the Commandant of Assam Rifles for the withdrawal of the Disturbed areas Act. In particular, they expressed their disappointment at the lack of action on accusations of rape against the security forces. The Naga mothers have primarily been concerned about the militarization of children and youth, since reports have shown how guns and shooting was the favourite game of children in villages that have been under the Armed Forces.[61]

However, the failure of the state to make representational politics more women-friendly makes women more amenable to the demands being made on them by non-state actors namely rebel groups in the game of power. They also use non-involvement in politics as a mode of protest against Indian state-centrism. But the state has failed to support their leadership in peace processes at both the local community and national level. In Nagaland women still retain faith in the actions of the underground. They say that they would prefer to give these groups less in terms of food or money but they believe that they have no alternative but to support them. They understand that women may be in an unequal position in society but for the cause of nationalism they prefer not to voice dissent but negotiate for spaces of empowerment. They believe that the insurgents are nationalists. One of the reasons for their support of their own power

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[61] Anuradha Chenoy, *Resources or Symbols? Women and Armed Conflict in India,* (unpublished paper) P.25.

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structure may also be the absence of strict social hierarchy between the genders among most of the Naga groups.[62]

In the domain of peace groups there are those who collaborate with special interest groups and sustain movement. Paula Banerjee calls them 'The Collaborators' and the best example of this genre of peace movements can be found among women's groups in Manipur. According to one observer they have become an institution in their own right. They started as *Nasha Bandis* and slowly captured the imagination of the People's Liberation Movement (PLA), an armed-opposition group. A spokesperson explained the modus operandi thus, "The underground outfit would nab the anti-social elements and hand them over to the women's bodies."[63] Thus Meitei militants actively support these women's groups. In the last two years the Meira Paibis have expanded their area of action. Now they campaign against atrocities by the armed forces. They also keep night long watches to foil raids by the security forces.

The Meira Paibis have used their role as 'Mother' and have mediated with the armed rebels and organised public meetings with them. They have tried to collaborate with the rebels without taking a critical stand. The underground sees women as custodians of culture and imposes many restrictions such as dress code imposition on Meitei women. However, many women do not complain against their 'men' in circumstances where there is a national liberation struggle. *Ima Taruni,* who has been in the movement for the last 30 years complained that the Meira Paibis are often called the mothers of insurgents. She pointed out that the insurgents were after all the sons of the vegetable vendors and the fisher folk. Even though these women work for peace they have lost legitimacy in the eyes of the state since allegedly they protest only against state sponsored violence. The government even issued a public appeal saying that the women's uprising was supporting the insurgents by foiling the arrest attempts of the police. They intervene between civil society and underground groups. However, these women groups

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[62] Paula Banerjee, 'Between two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland' in Rita Manchanda (ed.) *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), P.171.

[63] Khelen Thokchom, "War against Social Evils," *Northeast Sun,* 15-30 September 1997.

condemn human rights violations by the underground outfits too. For example, they are in the forefront of those denouncing the underground outfits for recruiting child soldiers but they feel that the state as a legally constituted body has greater responsibility than the underground to protect people's rights. Interestingly, the women often say that both the insurgents and the innocent boys are their sons and that they are performing the role of mothers. This reflects their dilemma. On one hand, as peace activists, they protest against violence and its perpetrators. Yet, given the situation in Manipur where the underground movement is part of the society, they stand to protect them as mothers, even if they are guilty.

It is pointed out by some scholars that Naga women act on collective ethos yet leave the space of individuation of the female subject which does not seem to be case with Meitei women. The NMA is successful in keeping the two protagonists, the Indian state and armed-opposition in negotiating peace talks. This marks a difference from that of Meitei women groups. An interesting phenomenon about women's movement in Manipur relates to their close association with the insurgent groups. They do not have the patronage of the state which makes it clear that they are recalcitrant voices of protest. However, the armed forces have recently begun to recognise the Meira Paibis' immense potential for conflict resolution. Paramilitary forces like the Border Security Force and Assam Rifles have started dialogues with the Meira Paibi groups in different areas. There was thus a simultaneous interaction with, and strong critique of the state. Indeed, it is worth noting that while the state has been an important aspect of the activism of the women's movement, and many of the claims and demands of the movement have been directed at the state, activists have yet to clearly articulate a full scale critique of the state.

Crossing Ethnic and Territorial Boundaries:

Another interesting feature of the Naga mothers which is absent in the Meitei mothers is that of crossing the territorial and community divide. The NMA in Nagaland and the Naga women from the hills of Manipur have joined in the effort for consolidation

of peace. The NMA collaborates with Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) in ushering peace in Naga inhabited areas. On March 15, 1999, the four women team of NMA and NWUM began an arduous journey on foot across extremely rough terrain to cross the border into Myanmar.[64] They crossed international borders to speak to the leaders of the NSCN-Khaplang faction.[65] Naga women, who traditionally were excluded from carrying important messages, were now trusted to be interlocutors between the two factions.

The Naga peace process in Manipur has produced contested histories bitterly dividing the *Naga, Kuki* and *Meitei* communities.[66] The NMA and NWUM have looked for opportunities to reach out to the *Kuki* and *Meitei* women to build an understanding of the value of peace. It failed to break through the distress and bitterness. In a workshop organised by the South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR) during an exercise in gendered mapping, while the Naga women spatially represented the necessity of peaceful co-existence predicated on the existence of mixed *Naga-Kuki* sisters' histories, the Meitei women making common cause with their Kuki sisters asserted hegemonic and exclusive histories.[67] Such instance makes Naga women wary of the Meira Paibis. They described the Meira Paibis as fronts for the Meitei militant groups. Similarly, the Meira Paibis regard Naga women's organisations as adjuncts to the Naga underground. Initiatives to reach out across the ethnic divide to the *Kuki* and *Meitei* women have repeatedly floundered.

Despite these misgivings, the NMA in collaboration with NWUM recognise that it is only the women who can build a dialogue across the divide. At the peak of the *Naga-Kuki* war in 1995, some women leaders of NWUM went to Kuki villages and appealed to

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[64] The NMA were the first Naga social organisation to visit the 'K' central headquarters, to honour with a 21 gun salute and be the guests of honour at their Republic Day event. In 1998, an NPMHR-NSF delegation had trekked to Myanmar and met Khaplang at a field camp (not Central H.Q).

[65] In the process the Border Security Force (BSF) arrested them. But as a result of intervention by the Chief Minister of Nagaland and Manipur all charges were dropped. On their return to Nagaland, they debriefed the top leaders of the NSCN-IM faction in Dimapur.

[66] The Naga-Meitei relationship has sharply deteriorated since the ceasefire. The June 2001 announcement by the Government of India of the territorial extension of the ceasefire to all Naga inhabited areas including Manipur, provoked violence and arson that forced New Delhi to withdraw.

[67] Rita Manchanda, *We Do More Because We Can...*, op.cit, P.62.

Struggle for Women's Rights:

Rights are a useful means of achieving gender equality, although rights may not deliver a knock-out punch to every structural or individual injustice, they serve as a mediating function and offer 'a new place from which to negotiate power, domination, and hierarchy with new tools' (Franke, 2002: 310).[69] They provide both a theory of justice and mechanism for achieving it. My consideration of women rights here includes the struggles and political efforts of Naga and Meitei women to establish a regime of rights within a patriarchal set up. Here, the rights of a Naga and Meitei woman involve her relation to Naga tribal customary laws and her position in rigid cultural norms of a conservative Manipuri society respectively. Significantly, this brings us to the question of how far women in this region have been successful in getting their rights recognised as women and in reworking gender relations.

In traditional institutional frameworks, the notion of 'women' is divided into two domains: the private domain where the woman is seen as the epitome of cultural and civilisational values, and the public domain, where she has to tread carefully, if she treads at all, because it is a domain replete with social restrictions and taboos inspired by beliefs of male dominance and female inferiority. Women's identities are caught up in conflicting identities, and are often pulled in different directions by their loyalties to their ethnic communities and social fraternities. The challenge for women rights activists of the region is to realise that there is a need to balance a respect for cultural diversities with a commitment to securing women's rights across the board for all women. Some human rights groups argue that the women's movement in this region has not raised gender-related issues because: "probably there are more pressing and important public issues."[70] Anuradha Chenoy asserts that, this discourse is a very typical nationalist-patriarchal discourse, where women's problems and inequity are always considered not important enough compared to other societal problems and thus left for resolution at some later

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[69] Cited in 'Introduction: Asserting Rights in the Twenty-first Century' in Deborah L. Rhode and Carole Sanger (eds.), Gender and Rights (USA: Stanford Law School, USA and Columbia University School of Law), P. xiii.

[70] "Women and Conflict Situation in Manipur, for a Human Rights Approach'" unpublished concept paper of Macha Leima (A voluntary women's Organisation, Manipur), 2002.

stage , after 'the more pressing and important public' issues are resolved.[71] Therefore, it is pertinent that if women can understand their own oppression they will be better placed to understand other oppressions since they are linked and supported by similar social structures.

Although Naga women are known to be freer from social restraint than women in several other sections in Indian society, yet situations of armed conflict coupled with the limitations of customary laws, compel them to be in a lower position than men. Although Christianity and modern education has advanced in Naga society, it did not succeed in modifying the precepts of customary law. As per tribal customary laws, Naga women cannot inherit ancestral property. If a woman is the only child, the ancestral property will be given to her father's immediate male relative.[72] When women brought the demand that they should have the prerogative of inheriting the land, they cannot openly express their voice to claim their share before men. Only recently Naga women's organisations have demanded the right to inherit property but as yet they have had little success. The *Mayon* Naga women[73] have raised such a demand. These women also began an agitation for women to be in the *Moyon* Naga Council and the President of the *Moyon* women group became the first woman to vote in the elections of the Council.

The Village Council is the highest body of administrative power in the traditional Naga society. Women are excluded from formal decision-making processes. However, the participation of women in the local bodies, especially at the village level is increasing. The Nagaland Village Development Board Act has reserved 25 percent for women's representation. This directive was to first ensure women's participation in village development and local bodies. Active participation in the village councils, traditionally a male domain, has been reported from some villages, for instance in Longitham village in

[71] Anuradha Chenoy, Resources or Symbols? Op.cit. P.23.

[72] See Lucy Zehol, *Ethnicity in Manipur: Experiences, Issues and Perspectives* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998), P. 55.

[73] Moyon tribe inhabits the Chandel district that is in the Southeastern part of Manipur. They are Kuki-Chins by virtue of their language, custom and tradition, but 'Nagas' by virtue of alignment with the 'Naga identity'.

Wokha district.[74] The Christian churches of Nagaland functioned as a patriarchal institution where women were not allowed to hold any important position of reverence or priesthood. It is only in recent times that women with enough theological qualifications have been given the post of pastorship or women coordinator. Today, we hear about men divorcing their wives and paying one rupee as alimony (a law set up by the British administration) in some villages. There are cases of women being sent way from their marital homes, (by the in-laws, on the death of their husband), if they have no children to "look after". Thus, Naga women still view 'Customary law' with a sense of uneasiness and feel increasingly insecure about the biased interpretations of customary law although their small achievements in the traditional male domain points towards the possibility of women's participation in traditional institutions in larger number in the future.

In analysing Meitei feminist politics, judgment falls on their structural ability to cross over from civil rights to women's rights. As Vijaylaksmi Brara points out, the Meitei women are less concerned with their rights as women and believe that they must get their civil rights implemented first.[75] The Meira Paibis are fairly conservative in their private sphere of 'home' but paradoxically have shed off this character in the public sphere. They are concerned more with human rights abuses committed by the Indian government than they are with their rights as women. Here it is the state action which defines the public/private boundary, as Frank Michelman (Conceptions of Democracy in American Constitutional Argument) asserts, "Although someone may have suffered harmful treatment of a kind that one might ordinary describe as a deprivation of liberty ... that occurrence excites no constitutional concern unless the proximate active perpetrators of the harm include persons exercising the special authority or power of the government of the state."[76]

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[74] Nagaland State Human Development Report 2004, P. 155.

[75] Vijaylaksmi Brara, 'Breaking the Myth: The Social Status of Meitei Women', in Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora (eds.) Changing Status in India: focus on the Northeast (Guwahati: North-eastern Social Research Centre, 2002), pp. 193-201.

[76] Cited in Tracy Higgins, 'Reviving the Public/Private Distinction in Feminist Theorising', Chicago Kent Law Review, (Vol. 75:847, 2000), P.857.

In Nagaland and Manipur, although women's activism has been becoming increasingly strong, many women have argued that the liberation struggle has had no effect on the status of women. In fact, most women believe that there is no co-relation between the two. However, in Manipur many women (41%) felt that there have been some changes in the status of women with the liberation struggle. This is because the underground movement here took action against polygamy and *nupi chingba* (wife kidnapping) in the 1980's, both customs that were unpopular with the society. Yet many cited instances where one militant outfit threatened to kill Meira Paibis who wanted the release of a victim. The mothers argued "They call us mothers yet threaten to kill us".

In such situations, the 'external' violence somehow acquires a serious dimension than the 'internal' violence of the home and hearth. Both the Naga mothers and the Meira Paibis have successfully created a space for themselves in the public, but they remain silent on their rights as women. In the case of the Naga women they are not able to come out of the bondage of customary rights most likely because of their high reverence for tribal cultural ethos. While, many members of the Meira Paibis are uneducated, contributing to their ambiguous and paradoxical outlook towards their own status in the society. They are thus conservative in their private sphere of home and more assertive in the public. This kind of feature is echoed by Kathryn Adam *(Sex War Redux: Agency and Coercion in Feminist Legal Theory)* "feminist conception of the self that juxtaposes women's capacity for self direction and resistance, on one hand with often internalised patriarchal constraint on the other."

Women in Decision Making and Participation:

The public sphere is defined as a modern institution and a set of values which brings private persons together in public to engage in the context of reasoned debates.[77] However, this idealisation of disembodied reasonableness has been criticised for its lack

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[77] Habermas conceptualisation of the 'public sphere' has provided the ground for theoretical developments (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1996).

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of historical specificity and analyses of gender (Fraser, 1994). In fact, public spheres have always excluded groups of people from the larger society for various political, social or economic reasons. Women were only partially recognised as members of the civil society because they were believed to have 'particularistic' needs due to their dual membership in the non-civil sphere of the family.[78] In social movements, women publicly announce the 'boundary tensions' between their role as mothers and their social roles in civil society. In the northeast, women continue to be absent from the established decision making bodies, but they have found other ways to voice their stories and emerge as mediators in conflicts that effect their being in such fundamental ways. Women must advocate political awareness and mobilisation of various women's interest groups in rural as well as urban areas; this initiative will be seen by some as a challenge to the traditional concept of women's participation in politics. The reason is that, be it in mainstream politics or be it in the traditional bodies, women have been non-participants.

With political developments leading to further militarization of society, many changes have led to the emergence of contradictions within the structure of civil society. We can locate within the outcrop of civil society organisations engaged in peace work, the activism of women's groups, in particular the NMA and Meira Paibis. Naga and Meitei women make meaningful interventions in civil society because of the political mobilisation of women. Nagaland and Manipur are clear examples of how women are active in civil society as peace activists. There are two apparent reasons which made the modern women assume the role of peace makers in modern times. Since both the underground and over ground politics have been the exclusive domain of men, women, eager to play a role in their turbulent, crisis-ridden societies had only the civil space open for them. In Nagaland, women's groups have always shared a common platform with student bodies, churches, and the Naga village or tribal councils in showing political, social and economic solidarity. Above all, the women groups have been in the forefront of advocating an inclusive and consensus politics that values the contribution of all. Both Naga and Meitei women's groups realised the value of working together with other

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[78] Gheytanchi, Elham, 'Civil Society in Iran: Politics of Motherhood and the Public Sphere' in *International Sociology*, December 2001, Vol. 16(4), pp. 557-576.

activists and collaborating with them, the importance of sharing information, and the sense of togetherness that comes from a broad platform of action. Amrita Basu has noted that, "Even women's movements that ultimately define themselves as autonomous from male-dominated parties and institutions are often closely intertwined with broader movements for social change."[79]

Accordingly, the NMA has been working with the other Naga organisations to reduce the violence and brutalisation in Naga society. NMA has been actively participating in the meetings and conferences along with the Naga Students' Federation (NSF), the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) and the traditional decision making bodies viz. the federation of Naga tribe councils (Naga Hohos), to strengthen the peace initiative through a ceasefire between the government of India (GOI) and the NSCN-IM. Even the state is not averse to using them for purposes of peace. By appropriating their role as mothers, they legitimised their role in the ceasefire process between the Indian state and national leaders. Earlier NMA had also come to Delhi as part of 12 high powered delegates to articulate the voice of the Naga people. Nevertheless, they have succeeded in convincing all parties that they are not dictated by any faction and therefore have created an independent space for themselves.

The Naga mothers saw and experienced that women's agency could play a mediating and pro-active role between the various factions of Naga society and between civil society and governing authorities. Beyond this, however, the Naga mothers have not asserted their right to be negotiators in the official peace talks between the Government of India and NSCN. Their argument is that their role is of 'bridging' the gap and making peace. The Naga mothers have focused on their role as 'objective forces' in the interest of peace. Neiduonuo Angami stated: "Our role is not to take decision; we have left this to the NSCN."[80] They believe that women's rights and everything else will follow if there is a political solution. They accept that their strategy is to retain their role as transformative agency that addresses social and political issues.

[79] Amrita Basu (ed.), *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, Colorado: West View Press, 1995), P. 9.
[80] Cited in Anuradha M. Chenoy, 'Resources or Symbols?' op.cited. P.25.

However, the community and the state more easily accept the task of women as healers and pacifiers rather than a more decisive role and link it to democracy and peace keeping. When the Naga Hoho was asked why women were excluded from the purview of peace negotiation meetings, the standard counter was "It is too early to included women now. We have to tread carefully because the peace process is very fragile and the Naga Hoho itself is a body that has just emerged." This completely negated the role women organisations were playing in negotiating peace. Political mobilisation of women is seen as a challenge to the Naga tribal concept of women's participation in politics. For Naga women to make positive interventions in this situation they have to undertake concerted action. But strong allegiance to their tribal groups can work against their greater unity and ability to achieve peace on their own terms.

As for the Meira Paibis, despite their socio-political and economic roles, they were seldom given a chance to express their views and anxieties on a public forum. They are never given a place at the negotiating table. This phenomenon of confining women to the role of foot soldiers is evident in most conflict situations. Even in seminars, the development of the Meira Paibi institution or its inclusion in decision-making processes relating to political issues was never discussed. We can note that though it is the women who face the security forces and the underground groups to shield their men folk, they are never included in the conflict-resolution process. The reason could be partly because most Meira Paibi members are illiterate and therefore marginalised in decision-making. As Vijaylakshmi Brar pointed out, in Manipur the women's movement is "of" the women but not "for" the women.[81] This perhaps explains the lack of women in decision making and in the conflict resolution process. Patriarchy has manufactured consent from women that they are apolitical both in their individual as well as organisational efforts.[82] This was a strange position as decision making should have been a logical conclusion of their prolonged efforts.

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[81] Gunjan Veda, *Tailoring Peace...the Citizens roundtable on Manipur and Beyond*, (Guwahati: Northeast Network, 2005), P. 36-37.
[82] See Sajal Nag, 'Her Master's Voice..., op.cit. P.224.

Democratising the Peace Process:

Women in northeast India have been relegated to only peace making endeavour despite their impressive record in all spheres of human activity and is confined to civic space rather than empowering political participation. Political scientist Anuradha Dutta, herself a chronicler of women's peace initiative commented, "In Northeast India which has a history of conflict for more than five decades, women have been kept from peace making process... (But) now in places like Nagaland, Manipur....women activists are playing a positive role and are able to articulate a view of peace and security with social justice, women's rights, economic rights, co-existence, tolerance and participatory democracy at its core."[83]

A prominent gender-historian Rita Manchanda wrote an entire monograph on the peacemaking initiative of the Naga women. She began saying,

> "...traditions here provided the social sanction in the tribal structure of Naga society for women's work in peace and reconciliation in India's longest running internal civil war on the Naga people's right to self-determinism. The peace building activities of Naga women's group have produced a social consciousness in Naga society that validates women as making a difference especially reaching on to bitterly divided Naga armed factions and fostering reconciliation and healing. It has persuaded the apex women's groups of the Naga tribe to translate their power as peacemakers in the informal public peace in a limited authority in the public sphere to the extent that no Naga delegation is considered complete without women's participation."[84]

The author described the Naga women as 'iconic' and 'women of peace in South Asia.' Manchanda summarised the potential impact of women's peace efforts in Nagaland in another essay saying, "Traditionally there was no space for Naga women in the indigenous tribal structures of power and representation but Naga women's peace activism have opened up for women a recognised space in civil society."[85]

The immediate challenge that faces Naga women is to play a pivotal role in the peace process, and help find a pragmatic solution to ending armed conflicts that have continuously ravaged Naga society for a long time. It needs to be emphasised that

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[83] Anuradha Dutta, 'Women as Peacemakers: A study of Northeast India' in Monirul Hussain (ed.), *Coming out of Violence: Essays on Ethnicity, Conflict Resolution and Peace Process in northeast India,* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2004), pp. 64-75.

[84] Rita Manchanda, "We do More Because we can..., op.cit, P. v.

[85] Rita Manchanda, "The Peacemakers" in *Northeast Sun* (January, 1-4, 2000), P. 24.

women's contribution to democratisation of peace process is embedded in an overall mobilisation by Naga social organisations in support of peace. Women's over-riding desire for peace in the region has ultimately led to peace talks between the Indian government and the underground outfits in Nagaland. *That the NMA has assumed enormous influence in Naga politics is borne out by the fact that they are the only women's group in South Asia who have participated in a ceasefire negotiation.*[86] In 1997 they mediated between the GOI and the NSCN (IM) faction and facilitated a ceasefire. Thus, in the present context, Naga women are nothing short of 'peace-makers'. According to the Nagaland State Human Development Report 2004, their activities related to the peace process have concentrated primarily on three areas, viz., peace and reconciliation, participation in capacity building and the people-to-people dialogue with the civil society.

In recent years the NMA has gained recognition as a serious actor in the peace process. The contribution of Naga women to peace building has been multi-dimensional. They have been preparing for 'life in peace' based on shared compassion and empathy within and across the society. Their first steps have been to take stock of social and economic resource bases and addressing structural issues, including women's rights in order to help establish peace and stability. Towards end, they have emphasised integrated development by encouraging gainful employment for youth in order to develop a just and productive society.[87] Thus, peace to them is not just a political phenomenon it is also economic and social. They believe that without development there cannot be peace which they equate it with progress; here they differ from the majoritarian attitude towards peace. Their involvement in development activities has increased their effectiveness and their acceptance in the Naga society. Naga women have portrayed that in doing social work women can negotiate spaces in the public sphere. Through their negotiation for peace they have created a niche for themselves in the public sphere. Another analyst of the women's role in Northeast India wrote, "Such an intervention (by the women) has

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[86] Khatoli Khala. *The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and its Impact on women in Nagaland,* (WISCOMP, Perspectives 5: New Delhi), 2003, P. 73.
[87] Nagaland State Human Development Report 2004, Government of India, P. 164.

enlarged the civic and public space of the ethnic minority community from which women were excluded."[88]

In January 1999, two women from NMA went to Bangkok and met the NSCN (I-M) leaders Isaac Swu and Th. Muivah as part of the first of the NSCN (I-M)'s consultations with civil society. The singular aspect of the Naga peace process is that the leaders of the NSCN (I-M) have come to recognise the strategic value of the peace mobilisation of Naga social organisations, prominent among which are the women's groups. Naga women groups that have been in the forefront of mediating the inter factional violence these last twenty years, accept that the leaders have not fully responded, but as Neidonuo Angami, the President of NMA said, "Come what may we cannot give up our commitment to peace and a lasting solution through mutual accommodation."[89] We can argue that women's peace work requires a different reading of the language of doing politics.

The case of the Meira Paibis in Manipur is completely different. Here women have tried to collaborate with the rebels and have lost legitimacy in the eyes of the state. This affects them in a number of ways. They are unable to mediate for peace between the state and the rebels. They have not been able to reach the negotiating table for peace unlike the Naga women. Only in factional politics do they have some role to play. But, since the major conflicts are state versus community, they in no way, are able to influence the course of the conflict. However, through their activities they have learnt the strategies of organising for political protest which many groups lack.

As far as peace initiatives are concerned, certain truths are more devastating. Not only do the women organisations not have any say in deciding the fate of the peace process which they had initiated and worked for, even in the negotiation process they are kept on the fringe. When a Shillong based journalist asked the members of the powerful NMA about their exact role in their meetings with the underground leaders based in

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[88] Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "Feminizing the Civic Space.., op.cit. pp. 251-258.
[89] Cited in Rita Manchanda, *We Do More Because We can…*, Op.cit, P. vii.

Bangkok and whether they were part of the core group which discussed major strategic action plans the reply was startling: "In reply they gave a wry smile and say we only speak to the leadership after consultation between men is over."[90] The mindset created by patriarchy makes women eager to accept peace-making as one of the extension of their home-making jobs as it does not threaten either the survival or the hegemony of the existing patriarchy. With the NMA, the language of their politics is articulated as an extension of their every day life – example 'kitchen politics'. That is, providing a neutral non threatening environment to facilitate dialogue in their kitchens, the heart of a Naga home. Food in Naga society is an important cultural signifier of care and trust.

Women continue to dialogue and "do peace" even when the climate that surrounds them is violent and intransigent. The responses of Naga and Meitei women to state repression mirror the reactions of other women in different parts of the world in similar contexts of conflict. Their creative mechanisms, combined with the will of women to survive, compel them to transcend their traditional roles and play a bigger part in the peace process, so necessary for the present society. They continue working with other organisations to reduce the violence and brutalisation of society. The experiences in the Northeast portrays that if women are successful in defining peace making as a women's job then they are not severely challenged. Women's negotiations for peace have the potential to change the situation of women even in traditional societies. Therefore women not only redefine peace but their own situation is also redefined by the politics of peace.

Genderisation of Politics - Problems and Prospects:

It has been realised by women that gender issues and empowerment of women require a larger struggle which can not be fought remaining within the confines of the civic space. Participation in the state political process, representation in the power structure and involvement in institutionalised politics are also necessary. While women

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[90] Patricia Mukhim, 'Nagaland: The unheard Voice' in *Telegraph,* Northeast Page, (13 May, 2003), P. 16.

are expected to be politically as active as men, they have less access to the political space associated with the dynamics of power. The traditional prejudices against women taking part in politics have proved to be a major obstacle to their entry into modern political processes. Going by their prominence in peace initiative and abundant work in the civic sphere it was expected that the transition of political sphere and sharing power would be smooth and easy. But it has become clear that the patriarchal ethos have limited the scope of women to peace politics, leaving the state structure as the exclusive domain of the men. In fact they had been able to manufacture consent from the women that they would refrain from joining active politics. Thus we find most of the women's organisations including NMA declaring in their manifesto itself that they are apolitical and that state politics is not their field of work.

As soon as the NDA government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party proposed to table the long standing Women's Reservation Bill in the Lok Sabha in all representative bodies of the state, the insecurity and viciousness of the patriarchal system came out in the open. The then Chief Minister of Nagaland, S C Jamir strictly opposed the reservation for women in his state. But his successor Rio went a step further to declare, *"Our beautiful darlings are good for politics but not so good in politics."[91]* However, without realisation Rio had made a profound remark which demonstrated how shamelessly women could be appropriated in politics but cannot be given a share in it by leaders like him. His use of women's organisation in the Naga peace process became quite apparent. This was evident in other states as well. The underground outfits are no better because most of the underground organisations have its female wings where scores of young women cadres are mobilised but seldom have they been promoted to higher offices of the organisation.

The Naga women desired to participate in State politics encouraged by their admittance to active politics by the men folk albeit in the field of peace initiative and civil society works They organised themselves into a non-governmental organisation called

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[91] Quoted in Patricia Mukhim, 'Breaking Gender Barriers', Editorial article in *The Telegraph*, Northeast Page (April 2004), P.6.

'The Initiators' and resolved to formally join the political process.[92] Subsequently on March 8, 2004, on the occasion of the celebration of International Women's Day at Kohima, the group resolved to field two female candidates for the lone seat that Nagaland has in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. But in a display of blatant patriarchal bias the candidates' names were refused to be proposed by any member of the Nagaland legislature who were all males. In Sajal Nag's words, "The first ever attempt by the Naga women who were praised very highly for their proactive role in peace negotiations to defy the male dictate and gatecrash the male bastion of state politics had been foiled by the evil designs of patriarchy." [93]

The Meira Paibis have played an important role in restoring a semblance of normalcy in the state. They are always cited as a shining example of a potent force in the social sphere. But it is where they have been stuck since the time they had started their activities. Meira Paibis have never gone beyond social reform because it is where men want them to be. In short it is the only space of a patriarchic society that has been demarcated for the women. These women are so glorified in their current role that they feel happy to remain in that cocoon of social reform- fighting drug addiction, alcoholism, HIV infection and other such social evil. Even the women refuse to realise that such social menaces cannot be fought without adequate political empowerment as they involve major political decisions. A number of reports show that although women have played a major role in socio-political movements, starting from the Indian Freedom Movement, their visibility and numbers in active politics has been poor. A gender activist after evaluating the situation in Manipur felt that, even if the Meitei women felt the necessity and had been organised politically, they would immediately be declared *persona non grata* in the Manipuri society. "So long as they go around hitting the lamp posts and their traditional torches shouting slogans that do not threaten any power equations, they will be

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[92] Initially leading women appealed to various Village Councils and Political Parties to nominate women to representative bodies of the state but their request were trivialised. Frustrated and desperate for representation, a group of Naga women decided to take the initiative themselves. This group finds the system which currently exists as biased, discriminatory and inimical to welfare, development and progress of their society and realises that it would take a long time for the State assembly to resolve to legislate women friendly acts and laws.

[93] Sajal Nag, op.cit. P.221.

talked about with pride in public for but once they decide to claim their political rights they will be ridiculed."[94]

Women were co-opted only in peace initiatives because peace effort is not considered 'politics' by the patriarchy as it does not involve decision making. Women's organisations are thus considered civil society groups. Interestingly both the male leadership as well as women's organisations believe that peace making is not politics totally ignoring the fact that non-governmental organisations are an essential part of the modern day polity and their roles are inextricable from the structure of State politics. It is common in northeast to ask the women to join the struggle started by the men folk when it reaches a crisis exhorting the name of a tribe, community or nation even though at the stage of conception women were never consulted. According to Sajal Nag, *"a consent is manufactured to the agenda and programme formulated by the patriarchy."* Women organisations often succumb to such tactics.

Conclusion:

By comparing NMA and Meira Paibis, it becomes clear that gender is not monolithic and interpreted in the same manner by women, even those embedded in conflict torn societies. The Naga women have been able to sustain their political manoeuvrings within their traditional roles and have grown to gain recognition as serious actors in the peace process. Since the Naga women have defined peace differently by associating it with justice and development; they have been more successful in their efforts at forming peace groups. Whereas, the Meira Paibis have not used their mother status to demand their space at the negotiating table for peace unlike the Naga mothers. They act with emotion rather than through institutions of the modern state. They have little opportunity to reflect on whether their actions are sustainable or whether they have addressed the roots of the problems. By focusing on empowerment in the public life, the Meira Paibis can be deemed to have been unable to merge their private and public

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[94] Patricia Mukhim, "Women and Mobility" in *The Telegraph*, North East Page, (11 March 2003), P.11.

identities. However, Meira Paibis still have a lot of potential as their valiant history testifies. They have emerged as a strong force in a patriarchal society and adopt creative mechanisms to voice their protest and make themselves visible as serious actors in a conflict torn society.

Women in both contexts, through their involvement in community- level political activism, have become actors and advocates for social change. In both the women's groups, ideas of motherhood, gender roles and women's life experiences were politicised and extended to the public. For these women organisations, activism is only in the informal space of politics since in institutional space they have little space. Hence, in protests against violence, women have not cared to transgress this space limitation. They are free to protest as "Mothers" and care providers, not as citizens and autonomous subjects. From the previous analysis it is apparent that those groups who have a broader definition of peace are more successful than those who think that peace is a political state of affair. Therefore we cannot ignore the fact that these women groups equate peace with justice and development. Therefore it is crucial that they be involved in decision making.

In a society where patriarchy manufactures consent, protests or attempts to break out of the space demarcated by men are considered blasphemous and silencing mechanisms are evolved. This has been happening in the Northeast where women have been performing within a delineated space. However, their agency is influenced by the relative power of the different conflicting groups to which they are aligned. Whatever, the end result, women are the ones who ultimately change patriarchal structures at grassroots level and are the agents for demilitarisation of society. We can say that the protest of these women groups is more important than the form it takes, the issue more important than the language it's couched in. This chapter does not argue that feminism can only be understood in "particularities", that is viewing each organisation as unique. However, this comparison helps to examine more closely the influence of structural and cultural forces of women activism.

Conclusion

In analyzing women in conflict situation, we can gain insight into how women are made victims of violence and also detect a new sense of feminist awareness among women in this part of the country. A conflict situation requires new patterns for coping and organizing and this in turn has led many women to realize that they are capable of more than what traditional gender roles define. It is important that we move beyond the one-dimensional conceptualization of women as victims of war towards one that embraces and encompasses all images of female agency in conflict situation.

My work has tried to map the role of two women organisations – Naga Mother's Association and the Meira Paibis in the northeast region. Locating Naga and Meitei women's experiences of conflict and addressing women's agency makes it visible how they have reconstructed new meanings in the interiority of their lives and stretched themselves to the public realm. This attempt is sometimes episodic not exhaustive, yet it still indicate the ways in which feminist struggles against violence have addressed a range of intersecting issues; more importantly, it examines the strategies adopted by women's groups to negotiate in these discourses for 'spaces' where women have been excluded. Their sustaining struggle fashioned by ever new ways of protest has proved themselves to be creative innovators of positive political change.

The current role of Naga and Meitei women is a part of their historical role as they draw their strength and resilience from history and the tradition of collective action. They have emerged as meaningful organized social actors through prolonged persistence of grave injustice and violence. One implication of this historical and comparative work is that women groups – Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis are essentially a modern phenomenon. Although there have been forms of female collective action in pre-modern societies, these have tended to be spasmodic eruptions of social protest. However, if women's movements in the Northeast have a historical association with multiple processes of modernity, they have not always expressed demands of full citizenship and equal rights. Where they fail is to make interventions in formal

structures. Moreover, they did not explicitly target women's oppression in the private sphere but urge the state to focus on substantive justice rather than individual rights. However, by comparing NMA and Meira Paibis, it becomes clear that gender is not monolithic and interpreted in the same manner by women, even those embedded in conflict torn societies.

The study also illustrates how gender shapes social protest and political actions. Both the two women groups politicize ideas of motherhood, gender roles and women's life experiences and extend to the public. As women activists, they must not junk all received notions of traditional feminity and motherhood – this is something maternal thinking tells us – instead they must appropriate and transform these images. Their activism reveals how, women have survived and coped with these adversities by re-creating and 're-imagining' new forms of existence, new alliances and networks in order to subvert destruction. Women act as negotiators and activists of peace at the grass root level which tends to combine questions pertaining to peace with other issues prevalent in the society. As Anuradha Dutta, a chronicler of women's peace initiative commented, "In northeast India which has a history of conflict for more than five decades, women have been kept from peace making process...but now in places like Nagaland and Manipur, women are playing a positive role and are able to articulate a view of peace and security with social justice, women's rights, economic rights, co-existence, tolerance and participatory democracy at its core" (2005:66). At this stage, they have arrived at a feminist understanding of peace as not just the absence of conflict, but as justice.

Among the Naga Mothers, agency is manifest through 'stretched roles' of women within the Naga social tradition. Naga women have used the language of motherhood and the tradition of 'pukrelia' as strategies of empowerment and mobilization in peace making. But these mothers, unlike many others in the region, have reached the negotiating table, primarily because they did not hesitate to intervene on behalf of everyone. Though the mothers cannot be called feminist by any means, their stand on violence has been equivocal. Consequently, because it embraces society as a whole, their transition from protest to intervention has been far more clearly articulated and realized.

They have signaled an alternative way of doing politics and peace, one that is non-violent, democratic and consensual. On the other hand, the Meitei women with their long history of activism adopt creative initiatives to fight violence and use the medium of women's bazaar and theatre as a centre for their social and political discourses. Though spontaneous, the state's women's movement have been wide ranging and organized with uprisings against local powers, the monarchy, colonial forces and the Indian government. Theirs is the history of commitment, courage and self-sacrifice. This women's movement in Manipur is distinct, because unlike other women's uprising in India, here women's uprising is never about uplifting their own status in society. This group is fairly conservative in their private sphere of the 'home' but paradoxically has shed off this character in the public sphere.

Thus the two women's organisations, in a manner quite unique and different from the mainstream feminist struggle, configure the cultural role of the Naga and Meitei women respectively where both the organisations operate with collective ethos. They are critical actors in challenging and fighting against (1) State violence, (2) the community's patriarchal structures that discriminate them. The trajectory of the NMA and Meira Paibis women's activism, however, is interesting and unusual for two important reasons: one, they rapidly gained social acceptance and commanded respect in a society where traditionally, women have been excluded from public activity; and two, their role evolved from that of social worker (attacking alcoholism, drug abuse and AIDS) to become social conscience, i.e., demanding accountability on behalf of society, as mothers of the community, from the state, from the armed forces and from the militants.

In modern times, women groups in the northeast India have been relegated to peace making endeavor despite their impressive record in all spheres of human activity and prefer the anonymity of civic space rather than empowering political participation. But they did not realize that by engaging in peace initiative they have already made a significant political intervention. They have to realize that gender issues and empowerment of women require a larger struggle, which cannot be fought remaining within the confines of the civic space. They have to participate in the state political

process, have representation in the power structure and join institutionalized politics. Interestingly, both the male leadership as well as women's organisations believes that peace making is not politics, totally ignoring the fact that non-governmental organisations are an essential part of the modern day polity and their roles are inextricable from the structure of State politics. Women are busy healing and reconciling at the local village level through informal, sporadic initiatives but they have been powerless to shape the 'big' questions which can again lead into destructive conflict. At the same time it is precisely in this negative space of disorder, opened up by the unraveling of state systems, that it is essential for local women groups to be organized to shape and re-create the new order in their societies. The experiences of these women in the northeast portray that if women are successful in defining peace making, as a women's job then they are not severely challenged and are able to negotiate spaces in the public sphere. This recognition helps them to negotiate for the reworking of their rights as women in their own societies.

While we can celebrate women's everyday resistance and demonstrate that women are not wholly subdued by their situations, we must be careful of over opportunism about their efficacy of such resistance and of conflating women's resistance with their agency. Moreover, if women do not use their agency in collaboration with others, individual women might ameliorate their own situations, but systemic gender inequalities will be untouched. Perhaps the most complex of these is the issue of the continuous, ongoing and persistent forms of domestic violence. In a place torn by conflict, the question remains as to how to address this form of violence. The significance of women activism in the northeast can make meaningful interventions in a context of conflict situation if they shed their ethnic loyalties and come together only as mothers, not as a Naga mother or a Meitei mother. Only the strength of women's movements in alliance with other democratic movements can ensure a more humane world-view that will most effectively lead to the kind of conflict resolution most compatible with the wider agenda of a truly transformational politics. In brief, the question is not whether women are victims or agents but rather, what sorts of agents women can be despite their subordination. It is pertinent to explore the distinctive ways and diverse arenas in which women deploy their agency, the different arenas where they may exercise it and the

agendas that orient and direct it. Only then can we determine what is pertinent to feminist agency and imagine how women's agency might translate into women activism.

The general failure of states across our regions to reach politically negotiated, peaceful resolutions of the conflicts has had one unexpected outcome. It has propelled NGOs, civil society groups and women organizations into more proactive on peace. Together they have initiated a range of activities that include everything from research and dialogue to track-two diplomacy to actual relief work. During the process of preparing for Women's Conference in Beijing, a strong federation of women's groups in the northeast evolved, under the name of the North East Network (NEN). This network is involved in monitoring the situation of women and human rights abuses in the Northeast region in collaboration with other groups within and outside India. They have not made women's initiatives exclusive of all other initiatives but rather have tried to work with other groups that are working towards democracy.

A culture of participatory activity by women organisations like the Naga Mothers' association and Meira Paibis, limited it may be, around cases of violence will legitimize women's occupation of public spaces for articulation of demands for social and gender justice. Therefore women not only redefine peace but their own situation is also redefined by the politics of peace. The ability of women's organisations in northeast India act as signifying agents, naming experiences that have been earlier unrecognized, at the root of the women activism, is a growing force in society and politics. Despite the extreme constraints and performance within a delineated space, Naga and Meitei women groups have been able to leave their mark in their assigned space. As part of recuperation of the neglected and marginal voices that live history in everyday resistance and episodes, the interventions of the NMA and Meira Paibis serve as material basis for understanding internal transformations of the Naga and Meitei social history. Through this endeavor of making visible the role of women in conflict situation, the mystic around the tortured heroic woman will be replaced by an appreciation for the difficult task that ordinary women engage with in the process of building a collective movement.

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