

The Contours of Political Movement in Assam through the Gender Lens

by

Bhanuprabha Brahma

Fellow of Phd (4th year), Centre for the Study of Law and Governance,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
Email: bhanu.du1@gmail.com

Abstract

India's Northeast has gone through a set of new social movements but the question of gender, during peace and conflict are either ignored or marginalized. Since Assam is a state with distinct linguistic and ethnic communities, the gender question becomes a site of conflict. There exists an exclusivist notion of identity in Assam, where all sense of solidarity between different ethnic groups has given away to a sense of suspect and distrust. The central problem is that women seen as an emblematic bearer of ethnic, class, caste identity is always victimized and are oppressed by moralistic controls on their sexuality which reflects the everydayness of sexual violence. It is an outcome of gender inequality and a violation of human rights. Women have been constantly dealing with the question of space, the autonomy that they have been trying to negotiate the aftermath Assam movement as they felt their stand to be vindicated. This paper depicts the moral policing faced by women and also the strong presence of women's resistances or the challenges they showed on or after Assam movement.

Keywords: Contours of political movement, political movement in Assam, gender lens, India's North-east, etc.

Introduction:

India's North-east has experienced many social conflicts but the question of gender, during peace and conflict are either overlooked or marginalized. Conflict in the North East is rooted in her peculiar political historical past that have their roots in a society which is unstable. Ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, a serious violation of human rights are some of the destructive consequences of inter-tribal or ethnic conflicts. The influx of foreign nationals, mainly from Bangladesh too caused a serious socio-political problem in the state and changed the demography of Assam (Hussain, 1993). Therefore it is no doubt that the historical circumstances played an important and crucial role in shaping the nature of ethnic conflict in Assam. In multi-ethnic societies like Assam production of history has been essentially a site of hegemony for the dominant nationalism as different ethnic groups contest the dominating truth of the national history. Though the conflict in Northeast India is mostly sensed in the form of armed struggle, social conflict in the context of Assam basically denotes the struggles for 'identity', the issue of ethnocultural identity due to the ethnic self-consciousness that has been raised by different ethnic groups which at times also extends to secessionist demands. In this sense, ethnic conflicts in Assam are indeed protracted social conflict as they are basically related to the issue around identity-related needs of certain groups, around ethnic, race, or culture that insure their distinctive identity within society.

The emotional structure of the community in Assam is fragmented by the fear and insecurity perpetrated by the ethnic conflicts or various insurgency movements. Gender as a category of analysis in a conflict situation of ethnic nature offers an interesting tool to understand the whole conflict dynamics with respect to women. The way ethnicity determines the nature of conflict in Assam, symbolism has been an important tool to determine the lives of women as it acknowledged moral force beyond the particular conflict. Recognition and representation remain an issue confined to women in such conflict-ridden societies of Assam. There exists an exclusivist notion of identity in Assam, where all sense of solidarity between different oppressed groups has given away to a sense of suspect and distrust. The relationship between society and women is one of constant construction and negotiation of boundaries forming specific constructions within and across it. The women in Assam appear to be living around an environment free of certain evil practices like dowry, female infanticide but in reality, it erects a false notion of gender emancipation as women are still the victims of gender-based violence in Assam. Therefore this paper aims to study the condition of women beyond this spurious notion of liberation in conflict-ridden societies of Assam which in turn prevent the women to exercise their basic democratic rights and gender inequality remains pervasive. It further aims at addressing the question of 'space' along with ethnicity under a broader framework of social conflict. This tool is used to draw attention to the way in which gender differences are constructed and the creation of gender forbidden space takes place. It depicts the moral policing faced by women and also the strong presence of women's resistances or the challenges they showed on or after Assam movement.

The Contours of Political Movements and its Impact on Women in Assam:

The growing nature of identity consciousness amongst the different groups added the feeling of insecurity, deprivation, and alienation among them. In this very situation, though all the people are equally affected, the gender dimensions of the conflict situation seem to be always neglected and sidelined in peace-making policies and so on. Inequality between women and men exists in the region in spite of the predominance of various ethnic groups who by and large do not believe in sex discrimination (Deka, 2013).

Assam, being a land of tribal and other ethnic groups, each group has a distinct cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical identity with different problems. At present due to the unrest situation prevailing in Assam, the state is mainly as a hot spot of bloodshed and violence. There is an ongoing struggle by people trying to establish their right to autonomy in most of the seven North-eastern States, which led to political instability, strife, and outright violence in the region. For example, Assam has witnessed the anti-foreigner movements, Bodo–Adivasi, Karbi-Dimasa, and Karbi-Khasi ethnic strife and the secessionist movement by ULFA¹ since 1979 (Phukon, 2008). Thus for the last few decades, the region has witnessed human rights violations due to the ethnic conflicts, militant activities, and its resultant response of the state and gender inequalities are deeply inherent where women's condition becomes more vulnerable during these conflicts. The ongoing armed-conflict prevalent in Assam has intensified the violence faced by women, which takes the form of sexual, mental, or physical abuse, killings, and clashes. Although all the members of communities are affected, the impact on women and girls is far greater because of their status in society and their sex. Men, women, boys, and girls experience conflict in different ways. The contradictory feature is that people, on the one hand, have submitted to the "culture" of

¹ United Liberation Front of Assam

conflict amidst the widespread sense of helplessness while they still desire and force to be free from such a situation of conflict which cripples the people from all sides.

The Assam Movement took place in the wake of the fast-growing reputation of AASU as the most powerful and effective body representing mighty student power in Assam. This Assam agitation led by AASU ultimately led to the birth of Assam Gana Parishad² after the historic Assam accord being signed in 1985 (Deka, 2013). This garnered overwhelming support in the name of regionalism and savior of greater Assamese society and formed the government thrice in Assam. The hegemonic notion of the ethnic Assamese ruling class came to prevalence. The tribes and other ethnic minorities have been building up mass movements as a protest against their oppressed status. The surfacing of a Bodo insurgency in the State of Assam has become a serious major problem. The Bodos, one of the most primitive settlers in Assam forms the largest tribe in Assam. Since Independence, they have been raising secessionists' overtones for better social, political, and economic conditions. An extensive record of conflict between the Bodos and the Assamese exist since the post-Assam movement as the Bodos feel being neglected and suppressed by the latter. In the early 1980s, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) emerged as a potent force under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma (Hussain, 1993).

Ethnic based organizations in conflict areas like Assam became favorable to the growth of sub-nationalist politics in the post-independence years (Baruah, 2005). The emergence of All Assam Student Union (AASU) as the platform for powerful student movements reached its pinnacle with the prolonged and intense years of the Assam Movement (1979-1985). However, what assumes special interest for this study is the significant course the organizations traverse in the eventful ten to twelve years from its inception in the late 1960s till the volatile years of late 1970s, years of warming up towards a movement on a mass-scale. This was a phase of significant transformation not only for AASU but for the subsequent course of the student movements in Assam in general. It marks a clear shift of emphasis, ideological articulation, and focus on the part of the dominant student politics of the state.

The formation of the Asom Chattra Sanmilian in 1916 was an unprecedented event in the history of student activism not only in Assam but for the whole of India as the socio-political activism on the part of the Assamese students predates even the formation of the Indian National Congress (Goswami, 2002). The ideas of early nationalism and the ideology articulated by the Asom Chattra Sanmilian cannot be seen as specific to the students alone. It has to be seen in a much wider perspective of capitalism and colonialism and the situation of Assam in particular. From 1916 to around 1923, almost every address of the secretaries made reference to the ideals of nationalism in general and Assamese nationalism in particular with emphasis on the revival of Assamese identity and language, and protection and development of Assamese literature (Goswami, 2002).

The Assam movement that started in 1979 had its own periodic peaks and lows. If the initial phase of the movement is characterized by massive political mobilization, in the later phase of the movement gradually started losing its momentum, and if the former phase was more or less peaceful and democratic in its appearance, the later phase exposed the violent nature of the movement which at the same time took an undemocratic turn. The Movement almost turned chauvinist and alienated a number of tribes, which earlier identified with the greater Assamese society (Baruah, 2005). Baruah has rightly pointed out that the term "ethnic Assamese" came to be prevalent in discussions of Assam politics since the Assam Movement (2005: 125). The Assam Movement ethnicized the Assamese and the political landscape of Assam, as different tribal and

² Abbreviated and known as AGP.

religious minority organizations began challenging the ‘assumed’ authority of the Assamese language. This resulted in the outburst of numerous identity assertions by different ethnic groups in Assam. The rise of the All Bodo Student Union,³ their demand for a separate state of Bodoland along with the minority groups like the Karbis, Dimasas, and Mishings have always added to this ethnic violence. These groups have their respective student organization, the cultural organization backed by some powerful politicians. These organizations get a kind of authority to impose cultural codes and keep the women under observation that depicts how the student politics remain as a mere representation of ethnocultural issues. The question of identity has become a central concern. Assam, which is a conflict-ridden region, has made the position of women worst linking them as the representative of their culture and nationalism. The leaders of the specific student group of Assam decide what women should wear, whom they should meet, whom they should marry. The right of women to choose whom to love has also been denied in a certain aspect. Social control mechanisms are routinely enforced through definitions of what is normal and natural. It is through the categories of womanhood and heterosexuality that tries to control gender identities and sexuality. Gender is an effect of disciplinary practices, regulating mechanisms of power. Gender and sexuality are always interrelated terms. The issue lies in the construction of sexuality as a social concern. The very fact of carrying forward tradition and culture has reduced women to cultural objects since the nineteenth century.

Reassessing the period of the Movement, we can recognize some more bitter facts about it. Notwithstanding the heavy presence of women in the Assam Movement, any specific women’s issue was not taken up rather being subsumed to the sub-nationalist question. Their basic concerns were excluded. In fact, All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) leaders tended to be unreceptive and founded the idea of separate articulation of women’s issues as divisive. Women-led many demonstrations but the very nature of women’s question was limited only to the rhetoric of the nation as the motherland. This movement did not give a platform to women to form their own space but portrayed as the bearers of the cultural domain (Sen 2005).

In March 1983, when the Assam movement was going on, a women’s magazine *Aideur Jonaki Bar* was published with the aim of raising women’s consciousness and creating a movement. The most important question that arose with the onset of separate women organization was when the nation was at peril, why do we need to think of women separately? Challenging patriarchy interrogating women’s space in politics and conflict transformation hence became very important as the women felt their stand was vindicated. However, as the Assam movement was progressing, women were joining the movement spontaneously, there was a need to organize women in order to play an effective role. The varying roles played by women organizations in the formation of society, the emergence of women in public sphere needs to be focused on, and also examine how women’s associations are both empowering and transformational but may paradoxically also be static.

A historical and contemporary analysis of different political mobilizations in Assam, however, will reveal the inadequate representation of women at every instance. This is not to say that women did not endeavor to create spaces for their own empowerment. The movements created political mobilization only to contribute them in number. Hence, the feminist discourse in Assam needs greater and emphasis.

Student activism is an important carrier of ideas and is influential in contributing to debates around politics, environment, economy, and social justice. With its focus on both diversity and solidarity, the student organization can work on their collaborative possibilities of these

³ Commonly known as ABSU.

movements instead of being manipulated by the political class that can pit the student groups against each other. Being the primary harbingers of social change, the youth organization scarcely regards women as a part of the broader issue of development. The depressing part lies in the fact that they are not aware of their own lacunae within student politics. The student organization being cognizant of their cultural roots and their fraternal ties categorize themselves into communities victimizing women. While they regard themselves to preach cultural autonomy, they instead reproduce cultural conservatism. Youth organization plays a productive role in shaping up identities whereas gender and ethnicity have a great structuring influence. The category of gender is decisive for understanding what joins the national to the domestic and public to private. Culture, class, and caste combine and conspire in violence against women. In these conflicts, culture operates in what describes as a code for authentic and alternative groupness, and as the basis of context-specific political claims (Brass, 1991).

Conclusion:

There is little or no knowledge regarding what constitutes gender issues among the student organizations of Assam. They actually are not aware of what consists of the set of these issues. The issues they consider were regarding the concern of ethnicity, identity which turned them in the role of moral police but the question regarding women's invisibility in all spheres of life, legal, political, economic was never challenged. The issues regarding women's entry to the religious places like Namghar⁴ were never been considered. Even the unequal representation between male and female elected representatives in the Student Union has never been noticed by these leaders. There always lays a hidden gap within the youth politics in Assam. So mid-seventies saw women's organizations on the rise trying to find a space for themselves. Women were coming together under different kinds of solidarities.

To combat national forms of patriarchal domination, firstly, under colonial rule, and, subsequently, under the independent state, there were establishments of women's organizations. Women's organizations were formed to confront a variety of problems ranging from ethnicity and identity to issues that reflect systematic inequalities of class, status, and power. Mahanta (1998) claims that the organization's women have built, campaigns women have led and events women have staged to challenge these relationships of domination have had an enormous impact on the Assamese Society. Women are chiefly seen as an undifferentiated group chiefly as victims and sometimes as resisters. The construction of women's sexuality does not only deal with regulation and resistance but also with the historic and local circumstances which they had to act upon restricting themselves.

References and Bibliography

Afshar, H. (1996). *Women and Politics in Third World*. London, New York: Routledge

Ahmed, S. (2004). *Differences that matter Feminist Theory and Postmodernist*. United Kingdom: Cambridge

⁴ an Assamese name of the religious place

- Banerjee, P. (2001). Two armed patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland, in Manchanda Rita (ed), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. New Delhi: Sage publication
- Barna, B. K. (1951). *Cultural History of Assam*, Vol 1, Nowgong
- Barnes, A. (2015). *Feminism of Discontent*. New Delhi: OUP
- Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organisation of culture difference*, New York
- Baruah, A. (2005). *India's North East: Developmental Issues in a Historical Perspective*, New Delhi: Manohar Publisher
- Behal, M (2012). *Women's Collectives in Assam: A Short History of their status and present-day realities*. Retrieved September 12, 2019 from www.northeastnetwork.org
- Borthakur, S. (1987). *LekhikarJiboni*. Assam Sahitya Sabha
- Brass, P. R. (1991). *Ethnicity and Nationalism Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage
- Chattopadhyay, D. (1990). *History of the Assamese Movement, since 1947* Minarva
- Choudhury, S. (2017). *Changing role of women in conflict situations: A study on Nalbari District of Assam*. Retrieved September 12, 2019 from www.manipurresearchforum.org
- Choudhury, R. (2007). *Aei Xomoy, Xei Xomoy*. Guwahati: Banalata Panbazar, Dutta Nandita: Communities of women in Assam
- Crensha, K. W. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford law review* 43 (6): 1241-1299
- Datta, P. S. (1990). *Ethnic Movements in Polycultural Assam*, New Delhi: Vikas
- Das, S. K. (1994). *ULF A:A Political Analysis*. Delhi: Ajanta
- Deka, K. (2013). From Movements to Accords and Beyond: The critical role of student organisations in the formation and performance of identity in Assam. *Nmml Occasional Paper: Perspectives In Indian Development*. New Series
- Deka, M. (1996). *Student Movements in Assam*. New Delhi
- Deka, M. (2013). *Women's agency and social change Assam and beyond*. New Delhi: Sage Publication
- Goswami, I. (2002). *An Unfinished Autobiography*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers
- Goswami, R., Sreekala, M. G., Goswami, M. (2005). *Women in Armed Conflict Situations*, NEN, Guwahati

- Hussain, M. (1993). *The Assam Movement: class, Ideology and Identity*, Delhi
- Karna, M. S. (1998). *Social Movements in North-East India* New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1998
- Mahanta, A. (1998). *Women movement in Assam and Northeast India: An assessment* in Karna, M. S. 'Social Movements in North-East India' New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company
- Manchanda, R. (2004). *We Do More Because We Can: Women in the Naga Peace Process*. South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR). Kathmandu
- Misra, T. (1987). *Literature and Society in Assam: A study of the Assamese Renaissance, 1826-1926*, Guwahati
- Misra, U. (2001). *The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey*, North East India History Association, Shillong
- Misra, U. (1987). All Assam Students' Union: Crisis of Identity. *Economic and Political weekly*. 22 (13) March
- Mohanty, C. T., Ann, R. & Lourdes, T. (1991). *Third World Women and Politics of Freedom*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Mosahary, R. N. (2002). *Bodo Student Movements*, in Apurba Kr. Baruah Ed. *Student Power in North- East India: Understanding Student Movements*, New Delhi
- Phukon, D. (2008). *Women and Politics of Peace Process in Northeast India*, in Achutya Panda (ed.) *Situating Indian Women*. New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications
- Rai, S. (1996). *Women and the State in the Third World* in 'Women and politics in the third world,' Ed Haleh Afshar, London: Routledge
- Riley, D. (1988). *Am I that Name? Feminism and the Category of Women in History*, Univ of Minnesota press
- Sen, I. (2005). A Space within the Struggle, in 'Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader' by Mala Khullar(ed), New Delhi: Zubaan
- Sen, M. (2017). Women Subjectivity And Female Concerns in the Earliest Assamese Journals: An Era Of A New Identity For Women. *Journal of northeast region (JONER)*. Volume 1, pp. 1-11.
- Sultana, P. (1996). Tracing Masculinity: From Assam Movement to ULFA. *The Chronicle*. December 2015: pp. 20-25.
- Waylen, G. (1996). *Analysing Women in the Politics of the Third World* in 'Women and Politics in the Third World, ed Haleh Afshar', London: Routledge