

Framing women’s activism in Northeast India and their Multifaceted role during armed conflict: A case study of Boro Women

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Abstract

This study looks at the various dynamic roles women occupy in an armed conflict situation. Many research look at women’s roles from the perspective of victims or peacemakers in the study of armed conflict. It will go beyond the two notions to look at the various engagements women in conflict areas have undertaken and the agency involved in the process of dynamic roles. The simplistic division of roles during armed conflict, men as perpetrators or the rebel, and women as victims or peacekeepers don’t tell the ground reality. The overall objective is to situate women in an armed conflict and how they have resisted the state collectively, responded, and participated in the violent conflict. This study will develop a case for women who have participated in the movement and how they have exercised agency and will go beyond the notion of a peacekeeper to include dynamic roles. Based on an empirical study with Boro women of Assam, seeks to highlight the complexities of their roles and agency.

Keywords: boro, agency, women, collective, combatant

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I. Introduction

The nature of conflict in Northeast India is the fight for self-governance in the form of a separate states or nationhood which gave rise to insurgencies or militants in their quest for autonomy. Different states in Northeast India have witnessed varied movements and the region became a highly militarised zone cases of armed confrontation between different parties became a common affair in the daily lives of the people and reduced the region to witness one of the longest armed conflicts in post-colonial India. In studies dominating armed conflict, women’s position is rather viewed with the aspect of promoting peace or becoming significant demography in post-accord resolution. However, many case studies reflect the varied roles women undertake in their fight for liberation.

The UN resolution 1325 emphasises the need for “women in the peace building process and their right to participate at all levels, especially in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes” (Cohn, 2004). While such resolution emphasises the post-conflict empowerment process and their political participation. And this discourse has largely dominated the study of women and armed conflict. While the resolution calls upon different parties to take up the gender-specific matter in an armed conflict and address the skewed gender representation in decision-making and address the gender-specific violence. While it seeks to address the issues of gender-specific, it also runs on an ‘essentialist’ understanding of women as capable of being ‘inherently peaceful’.

While peace building goes beyond post-conflict resolution, it is a ‘process that flows through pre-conflict or conflict prevention, conflict, and post-conflict phases’ (Manchanda, 2005, p. 4737). Women in communities are engaged in different roles managing and trying to prevent outbursts of conflict at a very local and personal space when they come in contact with the state machinery. During the conflict, women assume multiple roles that break the chain of violence and manage their community survival. In the post-conflict resolution, their roles are not recognised and their positions are undervalued which doesn’t transform their situation. What is usually the case is women slipped back into their gendered roles without disturbing the status quo in the post-conflict society. There is rather a lack of attention to the post-conflict ‘peace’ which has greater impoverishment for women in question (Manchanda, 2005). This is evident from the fact that most peace negotiations don’t have women as stakeholders in the process of reconstructing society. Conflict condition brings changes in gender relations uprooting traditional gendered roles and pulling women into new arenas of politics and society which makes way for post-conflict reconstruction of society and changed in gender relations

easier. But it is often the case that post-conflict spoils are not equally distributed and tapping women's resources in peacebuilding has never been the case in Northeast India.

In the two extreme spectrums of women as 'victims' or 'peacekeepers' women are always bracketed within 'either or' situations and forsake the multiple situational dynamic roles that become important to understanding women and agency. It is important to look for women in different positions and values, then see them as just 'anchors of peace' (Kolas, 2017, p.17). Women's participation doesn't ensure enduring peace and is as divided as men. They are not shortcuts to peace, but rather see them for their agency in conflict and post-conflict situations and the complex multi-dimensional role and agency in everyday negotiation of power.

Boro Nation and Identity

Like any other movement, Boro sub-nationalist movement has been associated with the ideas of liberation and autonomy. Their struggle for autonomy and liberation has led them to the construction of tribal nationalism in the state of Assam. In many discussions on Boroland movement, dominant forces like All Boro Students Union (ABSU), National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) and Boro Liberation Tigers (BLT) and their strategies have been studied and emphasised in the study of the political movement for separate statehood. These dominant voices had an active role in shaping and constructing the idea of "one Boro nation" where they initiated the tasks of writing and telling history. Amrapali Basumatary (2018) in "we have got things to say" argues that the dominant forces in their glorification terms tried to distinguish themselves as free of gender-based violence, despite upholding patriarchal values of uniformity, suppression, and silencing. In all collectivities or 'we-ness' that the dominant forces project, it is hierarchical and a certain power relation exists with the non-dominant forces or voices. As it has been established by many feminist thinkers that the nation and gender construction happen intimately and in tandem with one another (Yuval Davis, 1994, Thapar, 1993, Molony, 2004) the Boro society and the construction of identity have also ascribed Boro women with essentialising characteristics for the benefit of Boro political identity. However it is not to say that women didn't have an active role in the movement, many women organisations sprung up to become a good amount of civil society members. Their role, however, within limited visibility and activism was mostly to assist the dominant forces and ideals and to organise women and uplift them in general.

Boro sub-nationalist movement intensified and took a militant turn from the 1980s onwards which saw women collectives emerging when state repressive measures began its counter-insurgency initiatives and incidents of women tortured and raped surfaced by the state machinery. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (ATWWF) emerged in such a situation in 1986, which was eventually renamed as All Boro Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF). They became the torchbearer of women's issues in the plight of gendered violence inflicted by the state machinery on Boro women. Under such circumstances, women collectives emerged to give a lending voice to the identity in making and constitutive of an understanding of Boro women.

II. Methodology

There is a need to move away from this dichotomy of "victims and peacekeepers" of understanding to focus on women in action during turbulent times. In northeast India, in the long armed conflict, women have played multiple roles as combatants, protestors, peacemakers or facilitators. Based on an empirical study among Boro women, this study attempts to categorise women in a different framework of roles during conflict and their changing roles in the post-conflict. Different roles assumed by women in conflict situation depicts the various agential capabilities and the survival strategies forged every day in their resistance struggle. Two organisations have been identified, "All Boro Women Welfare Federation" (ABWWF) and "Boro Volunteer Force" (BVF). ABWWF is a socio-cultural organisation whereas, BVF was an underground group that took part in the arms movement. It is through these two organisations women's nature of participation and their role in the identity construction process will be analysed. Women members were personally interviewed to take into account their diversity of experiences and narratives.

This paper has identified categories of Boro women during conflict based on an empirical study: Women as combatants or militants and women who were part of collective group activism. While the two classifications are broad-based, we argue that women within each group have shifting roles depending on the situation and aren't fixed categories. In the course of the conversation, it was found that at times the roles shifted from being a socio-cultural activist to helping in the arms movement. There was certain duality and shifts in their roles and therefore, the paper proceeds with the caution that it isn't a clear distinction between women as combatants and women in collective activism.

Women as combatant

'Something is disturbing about the concept of women as terrorists. Perhaps it has to do with the feminine identity as a nurturer-women are mothers, sisters, and wives, but not killers' (Craven and Dally, 2009).

This notion of women as terrorists or militants or combatants has always disturbed the gendered role of women as a nurturer or a peacekeeper, but these are women who are actively involved in the struggle by choice or owing to their circumstances. 'Women as terrorists, mothers, recruiters, and martyrs' is a widely common phenomenon around the world where different organisations have deployed women for various tasks.

In the northeast of India, women's role as a combatant is not uncommon though the ratio is less in comparison to men. Women have fought along with men in the identity struggle. Rakhee Kalita Moral (2017) in her study, "demobilized, dispossessed, disappeared?" talks about ex-ULFA women, while they are not huge in number, these women rebels constituted an important aspect of the rebellion". She foregrounds the lives of these women from being cadre members to their anonymity in civic life once they return or the group's disbandment.

An interview conducted with Boro women who were clandestine operatives revealed that they were given "special training in nursing and medical aid, informant, and weapon training" (a former member of the Boro Volunteer Force). Women's image and position during armed conflict are that of a defenceless person who is in a vulnerable position and a victim of the vicious conflict. However, a closer look suggests women play multiple roles in armed conflict, from combatants, and peacekeepers to activists. However, Boro women took up the combatant role and joined the underground militias. As this study is drawn from field interviews with Boro women who were part of different groups, civic organisations, or underground militias, women had undergone role transformation from traditional homemakers to take part as 'peace makers' and 'combatants'. A large number of Boro women have been part of clandestine groups which carried out activities for the group they were part of.

Women in Collective

There are women collective groups and activists who have taken it upon themselves to address the issues related to women, in general, arising out of structural inequalities or commonly referred to by many scholars as 'peacekeepers'. Women collective organisations and civil society groups in Northeast India are usually viewed through the lens of peace-building efforts. Different range of activities, and perspectives while responding to the immediate surroundings during conflict time amounts to their action being called peaceful initiatives. While these are some of the political ways they can undertake in their everyday life they seem to have a bearing on their larger community as these are collectives based on ethnic politics.

These are groups that are embedded in ethnic politics and address gender and social issues within this framework of understanding. They also happened to emerge when the region was becoming a long theatre of state vs. community conflict. Many of these collective groups emerge during the long-drawn violent and militarised atmosphere which witnessed the large scale of human rights violations, abuse, and gender violence. The disruption in the community and their lives that took a turn due to identity movements, affected the lives of individuals in the community making it difficult for their everyday lives to go about. Stories of men of the community being hunted down by the state forces and women of the community facing gender-based sexual violence compounded their rise and everyday politics. The long-drawn conflict created empty grounds in civil society which led to the emergence of women's activism. It gave impetus for transforming the everyday informal politics of these into collectives to the formal sphere in politics.

They don't start as formal political force intervening in violent politics, but they begin as socio-organisation "addressing local social issues of alcohol abuse, domestic violence, polygamy, and in some cases inter-group marriage with certain group members which were not accepted socially and ethnically" (member of ABWWF). Few respondents in the interview revealed inter-group marriages were not allowed in certain cases as it was a time of high intense identity movement and 'saving' the community was the priority. As Assam has a complex ethnic structure, sometimes the threat to a community is perceived via the 'other' who stands to threaten their community and more so through inter-group marriage which is seen as encroaching on their ethnic boundary. Such complex ethnic structure combined with a violent identity movement has seen many such instances of inter-group marriage being socially boycotted or penalty payment.

Nevertheless, women's collective organisations are significant in such crucial times as they address social issues and seek to bring harmony in a conflict-ridden society. These organisations have played a substantial role in highlighting the gender-based sexual abuse that has been undergone in these remote areas of the Northeast. Their strategies and intervention have generated media attention to the issues and have gained massive support in their activities which made them a force to be reckoned with in such tumultuous times. They rose from addressing issues of "witch hunting, drug paddlers to becoming a frontline peace negotiator and stakeholder in the peace process translating its local power into a formal authority in the public sphere" (Manchanda and Kakran, 2017, p. 118-119).

Responding to decades of human rights and sexual abuse, many of these collective groups strategies in ways that challenged the gendered narrative of violence. Women became targets of armed forces as they were identified as 'relatives' of undergrounds and became subject to repeated sexual and human rights abuse. As their bodies became the symbolic terrain of battle, women collective groups in many instances have used their bodies

as shields and as a weapon to challenge the state forces. They overturn the sexualization of women's bodies to obstruct the forces from clashing. "Incidents of women shielding men, physically lying on the road blocking trucks loaded with village boys from driving away"(Manchanda and Kakran, 2017) became common strategies in many collective groups from the different ethnic nationalists. Such strategies defined the impact of these women groups who generated moral authority in the public sphere and claims to formal politics eventually.

Agency in Dynamic Roles

Women as combatants and as part of collective groups provide an intersecting point to explore women's agential capabilities in the broader canvas of the dynamics of the relationship between gender, ethnicity, and nation. In decades of conflict and ceasefires in many cases in the Northeast, women are still struggling to make their case for their inclusion and equal rights. It is not uncommon to see women constantly facing social suffering and structural violence, however, on the other hand, conflict conditions have pulled women into new roles and tasks bestowed with more responsibility and decisions to make.

Women in combat are not a completely new phenomenon in insurgent-led movements. While they usually make up a small number in comparison to men, they are an important aspect of rebellion. It is an act of transgressing all the social norms as they defied gender roles to join guerrilla groups. Their category as combat women in itself provides a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between women empowerment and militant armed forces. Women guerrilla forces are visible in different regions of the world as they are in Chechen separatists group known as black widows, LTTE, Japanese red army, and shining path (Cravan and Daly, 2009). In the Boro movement, the "Boro volunteer force" was a clandestine group formed in the 1980s were around "35 women were given combat training and different logistic roles necessary"(former member of BVF). "Two male cadres were the trainers who sheltered these women in an abandoned public health office in Chitnaguri village in Kokrajhar district" (Former member of BVF).

Political grievances are considered one of the main reasons why women rebel or joined militancy. It affects them in the same way as men. Two women respondents in the field interview claimed how the state atrocities had taken away the basic rights of their community beginning from language homogenisation to brutal forces that came down on their demands (member of ABWWF). They are equally motivated as men in their fight and membership. It is a different matter when women in their society didn't receive equal treatment once the momentum is lost in their struggle. As much as grievances play a role in motivating them to join, in many cases their relationship with the men in surrounding influences them or motivates them to be a part of the militant group. Their relationship with the male insurgent can't be ignored in understanding their motivation. As we also try to understand the agency of women in a collective group, it is important to remember that women get embroiled in different responsibilities during conflict due to several reasons and most importantly everyday survival. It is the everyday survival strategies and coping mechanisms that sort of lead them into "accidental activism" and "ambivalent empowerment" (Manchanda, 2005). Motherhood ideology also has played a central role in their strategy, it is seen as an extension of their 'gendered' role as mothers and nurturers and is directed towards saving the community. The maternal frame has allowed that space that was dominated by men, giving them legitimacy which doesn't stand to challenge the system and their 'visibility' role in comparison to militant women reflects the acceptance and legitimacy it has on politics then militant women whose identity is remained hidden. While militant women transitioned into anonymity post-conflict and have to map their existence meticulously, women in collective groups continue to take forward the motherhood politics in post accord political space.

As wars are gendered and women carry a disproportionate burden of looking after their families and community and their continuation with that role in public space, the elements of the agency are found in what these ordinary women do in the conflict period. Their activism "rests on the stretched roles of women's everyday lives as caregivers, nurturers"(Manchanda, 2005, p.4739). As "ambivalent and accidental" as their activism is, there is an agency in the choices they make and political exercise in the space they choose. These are women who support peace and negotiate for a better position with the institutional structure as political subjects. Motherhood politics gives them the anchor to participate in the public domain even though it is an extension of the traditional gendered role. Most of the women collective groups in the Northeast aren't looking for restructuring gender relations, but the maternal frame provides them the starting point and over time participate in multiple political processes. It helps them "negotiate their demands with the state and help in translating their demands into easily recognisable cultural terms and find support in public" (Dey, 2017). What is noticeable in the Northeast is that many of the collective women members continue to make their presence felt in comparison to the women rebel who are completely forgotten in the post-conflict negotiations. This has been the case with Boro women as well as women who engage in collective activism are more visible and present than women who were part of the clandestine groups. Whatever little peace talks demand women's participation comes from these collective group that uses maternal frame instead of women militant who also in par with militant men are not included in the number of 'underground' member.

Though women in the armed forces contribute equally in their various position to make the movement successful and effective, they don't contribute to the list of names for peace settlements. As Raja Singham Senanayake (2004) says resistance to returning to gender roles comes not from ex-combatant but from women who lived ordinary life through collectives. Women in the Northeast through collectives have been at the forefront of trying to mitigate political violence through their sporadic actions of intervention to protect their family and community from immediate violence. Narratives of women shielding men from being taken away and preventing sons' from getting arrested are common instances in villages when they are hounded by the state armed forces.

Combat women present a complex situation when it comes to understanding peace and women activists' practicing resistance against militarised armed forces in the same political space. Many women collective groups exercise resistance against armed forces and militarised atmosphere and pursue various humanitarian, social, and political strategies for a peaceful and more harmonised community (narratives of members of ABWWF). These are women who engage in peace building and political mobilisation which focuses on the strategic representation of women in inclusive politics and pursuing social ills of domestic violence, polygamy, witch hunting, and alcohol abuse. Some of these strategies are instrumental in the sense they are looking for a more inclusive society and also fighting against armed groups. The violent social scenario presents a complex picture of the civilian collective group and militarised women's agency in their everyday resistance and empowerment. These are women of two categories who are exercising their own will and agency and fighting for a cause and joining strategies they feel will have more impact on their strategic actions. Both categories of women are a way of articulating their agency, though it doesn't change the patriarchal roles. However, very little is known about the Boro women cadres in armed organisations and the kind of work they carry out. It is difficult to identify and locate them, thus making them invisible as they transitioned into anonymity 'post accord'.

Militarised women create a problematic narrative for feminist politics as it locates the possibility of emancipatory politics in authoritarian and militarised and destructive struggles. Though an agentive moment is created when women transcend the traditional gendered role and in joining the militant, how do they articulate rights for women based on militarised participant. Militarised politics has been studied by many feminist scholars to draw a connecting linkage between military, patriarchy, and masculinities. However, as complicated as their position is within the feminist narratives, denying them agency further undermines their position and capacity to negotiate for their share in the peace settlement process.

III. Conclusion

Women in conflict scenarios such as Boro women's case suggest that agency is very complicated, dynamic, non-linear, very ambivalent, and conditioned within the ethnic nationalist agenda. As women are engaged in multiple roles from resisting through collective groups to joining combat roles, Boro women have been part of the movement in their different capacities and exercised agency in joining. Women are not forced into these positions but make a conscious decision to make their contribution and mark. While not all women activists are feminist in nature, many women's activism centered around ethnicity involves the exercise of "feminist agency" (Leigh, 2008). These organisations and their activism have proven as transformative as any other feminist movement in their mobilisations and impacting the discourse on women's rights within the maternal frame. Women's agency and empowerment must not be understood with a single set of rules.

This paper has looked at different understandings of women's resistance against state violence to analyse how women participate in different capacities and exercise their agency in conflict. It has located women's empowerment and agency in situations of armed conflict, breaking down stereotypes of women as victims or peacemakers and their invisibility from discourse on identity politics and armed conflict. It examined their agency and participation in conflict and their erasure from the peace process. This paper responds to the question of women's activism in the Northeast and how women in conflict zones have exercised their agency against the state and participated in dynamic roles. Women in conflict zones respond in multiple ways, as armed members or as part of women's collective organising and protesting against state violence. Women have engaged in different roles and have negotiated their space around them to venture into roles and responsibilities that were not familiar and in ways have changed the discourse around womanhood and politics. To the question of the agency of women, they have demonstrated their agency through dynamic roles while engaging in violent conflict.

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