

Peace as the Modality of Power: Nationality, Para-State Politics and the Silencing of Women

G. Amarjit Sharma

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the implications of the political peace process between Kuki-Chin-Zo militant organisations, the state of Manipur and the Union Government of India on women as a political subject. This process involves historically evolved issues of contested Kuki, Chin and Zo nationalities; para-state politics among the Kuki-Chin-Zo insurgent groups; and the legal and extra-legal violence in the state. The paper argues that the language of political autonomy vis-à-vis the state which evolves within a society is essentially part of a discursive structure in which ‘indigenous’ scholars, on the one hand, and militant organisations, on the other, articulate who the Kuki-Chin-Zo people are. Although there is a critical awakening of the dominating politics of the colonial and postcolonial state, politics in the North East has instituted a political order that silences women and sexual violence in the meta-narratives of nationality and state.

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The Backdrop

In August 2008, armed groups belonging to the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) signed a trilateral agreement on Suspension of Operation (SoO) with the Union Government of India and Government of Manipur in Delhi. The key objectives of the SoO are settlement through ‘political dialogue’ with the government and ‘unity building’ among the Kukis. Later on, armed groups under the United Peoples’ Front (UPF) joined the SoO agreement. The number of armed groups that agreed to the SoO increased from nineteen in 2009 to twenty-three in 2019.

KNO and UPF are the composites of various armed groups of Kuki people living in the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram, and the countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. Both organisations have decided to work on a common platform for their demand of a separate state for the Kukis. Sielen Haokip, spokesperson of the KNO, has said that the primary purpose of the SoO is to engage in political dialogue to find a settlement for the Kukis within the Constitution of India. He feels that the SoO has generated a ‘strong sense of common purpose’ among the various armed groups and has encouraged ‘unity building’ among the Kuki clans (Buhril 2009). Haokip (2011, 211) also urges Kuki-Chin-Zo groups ‘to converge on identity of [the] Kuki for the benefit of the future.’¹ T.L.Jacob Thadou, Convenor of the UPF in the Joint Monitoring Group of the SoO, has said that armed groups are engaged in a ‘learning process’ that requires making ‘peace, build[ing] confidence, and resolv[ing] difference[s]’ (Buhril 2009).

Reportedly, one of the subjects of negotiation in the peace talks was a state within a state within the Constitution of India (*The Telegraph* 2017), or a Kuki Territorial Council within the state of Manipur (*The Indian Express* 2019). The term representing the collective identity of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people is debated from various subject positions within the same society, and the peace talks are not seen merely as a path to a power-sharing agreement or achieving an administrative or political settlement.² The talks are also moments of addressing inter-clan and inter-group differences among the tribes within a particular society. This paper’s critical concern is the implications of the language of ‘political’ and ‘difference’ for women in the subject of peace politics. The question is not merely one of why women’s voices are not heard or represented.³ In denying women a part in the peace talks, the peace process often treats women as ‘pre-political’ subjects.⁴

¹ In this line, KNO’s leadership under P.S. Haokip gave the political ideology of Zale’n-gam (literally, free land) in 1980. Zale’n-gam under the leadership of the KNO has two-fold objectives. One, recognition of the Kukis as an independent people; two, restoration of Zale’n-gam, the free land of the Kukis, by way of according statehood – Western Zale’n-gam in India and Eastern Zale’n-gam in Burma. (For further details see, Haokip 1998.)

² I use Swarna Rajagopalan’s (2008) observation that the path to an accord is often more critical than the accord itself. By ‘path’, she means the degree of hatred, which groups are included, and so forth. However, I use ‘path’ in the sense of politics, political order and groups instituted while approaching peace talks.

³ Conventional arguments (e.g., Banerjee 2008) that the peace process allows women to acquire a new space does not address why women’s questions (the question of land rights, reproductive rights, inheritance, etc.) are not necessarily part of the peace process.

⁴ Anthropologist Anungla Aier (2017) argues that in the context of the Naga Mothers Association in Nagaland, there is gendered citizenship in that ‘no Naga clan, village, or tribe would allow women to represent them politically in the public arena’.

This paper proposes that the formal peace process is not produced just by who is part of the process or who is not included, but also by what issues should and should not be part of the process. The author feels that how the peace process unfolds cannot be understood by focusing only on the terms of engagement or political dialogue between parties. The language and methods of politics employed have also to be understood by locating the peace process as part of a community's broader political approach and interaction with the state. In this paper, I focus on what the Kuki-Chin-Zo people have undergone while undertaking the peace process, the questions of nationality and para-state politics, and to see the kind of contested and violent political order such questions have instituted in the Kuki-Chin-Zo community. The silencing of women's questions by the community occurs within this objective condition.

The language of 'political dialogue' and the objective of resolving 'differences' (among the various militant groups), as articulated by the KNO and UPF, signify the politics that silences women as the subject. Such a language of politics on the part of society is essentially part of the discursive structure within which 'indigenous' scholars and leaders articulate and debate each other. In this sense, the political is understood as the historically specific and contingent complex field of realities within which discursive articulation of social realities, including imagination for an autonomous area and state of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people, takes place.⁵

Ancestry of the Political

The history of the colonial and postcolonial state for the Kuki-Chin-Zo people is scattered in most of the indigenously bred literatures (some of which are discussed later). This is because of the way the colonial state governed them in the past—as frontier provinces, backward tracts, savages, etc.—and the emergence of sovereign state boundaries among India, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma).

In this context, at least three significant historical events (not ignoring that there are other historical moments) can be considered critical: the Chin-Lushai Conference of 1892; the Kuki or Zogal rebellion of 1917-19; and the Government of India Act of 1935. These moments are articulated among 'indigenous' scholars as moments that segregate a shared history and contiguous territory of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people. Zo historians Khup Za Go (1996) and David Vumlallian Zou (2010) see the Chin-Lushai conference of 1892 and Government of India Act 1935 as the 'unhappy past' for the contemporary unification project of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people. The Chin-Lushai conference of 1892 held in colonial Calcutta discussed the possibility of administrative unification of the 'Chin-Lushai country', spread across parts of colonial Bengal, Assam, and Burma. Colonial officials differed on the administration of the Chin-Lushai country as one political unit, except the decision that southern and western Lushais would come together within colonial Assam. While the Government of India Act of 1935 separated 'British Burma' from 'British India',⁶ Zou (2010, 59) observes that the Act also partitioned the open Asian Borderland—or, Chin Lushai country—inhabited by various Zo 'indigenous' tribes. What was an administrative issue for the colonial state becomes a usable past for the Kuki-

⁵ Here I tend to agree with Jonathan Spencer's (2007) understanding of the political as the complex field of social practices, moral judgements, and imaginative possibilities.

⁶ Under the Government of India Act, 1935, British India means those areas under the Governor and Chief Commissioner's provinces. British Burma means territories under His Majesty, to the east of the states of Bengal, Manipur and Assam.

Chin-Zo to reconstruct themselves as one collective self. The Champhai Convention held in May 1988 at Champhai, Mizoram, declared that the people of Zo ethnic origins, inhabitants in the Chin Hills and Arakans of Burma, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the Mizoram state, and adjoining hill areas of India were descendants of one ancestor. Language, culture and tradition, social and customary practices are considered evidence of ethnological facts. The convention also declared the following: (a) the colonial rulers divided the ‘ancestral homeland’ and the Kuki-Chin-Zo were ‘distributed’ like cattle, sold and separated; (b) emergence of the sovereign states of India, Burma and Pakistan in the 1940s aggravated ‘the administrative fragmentations and gave birth to deeper agonies of separation, for the constitutional laws of respective countries divided Zo ethnic origin into different nationalities.’⁷

As such, for Khup Za Go (1996), looking into the past is the ‘pre-modern history’ of the Zo people to establish the Zo as the modern political self. Yet, the self has to negotiate with the clan, dialectical and tribes-based identities, and territoriality.⁸ Gougin (1980, 50) observes that if Zomis of the East were unknown to the Zomis of the West, then do Zomis constitute a nation. His answer is in the affirmative, but he felt that besides ‘recognition by the world’, there is a need for ‘declaration’ by the people themselves. Declaration is not merely the act of announcement, but a conscious political action to become shared members of a nation.

For scholars of Kuki-Chin-Zo society in general, the historical moment of the Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-19 (called the Zogal rebellion) was also a moment of discovering themselves as a collective political self. A few scholars understand this war as the ‘people’s war’ against the colonial state. Guite and Haokip (2019, 4) argue that people took part in the rebellion not for their chiefs or any financial gain, but as ‘men of one country’. Sonthang Haokip (2019, 208) interprets the same war as a ‘national war fought against an established enemy’, fought by ‘Kuki patriots and freedom fighters’ through an organised Kuki war council, and it was not merely a ‘raid’ and ‘savagery’. Thus, one can see the shaping of the Kuki-Chin-Zo community’s political self by the stress on ‘people’ or ‘national’ instead of ‘chiefs’.

Another crucial political task was the search for a more fundamental and primary distinction of the Kuki-Chin-Zo society from ‘others’. Anthropologist F.K. Lehman (1963, 14-16) observed that the Kuki falls more into the ‘orbit of Manipuri than Burman civilization’ and has specific characteristics different from the southern Chin because of their proximity with the Manipuri civilization. However, such proximity had been questioned to define an alternate society (political self). Gougin (1980, 64) argues that the Zomis were never under the domination of Burmese kings, although they now live under the Burma state since its independence. In 2000, while demanding separate ‘territorial rights of outer Manipur tribals’, in the context of Manipur, the All Tribal Students’ Union Manipur (ATSUM) asserted that most tribes in North East India predominantly lived as ‘independent and sovereign nations’ till the advent of the British (ATSUM 2000, 14). ATSUM asserted that tribes were not part of the Merger Agreement of Manipur, 1949, that united Manipur with India.

Two significant observations can be drawn from the above discussion: one, is the articulation

⁷ Under the Government of India Act, 1935, British India means those areas under the Governor and Chief Commissioner’s provinces. British Burma means territories under His Majesty, to the east of the states of Bengal, Manipur and Assam.

⁸ Ashis Nandy (1997) talks about the issue of political self primarily in dialogue with itself. Modern self that is buffeted by the pre-modern, non-modern or countermodern categories and passions.

of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people's political self; another is the externalization of the colonial and postcolonial state. However, articulation of the modern political self in the above lacks narration from the standpoint of women. In recent years, such critical assessment of the political self can be observed among the Kuki-Chin-Zo women scholars. Hoipi Haokip and Arfina Haokip (2019, 240) argue that, in the context of the Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-19, all available records are written about men of higher rank, such as chiefs and warriors. They further argue that women were an 'invisible confederate' in the war and the 'moral agents' behind the men's ability to withstand the imperial forces for about two years (Ibid, 247-48). In the same context, to another Kuki woman sociologist, Hoineilhing Sitlhou (2019, 276), women were capable of playing a very significant 'backstage role' in the rebellion off the battlefield. These historians and sociologists urge more attention be paid to women as 'witnesses' to the inhuman torture of men, and their silent suffering. Whether these new voices or writings matter in the politics of the larger collective autonomy and demand for a separate Kuki state is a matter of concern.

In the following section, I discuss how the gender blind ancestry of the political (as described above) continues to inform the peace politics of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people.

Exclusionary (Para-) State Politics

The Kuki National Assembly (KNA), formed on 24 October 1946, represents the first organisation that attempted to build a collective land and territorial identity of the Kuki-Chin-Zo people living across the nation-states of Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. In January 1960, KNA demanded a separate Kuki state. However, other such collective imaginaries also exist among the Hmar people around this time—the Hmar Assembly formed in 1954, and the Hmar National Union in 1960. Similarly, there is the Zo land for people comprising the same stock among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo people. Broadly, three kinds of state imaginations emerge—the Hmar state, the Kuki state, and the Zo state represented by militant organisations such as the Hmar People's Convention (HPC), the KNO, the Zomi Re-Unification Organisation (ZRO), etc.

The politics of these organisations is understood, in the context of this paper, as para-state politics. Para-state politics refers to the broad ideas of maximum autonomous area, a self-governed territory within the state of India, and freedom from what is being perceived as neighboring 'dominant' ethnic groupings such as the Meiteis and Nagas. It also apparently carries the technical and constitutional meaning of 'state within the state' under Article 244A.⁹ So, there are political (extra-constitutional) and constitutional meanings to the idea of para-state politics. However, it is not merely about negotiation (with the state of India) for a self-governed entity and the constitutional meaning of 'state within state'.¹⁰ It is also about identities among contesting groups and insurgent factional politics among the Kuki-Chin-Zo people.¹¹

Varied faces of insurgency (militant) movements within the Kuki-Chin society can be noticed.

⁹ Article 244A under the Constitution of India refers to the formation of 'an autonomous state'. The Parliament of India may, by law, form within the State of Assam an autonomous state comprising (whether wholly or in part) all or any of the tribal areas in Assam and creation of local legislature or Council of Ministers.

¹⁰ This may not be what the official state (of India) means when dealing with para-state politics. The official state follows the mechanism of containing ethnic conflicts (and insurgency) through grant of statehood or autonomous councils on ethnic grounds. See details in Chadda (2010), Lijphart (2010).

¹¹ Scholars like Gangte (2014), Lal Dena (2011), etc., have focused on Thadou Kuki dominance politics and 'inter-tribal' clashes in Kuki-Chin-Zo society. For instance, there were clashes among the Hmar and Thadous in 1960, and Thadous and Zomi leadership in 1997-98.

Mention can be made of the Hmar state demand under the HPC and the Zo state demand under the ZRO. Hmar historian Pudiate (2002) narrates the history of Hmars as one of struggle against chiefs in the hills, who were considered collaborators of the state.¹² Hmar history and politics give a sense of a history of the commoners in the hills. HPC, which emerged as a militant organisation in 1986, demanded autonomy for Hmar people as part of its demand for Greater Mizoram. However, the Mizo Accord signed in 1986 (that led to the formation of Mizoram as a state under the Union of India) failed to include the Hmar inhabited areas of Manipur. Later, the Hmar People's Convention-Democratic (HPC-D) started demanding a Hmar state covering the Hmar inhabited areas of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam. The ZRO was formed in 1993 to reunify the Zo people in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Its armed wing, Zomi Revolutionary Army, was formed in 1997. Militancy among the Kukis began in the 1980s with the formation of the KNA that claimed the Eastern Kuki State and Western Kuki State for the Kukis-Chin living in Myanmar and India, respectively. However, in the same year, yet another group called the Kuki National Front (KNF) emerged, which demanded a Kuki state within the Union of India for the Kukis living in the state of Manipur.

Women have not become an essential part of these competing groups' politics. There are also no reports of women serving in capacities other than as 'informants' or 'couriers' for these organisations. A study (Sharma 2018) of the Hmar Women Association (HWA) and other women's organisations associated with it in the district of Churachandpur (in Manipur) has shown that women, particularly under the HWA, choose to keep a distance from militant organisations for various reasons. One is because of the male dominance in these organisations, and because of what they call the 'macho' and 'gun culture'. Another reason is the perception that even if they (the women) become members of such organisations, there is little chance that opinions can be shaped in favor of women and their specific issues. Thirdly, there is also a tendency to normalize the exclusion of women and women's questions in the politics of militants and civil society.

The para-state politics in brief has two serious implications for women. First, the para-state seemingly operates by dividing 'social' and 'political' issues into separate compartments. While the para-state politics talks about political autonomy and state, the issues of women's right over property, and unequal status in the customary laws and village authority are not part of para-state politics. The author's field work in the district of Churachandpur from 2015 to 2016 shows that these are important issues for the women in Kuki-Chin society, although these issues seldom become part of the dominant politics of state and civil society.

Second, para-state politics has produced an order of civility and culture of everyday violence that not only victimizes women, but also minimizes possibilities of women's role in the mainstream politics of the community and militants. Conflict over a long period between the state and militant groups has produced a civil society that is based on limited understanding of rights and the public sphere. Broadly, two specific features of the public sphere can be observed in Kuki-Chin-Zo society. First, civil society is a public space where the state, militants and human rights groups fight for the legitimization of their respective identities and the issues

¹² The Hmars under the Mizo Union party (formed in 1946) were part of the movement for Mizo Autonomous District, comprising the Mizos in Mizo hills of the then Assam, and Hmars in Manipur. The Mizo Union party was against the holding of election in the hills under the Manipur Constitution Act of 1947 (a representational democratic polity existed in Manipur before it merged into India in 1949).

concerning them. Such a public space only demands women as ‘peacemakers’, rather than addressing women-specific issues. Second, rights-based groups are limited in a public sphere in which customary institutions and practices that allow little space for women are defended as core to their ‘tribal identity’. Such civil society hardly speaks against incidents of violence that victimize women. On two serious incidents of rape and sexual violence in 2010 and 2013 that involved the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB) and ‘unidentified men’, the task of defending the rights of the victims was mainly led by women’s organizations like Churachandpur Joint Women Organisation (CJWO). The so-called civil society, which is a byproduct of insurgency and state conflicts, is less vocal in such situations.

There is also another level of everyday violence as a result of operations of militant groups—inter-group conflict and conflict with the state. Women would call such situations as ‘gun culture’, not just to mean the organization, but also the nature of civilian space that is run by organizations controlled by armed male militants and state forces.

Given these developments, one wonders what sort of platform KNO and UPF foster to negotiate peace with the state. The primary objective has been to deal with inter-tribal or inter-group differences, excluding any agenda for women.

In this backdrop, we can see that politics is largely reduced to being a Kuki or Zo or Kuki-Chin. What emerges in defining and deciding what the collective means is all about addressing what one should call themselves generically, and the political identity and status they would like to claim as a state. However, this being-ness silences women as the articulatory subject—that women can form a political view within or outside such grand ideas of state and autonomy has never been discussed in the ensuing debate and dialogue. In the next section, we will look at another dimension of what the political means in the peace process following the tripartite SoO agreement in 2008.

Suspension of Operation, Peace Talks

The first SoO agreement was signed on 1 August 2005 between the Indian Army and Kuki and Chin armed groups, the KNO and UPF. On 22 August 2008, the KNO, Union Government of India and Government of Manipur signed a tri-lateral SoO agreement in New Delhi. This SoO lays down specific ground rules to be obeyed by the armed groups—that all the ‘Under Grounds’ (UG) will abide by the Constitution of India, the laws of the land and territorial integrity of Manipur; all UG groups will altogether abjure the path of violence and will not engage in violence and unlawful activities; the security forces (meaning state forces) will not launch operations against the UG, as long as they abide by the agreement; and the cadres of the groups will stay in their designated camps.

There can be two sides to the SoO. For the KNO and UPF, the SoO is a political space for realizing the ‘state within the state’ and resolving the differences among them. For the state, however, the SoO is part of counterinsurgency measures. Subir Bhaumik (2007, 8) observes that the state faces the growing strength of the ‘Meitei insurgent’ groups, who refuse to start any kind of political negotiations and demand a referendum. A military agreement was signed in 2005 between state security forces and the Kuki and Zomi insurgent groups to remove

‘Meitei insurgents’ from the Kuki-Zomi dominant district of Churachandpur in Manipur.¹³ One has to understand this development along with two other developments around this time. One was ‘Operation All Clear’ that attempted to clear the ‘Meitei insurgent’ group United National Liberation Front (UNLF) from the so-called liberated zone along the Indo-Myanmar border; another was the broader shift to conflictual civil and insurgent relationships in the hills.¹⁴ But, without ignoring the politics of the state’s counterinsurgency,¹⁵ I focus here on the platform provided by the KNO and UPF.

The talks formally began in June 2016. However, the talks do not have any representation of women’s organisations like HWA or CJWO. In the second round of talks held in Delhi in October 2016, KNO and UPF submitted a charter of demands to the Union Government of India demanding implementation of Article 244A or ‘state within a state’ for the Kuki-Zomi areas of Manipur. This demand was a significant shift from the earlier demand for a separate Kuki state without any specific reference to any articles in India’s constitution. In the third round of talks held on 9 August 2017, the highest apex body of the Kukis, Kuki Inpi, resolved in a meeting to urge the KNO and UPF to present the ‘Kuki people’s demand for statehood’ during the talks. It said that any departure from this demand would be ‘deemed a betrayal of Kuki people and their aspiration.’ (*The Telegraph* 2017).

By the sixth round of tripartite talks held on 10 January 2018, the agenda seemingly changed to a demand for a Territorial Council instead of a Kuki state (Kipgen 2018). Reportedly the KNO and UPF referred to Article 244A and the kind of autonomy (legislative, executive and financial) granted to the Bodos through the Bodoland Territorial Council.¹⁶ The Kuki groups in this sixth round also wanted New Delhi to set up a regional office of the Ministry of External Affairs in the Territorial Council areas to allow free or visa-less movement of its people across the border to visit their relatives and loved ones in Myanmar. The envisioned Territorial Council, it was further reported, would also have separate educational boards for high schools and higher secondary schools, as well as the entitlement of one member each in both houses of the Indian parliament. The demand for the Territorial Council for the Kuki-Chin people in Manipur continued to be a central point for the KNO and UPF in the seventh, eighth and ninth rounds of tripartite talks. In the seventh round, Seilen Haokip, representing KNO at the talks, expressed that, based on the Bodo Territorial Council, they were pushing their demand for a Territorial Council (*Indian Express* 2019). The SoO was set to expire on 29 February 2020 but was extended till August 2020.

In this context, the concept of peace, as it has emerged among the Kuki-Chin-Zo scholars, also concerns the state’s lack of flexible and sincere engagement with the concerns of ‘marginalized indigenous peoples’ (Zou 2010, 6), and a ‘neglect and suppression of legitimate demands’ for ‘internal autonomy’ (of the Zo people) within the Constitution of India (Ngaite 2013, 21). This is

¹³ Manipur’s state government leadership opposed this ‘military’ agreement for they were not informed and involved. Later a formal tripartite SoO involving the state government of Manipur was signed in August 2008.

¹⁴ This particular shift in a civilian and military relationship and a new order of conflict is briefly discussed in Sharma (2008, 51-52).

¹⁵ The official peace process often addresses conflicts by reducing parties in peace talks to the competing interests of the parties involved. (See Das 2007)

¹⁶ Bodo Peace Accord (a tripartite agreement) was signed on 27 January 2020. This gave birth to the Bodo Territorial Region. This is the third agreement signed in the last 27 years. The Bodoland movement started in 1987, and the first agreement was signed on 20 February 1993 between the Centre, Assam government and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU)-Bodo People’s Action Committee. This agreement led to the Bodoland Territorial Council.

also reflected by S.T. Thangboi, president of the Kuki National Front (one of the parties under the platform represented by the KNO in the peace talks) in his observation that the Kuki's feelings of 'relative deprivation, frustration and alienation', on the one hand, and greater homeland demand of the 'Nagas', on the other, have contributed to the formation of ethnic militia and emergence of militant organisations resorting to violence (quoted in Arora and Kipgen 2017, 172).¹⁷

In the following section we shall see how the above language of collective group rights, marginality, autonomy and peace could not address a violent political order that hugely impacts women's lives.

Interpreting Violence: Rape and Sexual Violence

Para-state politics, as discussed earlier, institutes a political order that several factions of insurgents and ethnic armed local cadres (in times of ethnic conflicts) can appropriate through violence. Groups can play politics and engage in violent action to try and establish what being Kuki, Zo, and Hmar mean, and what sense of territory each should represent. In the process of such acts of defining and representation, cadres of insurgent groups who appropriate violence also acquire factional, monetary and masculine interests. There have been several media reports of KNA involvement in acts of extortion, demands for ransom, forced deduction of a certain percentage from an individual's or family's share of land compensation (given due to development induced displacement), threats to members of village authority, etc. However, violence is also used by the state, and laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Acts, 1958 (AFSPA) legitimize exceptional use of force.¹⁸ Two things are of concern in this context. One is the relationship between the legal violence and extra-legal violence as a result of exceptional laws and the violence against women that has occurred at the hands of armed insurgents or para-state actors; second, is the implications of such violence for women as the subject.

Broadly, three types of violence can be noticed if we follow the developments in this part of the North East in the last fifteen to twenty years: state-non-state legal and extra-legal violence, ethnic violence, and everyday violence. An instance of severe violence that occurred in the recent past is discussed. This was the alleged rape of Hmar women in January 2006 at Parbung and Lungthulien villages in the Tipaimukh sub-divisional area of Churachandpur district in Manipur. This category of violence falls in the first type.

Incidents of rape and sexual violence in the Kuki-Chin context (like the rape of Hmar women in 2006 referred to above), falls on a continuum of the legal (extra-legal) violence and non-state insurgent (para-state) violence. Although the state and non-state violence appear to be oppositional forces in the general discourse on insurgency, both types of violence equally victimize women. Many critics of extraordinary laws like AFSPA (as the embodiment of state violence that violates civilian and women's right to life) are also equally burdened with the

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¹⁸ A. Bimol Akoijam argued that AFSPA is an act of 'disguised war' (Akoijam 2005, 486-87). AFSPA is presented as an instrument 'in aid of civil power' (Section 3 of the Act) to 'suppress' 'armed revolt' or 'armed insurgency' in the North East region. But the Act has not brought insurgency to an end.

issue of armed insurgents' alleged violence against women. One explanation of this seeming ambivalence is that long years of imposing extraordinary laws have enabled various groups of people and insurgents to act like the state. Such insurgent groups acting like the state institute order by using violence against women.

A few things in brief need to be clarified on the relationship between the state's legal violence and the 'extra-legal' violence of insurgent groups (that is, violence that is not sanctioned under an Act, or law, or a decree of the state). This takes us back to the critique of violence by Walter Benjamin (Bullock and Jennings 1996), which was extended by Giorgio Agamben (2005). Benjamin says violence leads to the making of laws and helps in the preservation of the law. This implies that violence is both the origin and the means for the maintenance of laws. To Agamben, this legal violence is suspended in what he calls 'state of exception', but enables 'extra-legal violence' to operate as an act still sanctioned by the law.

However, this understanding of violence is largely confined to the study of the state and its monopoly in exercising 'legitimate violence'. How do we understand insurgent violence? Two ways can be seen. One, insurgents institute a political order through the use of violence. Violence can be used both against the state forces as well as among the contending insurgent groups as a means of achieving the objective of an autonomous state within and outside the state of India. Violence can also be seen as conveying a particular and desired line of thinking of an individual or a group of people. This could take the form of use of physical force, coercion, harassment, death and injury in everyday life. Two, insurgent violence can be seen as part of extra-legal violence. The latter could be related to the context of counterinsurgency measures that reportedly use different insurgent factions against each other. In the context of this paper, allegedly, both types of insurgent violence are visible and committed against women. A further serious concern is that under such a complex field, violence is reduced to an issue of general deprivation, human rights violations and marginalization of a collective group of people. As a result, peace politics gets reduced to an administrative problem, of federal power arrangements that address the issue of deprivation and marginalization, instead of addressing sexual violence.

The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) were allegedly involved in the January 2006 incidents of violence against Hmar women in Parbung and Lungthulien villages in Manipur (referred to earlier). Civil society groups, including women's groups, responded to the incidents demanding an investigation. The state government of Manipur formed the Rajkhowa Commission. The members of the commission visited the areas in March 2006. Afterward, members of the National Commission of Women (NCW) also visited the areas in May 2006. Testimonies of the 'rape' victims were taken by members of both the commissions. The Rajkhowa Commission report was never made public, despite calls by civil society groups based in Churachandpur, including the HWA. In an article in *Frontline* magazine, then member of NCW Malini Bhattacharya published a report (Bhattacharya 2006). A fact-finding committee formed by rights-based groups¹⁹ did not come out collectively with a final report, although one of the members of the group, the Naga Peoples Movement for

¹⁹ Aram Pamei of the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights headed the fact-finding Civil Society Team on Internally Displaced People in Tipaimukh Sub-Division. The other members were Babloo Loitongbam (Human Rights Alert), Joseph R. Hmar (Hmar Students' Association), and W. Joy Kumar (Human Rights Law Network). The team investigated the alleged incidents of rape that had taken place between 5 and 10 March 2006.

Human Rights (NPMHR), came out with its own report that was published by the media. None of the Kuki-Chin-Zo militant groups published their perspectives on addressing the issue of violence against women.

A perusal of such reports and views suggests that rape and sexual violence are predominantly articulated as violation of human rights, overlapping with issues of social and economic backwardness in the villages, minority and majority conflict, and a failed state system. There were contesting allegations among rights-based organisations on the incidents, labelling each other as collaborators of the Indian Army's counterinsurgency measures against UNLF cadres, or anti-tribal 'valley-based Meitei' insurgent groups. While the Human Rights Alert (HRA) sought cross-examination of the alleged women victims for a second time, NPMHR came out with a separate report listing 21 cases of rape and torture of 402 people, alleging that UNLF and KCP cadres were responsible for these 'dehumanising acts'. Demands for cross-examination were understood as an extra-burden on the victims who had already suffered stigma and taken shelter in the neighboring state of Mizoram. While the government's commissions prepared their final reports, civil rights bodies contested each other over the incidents.

An opinion published in *Outlook* magazine (Routray 2006) interprets rape as a failure of the state system. Routray argues that it (rape) is not the result of the absence of state security forces, but a failure of governance. Incidents of rape in 2006 are interpreted as an outcome of the intense militancy in Churachandpur district, and the severe limitations of the state to prosecute militants. In his opinion, this is a reflection of a state of affairs in which 'the tribal populations of Churachandpur have constantly been subjected to systematic acts of terror by valley-based militant groups, who have exploited the schism between the Valley and the Hills.' There can be two specific readings based on his opinion: (a) weakness of the state, and (b) the inter-ethnic relationship between people settled in the hills and valleys. This is the familiar trope of the divide between hill and valley residents as the divide between tribal and non-tribal populations.

Let us look at Malini Bhattacharya's report (2006) published in *Frontline*, written after her visit to two villages. Her report broadly has two components: one, is a set of testimonies of the victims, and the other is the military, administrative and welfare measures suggested to address what looks like *causal* issues of violence, instead of rape and sexual violence itself. About 25 women were allegedly 'raped and molested' on two separate days in January by two groups of insurgents (UNLF and KCP). To her, the victims' accounts are basically 'an account of the atrocities inflicted by militants on two tribal villages in Manipur', and the general fear and internal displacement of the women and families into the neighboring state of Mizoram as a result of the incident. The report mentions the victims as mostly 'unmarried' and 'minor' who were in a state of trauma, depression and acute health problems.

The issue of rape and sexual violation overlaps with the issue of a majority mindset against the minority, and the 'neglect' of villagers—administratively, economically and medically. The necessity of looking at rape and sexual violence independent from issues of majority-minority, tribes-non-tribes, and development-underdevelopment is neglected.

Malini Bhattacharya (2006) also observes that 'friendly and peace-loving tribal people' are

so deeply affected by the sense of neglect and deprivation that they consider not just the state government but also the majority Meitei community (to which the militants accidentally belong) responsible for their distress. She alleged that the state government failed to have a rehabilitation scheme to tackle the aftermath of the incident. She appreciated the state security forces (13 Dogra Regiment) in the villages for the ‘good rapport’ established with the people, and urged the state government to bring infrastructure development like roads and primary health centres, and increase the presence of police and administration in the two villages. In other words, she implies that the regular appearance of state security personnel, police and administration, and bringing infrastructural changes in the areas could address the problem of rape and sexual violence. This interpretation, observation and recommendation is the familiar problem of using the welfare perspective to address the issue of gender hierarchy. It is critical to note that welfare schemes of the state do not liberate women from the structures of power but confine them within that structure.

Conclusion: Beyond Peace Politics

In the focus of peace politics on recognizing the collective political self (against the scattered history, contested nationality, and the state and other ‘dominating’ ethnic groupings), the question of the social self has been sidelined. The social self has either been assumed to be part of political identity or, in the context of a stable and consensus opinion, on collective autonomy and a separate state within a state. These considerations have missed out on reading the social self, the issues of a dominant language, and the methods of politics of the state, civil society, militants and insurgents from the perspective of women. I would like to conclude the paper by briefly highlighting the perspective of the HWA, mainly to show the gap in Kuki-Chin-Zo society in adopting a positionality of women in the understanding of the politics of the collective self and the strategy employed by the state, ethnic insurgents and civil society.²⁰

Members of the HWA are accustomed to being informed and governed by customary laws that allow no space for women’s voices. Those whom I interviewed during my fieldwork between 2012 and 2015 in Churachandpur showed complete displeasure towards politics in the hills. Politics refers to the insurgency, civil society and electoral politics. These are considered to be domains of men, who are reluctant to hand over power to women.

Women expressed concern about the customary gender division of power that gives hereditary clan rights to males, and the inheritance of both movable and immovable properties to male members. Even the local village council election is merely a show of selecting, not electing, male representatives. Civil society is considered as the sphere where state, insurgents and human rights organisations contest for the legitimisation of their respective identities and autonomy. HWA members also raised the concern of everyday violence committed by sections of insurgent groups and state forces, which is mostly absent in the formal discourse on peace and conflict. Insurgency in women’s daily lives is a show of gun culture—a macho display of strength and the power of the gun. This nature of violence could not be distinguished from the violence committed by the state security forces.

²⁰ The concluding focus on the recovery of women’s perspective and positionality is mostly a repetition of what I have discussed in my previous published work (Sharma 2018).

The social has to be political if the peace politics silences women and the woman's question is subverted. The recovery of the social as political cannot take place within the politics of peace. This is because peace is a power arrangement primarily based on articulations of the language of autonomy, nation and nationalism. Hence, recovering the social would mean a different kind of politics that would address the essential issues of power and inequality in the everyday life of women that arise from the discourse of state, contesting para-state politics and violence. The collective should be unpacked to see layers of power and sexual violence irrespective of ethnic groupings and insurgents groups. This I have attempted to do by tracing the notion of the political in the dialogue under the tripartite talks (SoO), the contesting para-state politics, and the interpretation of violence.

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