

## Women, Post-conflict Security and Governance Practices in India's Northeast

Pahi Saikia

### Abstract

This paper begins with the theorization of securitization and governance in conflict effected marginalized spaces. It examines how new modes of securitized governance redefine the agency and lives of marginal groups, particularly women in relation to power redistribution and non-traditional forms of security. The paper submits that women's experiences of inclusive governance and meaningful participation in governance framework, is critical to gender-responsive governance reforms and capacities during and after peace negotiations in conflict situations. It calls for a gender-sensitive conflict analysis and argues that multiple sovereignties in such situations influence women's participation in formal and informal governance structures. The argument and the discussions in the paper are grounded in an analysis of gender narratives of conflict in India's Northeast where the voices of marginalized women are less visible if not hidden or silenced.

### Author Profiles

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### Introduction

The paper examines the differentiated outcomes in post-conflict peace transitions for women. The objective is to examine how conflict shapes women's agency and participation in post-conflict governance institutions. Post-conflict transitions and governance in general feature a range of aspects including demobilization and reintegration and rehabilitation of former rebels, providing material assistance to internal war victims, reforming formal governance structures, social reconstruction and confidence building. From a gender perspective, it is important to examine to what extent women articulate their preferences in the process of peace transition and governance reforms. To what extent do women as rebel returnees, war victims and activists overcome the legacies of militarized spaces and the challenges of inclusion in the formal and informal structures of peace and governance reforms in post-conflict settings? The research question in this paper is situated in this discourse of relocating women in analyzing conflict, democratic governance and peace in India's northeast, with a focus on Assam. The objective is to understand how conflict and post-conflict situations redefine participation of women, particularly rebels in relation to distribution of power at the local level and in governance.

The paper argues that securitization of territories located in the geographical peripheries of a state's political borders are of immense importance to state building projects and geopolitical security dynamics. Yet, women do not figure in the hegemonic nation-building projects. Drawing lessons from the constructivist approach to international conflict, peace and security, this paper uses the term securitization to mean new security threats. Threats to security in this context refer to non-traditional and non-military aspects of security.<sup>1</sup> Governance in the militarized zones of India's northeast is often informed by statist policies without any dialogue with the local communities, let alone women. We therefore need to examine the impact of militarization on women who experience shifts and political relocations in post-conflict situations. The paper tries to establish a relationship between gender, democratic governance and peace.

We consider the testimonies of people who resisted or lived through the experiences of violence and counter-insurgent violence. Micro-level narratives and interviews of women collected in Assam at various intervals in late 2000s inform the understanding of gendered experiences of conflict in this paper. The paper is divided into the following sections. First we outline the theoretical underpinnings of conflict analysis and gendered-governance. This section engages in the discussion of conflict analysis using gender and governance as conceptual tools. Next, we turn to locate Northeast India in the comparative discourse of conflict analysis. The third section focuses on the gendered experiences in the securitized post-conflict governance through narratives. The paper concludes by summarizing the arguments, the implications and scope for further research.

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<sup>1</sup> The Copenhagen School originally developed the concepts of securitization and de-securitization. See, Buzan, Ole and De Wilde, "Security", 1998.

## Conflict Analysis and Gendered-governance

Women are key to governance reforms and development policies in the developing South including India. Therefore, their participation in local governance spaces and post-conflict democratic transitions becomes important for meaningful participation in the livelihood opportunities in post-conflict settings. Efforts aimed at broadening the scope for inclusion of all citizens in general and marginalized sections of the society such as women in particular, have been made in post-conflict setting in the developing countries. The provision of quotas for instance, is aimed at enhancing the scope of inclusion, overall social development, representation, power and scope of social citizenship of women. Participation in this sense is a 'spatial practice that effects the relations of power and construction of citizenship that permeate any site for public engagement.' (Cornwall 2002) Democratic reforms in post-conflict societies therefore entail building up institutions that are consultative, and responsive to the needs and preferences of the marginalized sections. Despite these provisions and reforms, women's position in the key decision-making processes in these institutions remains significantly low. In post-conflict settings the legacies of violence and male-dominated governance structures and peace negotiations further create obstacles for women to participate in transitional peace.

The use of the term gender in this study is informed by socially constructed identities and practices where specific roles are assigned to men and women, in culturally specific contexts. Gendered subjectivities and the 'experiences of growing up in societies that devalue the position of women on a daily and structural basis' as Kabeer (2014) would argue, further calls for research and emphasis on gender as a dominant tool for conceptual analysis in conflict studies. Unraveling gender hierarchies and differences will enable us to reveal the institutional structures, division of resources, power relations and 'reversed realities', of the mundane lives of women in the conflict zones.<sup>2</sup> The involvement of women in such conflicts as some studies suggest, cannot be relegated to simplistic division of labor between male and female and stereotypical gender roles during conflicts. According to Marxist analysis, the first division of labour between men and women 'laid the institutional foundations of women's subjugation, private property, monogamous marriage and patrimonial inheritance (Kabeer, 1994: 44).' Women's role as active agents during armed conflict needs to be recognized to provide a systematic analysis of gender roles and strategies used by women as independent actors during wartime and peace building. Gendered analyses of conflict as some would argue enable us to 'articulate the linkages between the personal dimension and the institutions at various levels (Jacobs & Jacobson, 2000).'

Studies show that women's increased presence not only in peace negotiations but also in post-conflict transitions and governance reforms will result in gender equality.<sup>3</sup> These studies also reveal that active role of women as rebels and combatants may lead to change in perceptions on traditional gender roles. However, this may not necessarily translate into political agency. Women's ability to participate in both peace transitions and governance reforms are often marginal in many developing contexts. Women activist groups may try to fill up this gap and act as intermediaries between rebel returnees and the state. Limited access to open political

<sup>2</sup> The term has been borrowed from the work, Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> State of Affairs Women: Peace and Security, Knowledge Platform: Security & Law, Dutch NAP Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2015.

space may create alternative conditions for activist groups to mobilize women to participate in peace transitions and act as agents of change. Activists and transnational advocacy groups may espouse inclusionary governance agendas and political reforms. These actions may not result in visibility of issues related to gender justice in transitional post-conflict societies and therefore influence gender-sensitive outcome and the decision-making processes as far as governance reforms are concerned. However, it is important to take into account the inter-relation between gender, caste, class, ethnicity and other socio-economic cleavages to understand post-conflict transition and peace processes. Gender-sensitive reforms in post-conflict situations are often reconciled by the presence of traditional power relations and hierarchical norms, which create obstacles for women to overcome the legacies of conflict.

Systematic conflict analysis further calls for addressing the structural obstacles that constrain women's choices to post-conflict decision-making in the discourse of governance not just in the institutions of the 'state', as mainstream governance scholarship establishes but in the domain of mundane lives and less visible sites such as local institutions and households, where governance practices are enacted and negotiated. Mainstream studies on governance are mostly focused on the formal political institutions including, the institutions of militarization and security provisions. Governance from these statist perspectives is associated with patriarchal norms and hegemonic attitudes. Enduring impunity of formal political institutions and security providers add to the statist governance perspectives. Women's voices are often silenced due to enduring impunity in the post-conflict settings. Post-conflict governance reforms are therefore affected by existing hierarchies and gender norms, which undermine the capacity of women to effectively voice their concerns in the implementation of peace agreements or their participation in formal governance spaces. Hierarchy refers to 'obligations within a legitimately unequal distribution of power, roles, and resources, where individuals are embedded as a part of hierarchically organized groups and where power is exercised from above as a means for social coordination.' (N.Licht, Goldschmidt & Schwartz 2007, pp. 659-688)

Women's autonomous access to decision-making in these spaces is also limited due to the prevailing notions that women are victims and lack 'agency' within a conflict situation. Mainstream governance studies therefore leave aside the gendered sites and spaces to understand governance. Governance is mostly viewed using state-centric conceptions of politics and behavior.

Power relations, the regulatory structures and processes that exist in the terrains of family, culture and sexuality are rarely the focus of post-conflict governance reforms and policies. Predominant notions of masculinity and gender-specific spaces govern the regulatory processes in these institutions. Hegemonic nationalist regimes reinforce gender-specific spaces (for instance, gender-specific programs of reintegrating former rebels) through programs structured towards post-conflict governance and security. Post-conflict governance processes have to include both short-term and long-term goals of reintegration and provision of human security. However, women-specific alternatives rarely figure in post-conflict governance processes and reforms. Transitional processes in conflict-affected societies are often male centered and exclude a wide range of issues that are in the interest of local women in specific cultural contexts. In post-war Sri Lanka, as scholars argue, women have been forced to conform to 'gendered ethnocultural ideals of two contesting and contradictory ethnonationalist ideologies.' (Smith 2011) In places like

Afghanistan or even India women peace-builders are caught between the rising tide of extremism in their communities and the constraints placed upon them by counterinsurgency policies.

Governance reforms in post-conflict contexts as this paper argues therefore need to involve restructuring of such institutions tied to patriarchy, regulation of human bodies, particularly women's, and militarized masculinity. (Lahai and Lyons 2016) Human bodies become sites of contestation, intense governmental regulation and geopolitical territorialization as Sara Smith argues (Smith 2011). We therefore look at the transitions in conflict-affected societies, the processes of hegemonic nation-state-making that subsume gendered spaces, the 'local' and sub-regional nations in India's northeast.

### **State-making and Post-conflict Setting**

State making in the Indian sub-continent in 1947 led to the imposition of firm militarized control of India's northeast. This region was excluded from neocolonial political processes and was thus given a marginal standing in terms of nation-state building. Distribution of power and governance structures in these regions created asymmetries. Internal political boundaries were drawn to represent repressive 'gender regimes' where the distribution of power was centered on patriarchal notions of the nation-state. Conscious attempts were made to redefine distinctive group identities. Governance structures in these border zones further reinforced power asymmetries, more particularly buttressing women's exclusion from the project of militarized masculinization, the hegemonic nation-state building projects.<sup>4</sup> Postcolonial power divisions in India's northeast perhaps weightily took account of the 'particularistic' cultural symbols and discrete identities while leaving aside the construction of women as independent political actors in the post-colonial national projects. These processes unleashed intense forms of resistance in the form of insurgent violence. Politics of defiance created securitized governance structures and militarized zones. There was a growing tendency to create territorial spaces. Yet women rarely figured in the creation of these spaces. Women participated in marginal ways to voice resistance and the patriarchal notions of a sub-national identity within the militarized structures of governance. Post-conflict they failed to carve a space to defend the sub-national identity. In reality, women's voices became less visible, hidden or silenced in many ways in the post-conflict settings in India's northeast.

Historically, Northeast India emerged as a political and geo-strategic construct. Northeast appeared as a territorial unit of 'the Northeast frontier region' as colonial administrators note. A stable frontier policy was necessary and premised on grounds of colonial expansion and the opening of trade routes that traversed this region. Contemporary debates on locating Northeast India therefore highlight the intimate relationship between imperial policies, practices and the new patterns of relationships that are being recreated. The region experiences continuous challenges of political integration of indigenous ethnic minorities, social processes and integration of local polities into trans-national networks of political and social ties, along with strategic security interactions. The region grapples with the problems of local incapacities, conflicts and internal security. While the frontier region's geographical position and unexplored resources offer opportunities for informal diplomacy, continued problems of communal

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars have cautioned that modern states have a tendency to subsume multiple identities and nations and posit themselves as 'nation-states.' See Ommen, T.K. *Citizenship and National Identity*, Sage, 1997.



fighting, easy availability of illegal weapons, women trafficking and enfeebling criminal justice system, illegal trade and extortion, pose considerable constraints on integration, sustainable development and governance.

From 1979 to 1985 Assam witnessed a turbulent phase of ethnic mobilization and violence on the issue of detection, disenfranchisement and deportation of undocumented migrants from the neighboring areas of Bangladesh. Ethnic grievances of tribal ethnic minority groups found expression in the form of agitations and movements demanding greater autonomy or statehood within and outside the Indian union. Assam was engulfed in violent nationalism led by the United Liberation Front of Assam from late 1970s, seeking independence of Assam from India since ULFA did not believe in the constitutional laws of the country. The movement went through various phases of political mobilization and by 1990s it turned to extreme forms of violence including civilian deaths and destruction of public properties which ultimately led to loss of support and sympathy that the organization earned during the initial years of mobilization.<sup>5</sup> Decades long violence and counter-violence by the Indian security forces marred normal political functioning, civilian peace and shattered the political economy of Assam.

Ethnically motivated insurgent violence that destabilized internal peace for decades in India's northeast considerably declined post 1990s. Government records and vernacular newspaper reports suggest that some of the most intensive periods of insurgency were in 1990s when the ULFA, Bodo and Karbi militants in Assam and many other insurgent groups in the rest of the northeastern states in India were highly proactive. Declining popular support, organizational weaknesses, counterinsurgency campaigns altogether played an important role towards relative decline of high intensity ethnic insurgent violence in these states. The South Asia Terrorism Portal recorded that there are active small-scale insurgencies in India's northeast but overall, there has been a sustained decline of fatalities in insurgency-related violence between 2010 to 2012.<sup>6</sup> Despite significant decline, there have been only a handful of cases where peace talks have been initiated between the government and the insurgents. Internal factions within insurgencies have added to mounting costs of negotiating peace in India's northeast.

An overview of the peace process of ULFA insurgency reveals that formal peace initiatives started with the involvement of civil society members, such as academics, journalists and activists from September 2005 onwards. The Peoples' Consultative Group (PCG), an eleven-member civil society delegation formally expressed their willingness to act as mediators for peace talks. Between October 2005 and June 2006 several rounds of talks were held between ULFA and the state executives. The talks ended without an outcome and PCG finally withdrew from the negotiations. The debacle led to resumption of hostilities. Loss of support from Bangladesh and joint counterinsurgency operations with the Bhutanese security forces finally led to the arrest of top ULFA leaders in 2009. This was followed by the ceasefire agreement between 28 Battalion of the ULFA and other units and the government of Assam. The peace talks that were held by pro-negotiation section of ULFA and the state involved a process, which included hardliner strategies, coercion, surrender and arrests, and bargaining with the ULFA leadership.

<sup>5</sup> Hrishikeshan, K, Assam's Agony: The ULFA & Obstacles to Conflict Resolution, Available at: <https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/article2.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/index.html>

In August 2011, the pro-talk faction of the ULFA led by Arabinda Rajkhowa submitted a 12-point charter of demand to the Government of India to initiate the peace negotiations. The demands included a) A discussion on “grounds for ULFA-PTF’s struggle and their genuineness”, b) Status report on missing ULFA leaders and cadres, c) Constitutional and political arrangements and reforms, protection of the identity and material resources of the local indigenous population of Assam, d) Financial and economic arrangements, e) Settlement of all royalties on mines/minerals including oil on a retrospective compensatory basis and rights of independent use for a sustainable economic development in future, f) Illegal migration-its effect/impact and required remedies including sealing of international borders, river patrolling, development of a native force to man the borders, g) Ethnic issues-problems and constitutional restructuring including settlement of border disputes and removal of encroachment, h) Education and health-reforms as required to preserve the identity of the people of Assam and benefits, agricultural and rural development, i) Land and natural resources-including right of natives to the land, flood control and management, industrial growth, development of infrastructure, removal of transport bottleneck, development of entrepreneurial skill and efficiency in labour, availability of credit, infusion of capital-leading to industrial take off, j) Right to engage in specific relationship with foreign countries for promotion of mutual trade, commerce, k) Cultural relationship, restoration, protection, preservation and spread of indigenous culture of Assam in all its variety, l) Amnesty, reintegration and rehabilitation of ULFA members and affected people.<sup>7</sup>

In September 2011, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) signed an agreement with the government of Assam and the central government that they would suspend their violent operations.

More than a decade has passed since the peace process was initiated between the ULFA and the state. Women’s participation in the formal peace process and governance reforms has been negligible. It is notable that the Charter of demands adopted provisions for reintegration and rehabilitation of ULFA rebels and the people affected by violence. The proposed demands clearly mention the need for socio-economic reforms, revenue share, and protection of cultural identity and resources of the people of Assam. However, it failed to include women specific provisions for structural changes and reforms aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating women cadres, women informers, wives and family members of those affected by the violent movement. Socio-economic grievances and lack of opportunities was an underlying condition for the support and sustenance of the ULFA rebellion. Women cadres shared similar experiences of resentment against the state and the preconditions, which led to their initial support for the movement. Prevailing gender injustices, gender stereotypes and norms had an important role to play in terms of support provided by women cadres who worked in different non-combatant capacities within the organization. However, the Charter of demands does not provide a framework of long-term socio-economic support or reconstruction, reintegration in the society through legal advice, assistance or rehabilitation in the form of livelihood, inclusive governance, skill development and income generating activities of women in such conditions. Moreover, the Charter does not respond to human security or gender inequalities and hierarchies that prevail within the society. To sum up, women’s voices in the Charter of demands are hidden and silenced.

<sup>7</sup> Available at: [https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/ULFA-PTF\\_charter.htm](https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/ULFA-PTF_charter.htm)

Unlike other insurgencies in South Asia, such as the LTTE, very few women cadres in ULFA were engaged in direct combat. Nevertheless, the intrinsic role and support of women within and outside the organization as 'sympathizers, mobilizers, perpetrators and preventers' needs to be acknowledged. (Bloom 2012) As Moral (2014) argues, "Rarely is the ULFA woman at the centre of action, seldom are there references to her in the press. More importantly, does the outfit itself consider her important stakeholder as possibilities of peace and a resolution of the conflict lurk in the horizon, hazy and distant though they may seem." Yet women's voices are imperative as Moral argues. (2014)

### **Micro-level Testimonies: Learning Through Narratives and Experiences**

Studies show that narratives of violence by participants are rarely 'objective recollections of a recorded past but molded by changing socio-political conditions and moral context of recollecting memories of violence.' (Hughes 2013; Wadugodapitiya 2010) Perpetrators of violence may position themselves as critics and speak as subjects, which often make it difficult to differentiate between victims and perpetrators of insurgent violence. The reliability of micro-level narratives on everyday experiences of violent conflict including, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, have been seriously debated in social science methodology. The use of oral narratives and testimony of ordinary people affected by violent conflict have methodological challenges.

Nevertheless, they are important sources of information as they provide important linkages between the history and the current situation of conflict. These testimonies must be juxtaposed with the larger macro-level literary accounts to understand the dynamics of conflict. To put in Kalyvas's (2006) terms, the real drivers of violent conflict, as some scholars argue lie at the intersection of "master narratives", which involves details of what that conflict is, oppression, treachery, past injustices that one group faces by the other, and the everyday concerns of local elites. Master narratives are rarely enough to prompt large numbers of people to take up arms, much less to continue fighting when the costs of war become apparent. Rather, it is the complex ways in which such narratives intersect with essentially local concerns that can both prompt and sustain violence.

Violence became pervasive, infiltrating into daily life experiences of rural and semi-urban settings in Assam. The most challenging part during the field visit was to find individual interviewees willing to share the experiences during the peak of insurgency. Women respondents revealed how they conceptualized different ways to reconstruct and negotiate with the securitized governance, based on everyday experiences. Some stories reveal linkages between past and current perceptions, attitudes towards *jatijotabadi* (sub-regionalism); *Andolon* (agitation/movement); *Bharat sarkar* (Government of India); CRPF (Indian paramilitary forces) that were predominantly recalled and emphasized in the responses by interview participants. However, there were instances when the participants avoided re-calling and preferred to keep their 'charred' memories at bay. There were still others (for instance, former cadre members) whose narratives were distorted and incoherent.



*Memories, Violence & Lived Experiences: Women's Testimonies from the Field:*

Elisa<sup>8</sup> who was associated with the ULFA insurgent group since late 1990s, as an informer, married to an ULFA leader, narrated her story of joining the group, counterinsurgency operation in Bhutan, arrests, return of rebels, the support of ceasefire, peace talks and the challenges of socio-economic inclusion into the larger Assamese society. Elisa narrated how she was linked to the organization through ULFA cadres who were provided shelters in her village, which served as the hub of ULFA activities way back, during the peak of ULFA militancy in 1990s. Elisa recollected how she spent her days in the ULFA camps in Bhutan along with other women cadres until Operation All Clear in 2004.<sup>9</sup> Elisa, originally a resident of Sadiya, was a college student in Dibrugarh in early 1990s. Due to financial difficulties she was desperately in search of a job and therefore studies were kept aside. On being asked about her individual motivation to support ULFA she narrated that in late 1980s and early 1990s ULFA cadres used to regularly visit her native village in Sadiya to conduct meetings with the villagers for mobilization and recruitment of cadres. Elisa recollected how along with her husband Antu Chaudang, a surrendered ULFA cadre, she lived in the ULFA camps in Bhutan until Operation All Clear. She was arrested in the Bhutan operation in December 2004. Since then, she has been facing legal charges. Further, her story of return to her family reveals that Elisa's record as an active supporter of the banned insurgent organization, prevented her from constructive reintegration into the society. Elisa narrated how like other women cadres and returnees were denied financial assistance from micro-credit financial institutions when they wanted to start small-scale business activities for livelihood. Elisa's views on the *sangathan* (the rebel organization) and the current process of negotiation among the leaders and the state authorities reveal the unequal power relations and the vertical chain of command that ULFA as an organization follows. Ironically, the former female members, including Elisa, have not challenged the chain of command. Like other accounts, as we will discuss next, Elisa's story reveals exclusionary, hierarchical and a male dominated peace negotiation process.

Another woman cadre, Uma, originally a resident from Sadiya in Upper Assam belonged to a family dependent on subsistence farming. She joined ULFA in late 1990s. She was arrested in 2004 and kept in the designated camp in Kakopathar for rehabilitation. Uma's participation and role as she narrated, was a mix of personal victimization, socio-economic grievances and ideological motivation represented in her role as an active supporter, partisan or a perpetrator of violent anti-state insurgent actions during the peak of ULFA insurgency. Uma was skeptical about the rehabilitation and reintegration process. She belonged to a poor socio-economic background and this was the primary reason why she joined the movement. She shared ambiguous feelings about the movement and her future of reintegration and constructive peace as a returnee. Uma expressed,

*We are under trial and stuck in the camp. The government promised Rs 2,500 a month as a stipend, which is also not very regular. We cannot go out to work because our cases are pending in the courts. We miss our family but I cannot visit my village. I get an impression that there is a certain level of discomfort not only amongst the relatives and neighbors but my own parents who share a sense of helplessness, regret, frustration and anger.<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> The real names of the interview participants have been kept confidential.

<sup>9</sup> I had the opportunity to personally meet Elisa on different occasions in 2014, 2016 and again in 2018 in the district of Tinsukia (Assam).

<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted in Tinsukia district, Assam. December 2014.

Uma's story of return reflected challenges and defiance as rebels like her tried to reconstruct their everyday lives.

Dakhina, one of my interview participants, the only survivor of a family that was massacred in 1990s insurgent violence, began in a circuitous way to describe the local conditions of the village in Upper Assam where she grew up: "*More than 80 percent of the villagers are dependent on rice cultivation. Tea is locally grown but at a small scale. I went to a local school, which is in a dilapidated condition. I dropped out of school at a very young age due to family compulsions.*"<sup>11</sup> She paused for a moment. Ensuing another round of careful investigation about the purpose of my visit and verification about my acquaintance with the local assistant, Dakhina showed finally her willingness to narrate her experiences of violence in the village. She began to speak about the rivalry between insurgent groups in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Assam, which she believed precipitated the killings and violence under mysterious circumstances in the village. She recounted the killing of her entire family in the village in September 1999. Dakhina, a worker at a primary health centre now in her mid-40s was married and lived with her husband and two children at the renovated house of her parents:

*People in our village were sandwiched between the state forces and rival groups. Anybody who is suspected would be caught in the wee hours of the day and tortured. Retaliatory killings took place by unidentified men and people were caught in between. On the night of the incident in September 1999, villagers heard gunshots and movement of vehicles before the incident took place. I came to know about the incident a day later. Nothing was left behind. There were inquiries, police knows who was behind the killings but the culprit is left scot-free. As compensation and as a mark of the government declared a weaving center at the location. The political leader came and inaugurated this room [she points to a room made of bricks and plaster] that you can see right in front of my house. Only the inaugural ceremony took place, nothing happened after that. The room is now left deserted.*<sup>12</sup>

Manjula, a young energetic primary school teacher in her mid-40s sat in the front yard of her village house in Sibsagar district in Upper Assam.<sup>13</sup> She disclosed her experiences of insurgent violence of late 1990s in Assam. Manjula reflected on 'state' perpetrated violence, torture and transgression of individual and collective rights of village residents during the peak of the conflict and afterwards.<sup>14</sup> Manjula's narration was the reflection of her subjective experiences, which engulfed the interiors of her village. In lucid and methodical terms, Manjula expressed,

*My personal encounters with violent struggle begin at home when we faced oppressive search operations, when we witnessed the affliction of physical harm on my father, uncles and village elders. As a teenager we woke up to the sounds of people marching in the graveled streets of our village, sounds comparable to 'military' footsteps. We heard screams of men and women in pain. Those voices were suppressed, muted and silenced in everyday chores, yet they left a deep impact, an inner resistance, conflict,*

<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted in Sibsagar district in April 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted in Sibsagar district in April 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Real name changed to maintain confidentiality.

<sup>14</sup> Mahmora is a revenue circle, consisting of nearly 118 villages, located in the district of Sibsagar in Assam.

*a sense of assault within. Military check posts are a feature of our mundane lives. Routine checks by military personnel continue and so the invisible war continues.*<sup>15</sup>

Her story unfolded the disquieting experiences of threat and brutal violence perpetrated by insurgents and state forces. What immensely caught attention was the powerful articulation of her experiences of routine life amidst violence.

The above testimonies of retaliatory killings that were prevalent in the last few decades of ULFA insurgency display the widening internal rivalries between the state-supported surrendered ULFA cadres and the active members of the group. At the same time they indicate the preponderance of the nation-state project where the strategy is survival through control and repressive power against internal insecurities. Human rights groups criticized these incidents that perhaps expedited the setting up of inquiry commissions in some cases. However, the effects are pervasive and profound. Vengeance killings had a decisive impact on mundane lives of civilians caught in the crossfires in the insurgent zones. One can discern from the narratives, a sense of not just resentment and silence but also possibilities of coping and resuming mundane activities in the midst of fear and violence. How do survivors or victims like Manjula negotiate their spaces with the perpetrators: counter-insurgency state actors on the one hand and former insurgents on the other? It is also important to note that the process of peace negotiations does not explicitly refer to the reintegration of women returnees and those affected by violence, as some of the narratives clearly suggest. Securing socio-economic rights and capability of women affected by war is key to constructive peace and democratic governance reforms. In the absence of such provisions in the peace accords, such as the Charter of demands in the pro-ULFA negotiations, transitional justice and constructive peace remains to become a reality. The women participants who were interviewed were either dependents or joined the organization as porters or informers. They were mobilized and equally supported the activities of the organization like their male counterparts. Likewise they equally put their lives at risk. However, what was intriguing was that they both failed to challenge the male dominated negotiating space and some even accepted gender positioning as a prevailing norm because for them the larger goal was a sense of belongingness to the *sangathan*, or to find collective security by being a part of the memory making within the organization.. When asked about the role in the organization as a combatant one of the former women cadres replied,

*I entered the sangathan as a cadre and an informer. I would collect local newspapers and from interior villages in Kakopathar to send information. In 2005, an army officer arrested me. We called him 'mad officer'. I was taken to Kakopathar army camp, interrogated and assaulted. I categorically asked them not to touch my body and asked for lady constables from the Assam police. They were finally brought around 5 pm. Next day I was taken to Kakopathar police station and then to Doomdoma around 8 am. I was interrogated for 4-5 days and then shifted to Tinsukia police station. Subsequently, I was taken for investigation to Guwahati and kept in Kahilipara police headquarters where I stayed for about 15-16 days. The interrogation part was a mental harassment for me. I faced physical torture by a senior rank lady police officer about which I*

<sup>15</sup> Mahmora is a revenue circle, consisting of nearly 118 villages, located in the district of Sivasagar in Assam.

*reported to the officer-in-charge in the headquarters. I was again brought back to Kakopathar. In December 2005 I was released on bail. I decided not to come home because of fear or torture that my family would face. I went to our leader and resumed my activities until 2008 when the 28th Battalion decided to enter into ceasefire with the government of India. I joined the ceasefire group.*

On being asked about her role in the ongoing peace process, she replied, “All major operations were carried out by our leaders. The leaders of the pro-talk ceasefire groups attend the meetings with the government. They have a better understanding of the politics.”

### **Final Thoughts**

Post-conflict transitions involve long term and continuous process of building institutions that are inclusive and participatory. Gendered governance is a step in this direction that may lead to constructive peace. Governance from this perspective is not limited to participation in formal political spaces or public institutions through affirmative action policies or quotas but includes wide-ranging reforms that would shape the political outcomes in the conflict-affected societies through collective mobilization, change in attitudes and perceptions about gender roles during wartime, peace agreements and social change. Transitional peace and governance in conflict settings therefore calls for gender-sensitive outcomes where combatant women, victims and supporters can participate and exercise agency.

Unlike other insurgencies in South Asia, such as the LTTE, very few women cadres in ULFA were engaged in direct combat. Nevertheless, the narratives of former women rebels and active supporters as the discussions in the paper revealed are important as they enable us to understand how these women negotiate with their struggle for reconstruction of separate spaces in the post-conflict reforms. Women's unheard voices and the silences around them in ULFA as combatants, nurses, informers, wives of rebels and as non-combatants, reflects how their actions, their motivation, roles and participation determined not only the character of the insurgencies but also the aftermath of violence in terms of peace making, most importantly the impact of violent insurgencies and the post-insurgency challenges of rebels being accepted and socio-economically reintegrated into the societies.

Yet, women's unheard voices and the silences around them in ULFA as many other insurgent organizations in South Asia reflects how their actions, their motivation, roles and participation determined not only the character of the insurgencies but also the aftermath, most importantly in post-conflict integration in peace and governance structures. The above testimonies were crucial in constructing the perceptions of violence, resistance and the mundane in conflict zones during armed insurgency in Assam.

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