

## Of Processes, Peace Accords and Women in Northeast India

Roshmi Goswami

### Abstract

This paper, premised on the argument that peace building at any given point of time cannot be an apolitical agenda provides a bird's eye view of the glaring gaps in the women's question both by the essentially patriarchal transactional peace processes as well as by the women themselves in the Northeast region of India. It further attempts to surface the fault lines of the political expediency 'settlement' and 'transactional' approach and its repercussions in the long term. Looking at the recent 'peace settlements' the paper ends with a series of questions on meaning and value of a so called 'peace' settlement within a political context where democratic rights and constitutional guarantees are violated with impunity and the stand that women peace builders from India's Northeast take at this critical moment of time.

### Author Profiles

**Roshmi Goswami** is a feminist human rights activist and independent researcher known for her pioneering work on women in conflict situations. She is Co-Chair South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR). She is also associated with several organisations including Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights and Urgent Action Fund-Asia Pacific as board member; National Alliance for Women as founding member and the Northeast Network as co-founder. Dr. Goswami is presently involved in cross-regional research on Gender and Violent Extremism. She is based in Shillong, Meghalaya.

## Of Processes, Peace Accords and Women in Northeast India

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The politically restive and conflict affected Northeast (NE) region of India sharing borders with Bangladesh, Tibet, Myanmar and Bhutan and joined to the rest of the country by a 22 km strip of land called the ‘chicken’s neck’ provides an interesting site of a range of peace processes, agreements and formal Peace Accords. This can be used among other things to analyze the larger dynamics of peace building and peace negotiations. While the impact of the decades of protracted and often low intensity warfare in the region has been especially severe on women and girls, the role that women from the region have played in peace building and conflict resolution has also been much discussed, lauded and at times perhaps a little over rated. The question that still remains though is whether the ‘women question’ featured or features in any of the signed or prospective peace agreements. If so, how and if not, why?

This paper, premised on the argument that peace building at any given point of time cannot be an apolitical agenda provides a bird’s eye view of the glaring gaps in the ‘women question’ both by the essentially patriarchal transactional peace processes as well as by the women in the region. It further attempts to surface the fault lines of the political expediency ‘settlement’ and ‘transactional’ approach and its repercussions in the long term. By also looking at the recently signed Bodo Peace Accord the paper raises and ends with a series of questions on what it means and what is the value of a so called ‘peace’ settlement within a political context where democratic rights and constitutional guarantees are being violated on a daily basis with impunity, where the culture of dissent, dialogue and discussion has been obliterated and a questioning civil society is black listed and witch-hunted? What stand have the women peace builders from Northeast India taken or can they take at this critical moment of time? Is it to support a peace deal at any cost or is there a need to call for peace with justice?

Contrary to the expectations of policy makers and parties to a conflict, researchers and critics point out that a peace accord is not necessarily the endpoint of a conflict whereby a conflict is permanently resolved (Rajagopalan 2008). As Rajagopalan argues peace accords are but ‘milestones’ that could be a minimalist ceasefire or a mini constitution but more importantly must emanate out of a peace process. Finally, the success of any accord or agreement is determined by how open it is to an ongoing process of peace building and reconciliation and on how inclusive and participatory a process has been. In the last two decades the idea of peace itself, its conceptualization and articulation has seen a gradual change. The earlier focus was almost entirely on the cessation of hostilities and the renewal of formal politics as the way of governance. As such peace processes were essentially militaristic approaches focused on ceasefires, demobilization etc. But as Radhika Coomarswamy points out “today it is recognized that peace is something far more than the “absence of violence.” Peace has increasingly meant an inclusive political process, a commitment to human rights in the post war period and an attempt to deal with issues of justice and reconciliation” (Coomarswamy 2015).

The contribution of women’s peace activism globally to this changed perspective cannot be overestimated. October 2020 would mark two decades of the historic adoption of UNSCR 1325

hailed as a landmark in the understanding of peace building that endorses a political recognition of the relevance and centrality of women and gender to peace and security. Regrettably though over the span of twenty years much of the feminist vision and transformative potential of the core message of UNSCR 1325 i.e., “women build peace” has got progressively diluted and in some areas gone totally missing. Reviews of different peace processes over a period showed that the thrust continued to be on political arrangements and conflict management with the focus on finding ways to contain the conflict and somehow manage its fallout rather than the more difficult approach of conflict transformation advocated by Lederach (2003) and Galtung (1969). Lederach’s idea of conflict transformation aims at creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice and entail a prolonged and dedicated period of finding ways of maximizing the potential for positive and substantive change. This understanding thus moves the static “end state” peace building approach to that of peace work being characterized by intentional efforts to address contentious issues, and increase understanding, equality and respect in relationships (Lederach 2003). For Galtung (1969), peace building is integrally connected to addressing structural violence or indirect violence. Absence or negation of structural violence is what Galtung defines as positive peace, differentiating it from what he calls negative peace which is the absence of personal or direct violence.

The 2015 High Level Global Review to mark the 15-year anniversary of UNSCR 1325 was an important moment for critical reflection and of revisiting the ‘women build peace’ core and trajectory. At that time, some of the emerging challenges to women as peace builders were already quite visible, the most pronounced being increased militarization and the complexities of rising violent extremism. Today, five years later the context has changed more than ever before. Across the world we see a dismantling of democracies and the ascendancy of fascist forces as we enter into what can be best described as a state of undeclared ‘global emergency’.<sup>1</sup> More alarming is that these forces have joined hands across continents and across countries to work out political arrangements that reinforce one another. All peace deals made in today’s political scenario then, no matter how local the context, are not untouched or uninformed by this global development.

The Northeast region of India, infamous for protracted armed conflicts spanning several decades has witnessed a series of peace processes and peace deals or arrangements since 1986 when the Mizo Peace Accord was signed. The conflicts in the region as diverse as the region itself have ranged from political and civil struggles for self-determination, aggrieved groups contending for a greater or fairer share of power or stake in the system, to inter-ethnic conflicts over fractured identities or scarce and dwindling resources (Goswami 2014). Questions of identity and ethnicity have been central and added layers of complexities both within the parameters of the conflicts as well as in the various ‘peace arrangements’ (Goswami 2019). In fact, over the decades new demands and new groups have emerged, but simultaneously civil society groups like the Human Rights Alert, Women in Governance (WIN-G), the Naga Hohos, the Naga Mothers Association and other women’s groups plus church bodies have also been integrally involved either on issues of human rights violations or in the peace processes itself. The peace processes and in many instances the peace deals have simply been short term political arrangements.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Wolff, The Lure of Fascism, *Aeon*, April 14, 2020; Chris Maisano, The ‘Crisis of Democracy’ Around the World Is a Crisis of the Working Class, *The Jacobin*, March 30, 2020; Kamalakar Duvvuru, Is India displaying signs of neo-fascism?, *Countercurrents*, July 29, 2019, Posted July 31, 2019 by Eds - MRonline; Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, September 2018.

On the other hand, key stakeholders and actors in the several decades old armed conflict and violence afflicted Northeast of India are well versed with international human rights mechanisms and normative frameworks. Many have not only engaged with the UN bodies but have also tried to use some of the normative standards and guidelines in their negotiations and political positions. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which was adopted by 144 countries including India at the UNGA in 2007, has been of particular interest and point of engagement for the numerous indigenous communities of the region. Resolutions have been passed by civil society forums as well as by more formal governance structures for the implementation of the UNDRIP recommendations. For instance, in March 2019, the Mizoram Assembly cutting across party lines decided to adopt a private member resolution which sought implementation of UNDRIP by the union government. This however has not been the case with women specific resolutions like UNSCR 1325 or the various concluding observations/ recommendations made by the CEDAW Committee.

On January 27, 2020 the historic Bodo Peace Accord was signed with much fanfare. Bringing an end to three decades of very violent militancy, the new Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Accord as it is called was signed by the Government of India with all the rebel factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), and a civil society body, United Bodo People's Organisation (UBPO). Third in the line of peace accords after 1993 and 2003,<sup>2</sup> the BTR Accord is being acclaimed as unique for bringing all the insurgent groups of a particular area together to put in their signatures and make a joint commitment to end violence. Inclusion of the frontline student organisation – the All Bodo Students Union as a signatory, in particular is being perceived as significant, given the role students bodies have played and continue to play in the region. On the 7th of February 2020 Prime Minister Narendra Modi flew in to address the celebrations, and announce a lucrative Rs.1500 crore economic package to the Bodo people.

The BTR accord is also striking for the record time and speed with which it was stitched together given its obvious transactional underpinnings. Ranjan Daimary, supremo of the NDFB(R) and a decisive stakeholder (presently serving life term for the serial blasts in Assam in 2008 which killed over 100 people) was released on bail to sign the accord. Following the passing of the controversial Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) despite stiff opposition by a sizable section of the population, the BJP was able to secure a foothold in Assam. Coming in the wake of the August 5, 2019 declaration revoking Article 370 and Article 35A which gave special status and protection of land, settlement and employment to the people of Jammu & Kashmir and the draconian measures to contain protest and dissent, the anxieties around the CAA in Assam were compounded. The anti CAA protests in Assam and in other parts of the country, notably Shaheen Bagh in Delhi (led by Muslim women), that interrogated making religion the basis of granting citizenship, were also met with repressive state measures.

In the context of Assam, the signing of the BTR accord was even more telling given that one of the key factors of the anti CAA protests in Assam was that the Act was seen as a gross violation of the provisions of the Assam Accord 1986. The Assam Accord between the All Assam Students Union and the Government of India had ended a six year long struggle against

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<sup>2</sup> The two earlier Bodo agreements are the 1993 Bodoland Autonomous Council Accord and the 2003 deal with the rebel Bodo Liberation Tigers.

the inclusion of 'illegal immigrants' in the voters list in Assam and against syphoning off mineral and other resources from the state without a fair payment of royalties and revenue. The Government of India seemed to be retracting on earlier commitment while making new promises in what appeared to be a tearing hurry!

During this period of protests across the country, women, old and young, have been the most visible face and voice of the resistance against repression, undemocratic and discriminatory policies. It is women who mostly spoke truth to power and displayed the courage to question and challenge what they experienced as the authoritarian predilections of the state. Over the years women of Northeast India have also been a prominent voice and face in the political struggles of the different communities of the region including in the Bodo peoples struggles. Bodo women under different banners but more prominently under the aegis of the Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF) formed in 1992 have fought alongside the men for greater autonomy, political self determination and economic justice. Given the especially negative impact of the conflict on the lives of women and impunity provided to state violators under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958<sup>3</sup> the Bodo Women's Justice Forum has been particularly proactive in raising critical issues of human rights violations. So effective have been their ability to mobilize and draw attention including at the International level that they began to be seen as a threat and have had to bear the backlash. Golapi Basumatary the general secretary of the organization and a well known and respected human rights activist not just in the Bodo areas but the state of Assam, was gunned down. Till date the assailants remain unidentified and thereby have not been apprehended. Similarly, Anjali Daimary the president and founder of BWJF who represented the Bodo tribe for the first time at the UN Working Group on Indigenous Population (UNWGIP) in Geneva, was arrested under TADA in 1993 and only acquitted in 2005.

Indeed, women of the Northeast region have been widely lauded for their roles in peace building and in ensuring stability, peace and reconciliation between warring groups. Naga women's groups, the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) in particular are known for the different roles they have played and for having built a broad-based peace constituency through their tireless efforts (Manchanda 2005). In 2001 they were successful in expanding the ceasefire ground rules between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isaak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) to protect civilians from armed groups and also work towards sustaining the ceasefire. Other roles include taking the initiative to mobilize reconciliation between the different factions, stop fratricidal killings, push for broadening the official talks making it more inclusive (Manchanda 2005). And as the Naga Peace process has had the active involvement of civil society under the aegis of the Naga Hoho, the women themselves have always also felt very much part of the peace process, and additionally because the leaders recognized them as an important constituency and invited them to the critical Bangkok consultations in 2002 and 2003. But the Naga peace process has been long drawn and protracted and one that has put the community in what could be best

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<sup>3</sup> The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA) which was first used in 1960 to curb the Naga struggle as a temporary measure has remained in operation in different parts of the region for over six decades. The Act provides total protection and statutory immunity to the security forces from arrest and criminal prosecution. The Act grants extraordinary powers to any military officer, including any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer and any other person of equivalent rank in the military forces, to use lethal force if deemed necessary, arrest without a warrant using such force as may be necessary including killing, and again without a warrant to enter and search any premises on mere suspicion.

described as a permanent state of impermanence (Goswami 2019). Women especially have had to confront a couple of painful but hard-hitting realities that raised a disquiet about their status and legitimacy in Naga society notwithstanding the crucial role they have played in the Naga National Movement. Naga women have been involved in a long struggle for political representation which came to a major confrontation in January 2017 during the civic elections when several tribal bodies called for boycott of the elections if women were given reservations. (Goswami 2019).

Akin to the publicity around the Bodo Peace Accord, in August 2015 barely over a year of having been in office Prime Minister Narendra Modi led a team of Indian officials in characteristic fast track mode to sign what was referred to as a landmark peace accord. It was with the NSCN-IM in New Delhi and it created euphoria all around. This was fourth in a series of agreements reached with the Nagas.<sup>4</sup> The PM himself referred to it as a 'new beginning' while the security and defense establishments hailed it as a significant step closer towards resolving one of the country's longest-running internal conflicts. But right from the start although the Modi government talked about economic transformation, the intent to develop and enhance infrastructure and a pledge to restore the 'pride and prestige' of the Nagas the accord referred to as the Naga Framework Agreement (NFA) remained shrouded in secrecy. There was no clarity on what it actually contained nor on the controversial but key demand of the creation of a sovereign Naga territory that includes Naga-inhabited parts of neighboring states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh as well as a portion of Burma across the international border. Apart from many of the unresolved contentious issues and coming at a time of enormous fragmentation among the various Naga tribes, the Naga peace process needed delicate, astute and patient handling by a new government. The fact that a quick fix mode would ultimately fail was always a possibility. Building trust on both sides has been an excruciatingly laborious process so it is highly likely that for the politically cautious leadership of the NSCN-IM the August 5, 2019 clampdown and abrogation of Article 370 and 35A in Jammu and Kashmir with its accompanying hyper nationalistic rhetoric did raise reservations about the Government of India's intent and trustworthiness. By October 2019 the fragile Naga peace process hit a major roadblock and at present is in a state of impasse.

The highly patriarchal structure of peace processes involves the World over, an endless series of negotiations on power sharing with new alliances being forged precisely for that. Consequently, even in Assam, within less than a month of the hastily stitched together Bodo Peace Accord, a decisive signatory of the Accord and a present ally of the ruling party began to express dissatisfaction with the terms of the Accord while the leader of the student organisation rose in stature and morphed into a new political leader. Women hardly ever find a place in these new power sharing arrangements and despite the role of Bodo women in the long years of struggle women have been more or less invisible in these new opportunistic arrangements. Taking an illustrative page from the Nepal peace process, the general pattern is that women are actively involved at a less formal level but finally excluded from formal peacemaking by the leadership of political parties involved in peace talks (Upadhyay 2011). It is not surprising therefore that Naga women too remained ignorant of the contents of the highly secretive framework agreement.

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<sup>4</sup> Three accords were signed with Naga rebel groups in 1949, 1960 and 1975. 1949 promised a measure of autonomy, 1960 gave statehood, 1975 - the Shillong Accord signed with the Naga National Council (who was simply mentioned as 'underground organizations') was a three point agreement as a step towards final resolution of the conflict.

Likewise, during the Mizo independence movement of the 1960s aimed at establishing a sovereign Christian nation for the Mizos, women had responded to the Mizo National Front's (MNF) call for Zolenna or Freedom for Mizoram, and joined the Mizo resistance movement in large numbers, enrolling in the Mizo National Volunteers (MNV). Although they essentially received training in basic nursing rather than combat, the women by providing food and serving as messengers carrying strategic information were the backbone of the movement (Goswami 2019). Nonetheless, as far as the discourse of the MNF movement and Mizo nationalism was concerned, it was perceived primarily as a resistance organised and led by men while the contribution of women remained sidelined and invisible. While there has been some portrayal of women as victims of sexual violence, to date the contribution of women and their participation has been systematically excluded in the larger discourse of the MNF movement (Goswami 2019). The women question – victim or agent – did not feature at all in the agenda during the peace negotiations with the Indian State or find any reference in the Peace Accord or the Memorandum of Settlement that was signed in 1986 (Goswami 2019). Interestingly, even the women themselves who were integrally involved in the resistance movement seem reconciled to this lack of recognition. Religion has always been a very strong factor in Mizo society and during the conflict years it provided tremendous comfort and support especially to the affected women. Gradually though the Church became an indisputable alternate seat of power and patriarchal control which enjoyed unflinching loyalty of the Mizo women. Apart from the women who lost their men to the resistance many of the MNF women themselves turned to the Church to deal with their disappointments and trauma. Some till date even justify the lack of space for women's political participation by saying work for God is far superior to political work (Goswami 2019).

One of the foundational pillars of the Mizo peace negotiations and the subsequent 1986 Memorandum of Settlement was a commitment to respect and protect customary laws, social and religious practices of the Mizo community.<sup>5</sup> This was a critical pillar too when the state of Nagaland was formed in 1963. Today therefore Mizoram and Nagaland are each permitted by Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution to frame its own laws that align with its customary laws.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately many of the customary laws of both these highly patriarchal communities are extremely gender discriminatory. Among others these deny women land and inheritance rights and a role in decision-making thereby denying women their very personhood.

The Mizo Peace Accord is regarded as one of the most uniquely successful peace agreements of the region. Factors like homogeneity and cohesive of the Mizo community, dynamic and committed leadership and civil society involvement, plus strong Christian values and the traditional Mizo concept of *Tlawngaihna* which is an ancient tribal code of ethics which calls for self-sacrifice, endurance and serving the community without self-aggrandizement are indeed some of the key factors of this success. Mizoram today can be described as a peaceful state with a definite, progressive focus showing extremely positive development indices. But

<sup>5</sup> Article states 'Notwithstanding anything contained in the Constitution, no act of Parliament in respect of (a) Religion or Social practices of the Mizos, (b) Mizo customary law or procedure, (c) Administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Mizo customary law, (d) Ownership and transfer of land, shall apply to the state of Mizoram unless the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram by a resolution so decides.'

<sup>6</sup> Article 371(A) of the Constitution states, "Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, no Act of Parliament in respect of religious or social practices of the Nagas, Naga customary law and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, ownership and transfer of land and its resources, shall apply to the State of Nagaland unless the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland by a resolution so decides."

for the Mizo women the progress has been ambivalent as they have had to fight long and tough battles to change gender discriminatory provisions protected by Mizo customary laws. And under the leadership and aegis of the Mizo Hmeichhia Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) Mizo women have had some degree of success in addressing issues of inheritance and property rights. Under Mizo customary laws a Mizo man could divorce his wife by simply uttering the words *Ka Mei Che* (I divorce you) and which could be done even at the slightest expression of disagreement by the wife. A divorced woman had to immediately leave her marital home and all her belongings even if everything was jointly acquired by both wife and husband. She also had no right to her children, sometimes not even visitation rights. The MHIP's concerted efforts resulted in this being changed first with the Mizoram Divorce Ordinance (MDO) in 2008, which was subsequently adopted as the Mizo Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance Act in 2014 (Goswami 2019).

On the question of political participation, Mizo women point out that the pre Peace Accord and statehood situation was perhaps far more favorable to women as both during the District Council and Union Territory period there were nominated seats and in one out of three nominated seats women had the chance to participate in political decision making and women were in fact nominated for these seats. After attaining statehood, however, the Mizoram State Legislature did away with this provision. So, 27 years after the attainment of statehood there have been just two women legislators. The Bodo Territorial Region Council on the other hand is far more inclusive for it proposes that there will be six nominated members including two women members and two from unrepresented communities. Whether that in itself will ensure justice for women is of course another matter.

The Naga women's struggle for a political voice and representation has been far more complex and visceral. Naga community unlike the Mizos are not governed by a homogeneous body of customary laws but are plural in nature, differing from tribe to tribe and village to village. Very often though the male led Naga tribal bodies interpret the customary laws uniformly aimed at denying women their rights especially around inheritance and land ownership. During the long period of the Naga ceasefire the Naga Mothers Association expanded its activism on peace to question deeper structural issues of violence against women and advocate for women's more substantive engagement in state building. Linking increased violence against women in Naga society to women's lack of socio economic rights within their own communities, the NMA's activism reaffirms ongoing feminist analysis that physical violence experienced by women during wars and conflicts are closely linked to their status and rights including socio economic rights during peace times. And that violence is but a continuum enabled by hierarchical social arrangements in both the public and the private spheres. Hence in the reconceptualization of justice the feminist political economy approach emphasize the need to give primacy to women's lived experiences. (True 2014).

As the protracted Naga Peace negotiations appeared to be reaching its final stage and the community looked to charting out a new road map for the future, the women's struggle for political<sup>7</sup> and economic participation, for power and resource sharing, acquired critical significance (Goswami 2019). November 2016 marked a moment that opened up a new chapter

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<sup>7</sup> Nagaland is the only state in the country that has never had a woman MLA. While every village and tribe has its own women's wing, there are no women on the village council and the apex decision-making body of Naga tribes, the Naga Hoho, too has no women's representatives.



for Naga women's activism on political participation. On a Constitutional amendment in 1992, 33 percent reservation for women was provided for in municipalities. But Nagaland, which passed its Municipal and Town Council Act in 2001, didn't include the provision and held Urban Local Body (ULB) polls in 2004 without providing that mandatory right to women. This was followed by a series of writ petitions and legal proceedings filed by the NMA which resulted in the Nagaland Assembly passing the Nagaland Municipal (First Amendment) Act providing for thirty-three per cent reservation of seats for women in ULB in 2006. But as the NMA urged the government to hold elections with the quotas, the government under pressure from tribal men took recourse through the special Constitutional provisions under Article 371(A) and passed a resolution that reservation for women would be in conflict with customary law. This too was followed by a series of legal proceedings by the NMA who eventually went in appeal to the Supreme Court, where a final order is pending. Meanwhile the Government of Nagaland to 'preempt' an adverse Supreme Court ruling decided to hold the 2017 Municipal Elections and implement 33 percent reservation for women. This was met with huge opposition by Naga men who spearheaded a series of protests. To resolve the conflict attempts were made by civil society organizations and church elders to broker peace and come to a compromise. The women were offered 'nomination' rather than 'reservation' which they turned down. The protests by the opposing men then erupted in arson and violence where two men lost their lives. The women leading the campaign were severely criticized, demonized and eventually isolated as men managed to influence and convince other women as well not to support them and the civic polls were indefinitely postponed (Goswami 2019). In the context of a highly fragmented society and fierce consciousness of one's ethnic identity, in confronting the NMA's challenge the Naga men stood united in their stand. Interestingly too the NMA women's appeal to the NSCNIM leadership for support did not yield any concrete response although they were sympathetic! An appeal for intervention sent to the Central BJP Government who had just signed a peace agreement with the Nagas also drew a blank. It was abundantly clear therefore that both parties to the Naga Peace agreement either conceptualize justice differently or do not believe that justice is important in a post conflict transition for that would entail that affected people have access to political procedures and a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Or perhaps they simply believe that women do not qualify to be the recipients of justice. This only goes to underscore the point that the complexities of justice, inequalities and transitions are especially intractable when it comes to gender.

The critical question though is how do the women themselves view these struggles *vis a vis* the peace processes? Do they see their struggles as a journey of dismantling hierarchies and how then is it different from the NSCNIM's position of 'shared sovereignty' with the GOI for that too is about dismantling hierarchies? How do they then reconcile their lived realities, needs and expectations versus the political negotiations/agreements on peace? In discussions with women leaders, it appears that the women's struggles and the peace processes/agreements are parallel lines that don't necessarily meet. For the Bodo women for instance that the BTR Accord addresses much desired issues such as fairly elaborate power and economic sharing arrangements, a focus on higher education, on protecting and promoting Bodo language and culture plus declaring Bodo language in Devnagri script as an associate official language of Assam are huge gains. Whether women will have a share in the power and economic arrangements is something to be seen in the future. For now, the BTR Accord seems to be a perfect Peace template for the women as well but it could also be a moment of lost opportunities for them. As Chinkin (2009)

opines, notwithstanding the huge challenges, a post conflict moment or societies emerging from conflict can also present a strategic opportunity to bring about transformation in all areas of women's lives including legislative and policy measures to advance women's human rights and political agency. World over evidence goes to show that these post war windows of opportunity for women are but very brief moments and have to be strategically seized.

The Naga situation on the other hand weighed down by the stress and strain of a prolonged wait for peacetimes brings out critical questions for women's struggles in politically contested contexts and transitions. In such contexts can women imagine justice that is outside the patriarchal purview of the 'community good' and how do they balance this need for justice with their socio-political commitments and finally how do they maneuver their multiple and often conflicting identities to achieve this balance?

An answer could perhaps be found in an emerging approach that Gready and Robins present which is that of transformative justice – “shift in focus from the legal to the social and political, and from the state and institutions to communities and every-day concerns” (Gready and Robins, 2014: 340). Elaborating what transformative justice entails and contrasting it with transitional justice, Gready and Robins propose that perhaps a transformative approach is more relevant to address the needs and realities of peace process contexts. It is certainly more relevant to the women because “transformative justice is not the result of a top-down imposition of external legal frameworks or institutional templates, but of a more bottom-up understanding and analysis of the lives and needs of populations” (2014: 340). Transformative justice, in particular in a post-conflict context is therefore of special significance for women and other marginalised communities for in its essence it implies a process of transformation of oppressive hierarchies, systemic and entrenched discriminatory social structures and of the possibility of positive peace (Goswami 2019).

For the 'conflict weary' communities of the Northeast region the offer of peace and economic packages by the seemingly decisive and 'strong' ruling regime can be lucratively attractive. But for the politically and economically interdependent communities of the region a conflict resolution approach that exacerbates fragmentation and divisions and is driven primarily by political upmanship and the desire to consolidate power and control resources is bound to fail and lead to the next cycle of conflict. For the women of the communities involved in their own struggles for gender equality the promise of assured political representation and rights can also be exceedingly enticing. But it is important to draw lessons from the women's struggles in Kashmir.<sup>8</sup> Kashmiri women are very clear that while there are issues of gender inequalities within their society, they cannot continue with their internal struggles without the concomitant commitment to overall democratic processes in the region. They do not desire an authoritarian 'protector' to come to their aid.

For the women of the Northeast at different stages of the conflict-continuum it is important to understand the hidden costs of succumbing to a 'protectionist' patriarchal olive branch. A transformative justice approach would help to keep the focus on changing all that reinforces

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<sup>8</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran, et.al, Interrogating the Normal in Kashmir - A Report, Indian Cultural Forum, 6 March 2020. <https://indianculturalforum.in/2020/03/04/interrogating-the-normal-in-kashmir/>

social and economic hierarchies of power and of the women themselves becoming agents in shaping the new agenda for change through policy and practice. It would above all call for a kind of women's resistance that reimagines itself outside the box of the Northeast 'peripherality' syndrome, and while going beyond the narrow limits of ethnicity, class, religious and political affiliations also connects itself to the larger democratic struggles in the country.

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