

Women, Peace, and Security in Northeast India **Ashild Kolås (Ed.)**

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Reviewer Profile

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2019 and 2020 have been turbulent years in India's recent history. Civil society protests erupted against the new Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019¹ and expanded to cities and small towns in almost all the states in the country. The protests took on the form of a nation-wide social movement before their spread was halted by the Covid 19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown. The highpoint of these protests were the participation and leadership of women, and especially women from ordinary walks of life, many of who had never before participated in political protests. It is therefore an opportune time to reflect on this work titled *Women, Peace, and Security in Northeast India*, edited by Ashild Kolås, a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) – which concerns women leaders in one of India's most securitized regions. By focusing attention on the women involved in peace-negotiations in post-conflict societies, this book grants recognition, although delayed, to many of these front-runners who have hitherto been denied space in academic literature.

Previous works on peace and conflict have covered the historical context of conflict as well as the factors accounting for the successes and failures of peace accords in India's Northeast. For example, in a comprehensive analysis of 13 peace accords between the government and different militia groups in Northeast India, Rajagopalan observes that the major obstacles to implementation of peace accords have been the unviability of the terms of the accords, existing demographics, which balances cultural provisions in the accords in favor of one over other groups, and the often problematic route to full disarmament (2008: 29-32). Yet, many such works remain silent about the role of women. We have noted the same kind of elision in studies of nationalist struggles, where the struggles specific to women are always kept subservient to the larger goal of nationalism, leading scholars to critically comment on the male perspective in such studies of nationalism, 'where the condition of women gets "bettered" as a by-product, but what's the difference' (Spivak 1987: 217). Although women have been active participants in both peace talks and in protest or rebel movements, they are routinely denied visibility or agency, their roles and actions seen as secondary or supplementary to those of men, and their specific demands forgotten or subsumed within the larger cause.

The objective of this book is to correct this lacuna in the existing literature. The second objective of this book, as Kolås poses in the Introduction, is to see whether institutional participation of women in post-conflict societies can lead to their social empowerment in Northeast India. This is an old question which assumes fresh significance in the context of Northeast India, where stereotypical assumptions abound about the relatively higher position of women, or greater gender parity, compared to the rest of India. As the contributors to this volume show, the idea

¹ Under the Citizenship Act, 1955 of India, one of the requirements for citizenship by naturalisation is that the applicant must have resided in India during the last 12 months, as well as for 11 of the previous 14 years. The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, relaxes the second requirement from 11 years to 6 years as a specific condition for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, thus facilitating their citizenship application. This Act notably excludes Muslim immigrants. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/citizenship-amendment-bill-2019-parliament-winter-session-nrc-6122846/> (Accessed 22 July 2020)

that women in this conflict-ridden part of the country are somehow better off, is a myth, as these women perpetually confront unequal and patriarchal power structures in their roles as rebels, politicians, activists, or peace-brokers, and it is only through struggle and solidarity with women's collectives, that they manage to carve out a space for themselves.

The editor organises the chapters according to theme and regional focus. The first chapter by Priyanka Upadhyaya acts as a framing chapter; it explores the role of women in governance and policy making in India, and argues that both social and political empowerment of women are crucial for generating social impact. The author focuses in particular on the gender based violence, typically 'violence against women' (McDui Ra 2012), including rape and dowry deaths, which is worse for women of marginalised communities in India, such as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled caste (SC) women. The interesting sections in this essay are the ones on Acts and Legislation, and violence against women, where the author discusses experiences and events specific to India that propelled ruling governments to legislate bills for women. For example, the custodial rape of Mathura a tribal woman by two policemen on 26 March 1972, which led to public outcry, especially from women, and forced amendments in India's rape laws. The author meticulously documents the evolution of the Indian legal system in the case of empowering women, but desists from exploring this point through further analysis; analytically this chapter does not break new ground. In fact, the reader is left wondering if this chapter was included to show the continuing injustices against women in post-conflict situations, because this point is not made clear.

The second, third and fourth chapters are on the women of Assam. The chapter by Arunima Deka explores whether the 73rd constitutional amendment in India, mandating reservation for women in Panchayat bodies, only pays lip service to the notions of equal representation or whether it actually paves the way for substantive democracy (Jalal 1995). Given that men in rural India tend to control women and use them as props in local grassroots politics, can we believe that formal participation in politics alone can 'efface unequal power structures and male hegemony' in domestic spaces? (p. 27). Several studies have pointed out that women in Panchayat merely act as extensions or proxies of dominant male members of the household, and that women are shown little respect in Panchayat meetings, while some other studies have argued the opposite – that the 73rd Amendment has indeed brought about social transformations. Do institutional interventions through reservation policies effectively empower women, with respect to the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, which implemented women's participation in 2001? According to Deka, some positive factors that influenced women's capacity as Panchayat leaders were personal histories of struggle, property ownership, family support, especially from the male members, and education. Factors that negatively impacted women's performance as leaders were the continuing load of housework even after assuming office, and patriarchal norms in public spaces, whereby women are forced to act like men. The author ends her article with the question whether women's empowerment is at all possible without increasing women's access to financial resources and intra-household bargaining capacity. This is a point which continues to be debated and it would have been good if the author had given more detailed treatment to it through particular case examples. It is also not clear how this chapter addresses the bigger concern in this book, mentioned in the beginning. Could it have drawn a connection between women in local governance and post-conflict management at the grassroots level?

Rakhee Kalita Moral focuses on women members of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) who move back from camp to community life, and the challenges they face in rehabilitation and reintegration into local society. In the absence of formal apparatuses of transitional justice, i.e. the transition from conflict to peace—which can counsel or support these women ex-combatants—many of them have been helped by informal women’s group initiatives and individual interventions. ULFA women cadres who surrendered to the state or demobilized, that is, voluntarily withdrew from the militant outfit to join civil society were in a vulnerable position; they were discriminated against even as part of the militant outfit, which reproduced the same unequal patriarchal structures and norms of civil life, as well as in the reintegration process, when they faced social stigma as well as legal troubles and had to fight court battles against the National Security Act, with which they were charged. In a subtle critique of the state, the author points out that the state, instead of helping these women, have offered no support in solving their legal problems. Neither have their former compatriots, the male ex-combatants, come to their aid. It is only women’s collectives, such as the Nari Adhikar Suraksha Samiti or the Asom Mahila Sachetan Manch, which have expressed solidarity with these women. These ex-rebel women eventually devised their own ways to reinvent themselves and integrate into society, such as starting small businesses, and in more novel ways, ‘disappearing’ by not leaving any traces of themselves and starting a new life by assuming new names and settling into marital life.

Dolly Phukon’s essay looks at women’s leadership role in various social movements of Assam, including the women’s movement, which was led by women closely involved with the national freedom struggle, the ethno-nationalist Assam Movement of the 1970s, and the radical ULFA movement of the 1980s and 90s, as well as in peace negotiations between ULFA and the Indian state, in which litterateur Mamoni Raisom Goswami was a frontrunner. It is an informative essay which retrieves important stories, otherwise neglected, from oral sources about women who participated in the Indian independence movement, but does so in a sweeping, sketchy way. A more detailed or intimate account of the journeys of women involved in peace processes (here, I am thinking of writer Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s foray into politics as a mediator between ULFA and the government) by paying attention to all the anxieties and uncertainties, aspirations and rejections that women encounter when they venture into traditionally male domain, would have made for a special read.

Chapters five and six deal with issues specific to women of Nagaland. Anungla Aier looks at how traditional Naga institutions, focusing particularly on the Ao tribe, perpetuate gender inequality by excluding women from decision making, and representation, and thus, effectively from indigenous notions of citizenship, to the extent that Naga women’s attempts to challenge male authority, stemming from a patrilineal clan structure, are suppressed or circumvented by citizens’ forums dominated by men. While advocating for the increased role of women in peace-making processes, the author cites Reverend Aier to argue that women are better able to factor in humanistic factors while negotiating for peace, are more patient, and can voice the experiences of women in conflict and post-conflict scenarios (p.105). As the world reels under the attack of a malevolent virus today, it is worth noting that many women political leaders (Angela Merkel, Jacinda Ardern, Sanna Marin) of the world have earned praise for their compassionate, transparent, and consistent approach toward the pandemic crisis management. Manchanda and Kakran continue the same theme in Naga politics, that is, the role of women

as peace activists. Like other conflict zones of the world, Nagaland also has ‘motherhood politics’ or Naga mothers participating in peace-building efforts, but this very symbolism as mother figures has also limited their influence to care-giving or counselling functions rather than enabling them to become an oppositional force against traditional male dominance, as the authors of this essay point out.

The ‘motherhood politics’ theme is replayed in chapters seven and eight, both dealing with Meira Paibi (‘torch-bearers’) movement in Manipur. Basanti Devi argues, on the basis of ethnographic work, that political motherhood in the Meira Paibi movement should be seen as a constantly evolving, dynamic category, in order to save it from being stuck in old patriarchal mores or of being co-opted by the state and to be an active force in the region’s politics. The author shows that members of the PLMPAM and Nupi Samaj, two key organisations associated with the Meira Paibi movement, project themselves as political activists rather than as social reformers, who fight for the cause of the community in the face of state oppression. Roma Dey extends the discussion on Meira Paibis, by exploring, theoretically, how the nude protest by the mothers of Manipur against the custodial rape and killing of Manorama by the Indian army, renders the woman’s body as an instrument of power and subversion against patriarchal state mechanisms of control. While this kind of conceptual understanding of women’s distinctive politics is necessary, the nude protest by Manipuri mothers remains a standard, and sometime, the only reference case, in scholarly discussions of women’s resistance and body politics from this region. Manorama’s death and its aftermath was a dark episode in the history of the Indian state, and especially, its military wing, the Indian Armed Forces; and it should always remain part of the collective memory of the people of not simply Manipur but the whole of India. Yet, this incident took place in 2004 and since then, fresh atrocities and new complicities against women have come to light. Perhaps, there will be greater conceptual gain if more contemporary ethnographic data can be brought in, or more comparative analysis attempted even while keeping alive the story of the brave Manipuri women.

Although one of the stated aims of the book is to recover the role and agency of women in conflict and/or peace-building, Moral’s essay is the only one in the compilation – and to some extent, the essays by Phukon, Aier, Manchanda and Kakran, and Basanti Devi – which highlights personal stories of women in their combatant and post-conflict lives. Most of the essays discuss institutional successes, failures or problems in empowering women, while touching on the other proposed theme of the book only fleetingly. The reader would have liked more ethnographic and historical narratives of women who go unremembered in official or male-dominated narratives of war and peace. An important question that could have been addressed in some detail in this book, either through the inclusion of a review chapter or as fragments within other chapters, is regarding state-perpetrated violence against women in the wake of peace accords. Often, peace is the label by which we describe a society that has emerged from decades of state-civil society (again, broad terms) conflict or civil and ethnic strife. Yet, the cessation of armed conflict does not mean that violence against women disappears or that women are given their proper due. This book could have explored to what extent the women’s question is resolved, or not, by peace accords. In other words, what does peace mean for women? What is the afterlife of women leaders in times of struggle? Do they come to assume leading roles in times of peace? Or does their entry into more institutionalised or official spheres undo the gains made in the battlefield, so to speak. Here one recalls the doomed electoral career of Irom Sharmila, the

‘Iron Lady’ of Manipur, who invited widespread public opprobrium from the same society that had eulogised her when she was on a fast unto death to end militarisation in her state.²

The chapters in this volume also focus only on three states of North East India, leaving the reader wondering whether the editor might have ideas for another volume for the remaining states – Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya. Some of the content appears repetitive, especially the discussion on motherhood politics. Can there be other ways to approach the political lives of women in North East India? Is it possible to explore alternative careers of women in the post-accord, post-conflict situation, or to tap into the experiences of women who were forced to migrate out as a result of war? This book lays out some very important questions and perspectives, and will be of great use as a reader for scholars and policy-makers interested in women’s political participation and the North East region of India.

² Irom Sharmila, who belonged to a middle-class Meitei family in Manipur, began her hunger strike in 2000 in protest against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives the armed forces near-impunity in areas declared by the government as ‘disturbed areas’. She decided to go on a hunger strike after the army shot and killed ten civilians near Imphal in her home state. She finally ended her fast in 2016 and entered formal electoral politics but fared very poorly in the 2017 Manipur Assembly elections. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-irom-sharmila-and-her-struggle-against-afspa-5725171/> (Accessed 22 July 2020)

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