

## Invisible Agency: Women in Post Insurgency Assam

Uddipana Goswami

### Abstract

This paper looks at the women of Assam in Northeast India who have been steadily marginalized in post-insurgency politics (when peace treaties have been signed, but conflicts continue). While both armed patriarchies – the state and the anti-state – wage their wars against each other or deliberate upon political power-sharing following ceasefire agreements, the women seemingly remain voiceless. Is their silent egression a symptom of civil society's large scale withdrawal from brutalized public spaces into secure private spheres following years of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations alone? How does their withdrawal impact possibilities of conflict transformation/transcendence and ultimately, peace? Through extensive fieldwork, the paper finds that in their noiseless existence away from the state-sponsored processes of peacebuilding, the women of Assam are, in fact, undermining the forces and agencies, state and non-state, that prop up the conditions of protracted conflicts. They are proving that peace and conflict transcendence can be equally rewarding. The women are also problematizing the 'post' in post-conflict by demonstrating that reconciliation and reconstruction can begin while violence persists.

### Author Profiles

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### The Backdrop

On 10 February 2003, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT)<sup>1</sup>. The BLT was an armed group demanding the creation of a separate state of Bodoland within the Indian Union carved out of Assam. The Bodo Accord, as the MoS came to be known, was meant to put an end to years of violence and political turmoil in western and parts of northern Assam. It did not grant a separate state, as was the original demand, but facilitated the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Territorial Districts (henceforth, Bodoland). The BLT was disbanded and its former commander-in-chief, Hagrama Mohilary, became the chief executive member of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) that governs Bodoland. Along with territorial autonomy, the BTC was invested with enormous legislative, financial and executive powers, almost equivalent to those granted to a state government under the Constitution of India (Memorandum of Settlement on Bodoland Territorial Council 2003). On the face of it then, the Bodo-Axamiya conflict that had plagued Assam since the launch of the Bodo Movement for separate statehood in 1987 was amicably resolved.

I visited Kokrajhar town, the headquarters of Bodoland, in 2005 when the first democratic elections to the BTC were being held. I met with former insurgents who were now candidates in the elections, a process that would make them a part of the same State system they had been fighting against until recently. All the candidates were men. Since 2004 when I first started studying the Assam conflicts, I interacted with these men, as well as with the women who had participated in the Bodo Movement alongside them. All spoke highly of women's contributions to the underground armed insurgency led by the BLT as well as to the political movement that was simultaneously ongoing and in which Bodo civil society – from literary organizations like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to women's groups like All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) – was actively engaged. I was informed how women had acted as force multipliers—recruiting people to the ethno-nationalist cause, mobilizing support, sheltering activists and militants, alerting people about police and military raids, acting as care-givers and couriers. The abuses and sexual violence that many of them had faced at the hands of the State's military, paramilitary, and law enforcement agencies – the sacrifices they made for the community – were also recounted. It was significant, therefore, that when the formal peace process that led to the signing of the Bodo Accord of 2003 was initiated, these women were not involved. They were also nowhere to be seen on the public platforms when, subsequently, the Accord was implemented and democratic elections held.

During field interviews, I asked the women why they had not participated in the elections and pushed for equal rights in the decision-making process: they claimed they had been compensated financially by the leaders of newly formed political parties to stay away.

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<sup>1</sup> The purview of this paper is restricted to the aftermath of the 2003 accord and is based on fieldwork conducted between 2004-2015, before the latest Bodo accord of 2020 was signed to bring in new power sharing arrangements.

That they did stay away would seem to indicate their complicity in their own marginalization. Their lack of protest and apparent surrender of agency can, in this sense, be attributed to the nature of hegemony as it is. However, the women are not the only marginalized entities in Bodoland. They are one among the many disenfranchised constituencies created by the hegemonic masculinities that have dominated Bodoland since 2003. Unlike the women, though, many of these other marginalized constituencies are overtly protesting their peripheralization. The non-dominant ethnic and religious communities, for instance, resisted the ascendancy of the Bodo elite, namely, the former insurgents and movement leaders who now control the BTC. Thus, in the decade since the first elections, the non-Bodo communities living in Bodoland came together under umbrella organizations like the Oboro Suraksha Samiti (OSS) and the Sanmilita Janagostiya Aikya Mancha (SJA) to field their own candidates in the 2015 BTC elections and safeguard their political rights. In the 2015 elections, SJA won four seats in the BTC which has a total strength of 46, and the OSS won 2 two (Siddiqui 2015). What is more, in the parliamentary elections, a non-Bodo, Naba Kumar Sarania, was elected twice to the lower house from Kokrajhar in Bodoland in 2014 (Firstpost 2014, Economic Times 2019). Given these contrasting responses to the experience of marginalization, this paper questions the women's apparent quiescence, not just in Bodoland but in Assam as a whole.

## Why Women

Connected to the Indian mainland by a 21-km wide stretch of land, Assam (and the Northeast as a whole) has been shaped in postcolonial India as a peripheral region. The ethno-nationalist conflicts here provide a rich context for the study of the many conditions of marginality: ethnic, gendered, and geo-political. These marginalities inform political conflicts and are informed by them in return. They engage with these conflicts by striking back at the Indian mainland not only through violent protests, but also by other more pacific means: like writing back through the literature of conflict and witness. They are also transformed by these conflicts: empirical evidence points to how – as a result of conflict – traditional ethnic hierarchies of Assam have been shaken down and historical processes of domination and passive-coercive assimilation are being reversed (*cf* Goswami 2010).

In this way, the conflict years had a transformative effect on Assam and its many collectives that had hitherto been denied access to equal rights and power. Indeed, if we were to apply John Paul Lederach's (2014) transformation approach to studying the conflicts of Assam, we could point out innumerable other instances of constructive change 'inherent in conflict'. This paper focuses on the women in the margins because, as evident from the example of Bodoland, they seem to be the only marginalized group that has not overtly protested their loss of agency. The paper builds upon the challenge of applying the same understanding of conflict transformation to women of post accord post-insurgency Assam as to the other marginal entities. 'Relationships', according to Lederach (2014), 'are the heart of transformational processes'. So, if ethnic and geographical peripheries could redefine, and at times, reconcile their relationships with their respective centers of power, why were the women seemingly unable to redeem their voices and renegotiate agency?

It is a pertinent question because, more than any other community, it is the women who seem to have the most at stake. For instance, political violence has invariably interacted with other forms of violence, more personal and intimate in nature, and these forms of violence have adversely

impacted the women of Assam. However, there are no political organizations addressing women's issues, nor is there any extensive form of feminist mobilization evident anywhere in Assam. The few women's wings of the political organizations that led the social movements during the peak years of conflict – like the ABWWF – have lost their relevance, having never considered themselves 'political'<sup>2</sup>. Many studies reveal how protracted violent conflicts provide women with greater opportunities for political involvement and equality (*cf.* UN 2000). It has also been suggested that feminism generated in antiwar activism tends to be more evolved and holistic, holding out lessons for anti-war movements and conflict transformation efforts in general (Cockburn 2010). Have the women of Assam lost out on this opportunity?

In seeking an explanation for this contradiction, this paper adopts and adapts the three lenses that Lederach suggests conflicts need to be approached with: the first lens 'to see the immediate action'; the second to look past it into 'the deeper relationship patterns that form the context of the conflict'; and a third 'that helps us envision a framework that holds these together and creates a platform to address the content, the context, and the structure of the relationship'. It then enters some of the marginal spaces where the women of Assam now live. Using the said three lenses, it analyses these spaces for patterns of relationship that inform actions that draw on the context of conflict to build stronger structures of relationships. The aim is to discover if these marginalized women of the troubled periphery are indeed victims of mainstream masculinity and patriarchal structures. If so, what impact does this victimization have on the conflict dynamics of Assam? Is their invisibility a convenient elision from the continuing deliberations between the parties in conflict? Or are they, on the contrary, challenging the dominant narrative? Marginality, after all, is a site of 'radical possibility, a space of resistance', and it can be 'a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse' (hooks 1989, 149). From there, where the margins are their own centre, this paper examines the nature of the women's resistance, if that is what it is. It explores how – if at all – such resistance can re-orientate existing approaches to violent conflicts and interact with the mainstream processes of political reconstruction and reconciliation.

### **Women in the Margins**

There are two probable causes for the disappearance of Assam's women from the public domain. The first refers to the changes in ethno-nationalist identity formation in Assam in the recent decades, and the second, to the conflict and violence that has characterized society concurrently. As Assam's (and the Northeast's) association with the Indian Union in postcolonial times led to the emergence of stronger forms of patriarchy here, these patriarchies informed and sustained ethnic conflicts. It is possible to map clearly the mutation of gender relations in the periphery as a result of these conflicts; such mutation can be traced back to the growing mimicry of mainland India's 'nationalist resolution of the women's question'. The separation of the Indian social space 'into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world', and the resolution of women's position in it is of particular interest here. The home, in this formulation, 'must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation' (Chatterjee 1989, 624). So, if the women of the many ethno-nationalist communities of Assam are invisible in public politics, are they being consciously and conveniently omitted from the

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<sup>2</sup> It is pertinent to note here that many organizations leading the social and political movements in Assam shy away from defining themselves as 'political'. Thus, the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) that led the Assam Movement (1979-1985) or the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) that led the Bodo Movement (1987-1993) refrain from considering themselves 'political'.

political processes whereby the men are redefining ethno-nationalist goals and deliberating over redistribution of political power in post-insurgency following the signing of the peace accord of 2003 in Assam? The women certainly seem to have been relegated to guarding the 'inner values' of their respective communities in a society that is outwardly brutalized. The near-exclusive involvement of the existing women's organizations in community drives against 'social evils' (for example, the sale and consumption of alcohol) would seem to indicate this.

This also connects with the second probable cause. Several studies have indicated that protracted conflicts do generally lead to shrinking spaces for civil society, causing people to withdraw from social life into secure private spaces (Hussain 2005). So, while the ethnic elites (comprising former rebel leaders, politicians and ideologues) take the centre-stage in the political reconstruction processes, is the rest of the society adopting the path of least resistance and passive acquiescence in order to avoid a repetition of the horrors they witnessed at the peak of violent conflicts in Assam when military repression and extra-judicial killings, ethnic cleansing exercises and bomb blasts characterized everyday life? Are the women then just another component of society that has chosen to withdraw into secluded spaces, away from brutalized public life? However, in militarized societies like Assam – where despite cessation of insurgent violence, martial laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 are still operational – private spaces also are not untouched by political violence. This is illustrated by the innumerable incidents of rape, torture, and killing in people's own houses by security forces in the 1990s when violence, both from militants and the security forces, had inflicted terror upon the civilian populations of Assam (Talukdar, Borpujari & Deka 2008). Incidents of sexual assault of women by Indian security personnel continue to be reported in recent years despite suspension of operation by militant groups (*cf* Times of India 2015). The large-scale criminalization of society resultant upon the conflict dynamics in Assam has made women's safety and security a matter of concern even where the security forces are not involved (*cf* Goswami 2010b). The women's travails, indeed, seem to be far from over.

Between 2012-14, I visited some isolated villages along the Indo-Bhutan border in Barpeta and Chirang districts of Assam. My conversations with women there revealed how armed men still visit the villages. Sometimes at night, militants enter their houses demanding to be fed and sheltered, and the women have to comply for fear of their lives and the well-being of their families. They thus become unwilling and unwitting actors in political conflicts that shake up structures in the centres of power, while leaving them to deal with the immediate terrors. There are so many firearms freely circulating in these areas that violent deaths are not uncommon. However, these incidents are not reported in mainstream media, which instead focus on official announcements of peace accords being signed and negotiations being held between the parties in conflict. The possibilities of fresh conflicts and more violence always remain open in these areas: the Bodo-Muslim riots of 2012 and the ethnic cleansing by Bodo militants in 2014 are recent examples (Bhaumik 2012; *The Guardian* 2014). In places like these, then, where the possibility of being pulled out of homes, being lined up, and gunned down remain forever alive, private spaces do not represent any sense of security.

This paper, therefore, suggests that rather than being a way of escaping brutal social realities, the women's withdrawal from existing public platforms is, in fact, their way of confronting these

realities, and changing them. The following sections are arranged—modifying Lederach’s three lenses—firstly, to look at the ‘immediate action.’ What are the women doing away from the public platforms? Secondly, it analyses how these actions are redefining ‘deeper relationship patterns’ and restoring relationships that caused conflicts. Are the women’s actions effecting ethnic reconciliation? And thirdly, it explores if these women can help us reframe existing approaches to conflict and ensure lasting peace.

## **Action**

During fieldwork, I encountered—mostly in rural and semi-urban areas—many women who are strengthening themselves within their marginal existences after decades of being immobilized by fear of armed violence, military repression and sexual assault. Some have formed self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives, with or without state assistance, to financially improve their lot. Some women SHGs are rearing pigs, goats, poultry and cattle to cater to the meat and dairy industries. Traditionally known for their weaving skills, others have formed handloom co-operatives to supply the domestic and foreign markets. Other industries the women are propping up include bamboo and jute handicrafts, dry fish making, and silkworm rearing. Their products are being distributed by a few local entrepreneurs and peace business ventures that have grown in recent years in the urban centers of Assam: pig farmers in Kamrup district, for instance, supply pork to Arohan Foods, which sells its processed meat products all over India (Goswami 2018). Some of these women are even supplying international buyers directly: individual weavers in Upper Assam are selling the silk, cotton and blended fabrics they weave at fair prices to The Fabric Social, an Australian designer label. Many of these weavers are former insurgents or wives and widows of former insurgents of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) who are trying to readjust to life in society at large (field interviews).

Unlike these insurgent women who mostly function as individual sellers, a few other women insurgents, also formerly of the ULFA, formed the Milijuli Atma Sahayak Gut (Milijuli SHG; Milijuli, in the Axamiya language means ‘in cheerful fellowship’) in Nalbari district. They pooled their own resources to buy looms and weave their own clothes. Subsequently, they availed of loans from a public bank and expanded their activities (Choudhury 2008). They reached out to 19 other SHGs and collectives to form the Kaplabari Cluster Development Samity and their woven products are marketed all over India by the Assam Apex Weavers and Artisans Co-operative Federation Ltd. Many women’s SHGs in Assam were, indeed, encouraged by governmental schemes or seeded by funds from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Following the signing of the Bodo Accord, for example, there was a mushrooming of these groups owing to the generous financial allotments made for the purpose. The leading political party, BPF, created a women’s wing which nurtured the all-woman Mainao Agro Multipurpose Society in Kokrajhar that won a national award for its farming practices in 2010 (The Assam Tribune 2010). A recent study conducted in two districts of Bodoland – Baksa and Udalguri – showed how microfinance SHG programs were successful in alleviating poverty there. Besides ‘a positive and statistically significant impact on the monthly income, employment days, and financial inclusion level of participants of the programme’ SHG households also showed ‘a higher level of financial inclusion as compared to non-participants’ (Maity & Sarania 2017, 1018). These women, then, are ensuring economic empowerment for themselves, their families and communities at large.

Another form of economic emancipation has come for the women of Assam through employment opportunities such as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) in the National Rural Health Mission of the Government of India, or as Anganwadi Workers (AWW) and Helpers (AWH) in the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). ‘Anganwadi’ translates as ‘a courtyard play center’ and is envisioned as a place for the ‘convergence of services for children and women’ where ‘women/mother’s groups can come together’. The AWW is in charge of this center and she is ‘a community-based frontline voluntary worker, selected from within the local community’. Both she and the AWH are paid monthly honorariums. The AWW and AWH work closely with the ASHA, who, at the community level, is the ‘first port of call for any health demands of deprived sections of the population, especially women and children’ (NIPCCD 2006, 13). ASHA is a ‘trained female community health activist... selected from the village itself and accountable to it... (and) trained to work as an interface between the community and the public health system’ (NHM n.d., 1). Despite the operational, infrastructural and bureaucratic problems that characterize most such government schemes in Assam, the AWW, AWH and ASHA have emerged as pillars of strength and succor for the local communities. In many ways, they provide leadership to the women of their areas. What is more, they have also inspired other women to appreciate and sometimes emulate the changes they are effecting in the familiar narrative of domesticity. Thus, Rahima Begum leaves her husband in charge of their house and three children every morning to go to the Anganwadi center in Kopati town of Udalguri district. The money she brings home complements her husband’s earnings from their small piece of land, and together they can send their children to private schools. Rahima’s eldest daughter wants to study commerce and become a businesswoman. ASHA Jonali Barman cycles<sup>3</sup> 10 miles from her village to Barama town in Baksa district to inquire after the well-being of her patients. She cooks for the entire family in the morning and her husband complains about the cold food when he eats his lunch alone. Jonali herself does not even get to have lunch sometimes, but she is not ready to give up on her hard-earned job yet. She encourages the young women of her village to earn their own living, finding them employment as domestic help, shopkeepers’ assistants, and so on (field interviews and observations).

## Relation

In their own little worlds then, these women are changing their lives and those of others in their community. They are also, at the same time, adjusting mindsets and encouraging other women in their vicinity. But it is not always the state-apparatus that has empowered them to do so. It is true, of course, that a lot of the activities mapped above have benefitted from external intervention, whether it be through government schemes or with NGO funding. Often, private players and businesses representing elitist agendas have also played an important role. However, being in the field and interacting with the women have revealed how little any of that matters to them: they are only using what they have, how they can. Like the Milijuli SHG, if they could, they would strike out on their own; but if they had additional help along the way, like a bank loan or a seed fund, they would take it.

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<sup>3</sup> The relation between women’s emancipation and bicycles is an old one. It was first noted in 19th century America when The Courier (Nebraska) commented in 1895 on “some new woman, mounted on her steed of steel” and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that “woman is riding to suffrage on the bicycle” (LaFrance 2014).

During the conflict years, many of the widows of conflict were ostracized by their own societies, for fear of militant backlash or the wrath of the state's agencies. The government did not compensate them, or if they did eventually, middlemen and bureaucrats siphoned away much of the financial aid. They had to survive, and they did it by whatever means necessary. Often family and people from the community helped but, in the end, as Bharati Kalita who lost her husband to State-sponsored 'secret' killers<sup>4</sup> in 2001 says, it is the woman who has to face the struggle all by herself (Husain 2006, 55). With no mechanism for addressing trauma and no legal redress, the women were left to fend for themselves and their children. That they survived, and many even thrived, is proof of their strength and resilience. And it is this resilience that holds out hope for overcoming violence and trauma in Assam.

The women of Assam embody the worst effects that conflicts can have on people. And yet, they are also the ones who, more than any other constituency, have transcended the adverse effects of conflicts. Sometimes they have done this on their own, sometimes as communities. In introducing studies of the disparate communities of women in Assam, Nandana Dutta (2017, 10) has pointed out how these communities 'may be formed in spite of social processes of isolation'. Labelling these as 'negative' communities, she traces how these exist 'despite resistances to their formation'. They are by no means 'the end product' but may form the basis of more organized resistance and mobilization, building on the similarity of experience. The widows of conflict constitute one such 'negative' community, and the resolve many expressed for coming together to 'do something' for other women in their situation indicates the possibility of future mobilization that may facilitate empowerment as a community (Hussain 2006).

Mobilization did happen with the wives of the ULFA leaders who went missing in 2003 from their camps in the forests of Bhutan during Operation All Clear conducted by the Indian Army and the Royal Bhutan Army. When no official account was made available for their disappearance, the women resorted to protests and fasts to demand answers and find closure (Moral 2014, 69). Allegations and counter allegations were made both by the State agencies and the ULFA that this mobilization and its outcome (the women eventually withdrew their agitation) were manipulated (Kumar 2007). The women, however, had to return to their lives and their children. As Menoka Chetiah, one of the wives, was quoted as saying, 'Those making these accusations were actually hoping we would die and they would launch another agitation over our bodies to further their own political interests' (*The Telegraph* 2007). These women have returned now to noiselessly rebuilding their lives, away from the public platforms managed by the men with power. Their rejection, therefore, calls for a redefinition of 'silence' which begs reframing as noiselessness under the circumstances.

Like these women, there are many others who are noiselessly redefining their own lives, alone or as communities. Loosely formed, these communities instill a sense of sisterhood that goes beyond ethnic considerations. Thus, when Jonali Barman helps girls from her village find employment, it is not on the basis of their ethnic identities. Weavers from the different ethnic communities are weaving motifs of their neighboring communities into their traditional designs, something that was considered taboo since these motifs often represent the narratives of their ancestors and their origins. But with the growing commercial demand for freshness and variety, the women

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<sup>4</sup> The secret killings of Assam were a spate of extra-legal killings that characterized the Indian state's covert anti-insurgency operations in Assam in the 1990s and 2000s. Family members of insurgents were murdered by unknown assailants (cf Talukdar, Borpujari & Deka 2008).



are experimenting with fusing these narratives together, often in the process, weaving a stronger fabric of ethnic harmony (field interviews)<sup>5</sup>. Achieved without ‘intervention, external agency or a powerful discursive framework’ the empowerment thus achieved by the women of Assam is distinctive. It is certainly different from that which is the goal of the women’s movement on the Indian mainland, a movement that is ‘mostly an elite grouping that is isolationist in its own way’ (Dutta 2017, 6). The nature of ethnic reconciliation effected in the path to such empowerment also, therefore, is stronger and built on a more durable foundation.

These women then provide a sharp contrast to the political processes of reconstruction and reconciliation underway in Assam. All evidence indicates that these processes are outward looking and patronage-seeking. During a two-day ‘Jatiya Mahasabha’ (National Conclave) that met in March 2007 to discuss prospects of peace and chart new ethno-nationalist goals, the chairperson of the Dima Halom Daogah (DHD), an insurgent group that signed a ceasefire agreement in 2003, urged the GoI to hold talks with the ULFA and act as ‘guardian and big brother’ (*The Hindu* 2007). The current peace processes underway in Assam are all characterized by similar appeals to the authority of a state whose apathetic and myopic policies had instigated the conflicts in the first place. In the end, they all simply reinstate the same hierarchies of power with a few minor adjustments. The women, though, seem to have moved beyond the discourse of power and patronage. By claiming their own agency noiselessly, they have moved away from the public dispensation towards power politics. They do not make proclamations of subversion, they merely circumvent. And although none of this may ever translate into large feminist formations or movements for women’s emancipation, they do hold out lessons for conflict transformation and transcendence in Assam.

## Reconstruction

In Assam’s fractured and fragmented society, to expect an ‘autonomous’ feminist movement<sup>6</sup> to arise out of these developments on ground would be far-fetched. These women of rural and semi-urban Assam are empowering themselves and self-organizing in response to the post-insurgency social and economic realities. There is no conscious agenda, no proclamations, no self-consciousness indeed. They are empowering the individual woman, giving her the wherewithal to either subvert or circumvent gendered expectations, and perhaps through such empowerment, holding out hope of building stronger women’s collectives and movements in the future. At the moment, though, the communities of women in post-insurgency Assam are amorphous at best, and most certainly fragile. In the here and now, their usefulness lies in that they hold the key to conflict transformation and transcendence in Assam.

If, as Galtung (2008, 343) says, transcendence is, ‘a transformation of empirical reality so that what once was a contradiction no longer is’, these women of Assam are changing the narratives of competition and contradiction between the communities of Assam. By focusing on themselves as individual women or as interdependent women of self-sustaining communities, they are adjusting their own agency. Noiselessly, from the bottom up, they are overturning gender norms, but not militantly. They are using available resources and improvising, leveraging

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, although the Dimasas people of Dima Hasao district have gender-specific designs on their fabrics, men and women are now wearing designs not traditionally meant for their respective gender, thus challenging gender stereotypes (field interviews).

<sup>6</sup> The current (and third) phase of the Indian feminist movement has been self-characterized as ‘autonomous’, signifying that it is independent from other public groupings in the social and political arena and from nationalist and reformist politics (Ram 2000).

their resilience and innovativeness. Sidestepping confrontation then, they are concentrating on enhancement. In the process, they are reconciling relationships and laying the foundation of peace for the future. Reconciliation begins with ‘restoration of a state of peace to the relationship, where the entities are at least not harming each other, and can begin to be trusted not to do so in future, which means that revenge is foregone as an option’ (Santa-Barbara 2007, 174). And these women have traversed far beyond in their relationship with each other, away from mainstream ethnic politics.

Admittedly, these quiet changes may not have been possible if these women were in the political or public limelight, and perhaps it is the condition of marginality alone that affords such opportunities. The men who are in control of post-accord and post-insurgency public politics in the Northeast periphery, then, need to derive inspiration from these women in order to address the region’s long-running conflicts. They should revisit their grievances against the Indian mainland and the strategies they have devised to address these grievances. Years of armed conflict and militant violence have not helped any of the insurgent groups of Assam achieve their stated objectives: the Bodo or Dimasas did not get a separate state, and neither did the ULFA or the NDFB attain sovereignty. A fresh look at the ethno-nationalist goals also, therefore, might be called for. It is true that the national conventions of many of the communities of Assam are regrouping and rethinking their approach, but undue reliance on external patronage might leave them open to further manipulation.

Self-help and economic empowerment are essential. The blueprint that Parag Kumar Das, outspoken intellectual and one-time ULFA ideologue, had drawn to make the Assam economy self-sufficient can serve as a guide here. He advocated full control of the economic machinery, from resource generation to manufacturing to value addition to marketing, by the people of Assam, rather than by the Indian State machinery (Das 1995, 74). One of the most significant grievances against the mainland in Assam, since the Assam Movement (1979-1985), has been that it has choked industrial or infrastructural development in the state while depriving the people of the right to their own resources. Instead of expecting the Indian State to turn suddenly benevolent and grant the insurgent groups the right to control the resources through signed documents, the need is to use what is available at the moment, be empowered, and help every other community of Assam in the path of empowerment. Among the many transformative impacts of the conflicts has been the emergence of local entrepreneurs in urban centers, some of whom are women and some from hitherto marginalized ethnic groups. The Purbanchal Maitri Development Society, for instance, is headed by a woman, Gitali Thakur, who is helping other women across Assam find gainful employment in retail, hospitality, and domestic services (*cf* Goswami 2018). The transformation, then, has happened, but it needs to be acknowledged.

Acknowledging these changes would call for a reframing of the existing conflict narrative. Policy makers, peace negotiators, and research scholars need to help re-orientate existing approaches to conflict that only highlight its negative, destructive impact. The transformative opportunities that conflict affords need to be made part of the political discourse, from which it is now absent. Having spent decades in the ‘shadow of the gun’ (as a popular formulation goes), people are ready to move out of direct violence and into peace and reconciliation. There is evidence of a subconscious peace culture in recent developments in Civil Society initiatives, in industry and entrepreneurship, in literature and scholarship, in contemporary arts and culture, as well as in popular imagination and day-to-day living. Writers, scholars and journalists like

Ratna Bharali Talukdar, Aparna Goswami, Parismita Singh, Rakhee Kalita, Jahnvi Barua and Uddipana Goswami are reimagining/reframing conflicts and women's roles in them; singers and bands like Zublee Baruah and the Hurricane Girls are fusing ethnic melodies and reviving traditional ethnic music. These are seldom talked about in contemporary scholarship (*cf* Goswami 2018). Despite the intervening years of violence and incalculable loss, the women of Assam are positively transforming the deep cultures and structures. They hold out the hope for a robust peace that will also be sustained. What is more, there is every indication that this peace will be economically viable to boot, empowering many from different walks of life.

Violent conflicts are usually sustained because they are lucrative and/or convenient for everybody: armed forces, insurgent armies and State machinery alike. In analyzing the main stakeholders of a war economy<sup>7</sup>, Ballentine and Nitzschke (2005, 17-18) point out how the combat and shadow (or black market) economies are dominated by a wide range of actors. These include 'the security apparatus of the state (military, para-military groups, police) and rebel groups, as well as domestic and foreign "conflict entrepreneurs" who supply the necessary weapons and military material' as well as 'profiteers, transport sector, businessmen, drug traffickers, downstream' actors (truck drivers, poppy farmers). The Northeast serves as a conduit for drugs produced in the infamous Golden Triangle, on the western corner of which the region is situated. Reports of Northeast insurgent groups 'taking to protection of drug mafias as a quick way to raise funds' (Bhaumik 2005) raise concerns beyond insurgency and separatism. On the other hand, there are also allegations that India's security personnel appointed to counter the same insurgents and separatists are also involved in the drug trade (*India Today* 2013). Certainly, the security apparatus posted in the Northeast has come under scrutiny for its involvement in numerous instances of corruption and scam (*India Today* 2019). It is understandable, therefore, that neither of the armed parties – State and non-State – would want an end to the violent conflicts. But the women prove that conflict transformation and ethnic reconciliation also can – and have been – quite rewarding. Individually and as communities, they have begun to show the way towards creating a new economic reality by using available resources individually or as collectives. They are challenging popular attitudes to accommodate ethnic reconciliation and gender equality; what is more, they have made such accommodation economically viable.

The need now is to ensure that these transformations begin reflecting in meaningful policy changes. Creating stakeholders is a must. It is imperative that all stakeholders then revisit the conflict narrative so far, re-orientate their approach to peace and re-think possible solutions by working in tandem. To this end, the transformations already taking place should be analyzed so that what is gained is preserved and promoted, and the potential for further advancement in this direction is not lost. Instead of continuing to emphasize on what has been lost due to violence, the need is now to highlight what has been gained in terms of ethnic reconciliation and cultural and structural transformations. A transformational approach, after all, 'begins with two proactive foundations: 1) a reorientation of attitudes toward conflict as not necessarily negative, and 2) a willingness to engage in the conflict in an effort to produce constructive change or growth' (Lederach 2014). This might prevent violent conflicts from erupting in future, besides having a salutary effect on the ones ongoing.

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<sup>7</sup> Following Goodhand (2004), Ballentine and Nitzschke (2005) differentiate between combat ('based on economic interactions that directly sustain actual combat'), shadow ('the broad range of informal economic relationships that fall outside state-regulated frameworks') and coping ('those numerous economic interactions during armed conflict that provide benefits to the civilian population, particularly the poor and most vulnerable') economies of war and chart the different actors, motives and activities during armed conflict.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to underline two concerns: the first refers to the very formation of these communities of women in post accord post-insurgency Assam, and the other addresses the formation of these communities as collectives of women. These communities were formed by women who came out of the many processes of isolation that patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity devise to keep women under control. Protective institutions like home, family and traditions are often used to keep women away from each other. Both popular perception and scholarly investigation have failed to recognise the insidious ways in which patriarchy functions in Assam to uphold an illusion of women's empowerment while limiting them in many ways. That so many of the post-insurgency women have overcome these limitations to enter communities that truly empower them as individuals and as collectives, however, does not completely destroy 'the spectre of isolation that is the site from which these women emerge'. Given the more organized power and agency in most mainstream, masculinist enterprises, there is always, for these women, 'the potential of reverting to the state of isolation' (Dutta 2017, 6). Because, as already mentioned, these are not organized, consciously created communities; and they are amorphous too. However, it is this fusing together of strength and fragility, this determination despite the danger of disintegration, in the communities they form that holds relevance for all marginalized entities struggling to overcome their lot. That these communities were formed by women should not be central to our analysis. In fact, the emphasis should be more on the act and agency of coming together and doing together. This togetherness need not be gender-specific, and it has not been the intention of this paper to essentialize women as being more capable of forming such communities and acting towards reconciliation and reconstruction. It has been clarified at the very beginning that these communities of women are being considered as just one among the many marginalized communities in Assam. It is important to look at all these communities beyond their gender-specific contexts if they are to hold out any hope for peace. The women in this paper are discussed because they have successfully challenged dichotomies: they have taken away the power of disempowering from those at the top of the power hierarchy. Through their invisible agency, they have also problematized the dichotomy between conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, which pits conflict (as an aberrant condition of human existence) against 'peace' (a post-conflict situation when the last shot has been fired and the last corpse laid to rest). So, it is not only by flouting existing gender norms that they have transcended binaries. 'Dichotomous, mutually exclusive categories that shape our understanding of the world' are, after all, 'gendered.' What is more, they are 'key to the production and reproduction of violence at all levels' (Confortini 2006). The women of Assam show the way out of this cycle of violence by indicating that there could be powerful yet non-confrontational ways that could change the gender hierarchies and enable them to emerge as agents of change in a post-accord, post-insurgency economy and polity.

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