

Editorial

This issue of *Peace Prints* uses a gender lens to focus on peace accords from India's Northeast. This region has been both a centre of violent conflict as well as a site for peace settlements. This volume examines how women have engaged or not engaged with the trajectory of the many conflicts as they transitioned dynamically across the continuum of violent combat, negotiation, mediation, agreements and peace settlements among multiple actors. The papers point to the need to look at women beyond protective stereotypes and highlight the importance of engaging them as political subjects before, during and after peace settlements.

The Northeast of India consisting of the eight 'sister' states of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Sikkim is home to multiple ethnic groups. These groups, each with its own historical and cultural memories, often collide and clash within and across India's post independence internal borders. The internal borders have been recast and redrawn over the years in response to homeland demands of various large ethnic groups. The multiplicity of such groups has meant however that some demands inevitably remain unattended. Cross-cultural communities that spill over the old and new lines on the map also remain a given.

Indeed, some tribal communities are spread not only across internal state boundaries but also across international boundaries that border the Northeast. Some of the papers in this issue of *Peace Prints* point to the possibility of conflict when tribal groups straddle three or more borders such as the Kuki people living in the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram as well as the neighbouring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh or the Nagas who have a significant population not just in the hills of Nagaland but also in: the Indian states of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and neighboring Myanmar. In such situations every peace agreement, while mitigating conflict in one site may accentuate it in another. **Competitive homeland politics** creates a complex mosaic of positions, interests and needs that make dialogue, mediation and negotiation as part of the run up to a peace agreement a very challenging task.

Added to this ethnic diversity of the Northeast is the **competitive resource politics** that is spurred by the unique biodiversity that this region presents. With its fertile agricultural lands, mineral and oil resources, forest covers and rivers, this region is one of the richest in India in terms of natural resources though it remains one of the poorest in terms of development indices. Various ethnic and state actors have made overlapping claims over these natural resources accentuating the pre existing ethno political faultlines and the many competing nationalisms that have existed in this region.

This area has also had a complex and difficult relationship with the rest of India to which it is connected by a narrow sliver of land between Bhutan and Bangladesh commonly known as the Siliguri corridor 'chicken neck.' Its geographical isolation has kept it on the periphery of the mainstream Indian consciousness and the Indian state's tendency to homogenize the entire region simply as 'the northeast' without paying heed to its many diversities has resulted in economic neglect, alienation and the growth of a "rebel consciousness". Bordered by Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China, the Northeast is a **frontier region** marked by the geopolitics of migration, settlement and resource extraction in ecologically fragile land. With several rebel armed groups pitted against the Indian armed forces this region remains highly militarized and the site of multiple insurgencies.

While the key issues of the Northeast such as poor infrastructure, insurgency and undocumented migration have created conditions for violent conflict with multiple armed groups resisting Indian control over the territory, the attempts at managing and resolving these multiple conflicts have also made this region a veritable laboratory of peace accords. The peace agreements have ranged from the more minimalistic ceasefire agreements to constitutional ‘rearrangements’ pertaining to issues of autonomy. While there has been considerable scholarship on the content of these accords and their political settings, the analysis has been by and large gender neutral. There has been little systematic study on how these peace accords have or have not worked for women, whether women were included in the negotiations preceding it or not, and how it has impacted their lives and livelihoods after the accord was signed. Given that conflicts affect both men and women but in different ways, the “missing women” in the conflict narrative does not make for inclusive peace.

This issue of *Peace Prints* - informed by the numerous UN resolutions that have over the years pointed to the importance of addressing this — seeks to draw attention to this gap. It raises key issues about whether or not the accords have taken into account the economic losses and the psychological impact of long years of conflict suffered by women in the course of the insurgencies that have preceded the accords. It points to the cracks in the fabric of peace accords that arise when no thought is given to the economic rehabilitation and psychological support for women after long years of violent conflict.

The women of Northeast India have been part of the conflict narrative sometimes as supporters of the insurgency, at other times as community peacemakers. These roles have been more visible than in other conflict zones of South Asia. This issue of *Peace Prints* looks at their role in the creation, negotiation of numerous peace accords and analyzes if and how agreements and accords have changed the lives of women qualitatively. This could be in terms of their role in being able to create dents on the overall patriarchal structure and more specifically changes in their access to resources or in the promotion of inter as well as intra community reconciliation.

While analyzing the peace accords, contributors to this issue register the importance of taking into account women’s involvement in the pre negotiation stage of the accord, the actual negotiation and most importantly, the impact on their lives once the accord has already been signed. No accord is an end in itself and its success or lack thereof is dependent on the larger peace process in which ex combatants (male and female) as well as civil society represented by both women and men have invested. No peace accord signed by only the ex combatants—typically men since even women who have played the roles of combatants are rarely represented at the negotiating table—can create conditions for a sustainable post accord peace.

This issue of *Peace Prints* examines some of these accords specifically through a gender lens. The articles in this volume indicate that the accords took into account only the negotiating demands of male armed combatants. In the process, they bypassed the unique and perhaps quite different priorities of women either as ex combatants or supporters of a militant movement. Women who were active in peacebuilding or simply women in the community for whom restoration of their lives and livelihoods were the most important peace goal were also excluded. By privileging some experiences of the conflict over others, did the accords jeopardize the possibility of a long term sustainable peace whose scope goes well beyond the mere cessation of armed hostilities? Contributors to this issue of *Peace Prints* draw on the rich experience of the several peace accords in India’s Northeast to arrive at deeper understanding of the unexplored scope and possibilities for placing the lives and livelihoods of women within the framework of such accords.

Providing a critique of accords and their impact in India's Northeast, Roshmi Goswami in her paper titled *Of Processes, Peace Accords and Women in NE India* examines what happens to 'the women's question' when patriarchal and transactional peace settlements are signed that do little to address the culture of impunity and everyday violations of constitutional and democratic norms. She raises the critical question of whether women should support such transactional peace accords or continue to fight for peace with justice. In her bird's eye view of the Northeast, Goswami looks at peace accords signed in Mizoram, Assam and Nagaland and raises the vital question of the impact of such agreements on women and whether women would be better off aligning with democratic struggles in other parts of the country and the call for a more radical transformative justice rather than accepting state engineered peace accords that do little "to advance their human rights and political agency".

Mary Vanlalthanpuii's paper titled *The Mizoram Accord of 1986: Did it matter for Women?* examines the Mizoram peace settlement of 1986 between the Mizo National Front and Government of India that has been heralded as one of the most successful accords signed in India's Northeast as it brought to an end twenty years of armed conflict. The leader of the insurgent movement was later sworn in as the first chief minister of the newly created state of Mizoram thereby halting the large scale demand for independence and bringing down active levels of violence associated with the insurgency and counterinsurgency. Mary Vanlalthanpuii however critically examines the text of the accord to see how far it speaks—if at all it does—to the lived experiences of women in the years of the insurgency. She finds that the accord is gender neutral and does little to address the losses and trauma of women specially their lived experiences of gender violence once special legislations like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act came into play. The accord neither acknowledges nor compensates for women's economic, psychological or social losses in the years of the insurgency. It fails to provide any package geared towards the reintegration and rehabilitation of women in the post insurgency phase.

Two papers in this collection turn the searchlight on the state of Manipur that has witnessed an insurgency from the time of its inclusion in the Indian union in 1949 which carried over even after it attained statehood in India in 1972. Manipur offers an example of how accords in other neighbouring states can impact lives and livelihoods of women and men in a context where an ethnic community is dispersed over two internal and two external borders and boundaries. It is also a living example of how women are marginalised as political subjects when state and para state armed actors reach an agreement for suspension of operations. Such agreements may bring in a limited negative peace. However, it does little to create enabling and inclusive conditions for long term inclusive peace that include women as political subjects.

Swarna Rajagopalan's paper *Unintended Consequences: Northeastern Peace Accords and Manipur's Women* examines the effects of the signing of multiple accords in neighbouring states that has also impacted Manipur. As Rajagopalan points out although the Naga, Assam and Mizo accords are not uniquely responsible for the militarization of Manipur, they have led to increasing the instability in the equations (power hierarchies) between various ethnic groups in the state. The spill over impacts of all these accords have had consequences that have impacted the lives and livelihoods of the women of Manipur. In highlighting this, Rajagopalan also raises a critical question about the unintended consequences of peace accords and if in their inclusions (and exclusions) they end up accentuating violent conflicts in one arena even as they seek to mitigate violence in another.

G Amarjit Sharma's article *Peace as the Modality of Power: Nationality, Para-State Politics and the Silencing of Women* touches on woman as a political subject in the context of the peace

process between Kuki-Chin-Zo militant organisations, the state of Manipur and the Union Government of India. He argues that in articulating who constitutes the Kuki-Chin-Zo people, scholars are forced to navigate “para state politics” among the insurgent groups as well as the legal and extra legal violence of the state. In doing so there is a need to investigate if politics in the Northeast has instituted a political order that silences women and sexual violence in the meta-narratives of nationality and state. With the civil society space being reduced to a battleground between militants, state and human rights groups, women are boxed in to an ideal “peacemaker” capacity without due appreciation of their multi faceted role which has oscillated between passive and active support for the armed movement at times and peace advocates at other times.

Unlike Manipur, the state of Assam has been the site of multiple peace agreements. These include the Assam accord of 1985 between the representatives of the All Assam Students Union and the Government of India as well as three subsequent agreements with the Bodos regarded as the early settlers of Assam. These agreements were drawn up between representatives of the Government of India, Government of Assam and various Bodo groups (the All Bodo Students Union in 1993, The Bodo Liberation Tiger Force in 2003 and all factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland in 2020). Asserting that Bodo interests had been neglected by the Assam accord of 1985, Bodo groups entered into a separate process of negotiations with the Indian state culminating in the much publicized peace agreement of 2020.

The 1985 Assam Accord is seen as a major landmark in the Indo-Assam peace process. Two papers in this collection examine the impact of this major accord on the women of Assam while another focuses on Bodo women and their engagement with the peace process. Ethnographic research brings the voices of women from the field to tell their accord and post accord stories which have been drowned out by the shrill exchanges of the warring factions.

Uddipana Goswami’s paper *Invisible Agency: Women in post insurgency Assam* focuses on a conundrum namely the absence of women from post accord democratic processes such as contesting elections despite their presence as active members of civil society. What explains the silence of women when armed patriarchies — state and non state — work out their power sharing arrangements following ceasefires? Goswami argues that there is perhaps more to this apparent “inaction” by women than what meets the eye and that it may well point to the way in which women have chosen to withdraw from state sponsored processes of peacemaking. At the same time, in a subtle act of subversion, women have also undermined the forces and agencies that prop up the conditions of violent conflict. She posits that women have initiated their own processes of reconstruction and reconciliation, away from the negotiations at the high table because they have understood that such actions need not wait till after the violence is over and accords duly signed. Interventions to restore the fractured fabric of society cannot wait till after the violence is over and a formal accord inked.

While Goswami’s paper problematizes the very notion of post conflict and argues that women are redefining it, Pahi Saikia’s article *Women Post conflict Security and Governance Practices in India’s Northeast* focuses on what happens to women rebel returnees, war victims and activists after a peace accord has been signed, heralding a period of what is described as post conflict. To what extent do women as rebel returnees, war victims and activists overcome the legacies of militarized spaces and navigate the challenges of inclusion in the formal and informal structures of peace and governance reforms in post-conflict settings? The research question in this paper that focuses on Assam is located in this discourse of relocating women in analyzing conflict, democratic governance and peace. Drawing on ethnographic accounts, Saikia seeks to understand how conflict and post-conflict situations redefine participation of women, particularly rebels.

Amrita Saikia's paper titled *Women, Peace Accords and Social Reconstruction: Experiences from Conflict-Affected Bodoland Territorial Area District of Assam* draws on ethnographic research to analyse the experiences of Bodo, Adivasi and Bengali speaking Muslim women in the Bodoland areas of Northeast India (Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri) following the signing of the Peace Agreement of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003. She draws attention to the fact that women chose to participate in civil society groups despite the prevalence of strong patriarchal attitudes which made it dangerous, at times even life threatening, to thus engage. Saikia raises the question that perhaps stereotyping women only as victims does not serve them well in the post agreement phase and the need of the hour is to forge networks of solidarity among women in the pre accord stage so that they are recognized as a force for change in the post accord phase. She points to the importance of creating women's organizations for peacebuilding to be taken seriously as carrying potential political influence.

The Naga insurgency is one of the longest running self-determination movements in India. Side by side with this movement there have also been repeated attempts by the Government of India to reach a political settlement with various Naga groups. In this chequered history of peace negotiations, the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) has played a relatively visible role. Rita Manchanda's paper *Crisis and Opportunities in Naga Peace Process: The Women's Question and Naga Peace Accords* critically examines the complex trajectory of the NMA from what she describes as its embeddedness in community struggles and more limited motherhood politics to asserting its moral legitimacy as peacemakers with stakes in the arena of modern institutional politics, more specifically in terms of overturning patriarchal practices impacting women's property and land rights. Manchanda submits that faced with the immediate threat of the long peace collapsing in 2019, a dormant Naga civil society comprising largely women quickly reinvented itself and with this an opportunity was presented for the NMA to not just revive itself after a long patriarchal backlash but also assert its relevance in new arenas into which it had not hitherto ventured. NMA used this moment to assert itself beyond motherhood and sisterhood politics to claim its significance within an expanded arena at the intersection of tribal politics, modern modes of governmentality and intrusion of market forces.

Abantee Datta's reflection piece *The Indo-Assam Conflict: The Assam Accord and the Unpleasant Bitter Gourd* looks at the Assam accord of 1985 through a feminist, personal and deeply intimate lens and offers a re-reading of those clauses that in her opinion allow for a humanistic and more inclusive interpretation to open up spaces for women's experiences to be counted in the post accord phase. She uses the metaphor of the bitter gourd — an integral part of the cuisine of Assam — to indicate how through the many and varied ways of cooking it can yield different tastes and flavors. In much the same way the Assam accord can also lend itself to a much broader interpretation that breathes life and empathy into its clauses rather than the current one that is narrow and predominantly “bitter”.

The book discussion by Swargajyoti Gohain of the edited volume by Ashild Kolås *Women, Peace, and Security in Northeast India* underscores the importance of unraveling the many complex dimensions of studying women in peacebuilding processes in Northeast India. At the same time, she points to the importance of turning the searchlight on the “afterlife” of women once the immediate violent struggle is over, following the signing of some kind of peace agreement. She suggests that this is still a woefully under researched area and needs more scholarly treatment.

This volume of *Peace Prints* is an invitation to imagine the role of women beyond protective stereotypical images as victims of sexual violence or as mothers and sisters invested in peace or as uncritical advocates for an end to the conflict, brushing aside issues of justice and

equality which remain unaddressed. Whether or not an alternative route lies in women joining democratic struggles in other parts of the country as Roshmi Goswami advocates or in crafting their own reconciliation and restoration processes regardless of whether the violence has ended or not as Uddipana Goswami suggests, or in reinventing themselves by embracing the new spaces at the intersection of tribal politics, market forces and new modes of governmentality as Rita Manchanda observes, the road ahead for gender just peace accords is paved with new opportunities as well as formidable challenges.

Taken together, this collection of papers highlights the challenges of navigating peace in a frontier area with tribal ethnic and linguistic loyalties that defy cartographic boundaries. It draws attention to the role of women in this complex militarized terrain where they are often trapped between state and militant armed patriarchies. This has multiple ramifications. It could mean that women remain embedded in community work or motherhood politics at best – largely conforming to the sexual division of labor in a patriarchal society. However, it could also mean that following an initial patriarchal backlash women claim new spaces in the post agreement phase at the intersection of intense identity politics and new market forces that have entered this region. As some of these papers indicate women do not seem to be actively participating in democratic institutional politics in the post insurgency phase. This raises a thorny question as to whether this is part of the routine patriarchal backlash or whether women are choosing to keep away from state engineered peace politics to craft their own vision of reconstruction and reconciliation. This is at present nascent and opens up the possibility of new research and scholarship. This volume is an attempt to spark further engagement in that direction.

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Guest Editor