

# Women's Interventions for Peace in the North-East<sup>1</sup>

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## **Theoretical Considerations:**

The Northeastern part of India comprising the seven states, euphemistically called the *seven sisters*, has been a cauldron of unrest from the time of Indian independence. Critically located and sharing a border with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and China this region portrays that processes of democratic state formation may not lead to social justice for all. This is the theatre of the longest state vs. community conflict in South Asia. The region has witnessed an escalation of violence to an unprecedented scale in the last two decades. With increasing state sponsored violence there is also a tremendous increase in sub national militancy. The Northeast presents a situation of virtual civil strife. The Rs. 10,271 core development package for the region, announced by the Prime Minister, on the eve of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Republic Day show how critical the situation has become. It is clear that problems of the Northeast cannot be wished away. According to one observer "it is true that the economic factor has been central but an economic package cannot solve the ethnic problem. There is need for a political solution."<sup>2</sup> This paper is in response to similar concerns. It chronicles the political and social efforts undertaken by some women's groups in the Northeast for the resolution of conflicts and an end to violence.

A legitimate question at this juncture is why privilege women's experiences? As has been pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu, reality is also the site where permanent struggle to define reality goes on.<sup>3</sup> The reality of the State vs. Community conflict in the Northeast, that is given to us, is a male reality, in contention with other realities, as most of the commentaries are male centric constructed on the basis of male power compulsions. Most of the works analyzing intra-state conflicts in the Northeast do not deal with women's engagement in it. This paper's effort is to address this lacuna. It focuses on women's negotiations with conflict in the Northeast, especially their interventions for peace. Such interventions have not only redefined gender stereotypes but have transformed definitions of democracy, nationalism and peace. Also the diversity of women's interventions for peace in the Northeast gives new meaning to Joan Scott's contention that "politics constructs gender and gender politics."<sup>4</sup>

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1 Sections of this paper have been published in "Naga Women's Interventions for Peace." *Canadian Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (winter 2000).

2 Zarin Ahmad "India: Package for the

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, translated by Raymond and Adams, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press.)

4 Joan Scott quoted in "Viva": *Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*, ed. Sarah A. Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood (New York and London, Routledge: 1993) p. 217.

The paper seeks to identify the roles women play in peace building in the region. It is increasingly being recognized by the international community that women can play a significant role in the resolution of armed conflicts and in reconciliation processes. Research has shown that in many countries women have not only proved to be extremely creative in developing survival mechanisms, but they also play important, though unacknowledged roles in ending organized violence.<sup>5</sup> I, however make no essentialist plea here. I endorse the stand taken by the 1996 Santo Domingo Expert Meeting on Political Decision making and Conflict Resolution that “neither men nor women are innately more peaceful than the other. We learn the way we behave.”<sup>6</sup> However, because women are in an already marginalized situation in society, they view power and conflict from different angles. This enables them to act and speak out with less consideration for established power structures. Hence, they are able to innovate. Their marginalisation and invisibility often helps them in their peace making efforts.<sup>7</sup>

The case of the Northeast is particularly important because it is often contended that “pacifism and peace movements have always predominantly been Northern and Western movements.”<sup>8</sup> The same authors argue that women activists from the South consider peace movements as a luxury. This paper portrays that South Asian women have their own traditions of accommodation which is often under played by the North/South politics as defined by those in power. The role of women in peace making is particularly important in the context of Northeast because like any other conflict areas it has witnessed massive displacement of men for compulsions of self-defence and/or war. Women therefore form the majority of the civil societies there, especially in the hills. Therefore, any comprehensive efforts at conflict resolution in the Northeast cannot ignore the role played by women. Yet there is hardly any work dealing with the peace efforts of women. Hence, the need for such an analysis.

Information on women’s contributions to peace in the Northeast is extremely scattered. On the basis of examples taken from the peace activities of women’s groups in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland I seek to make a comparative analysis of what these women mean by peace and how do they intervene for it. Is this in any way different from the majoritarian definition of peace? The question assumes particular importance because these women are enmeshed in secessionist struggles that re define existing categories of analysis.

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5 For discussions on this theme see Arline Eisen, *Women and Revolution in Vietnam*, (London, Zed Books: 1984). Also, Wilmette Brown, *Black Women and the Peace Movement*, (Bristol, Falling Wall Press:)

6 United Nations Division for Advancement of Women, Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Political Decision Making and Conflict Resolution: The Impact of gender Difference (New York: 1996)

7 P. Villaneueva, “Daughters of War, Women for Peace: international Consultation on Women as Peacemakers.” *Women in Action*, vol. 2 (1995) pp. 23-25

8 Christine Schweitzer, “war and Pacifism,” *Women and Politics of Peace: Contribution’s to a Culture of Women’s Resistance*, ed. Biljana Kasic (Croatia, Centre for Women’s Studies Zagreb: 1997) p. 81

Even after believing in their own *Cause*, I ask, what compels these women to work for a resolution of conflicts? I discuss strategies that lead to successful interventions for peace by women. I address questions such as why some groups such as the Chapar Anchalik Mahila Samity or the Naga Mother's Association is able to procure a space in the cease-fire negotiations between the State and the "rebels" but others fail?

This paper efforts to overcome the stereotyped view of women as either passive victims or active collaborators in violence in the context of Northeast. It recognizes the various roles that women can play in situations of armed conflicts. It celebrates the efforts made by women in their local levels to intervene against violence, often at a great personal cost. It aims to portray women as individuals who have their won set of frequently unacknowledged and undervalued instruments that contribute to the peace processes. It defines peace as not just an antithesis to ware. I argue, that in negotiating for peace the women can at times negotiate for their own space in the public spheres that lead to a reworking of gender roles in political decision-making.

### **Gender and Institutional Politics in the Northeast:**

In most of Northeast women are marginalized in institutional politics. The situation of women in the four states discussed below is not different. Assam, at one time was synonymous with almost all of Northeastern India, but today it is just one of the seven states. It is still the largest state in the Northeast in terms of population but not of area.<sup>9</sup> It is a multi-ethnic state and According to the 1991 Census of the GOI Assam's population can be divided into speakers of sixty-eight languages and dialects. From times immemorial Assam has been the site of multiple immigrations, which contributed to the Anti-Foreigner movement of the late 1970's. I will not restate the often-repeated narratives of the formation of the Assam Gono Parishad (AGP) or the ULFA. For our purposes it will suffice to say that the AGP, which came to power as a result of the agitations of the late seventies did not usher peace in its wake. In fact peace has eluded Assam of the last two decades. The coming of the AGP marked some shifts in politics. For our purpose it is significant that when the AGP came to power in 1983 there were no women contestants sent to the Lok Sabha from Assam and only 2 women contested and was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly. Yet in 1978, there were 215 women contesting elections of whom 21 won.<sup>10</sup> Thus the coming to power of the AGP marked a push back for women from the political scene of Assam. This is particularly important because women participated in the agitations of the seventies in large numbers. Yet that did not produce any political benefit for them. From 1980 onwards no women has represented Assam in the Lok Sabha. In the 1996 Assembly elections only two women were elected from the AGP who does not even bother to practice tokenism where women are concerned. There is a growing alienation of women from institutional politics.

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9 Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Oxford/New York, Oxford University press 1999.)

10 Report on general Elections to Assam Legislative Assembly 1952-1991, Government of Assam

Although Manipuri women are not entirely new to activism yet in institutional politics they have little space. Manipuri women trace their descent from legendary women such as Laisna, the wife of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, who came to the throne in Kangla of 33 AD. She presided over the Pacha, or the women's court that dealt with women related crimes. Women also eulogize the military deeds of Linthoingambi of Ningthou Khomba, who was known to have saved her palace from attacks by the enemy. During the last century there were two women led uprisings in Manipur known as the Nupi Lal. These were against the British. Today, there is a women's bazaar in Manipur known as Nupi Kiethel where women meet, sell their ware and discuss problems of the day including politics. This bazaar has served as a launching pad for collective revolt by women. Yet in electoral politics women have not made any mark. For example in the 1996 Parliamentary elections female voters, who were 6,47,422 in number, outnumbered male voters, who were 6,38,438 in number, yet the number of women candidates were only two among the total of twenty eight.<sup>11</sup> In inner Manipur Parliamentary seat Annie Mangsatabam was only the second women candidate to fight elections after Maharani Iswari Devi in 1952. None of the candidates mentioned any particularly women's issues in their manifesto. Neither of the two women candidates won the elections.

In India, says Rajib Chowdhury, there are "four known matrilineal societies and, of these, three are juxtaposed in the state of Meghalaya,"<sup>12</sup> These three are the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes. Yet among none of the three groups women become the head of the family. For example, among the Garos *the men enjoy nokmaship*. The nokma's are the head of the family and also the village. Even in this heavily matrilineal state women hardly ever win elections and no woman has ever become either the Chief Minister or led any party in an Assembly or Parliamentary elections. Apart from Roshan Warjri there are hardly any electorally successful women political leader. The political elite who are men still largely dominates electoral politics.<sup>13</sup>

The Naga women have one of the worst sex ratios even in Northeast Indian standards but the second best literacy rate. The sex ratio is 890 and the literacy rate is about 55.72%. The sex ratio for women in rural areas is 912 and in urban areas 789.<sup>14</sup> This shows greater out migration of men from villages and the on-going conflict is the main cause for that. Naga women are extremely independent and there are more women cultivators in Nagaland than men. Yet in electoral politics the record of Naga women are hardly any better than the women from the other region of the Northeast. Although, Nagaland had some extraordinary women parliamentarians such as Rano Shaiza, the present day record is much worse. There are no women in either the Assembly or the parliament.

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11 Election Office, Government of Manipur, *Electoral Roll 11th Parliamentary Elections*, Imphal, 1996

12 "Women in Meghalaya," *North-East Sun*, August 1-14, 1997.

13 Regarding elite politics in Meghalaya see Pascal Malngiang, "Electoral Politics in Meghalaya," in Working of Parliamentary Democracy and Electoral Politics in Northeast India, eds. Girin Phukon and Adil-ul-Yasin (New Delhi, South Asian Publishers: 1998)

14 SR Luhadia, *Census of India 1991*, Series 18, Supplement 6 paper 1 or 1991.

Electoral politics in the Northeast is thus completely dominated by men. They dominate the seats of power. They dominate the seats of power. Sometimes women are given token representations but very often they become invisible. According to one observer this exclusion of women from electoral politics is a “deliberate exclusion” imposed on them by the men.<sup>15</sup> Thus electoral politics have in no way empowered women in the other areas in the public sphere where women have made spaces for negotiations. It is in the politics for peace that they are able to negotiate some spaces of action in the peace movements if not led by women, are overwhelmingly supported by them. Women dominate the peace movements in sheer numbers.

### **How They Organise Peace?**

There are different ways by which women organize for peace in the Northeast. Women’s peace organisations can largely be divided into three different groups. There are women’s groups that organise peace movements. The third group tries to take an independent stand and negotiate with both the army and the insurgents for peace. In Assam there are a number of interventions for peace but they are largely issues based. During and after the army atrocities in Nalbari and North Lakhimpur in 1989 and 1991 respectively, a number of women’s groups for peace sprung up. The most outstanding of these was the Matri Manch based in Guwahati. This group became the rallying point for mothers whose sons have disappeared. Although that was the philosophy behind the Matri Manch many women who were not mothers also joined the movement. They rallied around the issue of abuse of women. They took out protest marches against sexual abuses and violence against women. Initially, they were tolerated when they protested against statist acts of violence but when their protest became more general different insurgent groups threatened them. They did not have the patronage of the state, which made it clear that they were considered recalcitrant voices of protest. Opposition from all quarters forced these women to withdraw from active campaigns<sup>16</sup>. One of the disadvantages of this group was that due to their physical location in a city their protest marches had acquired high visibility. Thus, when their protest assumed a political character they promptly lost support of the male political leadership. The fate of the Matri Manch shows that in Assam most of political leadership is in the hands of men. Therefore, when women’s groups aspire to make claims of any sort in the public sphere there is a knee-jerk reaction against them. They are often marginalised and themselves become targets of violence.

**The Sajagota Samiti:** of their own members or their families. It may be a security raid in their villages or a rape within their kinship network. Within hours they organise themselves, lead protest marches and agitate for restoration of normalcy. These women are ordinary women who often remain invisible. Yet sometimes their agitations acquire such intensity that the mighty machinery of the state is brought to a standstill. But at other times the apathy of the State retards women’s initiatives for peace. The Samities such as the Sajagota Samiti do not operate under public glare and their invisibility helps them from serious opposition by either the State or the rebel groups who often regard them as of little consequence.

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15 Aparna Mahanta, “Working of Parliamentary process and Empowerment of Women in Northeast India,” in eds. Phukon and Yasin, 1998, p. 174

16 Interview with Renu Debi, a spokesperson of Matri Manch, 29 December 1998, Guwahati,

In their own small area, which is largely their own locality, these groups are quite effective. The women rally around each other during raids by either the police or the army. Sometimes, they negotiate with the security personnel to release women who are detained for questioning. They also form support network for abused women when their own families refuse to give them any support. During a discussion with the author, a member of the Sajagota Samiti, who preferred to remain anonymous, stated that the “worst crimes against women are perpetrated by the state machinery such as the army. But even the rebel groups are no better. They sensationalize State sponsored rape cases and make political mileage out of it. But once the incident loses its news value they do not care for the victims at all”<sup>17</sup>. Thus both the State and the rebel groups are not supportive of women or sensitive to their plight.

There are a number of Bodo women’s groups that organise issue-based peace marches and protests. The Assamese sub nationalism is under significant challenge from Bodo activists. A classic ethnology of the Bodos first published in 1911 describe the Bodos as “the original autochthones of Assam...largely Hinduised, they still form a large, perhaps the main constituent element in the permanent population of the province.”<sup>18</sup> a recent observer reiterates the same view. She says that the Bodos form “ the largest indigenous community in the present demography of the province.”<sup>19</sup> Historically, large numbers of the Bodo people have merged with the Assamese. “Underlying today’s Bodo upsurge is a determination to reverse the process.”<sup>20</sup> The Bodo demand for homeland has generated enormous political violence. That women get enmeshed within this violence is of little surprise.

The Bodo Women’s Justice Forum is a group that concerns itself with issues of peace and human rights. This forum was formally constituted on 20 February 1993. The group has initiated many state, regional and national level meetings on issues of human rights. The group supports the growth of self-government for Bodos. The intensity of the Assamese-Bodo conflict, and the effectiveness of the Bode Women’s Justice forum, can be gauged when one considers the fate of the first secretary of this forum. Golapi Basumatary, was the founder secretary of this organisation. She was also a founding member of the NorthEast Coordination committee on Human Rights. Golapi was active in trying to organize an Assames-Bodo dialogue on peace. She along with three of her friends were gunned down by unknown assassins on 22 December 1996, while she was traveling by a hired car after arranging a public meeting in Barpeta. There were allegations and counter allegations that Indian intelligence was involved in this. The government blamed the militants. However, Golape’s assassins were never brought to justice. Apart from the intensity of the conflict, Golapi’s killing portrays that women who try to negotiate spaces of power in the public sphere, have often to pay a heavy price in Assam.

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17 Interview with AD, a member of the Sajagota Samiti, 26 December 1998

18 Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (Delhi, Cosmo Publications: 1975) p.

19 Anjali Daimari, “The Plight of the Bodos of North East India,” *The North East Voice*, vol.1 no6 (1997)p.

20 Baruah, *India Against Itself*,p.

The Bodo and the Assamese women's peace movements portray that in situations of chronic hatred and violence women often organize on the basis of specific issues. They protest for the redress of a specific violation. They remain organized for a short period of time after which they disperse. This gives them a certain amount of anonymity and protection. The Assamese Women's "ten-day protests" fall within this genre. In Meghalaya the emergent women's protest for peace still in its nascent stage seems to be developing along similar lines. The case of Meghalaya is however, slightly different from the others. There are hardly any strong peace groups among the Seng-Khasi or the Garo women. Even though these tribes are matrilineal but men seem to dominate politics even in the informal sector. In community level women play some role in conflict resolution. According to one observer "there is a noticeable absence in sex crimes."<sup>21</sup> There is also an absence in women's efforts to organize politically.

Some of the issue based protest movement at times become quite successful. In Manipur such an issue based protest movement by women forced the All Manipur Student's Union to verbalise a demand and petition the state to stop gang rape of women. Since women who organise these protests remain anonymous they do not become targets of hate crime. Yet they are able to sustain the peace movement in one level. Where they fail is to make interventions in formal power structures. But its success is not measured by the visibility of the leaders and their ability to acquire power in political chess boards then the sporadic issue based protest movements for peace can be considered as partially successful.

### **The Collaborators:**

There are other peace groups who try to collaborate with special interest groups and sustain their movement. The best examples of this genre of peace movement can be found among women's groups in Manipur. This is a small state with a population of only 1,837,149.<sup>22</sup> Yet, even here there are three distinct streams of insurgencies. Like Assam, Manipur is also divided into the hill and the valley or the plains. The plains have 10% of the land area but 70% of the population. In the plains there is a distinctly different insurgency movement that believes the Maharaja of Manipur was coerced into signing the instrument of accession. The Manipuris were fighting for a separate country outside India. The next stream of insurgency is led by the Nagas. They form part of the Naga movement that stretch from Nagaland to its adjacent areas "in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the whole of Northern Manipur and portions of its western side. The third stream appears to be a divided lot though it is mostly identified by the Kuki insurgents."<sup>23</sup> There are as many peace movements as there are insurgencies in Manipur. An interesting phenomenon about women's peace movement in Manipur relates to their close association with insurgent groups

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21 Rajib Chowdhury "Women in Meghalaya," *North-East Sun*, August 1-14, 1997.

22 Census Report 1991

23 Sriram Taranikanti, "Insurgency in Manipur: A Case from Churachandpur," *The North-East and the Indian States: Paradoxes of a Periphery*, ed. P.S. Datta (New Delhi, Vikas: 1995) p.

In the valley women's activism is symbolised by the activities of Meira Paibies, or the torchbearers. According to one observer they have become an institution in their own rights.<sup>24</sup> They started as nasha bandis or to combat the ever-increasing consumption of alcohol by the men. Slowly they captured the imagination of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA imposed a ban on bootlegging and booze in January 1990. Two months later, succumbing to this pressure the United Legislature Front government declared Manipur a dry state. This was a victory for the Meira Paibies. The "social cleansing drive evoked popular support."<sup>25</sup> A spokesperson explained the modus operandi thus, "The undergrounds would nab the anti-social and hand them over to the women's bodies. People now seem to have more faith in them."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Meitei militants actively support these women's groups. In the last two years the Meira Paibies have expanded their area of action. Now they campaign against atrocities by the security forces. They also keep nightlong watches to foil raids. They dialogue questioning as part of counter insurgency operations.

### **The Negotiators:**

These women negotiate with both the army and the insurgents and yet are able to carve out an independent space for their actions. The best known among these organisations for peace is the Naga Mother's Association (NMA). The head office of the NMA is in the largely Angami city of Kohima. It came into existence on February 14, 1984, with a preamble that stated, "Naga mothers of Nagaland shall express the need of sensitising citizens toward more responsible living and human development through the voluntary organisation of the Naga Mother's Association."<sup>27</sup> Membership of NMA is open to any adult Naga women irrespective of whether she is married or single. Members can join through the women's organisations of their own tribes. The organisation encourages human development through education and its efforts to eradicate social evils and economic exploitations and work towards peace and progress.

The NMA has rendered valuable service for the cause of peace. It mediated between the Government of Nagaland and the Naga Student's Federation over age limit for jobs and came to an equitable settlement. An achievement of NMA is the formation of the Peace Team in October 1994 to confront the deteriorating political situation. Their theme was "Shed No More Blood." The NMA spoke against killings not only by the army but also by the militants. In a pamphlet released on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1995 the representatives of NMA wrote that "the way in which our society is being run whether by the over-ground government or the underground government, have become simply intolerable." The NMA celebrates the 12<sup>th</sup> of May each year as the Mother's Day and renew their appeal for peace.

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24 Yumnam Rupachandra, "In the Forefront," *North-East Sun*, 1-14 December,

25 Khelen Thokchom, "War Against Social Evils," *North-East Sun*, 15-30 September 1997.

26 Interview with S. Shimrai, 22 February, 1999

27 Constitution of the Naga Mother's Association, Reprinted in Kohima, 1992

Apart from peace initiatives the NMA has worked for social regeneration. In Nagaland there is rampant abuse of alcohol and drug. The NMA provides facilities for de-addiction. They collaborate with the Kripa foundation of Mumbai for rehabilitation of drug doers. The NMA has also started anonymous HIV testing. They are probably the first women's organisation in the Northeast to test pregnant women for HIV virus. The NMA is providing pioneering service for care of patients afflicted with Aids. An important issue that is preoccupying the doctors of NMA is the increase in HIV positive cases among pregnant women. An NMA spokesperson is of the opinion that conflict in Nagaland is a result of chronic underdevelopment. Therefore the NMA believes that without addressing developmental issues there cannot be any peace in Nagaland.<sup>28</sup>

NMA's greatest achievement is that most Naga women's organisations are its collaborators. The members of the NMA also collaborate with the Naga Women's Union of Manipur. The rallies organised by NMA are always will attended by other Naga women's organisations. The NMA work very closely with the Naga Hohos. That the NMA has assumed enormous influence in Naga politics is borne out by the fact that they are the only women's group in South Asia who has participated in a cease-fire negotiation. In 1997 they mediated between the GOI and the NSCN (IM) faction and facilitated a cease-fire.

The NMA however is not the only women's group. There are a number of others of which an important organisation is the Watsu Mongdung. An extraordinary case catapulted the Watsu Mongdung to fame. The incident took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1994 in Mokokchung town. Ten members of the Assam Rifles entered the town and carried on indiscriminate rape and arson. Innumerable women were raped. The Naga Human Rights Commission entrusted Watus Mongdung to investigate and identify the victims. The Watsu Mongdung formed a special committee and investigated the matter. The identified eight victims and reconstructed the incident after a through discussion with them. None of the other social organisation wanted to take this up. So members of the Watsu Mongdung decided to litigate on behalf of the rape victims. The case is still pending. Although, the Watsu Mongdung is largely an Ao organisation they have participated in protest marches organised by the Lothas and such other tribes.<sup>29</sup> However, they are one of the few women's organisations that do not collaborate with the NMA. This may be because of traditional Ao and Angami antagonisms.

The Watsu Mongdung carries out relief work during calamities, man-made or otherwise. They have led protests against any kind of oppression and violence. Once during a combing operation in Mokokchung when the army wanted to separate the men and women, they refused to be separated since they feared that the army would kill the men. Ultimately the army had to interrogate both men and women together and then released most of them.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Interview with Ms. Kheseli, Secretary NMA, 27 January 1999 and 10 October 1999m Kohima and Calcutta.

29 Watsu Mongdani Inyaka Aruba Report, 5 May 1995, Unpublished Report Mokokchung, Nagaland.

30 Interview with Merela Jamir, member of watsu Mongdung, 26 January 1999, Dimapur.

The Watsu Mongdung is not the only group that provides such services. There are other women's groups such as the Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL), which operate both in Nagaland and Manipur. The TSL worked in Ukhrul district. It has its branches in all the Tangkhul Naga villages. In July 1997 after an ambush by the NSCN-IM the Assam Rifles went on a rampage in Ukhrul town beating up the men including schoolteachers. People were so traumatised that life came to a standstill in Ukhrul town. The TSL not only spoke to the army and convinced the to release over forty civilians but also tried to instil confidence among the people of the town and its adjoining villages. They helped the people of the area to return to normal life by requesting the shopkeepers to open their shops. They appealed to the stranded people to go back home which brought back some semblance of normalcy in the town.

In recent years groups such as the NMA, the Watsu Mongdung or the TSL have gained recognition as serious actors in the peace process. Their organised campaigns and rallies have facilitated the cease-fire. They continue working with other Naga organisations to reduce the violence and brutalisation of the Naga society. They actively participate in discussions on peace and human rights. Through their negotiations for peace they have created a niche for themselves in the public sphere.

There are a number of Naga women activists in Manipur whose activities fall within this genre of peace movement. The Naga Women's Union in Manipur has fifteen constituent units and one of the more exceptional ones is Moyon Sanuw Ruwrkheh (MSR). The Moyon tribe inhabits the Chandel district that is in the southeastern part of Manipur. The Moyon women's organisation was formed in 1950 to improve the social status of Moyon women. From April 1994 the Moyon women's organisation included a number of political demands in their annual resolutions. They called for equal right of women to inherit property. They also, began an agitation for women to be in decision-making bodies. These resolutions were brought up for discussions in the Moyon Naga Council and the President of the MSR was given the right to vote. She was the first woman to vote in the elections of the council. In 1997 for the first time a Moyon woman became the speaker of the Assembly of the Naga Moyon Council. No other Naga tribe in Manipur has given their women the right to vote in their Legislative Councils.<sup>31</sup>

The Moyon women are extraordinary in another way as well. These women tried to initiate dialogue with Kuki women living in proximity. Initially they had some success but later the Kuki women activists told them that their men are unwilling to let such a dialogue continue. Notwithstanding the pressures from the men the Kuki women and the representatives of the MSR organised a formal dialogue between the women activists of the two groups. But on the day of the dialogue they were informed through an emissary that it will not take place as the Kukis were unwilling to continue it. The Moyon women are of the opinion that although the Kuki women were willing to dialogue on peace their men felt threatened by such a dialogue. Thus, they stopped their women from attending such dialogues. Even after this set back the MSR have continued their activities towards peace. They established networks with other Naga groups and are trying to organise a women's dialogue between the Isaac-Muvah and the Khaplant factions of the NSCN.

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31 Interview with Gina Shangkham, President MSR, 11 September 1999, Dhulikhel.

They crossed international borders to speak to the leaders of the Khaplang faction. In the process the Border Security Force arrested them. But as a result of interventions by the Chief Ministers of Nagaland and Manipur all charges were dropped. Apart from these sensational endeavours the representatives of MSR organise peace campaigns through awareness raising programmes, seminars and workshops on peace and harmonious co-existence in different localities. They collaborate with other human rights organisations on fact-finding investigations.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from peace activities the Naga Women's Union in Manipur also undertake developmental activities. They campaign for women candidates in Lok Sabha elections. They have begun campaigning for the inclusion of women in Naga village councils. None of the Naga village councils include women as office bearers. This is a source of great disappointment among Naga women. Hence campaign on this issue is a priority for the Naga Women's Union. They also work towards income generation programmes for the women. Their other priority area is to work towards equal wages for women. There is a disparity in wages between male and female workers in Naga society, which the Union seeks to correct.<sup>33</sup> However, their greatest achievement has been over property rights. Traditionally Naga Women do not inherit immovable parental property such as land. But due to the campaigning of these women the Naga tribes in Manipur are slowly trying to correct this discrimination against women. This is possible because the Naga *Hobos* (tribal councils) view this issue favourably and they have also included it in their agenda.

Among Assamese women's movement for peace there is one group that has successfully negotiated for the empowerment of women. The Chapar Anchalik Mahila Samiti for example has been able to make a mark in the political scene of the region. Chapar is largely a rural area. The members of Chapar Anchalik Mahila Samiti organise frequent meetings for women's legal awareness.<sup>34</sup> This group has had substantial influence on the lives of women in Dhubri. Although women's literacy rate is extremely low in Dhubri, women's sex ratio is on of the highest in the state of Assam. There are 950 women to every 1000 men. In 1961 the sex ratio was only 895 women to a thousand men.<sup>35</sup> Such an upward mobility in sex ration normal reflect an improvement in the social position of women. This, however, does not mean a corresponding improvement in the political situation of women. On the basis of an interview with a spokesperson of this group we come to know that there is grater tolerance among the male leadership in the district for women's activities in what they consider the social sphere<sup>36</sup> It may be because the Chapar Anchalik Mahila Samiti makes no political claims. They work towards greater legal awareness of women as well as towards an increase in the literacy rate.

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32 Ibid.

33 "Brief Report of the Naga Women's Union, Manipur," *Raisurang*, no.4 (1998) pp1-4.

34 For an extensive reportage of one of their meetings see *North-East Echo*, 20 June 1997.

35 Sex Ratio 1990-1991, Census of India 1991,

36 Interview with Majila Roy, 21 June 1998.

Such activities are deemed as social work that falls within the feminine realm. Only recently this group has started protesting against violence. As yet they are able to master the support of fifty to sixty women in matter of hours. Although these protests do not last for too long, but still they are becoming a permanent fixture in the political life of women.

From the previous analysis it is apparent that those groups who have a broader definition of peace are more successful than those who think that peace is a political state of affair. The NMA or the Chapar Anchalik Mahila Samity never denies that peace can be achieved when conflict ends. But they also believe that only political solutions cannot bring peace. They work towards a betterment of their own society and in this way they equate peace with justice and development.

### **Women and the Politics for Peace:**

Kumari Jayawardena in her path breaking commentary on feminism and nationalism stated:

Women's movements do not occur in vacuum but correspond to and to some extent are determined by, the wider social movements of which they form a part. The general consciousness of society about itself, its future, its structure and role of men and women entails limitations for the women's movement; its goals and its methods of struggle are generally determined by those limits.<sup>37</sup>

This is true in so far as the Northeast is concerned. But there is also another reality. Women's initiatives are not just determined by but also determine wider social movements. The plethora of issue based peace movements in Assam portray not only active opposition to women's initiatives and their alienation from institutional politics but also their indomitable spirit and their ability to innovative in difficult situations whereby they are able to channel their energy into local peace movements. There is logic behind their sporadic movements. These are the types of movement that the majoritarian political power structures tolerate. Hence there is a constant recurrence of such movements. These sporadic movements occur in regular intervals.

The case of the Meira Paibies in Manipur is completely different. Here women have tried to collaborate with the rebels without taking a critical stand. Thus their movement is considered as part of the insurgencies. Even though these women work for peace they have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the state who criticise their dharnas, which allegedly protest only against state sponsored violence. This affects them in a number of ways. They are unable to mediate for peace between the state and the rebels. Only in factional politics do they have some role to play.

But since the major conflicts are state vs. community they in no way are able to influence the course of this conflict. However, through these activities they have learnt the strategies of Organising for political protest which many women's groups such as those in Meghalaya lack.

The numerous Naga women's peace groups and some peace groups in Assam have however, successfully maintained their independent stand. They have convinced all the parties in the politics of peace that they are not to be dictated by any specific faction. Most of these women retain their belief in their *Cause*. But their actions show that they are on the side of peace. They want to achieve their goals through political actions and not through brutalisation of society. Women's peace groups in Nagaland have achieved enormous success. They have become an important and necessary component of the Naga *Hohos*. Yet even the state machinery is not averse to using them for purposes of peace. There are a number of reasons for the success achieved by the Naga women. The Naga women have been able to situate their political manoeuvres within their traditional roles. Peace to them is not just a political phenomenon it is also economic and social. They believe that without development there cannot be peace and here they differ from the majoritarian attitude towards peace. They call for a just peace that will result in equity and they equate it with progress.

The Naga women also successfully mix social work with their political actions. Whenever they face political opposition they shift their focus and work on issues of health, de-addiction and rights of women. Their involvement in developmental activities has increased their effectiveness and their acceptance in Naga society. The same is true for Chapar women in Assam. Even in a state where women's political initiatives face rigid opposition the Chapar women have portrayed that under the guise of social work women can negotiate spaces in the public sphere.

The experiences in the Northeast portray that if women are successful in defining peace making, as a women's job then they are not severely challenged. The experiences of Nagaland show that through peacemaking women are able to negotiate spaces in the public sphere. This recognition then helps them in their other negotiations such as the reworking of property rights. Women's negotiations for peace have the potential to change the situation of women even in traditional societies. It also leads to a democratization of society in as much as democracy can be equated with social justice. Therefore women not only redefine peace but their own situation is also redefined by the politics of peace.