

THE PERIPHERAL CENTRE

VOICES FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST



EDITED BY
PREETI GILL



When Thangjam Manorama was arrested and killed by the Assam Rifles in July 2004 in Manipur, it unleashed a protest the likes of which no one had witnessed. In some ways this was one of the triggers for this collection—to provide a space to women and men from the “Northeast” to tell us about the issues that confronted them daily, to talk about the pressures, the insecurities, the uncertainties confronting them in an area that has been facing low intensity warfare for decades. It is now many years since that incident but it is an image that has stayed in the mind, transformed into an icon of protest in the popular imagination.

The anger and the frustrations of the Manipuri women who staged that dramatic protest after Manorama's killing have in many ways been vindicated. In fact, each essay in this book brings to mind that troubling image, each contributor points to the Manipuri women, holding them up as a flag of rebellion, of protest, of questioning. Each essay questions issues of nation, identity, of what makes the people of the Northeast so alienated from the “mainstream”—some do it in a straightforward way and some refer to it obliquely. Many of the contributors are writers, academics or activists from the Northeast but there are many who are, like the editor, “outsiders”. But “outsiders” who share a passion for the region and an intense desire to see change, to see peace.

This anthology seeks to give voice to the many issues and concerns that have emerged as a result of the last three decades (and more) of conflict and violence that has besieged the seven states of India's Northeast. These conflicts have been intense and protracted and have had devastating and long-term effects on local communities. The impact has been particularly complex for women who have faced greater violations against their persons at the hands of the State's armed forces as well as exploitation by non state actors. All the articles in this volume are intensely personal responses to what is happening in the Northeast, to the changes, the growing asymmetries and faultlines that are causing enormous rifts in the region. The essays, first person accounts and interviews present a picture of what it means to live in the Northeast.

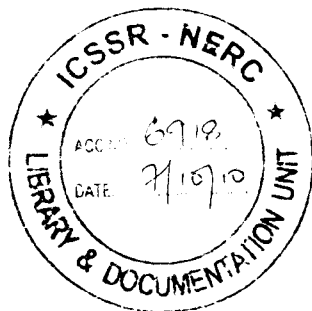
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The Peripheral Centre
Voices from India's Northeast



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Editor





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Introduction

Engaging with the Northeast: The 'outsider' looks 'in'

PREETI GILL

*Why did we think it was trivial
that it would rain every summer,
that nights would be still with sleep
and that the green fern would uncurl
ceaselessly, by the roadside.*

*Why did we think survival was simple,
that river and field would stand forever
invulnerable, even to the dreams of strangers,
for we knew where the sun lay resting
in the folded silence of the hills.*

*This summer it rains more than ever.
The footfall of soldiers is drowned and scattered.
In the hidden exchange of news we hear
that weapons are multiplying in the forest.*

*The jungle is a big eater,
hiding terror in the carnivorous green.
Why did we think ritual gods would survive
deathless in memory,*

*in trees and stones and the sleep of babies;
Now, when we close our eyes
and cease to believe, god dies.¹*

I would like to begin my introduction with a poem by Mamang Dai, one of the finest poets and writers from the Northeast. The poem is called 'Remembrance' and as you read it you are almost transported to that part of India that is called, for lack of a better term, "the Northeast". A region of green hills and lush valleys, of incessant rain, of dark deep forests, of mighty rivers, a region resonating with a deep silence. A silence that in much of this region now stands shattered by the sound of guns and a host of armed militancies. The poem, to me, embodies all that is the best in that region and all that is slowly dying and changing.

As Mamang says, will the traditional values systems, the ritual gods of these states survive the onslaught of guns, insurgency, counter insurgency, state and non state violence? A whole way of life is dying, slowly melting away into the shadows of the unknown. I feel that the Northeast region is at this sort of cusp—the old is giving way to the new, new beliefs, new dispensations, new power elites, new divisions and, of course, new alignments—it is a very difficult transition; made even more traumatic by internal conflicts and animosities that have been simmering for decades and are now on the boil.

Of course I do not belong to the Northeast and so my gaze is definitely that of the "outsider", an empathetic one who has a huge interest in the region, has travelled there extensively, and has had some experience of working on issues related to conflict and to women. I do not intend this to be an apology for being an outsider but rather as a personal response to the region referred to as the Northeast, and to the many issues of national significance that each one of us outsiders must engage with because we are 'Indian'. In fact I do think that many more outsiders should write about the Northeast, should visit the region, engage with the people and make their opinions and voices heard. But first what is this Northeast? And at what level does the outsider engage with the Northeast and the many complexities that make up the region? A region that is so far away in terms of physical, as well as

every other kind of distance, in accessibility, cultural affinity, etc., that it seems distant from the hearts and minds of many Indians with its lush landscape, its local people who, in the eyes of many of their countrywomen and men, look completely different racially.

Actually the label "Northeast" is meaningless and inappropriate—it's a label that scholars and locals object to vociferously. The expression entered the Indian lexicon in 1971. Like other directional place names (e.g. the Far East, the Middle East), "Northeast India" reflects an external and not a local point of view. In fact, I am told that in none of the local languages does any word exist that has this effect of lumping together seven or eight very disparate states, each individual in its cultures, ethnicities, physical contours etc., and certainly very distinct in the nature of its problems. In fact, as Sanjib Baruah points out,² "People tend to use the English term even when speaking or writing in a local language. Unlike place names that evoke cultural or historical memory, the term "Northeast India" cannot easily become the emotional focus of a collective political project." Dominant stereotypes about the northeast region persist which often just reinforce the images we have of these very troubled lands which are beautiful but fraught with conflict. And certainly, as Baruah points out,³ Northeast India's troubled post colonial history does not sit very comfortably with the standard narrative of democracy in India.

The North East Region (NER) comprising eight states, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and the latest entrant, Sikkim, has been one of the most continuously militarized regions of India since independence. During the 1990s, in terms of numbers, there has been one soldier for every ten civilians in the region.⁴ The common problems of economic underdevelopment, exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation and changing demographic profiles in the states of the region have provided fertile ground for the growth of local militancies, many of which later turned into popular secessionist movements. (Today, however, it is an acknowledged fact that most of these so-called independist movements no longer enjoy the support of the common people. Their support

bases have dwindled with them having degraded into armed groups seeking to extort money and power by various illegitimate means.)

There is a widespread perception of neglect and exploitation by the Centre, New Delhi and local people believe that the 'colonial exploitation' of the wealth of this region has ensured that the region lags behind the national average in terms of development indices. (It is important to point out here that poor governance is as much a reason for underdevelopment as is the atmosphere of conflict and insecurity.) The Shukla Commission which was constituted by the Government of India in 1996 especially to look into the under-development of the region, observed that there are four deficits that confront the states of the Northeast.⁵ These are: a basic needs deficit, an infrastructural deficit, a resource deficit and a two-way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country. The NER People's Vision 2020 document released in 2008⁶ is much more detailed and speaks of a number of other deficits which need to be addressed if the Northeast is to catch up with the rest of the country in terms of economic growth and development indices. The stress in this document is on all round development of the northeastern states with connectivity, infrastructure development and self-governance being the cornerstones of the development agenda.

There is a sense of deep deprivation which has been the basis of much of the unrest and violence that the region has been witnessing over the last fifty years. Most states have been besieged by three to five decades of armed conflicts which range from demands for self-determination and greater autonomy to assertions of complete secession from India, and a look at the recent past in Assam, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur provides ample evidence of the way this has affected the lives of local populations.

In Assam this unrest was a result of the anti-foreigner movement that lasted for six years and saw much violence unleashed on vulnerable minority populations by numerous insurgent groups that became active in the region on this issue. In Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, secessionist movements became very violent due to a number of reasons, further aggravated by the harsh measures undertaken by the Indian armed security personnel engaged in 'counter insurgency operations' and the imposition of a

number of oppressive laws, like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act 1958 (TADA), National Security Act 1980 (NSA), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act 1967 (UAP), and of course the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958. All these draconian measures have contributed to aggravating the prevailing ground realities in these volatile states. In Nagaland and the Naga dominated areas of Manipur, the conflict is based on their refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Indian state, while in Mizoram it was the neglect and apathy of the Indian government's response to the devastating famine of 1959 that led to the Mizo movement for independence. In addition, in Manipur and in Assam, strong ethnic rivalries have played a major part in the violence and insecurity that has engulfed the region. In Tripura the insurgency erupted over land tenancy rights because the land holdings of indigenous tribes have been reduced to less than thirty per cent of the total land. The fear of being swamped by immigrant Bengali settlers, who have come across the border, is a very real one and the splintering and factionalism in the many insurgent groups that 'rule' Tripura has led to much violence in the state making it a very difficult task even to access the villages and get data on the kinds and intensity of the violence that is being unleashed against vulnerable populations. There is large scale migration from rural areas to cities due to this all-pervasive fear and insecurity.

The dominant popular image of this region is one of countless insurgencies where Indian soldiers are engaged in the defence of the 'nation'. People in the Northeast *are* different,⁷ physically, culturally, in their religious affiliation etc., and this just underlines the fact of the divide that exists between the region and the rest of the country. It is true that there is a real lack of information about the region in "mainstream" India. There is a lack of knowledge about the ground realities of people's lives and of what is actually happening in many parts of the Northeast. Often the only access to information is through press reports, and the media focuses on specific issues that are often picked up because of their political nature. So you read of bomb blasts in Guwahati or Nagaland, or of counter insurgency measures in Assam or Manipur and so on but not stories about real people, real life situations on

the ground, the day to day struggles of people, the issues that engage them. Also, and very importantly, this has further strengthened and cemented the borders and the distances that exist between people of the Northeast and the so called “mainland”.

When Thangjam Manorama was arrested and killed by the Assam Rifles in July 2004 in Manipur, it unleashed a protest the likes of which no one had witnessed. In some ways this was one of the triggers for this collection—to provide a space to women and men from the Northeast to tell us about the issues that confront them daily, to talk to us about the pressures, the insecurities, the uncertainties in an area that has been facing low intensity warfare for decades. It is now many years since that incident⁸ but it is an image that has stayed in the mind, transformed into an icon of protest in the popular imagination. The anger and the frustrations of the Manipuri women who staged that dramatic protest after Manorama’s killing have in many ways been vindicated—for how can anyone forget that searing picture? In fact, each essay in this book brings to mind that troubling image, each contributor points to the Manipuri women, holding them up as a flag of rebellion, of protest, of questioning. Each essay looks at issues of the nation, of identity, of what makes the people of the Northeast so alienated from the “mainstream”—some do it in a straightforward way and some refer to it obliquely. Many of the contributors are writers, academics or activists from the Northeast but there are many who are like me—outsiders. But we share a passion for the region and an intense desire to see change, to see peace. The volume has not been divided into sections but the pieces are all intensely personal responses to what is happening in the Northeast, to the changes, the growing asymmetries and faultlines and it is in this light that I would like the different pieces to be looked at. They talk of a host of issues, of troubling images and yet do come together into presenting us with a sort of composite picture of what it means to live in the Northeast.

A second trigger for me personally was a visit to Nagaland a couple of years ago when, in the course of my travels through some Chakesang villages close to Kohima, I met many people whose ordinary, everyday lives had been changed irrevocably by what had happened in the state. I learnt that each family in Nagaland

has a story to tell, of personal loss, of bereavement, of physical and emotional trauma. Simply listening to their stories was a humbling experience because for many of them it was the very first time that anyone actually listened to them, actually heard their stories. Many of these are stories that the world outside does not know, has not heard, that have been silenced and marginalized. If indeed documentation does work as political intervention, then these are stories that we must hear so that there is mutual understanding and respect among communities. Perhaps this volume will help in mapping some of the trauma and tragedy of an entire region and to open up the region, in howsoever limited a manner, to the outsider. Perhaps it will work like a widening gyre, a spiral that is opening up and revealing stories and experiences of a little known region.

Analysts say war and civil conflict can be devastating to social and cultural forms because they impinge at the level of the whole society and every person who has survived conflict is aware of the wide ranging ramifications that this atmosphere of violence and insecurity has on them. It takes people and society a long time to come to terms with what has happened, is happening around them. Let me recount here a story that a young woman whom I met in Dimapur told me it. It is a story that has stayed with me. One day, when their village was being bombed by the Indian Airforce, this little girl, a mere baby was hidden away in the hollow of a tree by her mother. The mother was fleeing from the burning village and as she ran she hid her precious bundle inside a tree thinking she would come and retrieve her baby once it was safe. It was three days before she could do so. As the child lay alone in the dark, hungry and frightened, waiting for her mother, what must she have thought of? What kind of impact would this have had on her young mind? The incident haunted her and as soon as she was able she decided to join the Naga National Front of which her father too was a part. It was only much later that she learnt to come to terms with these terrible memories, learnt forgiveness and turned to the church, and made her place with the violent past she had lived through.

This anthology has been a long time in the making, for various reasons among which are the distances, the poor communication

network, the rapidly changing political landscape and new developments everyday, making contributors return again and again to their articles. For me, as the editor of this volume, putting it together has been a process of constant learning—learning about little known histories and of peoples from the margins, the frontiers—with all the attendant complexities and insecurities that that implies. As publishers and as feminist publishers it is important that we engage with these histories, with these voices from the ‘margins’. It is for all these reasons that this is an important publication for it is looking at the experience of conflict that both women and men have been facing in this region. Women, of course, are even more vulnerable than men at such times with greater restrictions placed on them, their mobility, their access to health, education, livelihood, employment, even leisure. When we envisaged this volume it was all of these issues that we set out to explore through the telling of personal stories, or personal perspectives of a political situation and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to this volume.

To say that women have faced violence in situations of conflict is to state the obvious but what it means in terms of the short-term and long-term impacts is something that is still being studied and analysed. While the most obvious impact is physical or sexual violence, the psychological scarring as a result of prolonged exposure to brutality and the restrictions placed on women in a patriarchal society have even greater consequences for their well-being. And this in turn impacts the whole society; it deeply wounds the whole community and destroys much more than individual lives. Women find themselves at the receiving end of violence on three fronts, from the state, the militants and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes. The effects of violent acts like rape, sexual abuse and physical assault and abuse has led to deep psychological and emotional trauma and a very high incidence of what is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Women have to cope with the realities of daily life—they are responsible as mothers of the children, the hurt and the wounded, who are innocent victims to conflicts not of their creation. They are the wives of injured, disabled or missing men, the soldiers of

warring factions and the state. They suffer as civilians with their freedoms curtailed and shackled. They are assaulted, beaten, humiliated, raped and murdered during conflicts. The loss that women face in conflict time is not just emotional, or physical in terms of losing a loved one, but also transfers into the economic and social spheres.

Most women experience a decline in social legitimacy and find themselves relegated to the fringes of society with no one to care for them or to speak on their behalf. Since they form the bulk of the unemployed and the uneducated, women find themselves ill-equipped to take on the burden of the household and as a result become completely poverty stricken. Young widows are forced to head households even though in a patriarchal feudal set-up they have little or no access to land and property. Interviews have shown that during and in the aftermath of violence and conflict there is an increase in female-headed households as many men are killed in encounters or raids or have simply 'disappeared'. In most tribal societies, the economic burden is generally considered the sole responsibility of women and for this reason, perhaps, women get very little help from their own menfolk or from the state in the reconstruction of lives after conflict. Many of these issues have been explored and commented upon by writers in this anthology but to say that it is only the women who have suffered is to deny the wrongs and indignities suffered by the other half of the population.

Food scarcity, destruction of infrastructure and basic facilities like water, roads, bridges, hospitals, shelters and farmlands have an impact on the entire social structure of the community. The devastation of the natural environment, too, has serious repercussions since in times of conflict with the men engaged elsewhere, the women often have to take on the role of food providers and caretakers. What this means is then a complete turning on its head of the known circumstances, the known life and exchanging it for the unknown, the uncertain, the insecure, and the dangerous. What does this mean to people, to women forced to leave the familiar, known environments, their villages and towns for other unfamiliar places? How does this experience affect them and their

future generations? What sort of memories do these children of families constantly on the run, have of their childhoods? Does this dislocation mean a destruction of the very fabric of normal life? Of traditional structures?

In a conflict area, spaces, especially women's spaces, become restricted and their mobility severely hampered. People are unable to work long hours in their fields, being forced to go in groups for fear of assault from armed security personnel or armed groups. Fewer hours in the field means that food security gets affected. Most of the country's development schemes and programmes have made little inroads into these remote hill areas and although the central government has poured millions of rupees into development, there is little evidence of its use.

Often women's bodies become the site of battle with innumerable instances of atrocities and brutality—we have references to these in articles here. Women who lose their 'honour' find it extremely difficult to lead normal lives and live down the stigma. In such a scenario does the code of social conduct that once ensured 'normality' and what was once understood as 'normal' behaviour suddenly get turned on its head? There are no rules anymore—there is a total breakdown of socially sanctioned behaviour and of structures, so, does the role of the State become blurred? Is it still perceived as the protector of the weak and the vulnerable? The arbitrator of right and wrong? Or does the State too turns adversary and violator? And when the State abdicates its responsibilities, do alternate groups 'take over' the space?

These were some of the questions that I wanted to look at but as the pieces were commissioned and started to come in, the volume and the writing of it seemed to assume a life of its own, so much so that now we have personal pieces where each writer is dealing with these issues in a very individual way, reacting and writing and engaging with the 'problems' from their own perspectives and in the process providing us, the readers, with information and an opening up that is unexpected and thought-provoking.

Through much of its post-colonial history, insurgencies and counter insurgency operations have been a part of the fabric of everyday life in Northeast India with militarization having become 'a

way of life' in the region. The volume begins with Sanjib Baruah's extremely well written, somewhat provocative piece that also works here as a sort of introduction to the Northeast (should we require one), a region that a recent World Bank report describes as "a victim of a low-level equilibrium where poverty and lack of development lead to civil conflict, lack of belief in political leadership and government, and, therefore, to a politically unstable situation. This in turn leads to further barriers to poverty reduction, accelerated development and growth". According to Baruah, "the deficits of democracy, development and peace are best explained by Northeast India's history as a frontier and by the lack of Indian policy-makers to see the contradictions rooted in this context". He goes on to propose the term "post frontier" around which a context sensitive alternate policy framework can be developed. As an illustration of what this paradigm might look like he proposes the institution of multilevel citizenship to replace ethnic homelands as a more democratic way of managing indigenous-settler tensions in the long run.

The second piece is more personal with Sumi Krishna describing her journeys through Northeast India in the '70s when she was stirred by the spectacular landscapes, charmed by the friendship of its peoples and naively optimistic about the future of these seven newly formed states. Over the next three decades she sees how uneasily national and state identities wrought by the legacy of colonial geography and post independence policies sit on these multiethnic societies that are poised at different stages of development. She concludes that, "In a contested and gendered terrain where the struggle to preserve cultural specificities is up against the larger homogenizing universals of the Indian state, political and developmental options are limited."

In another intensely personal piece Sanjoy Hazarika agonises over the horror of the worst ethnic carnage in Assam, the killing fields of Nellie in 1983 where more than 1700 people lost their lives. Hazarika takes this as symbolic of the growing divides in Assam between settlers and the indigenous, between tribals and non tribals, between one tribe and another, between those of one religious faith, not to speak of political ideology, and another. According to him it encapsulates the growing feeling of mistrust

and suspicion of the 'other'—a feeling that is growing more widespread and more contentious with time. In fact, later in the anthology when Tilottoma Misra refers to the Nellie incident in her piece about literature reflecting real life she makes a very perceptive and troubling comment on the 'silencing' of the middle class: "The Assamese middle class was so shaken and silenced by the extent of brutality committed on that day at Nellie that an undeclared censorship seems to have been imposed on all discussions on the subject. The government too seems to be fearful of the possible fallout of such discussions even in intellectual circles."

In her piece on the insurgency scene in Arunachal Pradesh Mamang Dai talks of the insidious growth of armed groups that have infiltrated the state which was till fairly recently considered safe and untouched by the insurgencies and ethnic rifts that divide most of the states of the Northeast. With the entry of the NSCN (K) and more recently NSCN (IM) today, she says, Tirap and Changlang districts have become the battleground for Naga insurgents where simple villagers are being "brainwashed and terrorized". Further complicating the insurgency menace in Arunachal Pradesh is the demand for the integration of Naga territories and the extension of ceasefire to "Naga inhabited areas".

Rupa Chinai has two articles in this collection. The first, "From a Reporter's Diary" is a personal, extremely evocative account of her engagement with the people of Northeast India during the course of her travels there over the last 25 years. Not too many people from "mainland" India have had a chance to visit the Northeast and to engage with the people of the region and as a consequence our knowledge of the area is sketchy at best. She describes the first stirrings of the nascent Bodo movement that later snowballed into a violent conflagration engulfing the lives of so many. All over the Northeast today, she feels, one sees the consequences of people who have been pushed against a wall. She echoes Sanjoy Hazarika's words, "People take to arms when pushed to the wall." In her second essay she looks at the state of women's reproductive health in Nagaland's inaccessible outlying villages and districts and brings to us a picture of neglect and poverty, the lack of infrastructure, of adequate data and the appalling sense of hopelessness. She ends her piece with this dismal forecast: "With geography, ideas of

race and 'mainstream' indifference stacked against them, Nagaland remains a mirror to how India in its march towards 'development' and 'health for all' treats the most marginalized segments of its population. And it appears unlikely that the voices of the beleaguered women will be heard anytime soon."

Roshmi Goswami describes the birth of the women's movements and women's activism in Manipur and Assam where women have reacted strongly against the many issues confronting them. The Meira Paibis, for example during workshops and seminars came out strongly against domestic violence resulting from alcoholism but the control of the drug mafia and the nexus between them in gun-running was either not mentioned or was only talked about in strict confidence. The women wanted peace but seemed to know where negotiations would not be possible. The women spoke out strongly about being targeted during search operations, about their vulnerability as 'shelter providers' and the pressure on them to be keepers of the faith and of community values. In all of the discussions however even among the most vocal groups, there seemed to be a line beyond which the women were hesitant to venture. Due to the armed conflict situation in the region there has always been a lot of human rights activism in these states and the human rights discourse is firmly embedded in the region's political landscape. Because the political situation has often resulted in civil and political rights violations, the focus of human rights activism has primarily been on civil and political rights. The challenge for feminists and for any women's rights organizations has therefore been: how does one articulate and negotiate that women's rights are human rights? What kind of peace do women envisage and what roles, if any, can women play in peace negotiations and peace processes? Elsewhere in this volume too this finds resonance: women have the greatest stake in peace but their presence in peace-brokering is non-existent. The reality is that women are not considered a decisive constituency in conflict resolution either by the state or non-state agencies but that they have had their uses and have been exploited by both in the role of go-betweens, healers and pacifiers.

Sanjeeb Kakoty's piece on Khasi borderlanders is most interesting because he describes to us a strange fallout of the partition

of India. For the borderland people of Northeast India who share an incredible 96 per cent of their borders with other countries, the redrawing of national boundaries has extracted a harsh price. People on either side of the artificial divide share a long history of kindred language, ethnicity, culture and economic inter dependence and so this redrawing seems like an aberration to natural justice and wisdom. Migration here reflects a much older reality than national maps. An artificial border has transformed honest, hardworking people into smugglers and habitual law-breakers according to Kakoty: "Anger at the denial to cultivate their own fields, dumbstruck at being made landless paupers in their own homes, disallowed to engage in simple barter and trade to sustain themselves, anguished at being denied the right to propitiate the spirits that reside in the sacred groves, the life of the borderlanders in India's Northeast is unenviable."

Rahul Goswami, another 'outsider' who spent considerable time doing a study on tourism development in the village of Khonoma describes the socio economic realities of a Naga village as well as its cultural life. Khonoma is a historic village near Kohima, the only village said to have held out against the British, this is Z A Phizo's (the pioneer of the Naga National Movement) village. The economy is primarily agrarian and it is balancing precariously its own traditional, institution driven methods of conservation and natural resource management against its need to channel its youth into productive activities: "When fundamental freedoms are often placed under threat in the region and a basic exchange of ideas and experiences is hampered by the continued absence of infrastructure, the routines and processes of enterprise often recede into the background. To treat them as unimportant however is to do the region's inhabitants a disservice, for they are enterprising and hardworking under extremely difficult circumstances."

Both Deepti Priya Mehrotra and N Vijaylakshmi look at Meitei women's activism and the drama inherent in the protests launched by these women's groups. "These women's groups oppose militarization and AFSPA. They also take up issues specific to women such as rape and molestation. The Meira Paibis are transparently and uncompromisingly pitted against state violence."

The women, in both instances taken up in these articles, are clearly challenging militarization and specifically the violence faced by ordinary citizens at the hands of the state's armed security forces but the means that the women adopt are somewhat extraordinary. Two extreme, dramatic acts are the object of focus: the fast undertaken by Irom Sharmila, a quiet, hitherto unknown, young woman who has been fasting for the last almost ten years. This is "the longest political fast known to human history". The second act is the public disrobing by a collective of middle aged women in front of the Kangla Fort (the headquarters of the Assam Rifles) in protest against the custodial death (the rape and murder) of Thangjam Manorama. Both acts were born of intense pain, anger and helplessness and succeeded in drawing the attention of public and media across the country to the critical issues of state violence and the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.

These searing images led to outrage in the national and regional media with a number of well known and respected voices shouting out in protest. Some of these have been gathered together here and presented as a mosaic beginning with the report filed by Manorama's brother with the Committee set up by the Government of India to look into the demand for repeal of AFSPA and the number of instances of rape, custodial deaths, violence faced by the people of Manipur. The other outraged voices are those of Urvashi Butalia, well known writer and publisher, feminist and activist, Pradip Phanjubam, journalist and editor, Kalpana Sharma, journalist, editor, activist writer; Monisha Behel activist, researcher, Monalisa Chagkija, newspaper editor and publisher, and Nitin Gokhale, now a correspondent with NDTV. Once again all these are intensely personal pieces and all reflect civil society's 'engagement' with burning issues.

There are many other issues that this volume focuses on: Monica Banerjee writes about strengthening civil society networks in her paper on "Conflicts and Constructive Work" and one of the most critical and difficult questions she poses is: How strong is civil society in the Northeast? While there are numerous Mahila Samitis, Youth Clubs, traditional charity organizations and dynamic students unions and women's movements what these institutions reflect more than anything else is the region's belief in

community institutions, what needs to be debated is how best these can be used to “diminish the region’s conflict-ridden character”. Having demonstrated their considerable leadership skills, leadership roles and participation in formal political structures should have come easy to these women but ironically the reality is just the reverse. In keeping with traditional customs women do not find a place for themselves in traditional institutions of governance be it the Dorbars of Meghalaya, Village Development Councils of Nagaland or the village councils of Arunachal Pradesh. It is because of this that subsequent structures of democratic governance seldom see women contesting and participating in elective politics. Connecting with this Temsula Ao advocates for change in the status of Naga women so that a more balanced partnership may evolve, one that may force women to take on decision-making roles in society and may even empower them to enter the political arena—a move that would face vehement opposition, she feels, not just from men who are happy with tokenisms, but also from the women “who are still traditionalists at heart and would be happy to continue in the state of ‘benevolent subordination’ rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the mindset of men so strongly entrenched in their age old belief in male superiority”.

Esther Syiem and Lal Dena write on similar issues. Esther describes the interesting paradoxes inherent in Khasi matrilineal society and highlights the inherent contradictions in a system that elevates women but is powerless to help them in their multiple subjugations. She says that, “Now there is another changeover threatening to destabilise the matrilineal system as strident voices express a desire to revert to a more familiar patriarchal system. The Khasi matriarchal system is being interrogated and problematised as never before.” Women according to her have constantly sifted and sublimated their dreams of self-expression and the articulation of their deepest secrets and fears. Interestingly there has been no woman writer among the Khasis (there are many poets though) for even within this matriarchal system it seems that the stimulant for self-expression through the written word seems to have been denied to women. The family is obviously the most important unit of Khasi community life and to guard this is

crucial: "There are circles within circles to guard the stability of the family and to keep the clan intact. The clan still functions as an important yardstick of one's Khasiness...A network of clan relationships holds Khasi society together and gives it its uniqueness." There are a number of Khasi women's organisations in different parts of the Khasi-Jaintia hills, both in rural and urban areas. The (Ka)Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei was formed in 1992 as the coordinating body for 24 affiliated women's organizations of various localities of Shillong and its suburbs. Traditionally Khasi women were not allowed to attend the Dorbars or local village/ clan councils, however today, there are localities, especially in urban areas, where this is changing and women not only attend dorbars but freely articulate their views.

Lal Dena makes a somewhat similar comparison when talking about the status of Mizo women in contemporary Mizo society: The basic contention being that Mizo society is patriarchal in nature and tends to push women into traditional familial roles. It is interesting to note that Mizo women have recently formed the Mizo Hmeichchia Inzawmkhawn Pawl (MHIP) spearheading the movement for the emancipation and welfare of womenfolk.

In her article "Women writing in times of Violence" Tillotoma Misra discusses the literary representation of traumatic experience and the mind's ability to choose what it desires to remember. The stories and poems she chooses capture some traumatic moments and though they may not be considered as 'great literature' in a society that has been silenced and numbed by a neurotic fear of political violence and retributive justice, these voices do register some form of protest. She makes the point that, "Recent theorists of trauma say that it is precisely because of the uncertain nature of literary discourse that it is capable of transporting us through those regions of the wounded psyche which no historical narrative can reach effectively". This ties up with Dr P Ngully's short article on "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder". Dr Ngully is a well known Naga psychiatrist who has been studying PTSD in Nagaland—he is among the very few doctors to have done so and according to him the sight of a uniformed person evokes fear and terror in the village people (of Nagaland) who have rarely seen any other face of

India barring the army or the paramilitary forces, which they associate with harassment and violent behaviour.

In the clutch of health related issues confronting the North-east, three are explored here at some length, PTSD in Nagaland (by Dr Ngully who worked at the Kohima Mental Hospital), the spread of HIV AIDS in the region (by Shyamala Shiveshwarkar) and the state of reproductive health in Nagaland (by Rupa Chinai). The three together provide a view into the health of these states. As Rupa Chinai puts it, "These small communities, among the most marginalized on the Indian map, provide a rare insight into what is going wrong with India's public health policy and programmes." Continued violence especially in the rural areas has also resulted in large-scale migration of young women to urban centres. This leads to a number of problems because suddenly the women find themselves cut-off from their tribes, their village and their cultural moorings. Without any kind of effective support system they became extremely vulnerable to violence and exploitation. It has been found that this has led to women being sexually exploited and even trafficked for work or for sex. The incidence of HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, alcohol and substance abuse increases substantially in such a situation. According to Dr P Ngully, "It is authentically not possible to say as I haven't done any research myself, but generally speaking, conflict does cause a lot of stress. In order to relieve the stress many turn to alcohol or drugs as these substances help to mask the stress."⁵ The feminization of the AIDS epidemic is becoming all too apparent, says Shayamla Shiveshwarkar, with critical linkages emerging between drugs, violence, gender inequalities at the individual, family and social levels and women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The increased vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS in situations of conflict is an area of growing concern to social and health activists in the region. The presence of armed forces in large numbers increases the demand for sex work and since there are no designated red light areas in the cities and towns it is difficult to know which high-vulnerability communities to target for HIV interventions. A number of young women get sucked into sex work or drug trafficking because of loss of economic options and increased poverty as a result of the long standing conflict situation. "The greatest factor

for vulnerability is also that these women are in no position to demand safe sex or negotiate condom use.”⁶

Mitra Phukan’s piece, provocatively subtitled “Who Killed Mother Teresa?” raises some uncomfortable questions about the ‘children of the conflict’ and about what is happening to the youth of these conflict afflicted states. What effect has this had on an entire generation that has been born under the shadow of the gun? This is what has happened in the Northeast, and where people were once peace-loving, they are now getting inured to violent acts. Indeed, she says, this is inevitable, for unless one grows a hard shell around one’s sensitivities, how is it going to be possible to survive the emotional trauma caused by daily reports, and first hand knowledge of extortions, killings and kidnappings? She makes another point which needs careful thought: “For almost two decades now, the demand made by ULFA for a sovereign and independent state has meant that citizens fear raising the national flag on Independence and Republic Day. As a result children have grown up not knowing what these signify and having completely lost the positive effect on nation-building and unity that these occasions commemorate.” Instead what they have inherited is fear, insecurity and indifference. She questions what this means for the future of the state and, indeed, for the nation.

Nandini Thockchom’s detailed history of the Meira Paibi movement especially in the present context brings into focus once again the power that women in the Northeast have traditionally enjoyed and the public space they occupy. (It also connects with other articles on women’s movements in the Northeast like those by Roshmi Goswami, Monica Banerjee.) The powerful image of these women patrolling the streets with lit torches seems to light up this volume. These are ordinary women who traditionally shoulder the responsibility for the safety and well-being of the community. Tens of thousands of them have been actively involved in these protests, bandhs, road closures, public meetings, demonstrations, hunger strikes and mass rallies.

What V Sawmveli and Ashley Tellis do in their paper is to map the role that Christianity, in the form of the various churches that operate in the region, plays in situations of conflict and ask questions regarding the negotiation of political conflict by Christianity

both in Mizoram and the region as a whole. Christianity has a long history in the region—it first came in the nineteenth century through the pioneering efforts of Catholic, Presbyterian and Baptist missionaries and by the end of the colonial period large parts of the Northeast were entirely Christian. It is undeniable that Christianity came to stay in the region and has played and continues to play a very important role in the life of the people here. While, in general, women agreed that the church's role in negotiating peace is crucial they were loath to acknowledge that its absence from the peace process might be a problem and according to Tellis and Sawmvelli this may have to do with the deeply embedded misogyny and patriarchal devaluation of women in Mizo culture. The fact that women did not have a major role in the peace process does not mean that they did not pay a high price during the struggle: the mass rape of women by the Indian army during the period is not a narrative that one hears in accounts of the Mizo peace process. This can be seen as another kind of silencing. The moral and community policing that was effected by the MNF is in many ways no less a violation of women than the violent excesses of the Indian state. This was and continues to be a terrorizing from within according to the writers.

Both Sumita Ghose and Easterine Iralu write of personal loss and tragedy and of coming to terms with this. They are pieces courageous in their writing and serve to bring home even more forcefully the turmoil in these states and the ways in which they have wrought havoc on people's personal and public lives. Easterine writes, "Different emotions went through me as I washed the bloodstained shirt of a young man who had been shot a few hours earlier on a busy weekday in a bustling town. The red of his blood stained the white of my bathroom floor and my tears fell into that redness....I am grateful that blood is coloured red." She prays that her people will find the strength and the humility to change the deadly course they are on. Sumita Ghose wrote her piece almost ten years ago, just a few month after her husband, Sanjoy Ghose, was abducted by ULFA terrorists from the river island of Majuli in Assam. They were 'outsiders' to the island but in a short span of time made numerous friends among people who were fired (like them) with a passion to save their island from land erosion and

poverty. Her piece “Dealing with Conflict and Violence” was written from a position of “retreat and reflection” she says. According to her this was a retreat not *from* anything but within herself, in an effort to make sense of what had happened; and to find herself again.

The last and concluding chapter of the volume is devoted to a series of interviews. The ‘Voices’ of four strong women who have made a difference—unsung heroines. The voices of the women of the Northeast who have dared to change their own lives and of those around them by courageously stepping beyond the boundaries laid down by traditional patriarchies and inherited beliefs by exploring new frontiers. Theirs are the voices raised in protest, in celebration, in hope; voices that need to be heard in order to build understanding of a largely unknown history.

From Manipur we have Ima Thockchom Ramani Devi, a simple, down-to-earth elderly woman well-known in the region for the many battles she and her group have waged in the cause of peace and women’s empowerment. She talks about the arrest of innocent Manipuri youth, the formation of the women’s vigil group, the Meira Paibis, and even before that the Nishabandi andolan. These strong women are out there on the streets preventing bloodshed and violence from spreading. They don’t “allow men to come out as they are caught and killed...Today the number of men is reducing because they are being killed everyday...The army was sent by the Government to Manipur to protect us, which is their job, instead of protecting us they are raping the women.” She describes exactly how these elderly women decided to disrobe in front of the Kangla as a mark of protest and extreme anguish: “And that day, in front of the Kangla we women effortlessly poured out all that was pent up within us. It burst out from within us...We didn’t know what we were doing.” The extent of lawlessness in these states is mind-blowing and one is forced to ask whether the writ of the Indian government means anything in these vulnerable, highly volatile and extremely strategic parts of the country. The second interview is with Jarjum Ete from Arunachal Pradesh, another strong, articulate woman considered a rebel for raising various issues like forced marriage, property rights for women, alcoholism, violence against women and (most controversial of all) legalizing sex work. The third interview is with Ellen Phamnei

from Nagaland, the first woman graduate sent by the Baptists to become a missionary! The last interview is again from Manipur—Dr Gina Sangkham, president of the Naga Women's Union, Manipur discusses a host of issues ranging from the need for a Naga women's union in Manipur to the role of women in the peace talks, to their stand on AFSPA and Irom Sharmila's fast. This is probably the first time that Ima Thockchom Ramani Devi, Jarjum Ete, Ellen Phamnei, and Gina Sangkham have been interviewed in such an exhaustive manner.

With armed conflict and its adverse impact as a backdrop for the last fifty years or so, men have been the principle and, in most cases, the only negotiators even though women have been working hard to safeguard their homes and families and to resolve differences and work proactively to end the conflict. This can be seen in the extensive rounds of negotiations between the Naga leaders and the government of India, peace talks with MNF, the ULFA, Garo leaders etc.,—there are hardly any women representatives. There are some few exceptions of course: in the recent ULFA talks for example one of the group's main interlocutors was Indira Goswami the well-known writer and academic. Under her initiative a series of preliminary discussions were held with the GOI to bring the ULFA leaders to the negotiating table. After several rounds of talks between the People's Consultative Group and GOI however the possibility of peace became faint and ultimately the talks failed for a host of reasons. Another example is the outstanding role played by the Naga Mothers Association which came into existence in 1984. They propagated the message of "Shed no more blood" in 1994 and initiated dialogues with the 'undergrounds' and the state government to stop violence and bloodshed and spoke against killings by armed security personnel as well as militants. Once the ceasefire agreement had been negotiated between the Indian government and the NSCN (I M), the NMA was at the forefront of strengthening the process. In support of the ceasefire a four member team of the NMA and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur trekked across the border to Myanmar in 2000 to the headquarters of the NSCN (K) to appeal to their leader, Kapphlang, to at least talk with the NSCN (I M).⁷ Although the women were admonished by the I-M leadership for having undertaken the trip

without the approval of the I-M but it does serve to illustrate that women's groups in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Tripura have been 'speaking peace' to warring factions for a long time. As have women everywhere.

Let us recall what our concerns are as women, as citizens, as people who make up civil society:

"We are women from different autonomous women's groups, NGOs, development organisations, academia, and individual women. We come from different states, cities or villages, having different political persuasions, belonging to various cultures, from different class, caste and religious backgrounds, and speaking diverse languages. We are bound together by a vision that upholds equality, gender justice, peace and democracy. For decades now we have been engaged in multifaceted struggles that aim to bring about a world where every individual has the right to life with dignity and equality."

Indian Women Against War

Notes

- ¹ Mamang Dai, "Remembrance", *River Poems*, Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2004.
- ² Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005.
- ³ Sanjib Baruah, *ibid*.
- ⁴ Chenoy, Anuradha, *Militarisation and Women in South Asia*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002.
- ⁵ Shukla Commission Report.
- ⁶ Vision 2020 Report.
- ⁷ Patricia Mukhim, "Where is this Northeast?" from *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The Northeast*, Geeti Sen (Ed.), IIC Quarterly Monsoon-Winter 2005
- ⁸ 'Incident'—refers to Manoramas death under suspicious circumstances and the consequent protests by the woman of Manipur most specifically the disrobing of the 12 elderly Meities women front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles.