

# Gender and the Contours of Political Movement in Assam: Critical Appraisal of Ethnic Groups in Assam

**Miss Bhanuprabha Brahma<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-11006.*

## **Article Info**

**Volume 83**

**Page Number: 4371 - 4377**

**Publication Issue:**

**July-August 2020**

## **Abstract:**

A number of new social movements have passed through the Northeast of India, but the issue of gender is either ignored or overlooked through peace and war. Given that Assam is a state with distinct linguistic and ethnic communities, the issue of gender is a matter of controversy. Assam has an exclusive definition of identity, where a sense of skepticism and animosity has given rise to a sense of solidarity between various ethnic groups. The central issue is that, as an emblematic representation of ethnic, religious, caste ideologies, women are often exploited and marginalized by the cultural constraints of their identities that represent the everyday essence of sexual assault. This is the product of gender-based discrimination and abuse of civil rights. Women have continuously raised the issue of space, sovereignty, which they have sought to resolve as they feel their stand to be vindicated after the Assam revolution. This paper addresses the political oppression faced by women, as well as the clear presence of women's resistance or the problems they raised in or after the Assam Revolution.

## **Article History**

**Article Received:** 25 April 2020

**Revised:** 29 May 2020

**Accepted:** 20 June 2020

**Publication:** 10 August 2020

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

India's North East has experienced many social tensions, but through peace and war, the issue of gender is either overlooked or overlooked. Northeastern violence is grounded in its particular historic political context, entrenched in a fragmented setting. Any of the devastating effects of inter-tribal or racial wars include ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, and severe abuses of human rights. The influx of foreign nationals, primarily from Bangladesh, created significant socio-political problems in the state and changed the demographics of Assam (Hazarika 1994). There is also no question that historical considerations have played an important and vital role in deciding the nature of the Assam ethnic conflict. As the dominant fact of 'racial past' is challenged by different ethnic groups,

historical growth in a multi-ethnic community such as Assam has profoundly become a position of hegemony for dominant nationalism. While violence is often felt in Northeast India in the form of armed conflict, social conflict in the sense of Assam is primarily a fight for 'identification,' an ethno-cultural identity question emanating from the ethnic self-awareness of various ethnic groups, which is often the focus of secessionist demands. In this way, ethnic tensions in Assam are also continuing social conflicts, since they are profoundly connected to the issue of the identity-related needs of those classes, gender, race or culture, which ensure their distinctive recognition within the society.

The community's emotional foundation in Assam is fractured by the terror and instability that the racial struggles or separate rebellion movements sustain. Gender research in an ethnic conflict situation is a

useful method for recognizing the underlying complexities of conflicts and regard for women. The manner in which race decides the essence of conflict in Assam, symbolism was also an important tool for deciding women's lives as it recognized spiritual power beyond the specific conflict. Recognition and inclusion in such strife ravaged communities of Assam remains a topic confined to women. There is an exclusive notion of nationality in Assam, where some sense of unity between the various oppressed groups has given rise to cynicism and resentment. Interaction between society and women is one of the ongoing creation and negotiation of borders within and through diverse constructions. Women in Assam tend to live in a society free of such evil traditions as dowry, female infanticide, but in fact it creates a deceptive notion of gender equality because women are still victims of gender-based abuse in Assam.

This paper therefore seeks to research the status of women in Assam's conflict-ridden communities beyond this dubious notion of emancipation, which in turn prohibits women from practicing their fundamental democratic rights and remains prevalent in gender inequality. It also seeks to address the 'room' issue along with race in a broader sense of social tension. This technique is used to call attention to the manner in which gender gaps are built and restricted spaces are generated by gender. It illustrates the moral police force faced by women, as well as the intense nature of the resistance of women or the problems they posed before or after Assam.

## **II. THE CONTOURS OF POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND THEIR EFFECT ON WOMEN IN ASSAM**

The rising essence of identity consciousness among the different classes has introduced a sense of uncertainty, deprivation and alienation. In this particular case, since all people are equally affected, the gender aspect in the crisis situation still tends to be underestimated and ignored in peace-making policies, and so on. In view of the predominance of

different ethnic groups which do not believe in gender segregation in general, there is disparity between men and women in the region (Mahanta and Nayak 2013).

Assam, a nation of tribal and other ethnic groups, has distinct geographic, linguistic, religious and historical histories. The state is currently a hot spot for crime and abuse due to the turmoil in Assam. Citizens in most of the seven North-Eastern States are fighting to protect their right to sovereignty, which has contributed to the political upheaval. Assam, for example, has seen the tribal anarchy of the anti-foreigners, Bodo-*adivasi*, Karbi-Dimasa and Karbi-Khasi, and the secessionist ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) movement since 1979 (Phukon 2008). As a result, the country has suffered civil rights abuses as a result of ethnic strife over the last few decades, insurgent activity and its consequent reaction to political and state inequality and ethnicity is profoundly rooted in the idea that women are more marginalized during these conflicts. The ongoing violent conflict in Assam has escalated violence against women in the form of sexual, emotional or physical assault, killings and clashes. While all members of the community are affected by their place in society and sex, the emphasis on women and girls is much greater. Men, women, boys and girls are seeing a certain kind of confrontation. The contradictory aspect is that, on the one hand, people have succumbed to the "culture" of war in the midst of a deep sense of helplessness, while also needing and pressing to be free from a condition of violence that cripples people on both sides.

In the face of AASU's rapidly rising status as the most strong and successful body in Assam representing the mighty student muscle, the Assam Movement took place. This AASU-led Assam unrest eventually led to the birth of Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) after the signing of the historic Assam Agreement in 1985 (Mahanta 2013). In the name of regionalism and the guardian of the greater Assamese civilisation, this received overwhelming support and three times formed the government in

Assam. The hegemonic notion of the dominant ethnic group of Assam came to prominence. Tribal and other ethnic minorities set up mass demonstrations to protest their helpless status. The Bodo uprising in the state of Assam has become a major concern. The Bodos, one of the earliest founders of Assam, is the biggest tribe of Assam. They have raised post-independence secessionist overtones for better social, political and economic conditions. After the post-Assam revolution, there has been a detailed record of the conflict between the Bodos and the Assamese, as the Bodos believe they are neglected and censored. The All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) emerged in the early 1980s as a powerful entity under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma (Hazarika, 1994).

In the post-independence years (Baruah 1999), ethnic organizations in conflict zones, such as Assam, have been conducive to the growth of sub-nationalist politics. The emergence of the All Assam Student Union (AASU) as a forum for powerful student movements reached its peak in the long and serious years of the Assam Revolution (1979-1985). What is of special interest to this research, though, is the critical direction that organizations have followed in the eventful ten to twelve years from the beginning of the late 1960s to the tumultuous years of the late 1970s, the years of rising to the social revolution. Not only for AASU, but also for the subsequent path of student protests in Assam in general, this was a stage of great transition. This suggests a strong change in perspective, ideological articulation and concentration on the part of the state's mainstream student politics.

The role of Assamese students in nation-building was primarily based around and limited to linguistic, literary reconstruction and development in the early phase of 1826-1916. The philosophy was chiefly linguistic cultural nationalism, which was not associated politically and nevertheless had to take on some anti-imperialist aspect. Therefore, on the one hand, devotion and contribution to language, literature, culture and, on the other hand, conformity and compliance with colonial rule were the two

hallmarks of that period of Assamese nationalism (Kalita 1986). It was in effect the power of the growing Assamese middle-class of the period that was a willing beneficiary of the colonial rule's perceived benefits. But one comes across another viewpoint that looks at it as part of a broader phase of emerging Assamese cultural nationalism assuming anti-colonial political overtones of war (Sarma 1990). In this respect A. C. Hazarika concludes that when a few Indian thinkers gave birth to the National Indian Congress in 1885, around the same time, a few Assamese students were agitated about the development of Assamese literature as central to Assam and Assamese progress, which reflected an important aspect of student movements in the pre-independence period associated with the ideology of Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth and first few decades of the twentieth century (Hazarika 1960).

The founding of the Asom Chattra Sanmilian in 1916 was an exceptional event in the history of student activism not only in Assam but across India, as the socio-political activism of the Assamese students predates the formation of the National Indian Congress (Sarma 2002). The principles of early nationalism and the ideology articulated by the Asom Chattra Sanmilian cannot be seen as special to students alone. It must be seen from a much wider perspective on capitalism and colonization, and in particular on the situation in Assam. Almost every address of the Secretaries from 1916 to 1923 referred to the ideals of nationalism in general and Assamese nationalism in particular, with a focus on the revival of the culture and language of Assamese and the preservation and growth of Assamese literature (Bora 2002).

The traditional position of Assam Chattra Sanmilian as the forerunners of the Assamese people's fight for life continues to be the leading light for Assam students and a legacy that runs through the very soul of Assamese society and the student politics of today. Even today they raise questions in our minds as the numerous student agitations of the post-Independence period such as the 1955, 1958 and

1960 language revolutions, the 1969-71 refinery movement and the 1979-83 international movement are all a legacy of Assam Chattra Sanmilan (Bora 2002). With its characteristic radicalism and counter-radicalism, the early predominance of the middle-class ethos became an established feature of the dominant student politics of the Assamese society in the days to come. Founded in 1916 as a non-political body, Asom Chattra Sanmilan (Assam Students' Conference or ASC) operated side by side with the Asom Sahitya Sabha, formed the following year, concentrating on general issues concerning the culture and education of the Assamese people. The Sanmilan became politicised and rallied students against colonialism with the emergence of the National Congress after 1921. It officially became affiliated with the All-India Students' Federation (AISF) in 1939. The Sanmilan, the Assam State Congress student wing, broke themselves off from the AISF and became known as the All India Students' Congress (AISC) in 1942. The AISC branch in Assam disappeared in the early 1950s, while the AISF became a system organ for the Communists (Hussain 1993). Student politics in Assam was not represented by a single entity between 1939 and 1967, but by a number of competing organizations, both of which played a significant anti-colonial role under British rule.

There were their own intermittent highs and lows in the Assam movement that began in 1979. If the early phase of the revolution is marked by huge political mobilization, it steadily began to lose traction in the later phase of the campaign, and if its emergence was more or less nonviolent and democratic in the former phase. The latter period showed the brutal essence of the campaign, which took an undemocratic turn at the same time. A number of tribes, previously identified with the broader Assamese society (Baruah 1997), almost became chauvinistic and marginalized by the Revolution. Sanjib Baruah rightly pointed out that since the Assam revolution, the word "ethnic Assamese" has become prevalent in Assam politics discussions(1999: 125). The Assam Movement

ethnicized Assamese and Assam's political landscape, when numerous tribal and religious minority groups started to question the Assamese language's 'assumed' authority. This culminated in the eruption of various declarations of citizenship by various ethnic groups in Assam. This ethnic tension has also been exacerbated by the advent of the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), their demand for a separate Bodoland State along with minority groups such as Karbis, Dimasas and Mishings. Such groups have their own student organization, a community group sponsored by a popular legislature. These universities have a kind of control to impose patriarchal norms and to keep students under observation, which reveals how student policy is simply a representation of ethno-cultural problems. The question of identity has become a focal point. Assam, a conflict-ridden country, has made it easier for women to be seen as symbols of their culture and nationalism. Members of Assam's special student community decide what women should wear, whom they should meet and who they should marry. In certain cases, the right of women to choose whom to marry has also been denied. Social control systems are routinely enforced on definitions of what is normal and natural. It is by the constructs of femininity and heterosexuality that gender identity and sexuality are regulated. Sex is an influence of administrative operations, controlling control dynamics. Sex and sexuality are still words that are interrelated. The dilemma lies as a societal issue in the creation of sexuality.

We can note a few more grim facts about it as we revisit the era of the revolution. Given the substantial involvement of women in the Assam uprising, the sub-nationalist subject did not address any unique subject of women other than the subsumed subject. In reality, the leaders of the All Assam Student Union (AASU) and AsomGana Parishad (AGP) seemed violent and created the idea of separate articulating the concerns of women as discriminatory. Women were permitted to lead several protests time and time again, but the very existence of concerns being limited to the

conventional national issue convinces us that the topic of women was limited only to the nation's ideology as mother land. Its underlying issues have been sidelined. This campaign has not provided women with a voice to build their own space. A politicization of the historically feminine position of motherhood was involved. For the preservation of the cultural sphere, they are depicted as matrijati, the bearers of nations (Sen 2005).

Women's magazine *Aideur Jonaki Bar* was published in March 1983, when the Assam Revolution was taking place, with the goal of rising women's awareness and forming a revolution. The most important question that occurred with the launch of a modern woman's organization was, why do we have to care about women individually when the world is at risk? Questioning the patriarchy questioning women's place in politics and causing controversies became very important as women felt their position was being vindicated. However, as the Assam revolution progressed, women spontaneously joined the revolution; there was a need to mobilize women to play an effective role. It is important to focus on the various positions played by women's organizations in the development of culture, the growth of women in the public sector, and to discuss how women's organizations are both empowering and transformative, but paradoxically they may also be stagnating.

However, a historical and contemporary study of the numerous political mobilizations in Assam would show insufficient women's representation at any case. This is not to suggest that women have not tried to create platforms for liberation on their own. Political mobilization was generated by the protests only to add to them in size. The feminist debate in Assam therefore requires more focus and attention. Student advocacy is an important messenger of ideas and is influential in contributing to the national, environmental, economic and social justice debates. With an emphasis on unity and cohesion, the student organisation should concentrate on their collective possibilities in these protests, rather than being exploited by the political establishment who would

challenge the student groups. The youth group, as the key harbingers of social progress, scarcely treats women as part of the wider growth problem. The depressing aspect lies in the fact that inside student policy they are not aware of their own lacunae. Knowing its ethnic origins and fraternal relations, the student body categorizes itself into classes that victimize women. Although they see themselves as advocating cultural autonomy, they are reproducing moral populism instead. Youth organisation plays a constructive role in forming personalities while gender and ethnicity have a strong impact on structuring. The gender category is critical for recognizing what ties the national with the domestic and the public to the private. Abuse toward women blends and conspires with history, class and hierarchy. Community exists in these disputes in what is defined as a code for authentic and alternate groupness, and as the basis for political statements unique to the context (Eller 1999).

There is little or no awareness among Assam's student organisations, as to what constitutes gender problems. In truth, they are not aware of what the set of these problems contain. The concerns they called were about race, sexuality that put them into a moral police position, but the concern about the invisibility of women in all fields of life, legal, political, economic, has never been questioned. The problems surrounding the entry of women into religious places such as *Namghar* (the religious place's Assamese name) were never regarded. These politicians have never even noticed the unequal balance between male and female elected officials in the Student Union. There's always a hidden vacuum in the youth politics of Assam. But in the mid-seventies, the women's organization saw an increase trying to find a place for itself. People gathered under a number of forms of harmony.

Women's groups have been set up to fight national structures of patriarchal dominance, first under colonial control and then as a sovereign state. Women's groups have been set up to discuss a variety of concerns ranging from race and religion to concerns that embody common age, gender and

power differences. Aparna Mahanta (1998 ) argues that women's organizations have been set up, that women's projects have been driven, and that women's events have had an enormous influence on the society of Assam to combat these relations of dominance. Women are mainly seen as an undifferentiated group, often as victims and often as resistance fighters. The construction of women's sexuality is not just about control and resistance, but also about the historical and social conditions that had to be limited.

### REFERENCES

1. Afshar, Haleh. *Women and Politics in Third World*. London, New York: Routledge, 1996.
2. Ahmed, Sara. *Differences that matter Feminist Theory and Postmodernist*. United Kingdom: Cambridge, 2004.
3. Banerjee Paula, Two armed patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland, in Manchanda Rita (ed), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. New Delhi: Sage publication, 2001.
4. BarnaBirinchi Kumar, *Cultural History of Assam*, Vol1, Nowgong, 1951.
5. Barnes, Ashleigh. *Feminism of Discontent*. New Delhi: OUP, 2015
6. Barth, Frederick. *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organisation of culture difference*, New York, 1969.
7. Baruah, Alokesh, ed., *India's North East: Developmental Issues in a Historical Perspective*, New Delhi: Manohar Publisher, 2005.
8. Behal, Monisha. *Women's Collectives in Assam: A Short History of their status and present day realities*, accessed at [www.northeastnetwork.org](http://www.northeastnetwork.org) on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2012.
9. Borthakur, Sheela. *LekhikarJiboni*. Assam Sahitya Sabha: December 1987.
10. Brass, P.R. *Ethnicity and Nationalism Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage, 1991.
11. Chattopadhyay, Dilip, *History of the Assamese Movement, since 1947* Minarva, 1990.
12. Choudhury, Sanghamitra . *Changing role of women in conflict situations: A study on Nalbari District of Assam*, accessed at [www.manipurresearchforum.org](http://www.manipurresearchforum.org) on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2017.
13. Choudhury, Rita. *AeiXomoy, XeiXomoy*. Guwahati: BanalataPanbazar, 2007.
14. Dutta nandita: communities of women in assam.
15. Crensha, Kimberlé Williams. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford law review* 43(6):1241-99.1991.
16. Datta, P.S. (Ed.), *Ethnic Movements in Polycultural Assam*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1990.
17. Das, Samir Kumar. *ULF A: A Political Analysis*. Delhi: Ajanta, 1994.
18. Deka, Kaustabh. "From Movements to Accords and Beyond:The critical role of student organisations in the formation and performance of identity in Assam." *Nmml Occasional Paper: Perspectives In Indian Development New Series* 9, 2013.
19. Deka, Meeta. *Student Movements in Assam*. New Delhi, 1996.
20. Deka, Meeta. *Women's agency and social change Assam and beyond*. New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2013.
21. Goswami, Indira. *An Unfinished Autobiography*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2002.
22. Goswami Roshmi, Sreekala MG, Goswami Meghna (ed), *Women in Armed Conflict Situations*, NEN, Guwahati, 2005.
23. Hussain Monirul, *The Assam Movement: class, Ideology and Identity*, Delhi, 1993.
24. Mahanta, Aparna, 'Women movement in Assam and Northeast India: An assesment' in Karna, M.S, 'Social Movements in North-East India' New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1998.
25. Manchanda, Rita, 'We Do More Because We Can: Women in the Naga Peace Process', South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR). Kathmandu: 2004.
26. MisraTilottoma, *Literature and Society in*

- Assam: A study of the Assamese Renaissance, 1826-1926*, Guwahati, 1987.
27. MisraUdayon, *The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey*, North East India History Association, Shillong, 2001.
  28. MisraUdayon, *All Assam Students' Union: Crisis of Identity*. Economic and Political weekly, 22 (13), March, 1987.
  29. Mosahary R.N, *Bodo Student Movements*, in Apurba Kr. Baruah Ed. *Student Power in North-East India: Understanding Student Movements*, New Delhi, 2002.
  30. Rai, Shirin, 'Women and the State in the Third World' in 'Women and politics in the third world', ed Haleh afshar, London: Routledge, 1996.
  31. Riley, Denise. 'Am I that Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, Univ of Minnesota press, 1988
  32. Waylen, Georgina 'Analaysing Women in the Politics of the Third World' in 'Women and Politics in the Third World, ed Haleh Afshar', London: Routledge, 1996.
  33. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres. 'Third World Women and Politics of Freedom'. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
  34. Phukon Dolly, *Women and Politics of Peace Process in Northeast India*, in Achutya Panda (ed.) *Situating Indian Women*. New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2008
  35. Sen, Iлина. "A Space within the Struggle", in 'Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader' by Mala Khullar(ed), New Delhi: Zubaan, 2005
  36. Sen, Munmi .Women Subjectivity And Female Concerns in the Earliest Assamese Journals: An Era Of A New Identity For Women. *Journal of northeast region(JONER)*. Volume 1, 2017.pp:1-11.Sultana, Parvin. "Tracing Masculinity: From Assam Movement to ULFA". *The Chronicle 1* (December 2015): 20-25.
  37. Karna, M.S. *Social Movements in North-East India* New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1998.