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Endnotes

1. Interview conducted on 18/07/2022
2. Interview conducted on 19/07/2022

MOTHERS IN THE CONFLICT SITUATIONS OF ASSAM: UNDERSTANDING THE GENDERED TRANSFORMATION OF ROLES AND IDENTITIES

Debajani Gogoi

Abstract

This article examines how in Assam the decade's long armed conflict; ethnic movements and ethnic strife between communities influence and affect the lives of women's especially of mothers. The article also explores how the mothers experience the risks of these conflict conditions and the ways in which gender roles; gender relations and gender identities are changed in the times of conflict and its aftermath. In the context of Assam, the article analyses how mothers activism for instances as house heads, as resisters as peace negotiators during conflict or in post conflict situations establish their independent identities.

Key words: mothers, motherhood, conflict, gender-roles, Assam.

Introduction

Motherhood and mother identity hold an important place in military discourse of conflict zones. War, militarization and security discourse includes mothers in various forms in to their paradigm. However war and conflict is about death on the other hand mothering is about nurturing life (Khannel, 2009). But, directly or indirectly mothers are drawn into the deaths and difficulties of conflict. In such situations, the maternal body stands central and very relevant in the conflicts. Women's bodies are prominent site for the assertion of power (Murathy, 2016). Hence, the symbolic capacity of maternal body in different forms acquires significant meanings in the conflict situations. The symbolic metaphor of mother's figure as nation as biological reproducer

¹ This paper is a part of my current research on 'Body, Identity and Nation in Conflict affected societies: Experiences of women in BTR. The theme has been a major part of my M Phil research undertaken in the department of Political Science at Dibrugarh University.

of ethnic collectivises shape and reshape motherhood and the idea of mothering in the times of conflict. The fiction of nations is constructed on women's bodies and the material female body has been imagined as the site for viewing the nation and their bodies as literal figurative creator of identities (Eisenstein, 2000). In the process they become metaphorical representation of nation and national identity. The symbolic metaphor of mother's figure as nation as biological reproducer of ethnic collectivises sometimes makes their own identities invisible and such symbolizations consider women as procreator than as citizens and their status stands for the progress of the nation rather than their own (Eisenstein, 2000). In the late 1980's scholars encapsulate gender as socially constructed male and female roles in societies (K C et al, 2017: 177). However, in these construction and reconstruction of mothers figure as nation, vulnerable suffering mothers many mothers emerges negotiating their spaces and survives the risks of conflict breaking the traditional gender roles and norms. They take up new roles and responsibilities which are earlier reserved for the men and make spaces for their own identity (K. C. Et al 2017).

Assam is a unique land, confluence of different race, religion and ethnic tribes and communities each contributing to the life of this region through millennia despite many odds. In between love and odds, the post colonial Assam has witnessed many upheavals; the region undergoes many agitations and resistances from different tribes and communities for different socio-economic ethnic causes. The decades long armed conflict of militant for separate independent State, secret killings of 90's, events of ethnic conflict has turned this space in to militarized conflict zone. Mothers in such fragile situations of Assam have claimed an important role in framing new gender relations exercising their agency negotiates their spaces and identities as fighters, picketers, resisters, homemakers and peace negotiators despites many loss, pain and sufferings.

House head mothers: A Story from Conflict affected B.T.R

It is very difficult to precise the complex history of both violence and peace and its nature of violence in the region of B.T.A.D now called B.T.R as the land has experienced variety of conflicts across time (Sinha & Liang, 2021: 34). Many writers who are writing on the conflict of the North Eastern region find out the genesis of conflict as related to the issues of land, resources, identity and cultural protection (Sinha, Liang, 2021:34). The western part of Assam comprising the Bodoland Territorial Area District (now Bodoland Territorial Region) and its neighbouring areas which is a home to diverse

communities has experienced ethnic strife between communities, agitations, resentment from time to time over such issues of land, resource, migration and identity. In 1996, the ethnic strife between Bodos and Adivasis in the region rendered thousands homeless and caused death to many people.

In the context, a 60 years old mother named X from B.T.R region (name changed community not mentioned due to its sensitivities) who experienced the violent outbreak of 1996 narrated her story and recalled those violent past.

“The homes were burning and I, my husband with the little kid were fleeing away from our village. We had no other option but to stay in the relief camps for several days. Unfortunately, I have lost my husband in the relief camp. I had no choice but to live for my son. After the relief camp, I went to my maternal home for some days. But I decided to make a home for mine and for my son and built a hut near the Aai River (a river of Assam). But the home was swept away by the river. I started working as maids at houses and shops for daily wages. I could not turn back to my original home as it was captured by some other people. At the time someone informed me about a land plot which was to be sold by the owner. So, I decided to buy the land for which I sold my cattle. I cleaned the jungle (habi-bononi) to build the house (interaction with the respondent in B.T.R in the month of June in 2022).

She narrated how she worked hard to make a house of her own and raised her son all alone. Her mothering was not restricted to only bearing and rearing of her child. In the conflict situations of Assam, many mothers shoulder the responsibilities of households and cope up with different survival strategies with minimal facilities and resources available to them making a change in gender roles. It has been noticed that despite the laws, women have been denied access to property and resources in the patriarchal structure whereas the conflict conditions opens up opportunities and spaces for women to exercise their power on resources. The sexual division of labour assign private space for motherhood and mothering. The new gender relations make a change to it whereas mothers in varieties of conflict zones come out to the public spaces breaking the traditional stereotypes of mothering. She performed new conflict induced role such as bringing fire woods and vegetables from jungles as he stated in the interview, agricultural activities, and of living stocks in the absence of her husband. She cleared jungle to build her own house. The mother experienced risk and took up new roles and responsibilities in the face of distress and violence. Wasbir Hussain in his book “Homemakers without the Men: Assam's Widows of Violence” present the lived realities of

widows of Assam which includes lived experience of many such mothers who lost their husband in violence of Assam taking up new responsibilities survive the conflict and loss.

Protesting Mothers in the movement of ULFA in Assam

Paula Banerjee argues that women found their fair share of space as victims in any report in the conflict by any concerned groups whereas the role of the victim is not the only role women play in the conflict. Banerjee in her article *'Between Two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland' (2001)* states about how women perform their agency and deal with the conflict situations as peace negotiators, protestors, relief providers in the times of conflict. The varied roles, activities and the multiplicities of famine response break the gender stereotype. In the context of Kashmir conflict Rita Manchanda in her article "Guns and Burqa: Women in the Kashmir Conflict" (2001) discusses about different faces of women's agency in the conflict of Kashmir. In 1989-90 the spirit of Azadi touched the women of every age; mothers, daughters, wives came out into the street and for Kashmiri women coming out of their home and neighbourhood in the public space were an empowering experience (Manchanda, 2001: 50). The decade of the 90's witnessed crucial political turmoil and a difficult time in Assam. The violent activities of ULFA insurgency for separate independent State and counterinsurgency operations to neutralize the movement has hindered peace in Assam and affected the lives of civilians whereas women were the worst affected. In this context, mothers from various parts of Assam came out to the streets to protest against the violence on innocent civilians and the print media has documented those stories.

"Guwahati, Nov .21: In Kashmir, they say challenges of the veil, because the Muslim women coming out to resist the army have incarnated the spirit of a revolutionary but they dress the same traditional ways . In Assam, the women who tore apart the veil of fear have taken up the cudgels to force the army men to be cautions. The women in various parts of Upper Assam mustered up to fight against the army atrocities. They argue "We shall no more be frail commodities, we have to save ourselves and we have to protect our sons and daughters...." ...When this reporter visited the home of rape victim Raju Baruah, they assembled their and spoke out without any fear. They expressed their resolve to seek justice come what may.

In Jamugurihat of Sonitpur, whenever any military vehicle enters, women in groups raise blockades and force the team to go back. This practise

was initiated in Seunichowk there When army vehicle enter in to their village, they beat drums to alert the people, women in all corner rush out and gherao the vehicle. " (the Feminine Fury, NET, 22.11.91).

The report displays how women came out as protestors to the public spaces, to the roads wanting to protect their innocent sons and daughters. They voiced out against the unjust violence. They embraced various strategies to resist the security personnel's entering in to their villages. When conflict situations denied all the liberty and freedom to mothers, they came out to the public stood by the victims and cried for justice.

Peace interventions by mothers in the times of conflict situations of Assam

In conflict situations, women can play an important role in initiating, facilitating and sustaining peace dialogues (Hazarika, Anurita & Sharma, 2014: 6). Naga Mothers Associations in Nagaland (a state of North East India region) have played a significant role in peace building process of the State. They used the symbol and expression of the motherhood for political unity and mobilisation of women (Varma, 2022). They launched "shed no more blood" slogan to stop fratricidal killings in Nagaland and initiated dialogues and negotiations among various Naga rebel groups. Women in Assam do not get fair space in the decision making process. Though they play key roles in attempts to bring peace in the realm of conflict management, they are still invisible or very less visible in the formal peace process (Hazarika, Anurita & Sharma, 2014: 5). The late Indira Goswami tried to initiate talk between Government of India and one of the major insurgent group of Assam called ULFA but she left very little scope for her to address the gender issue (Hazarika, Anurita & Sharma 2014: 5). Sakuntala Chowdhry a trustee of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust in an interview taken in 1998 said that in today's problematic situation in Assam only the mothers can unify the splintered groups and bring peace into the region (Banerjee, 2001: 154). Likewise, a mothers group named "Matri Manch was formed after the army atrocities in Nalbari and Lakhimpur to protest against the atrocities on women and debate on mode of achieving peace as expressed by one spokesperson of the Manch (Banerjee, 2001: 154). But these groups could not sustain their journey for peace interventions and they were unable to establish a dominant voice in public spaces (Banerjee, 2001).

Conclusion :

The traditional values and norms of patriarchal societies push women into the private domain through the institution of motherhood whereas the sexual division of labour considers mothering as a work to be exercised in the private space. This, in return distances a mother from the public sphere of decision making, both in the labour market and the other state affairs. However, every political and economic activity has its impact on the lives of mothers. Hence, mothers play varied role and come forward breaking the traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Conflict situations open up many spaces for their empowerment to exercise their agency and powers on resources and to make their voice out in the public spaces. But the agency and knowledge of these mothers are still denied in public spaces and the patriarchal structure of the society does not want to accept their voice and hence gender questions of these women are still not fully addressed.

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