

Exclusionary Practices: The Marginalisation of Women in State and Public Policies

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Introduction

While the issue of gender has received serious attention in the academia and policy in India the same cannot be said in the context of the Northeastern region. There is not only a paucity of studies on women the problem has further been complicated by the stereotype idea that societies in the Northeast are free of gender discrimination. Several factors contributed to this line of thinking:

1. The high concentration of tribes in the region with their supposedly egalitarian social organisation marked as it were by the relative absence of caste and class based distinctions.
2. The presence of matrilineal societies where privileged position is accorded to the female with respect to descent and inheritance.
3. Women's active involvement in the system of production thus making them less dependent upon men
4. Women's greater freedom of movement and behaviour, and
5. High incidence of divorce and remarriage particularly among tribes

Drawing inferences from these characteristics, women in Northeast India have been portrayed as having superior social status unlike their counterparts in the rest of the country

Evidence from many parts of the region has however shown that in many communities traditional institutions are not only highly adverse to the interest of women, a number of exclusionary practices are also in place which deny women legitimate access to the resources and opportunities (social, economic and political) that exist

in society. Even modern institutions like universities and system of governance with their proclaimed commitment to the principles of democracy and equality show little sensitivity to the issue of gender.

Meaning and dimensions of exclusion

Exclusion refers to a condition where some members or groups are denied legitimate access or share to societal resources and opportunities. Exclusion generally occurs in or is built into a hierarchical system whereby certain groups and categories, such as, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes and women experience discrimination of different kinds. It implies, in brief, socio-cultural dominance of some groups and weak social standing of others.

Exclusion may take diverse forms¹, operates at different levels and spheres of the social structure, and draws its sustenance from various sources, such as, caste, class, ethnicity and gender inequality. These different forms and sources of exclusion may operate singly or in combination with each other. Where more than one source of exclusion operates simultaneously, the position of the excluded becomes highly vulnerable; for example, poor Dalit women where gender subordination is reinforced by their low ritual status and poor economic position

Gender based exclusion does not occur in a day or by the stroke of a pen, but is rooted in patriarchy² and reinforced by a slow and gradual process of socialization in gendered ideology. Central to this process is the culture of subjugation which views the ideas, opinions and aspirations of women as inconsequential, therefore merit little attention either at the level of mundane everyday reality or in policy. What sustains the culture of

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subjugation is the unequal power structure which enables the power holders (read men) to use the cultural and societal resources at their command not only to exclude certain issues, particularly those involving conflict of interest from the decision making agenda, but also to come up with norms, values and practices, and create a picture of the social reality that upholds their privileged position in such a manner that the excluded (women) begin to view their subjugated position as a natural aspect of their life. It would be instructive, at this point, to turn to Gramsci's theory of hegemony to understand how the process operates. Gramsci uses the concept of 'hegemony' to demonstrate how dominant groups maintain their dominance through the deployment of the twin mechanisms of 'coercion' and 'consent'³. In furtherance of their goal, cultural entities like mythology, language, literature and art, and institutions such as family, kinship, religion and education are variously called upon and strategically used, in benign as well as in not so benign ways, to construct, define and propagate the myth of the superiority of the dominant groups. By this means the dominant not only succeed to give legitimacy to their position but also make the oppressed complicit in their own subordination.

Family and the reproduction of inequality

Observation of situations in the Northeast reveals that of the various agencies that aided the powerful to maintain their hegemony, the family has been most prominent. Though the family in the Northeast is not as discriminatory towards women as evidence elsewhere in the country show, family ideology (defined as 'descent' or 'reproductive' ideology in anthropological writings)⁴ plays a vital role in their subordination. Women's centrality in the process of reproduction provides the rationale for the creation of a system in which women are not only idealized as wives and mothers, but also subjected to a system of control that robs them of autonomy of action and expression, alienates them from public life and other areas of decision making, and pushed them into a position of subordination vis a vis their male counterparts. Though the form, content and intensity of the ideology varies across cultures and groups, an examination of the socialization pattern of children reveals that among many communities girls and boys are socialized in different ways in accordance with the expected gender roles they are called upon to play in their adult life. While boys are granted greater degree of freedom of action, the girls are bound by a number of restrictive codes. For example, among the Meiteis of Manipur the story of goddess Imoinu is regularly invoked

to instill in girls values of hard work, selflessness, and obedience to the husband. Similar devices are found among the tribes in the hills. In her study on the status of women in Mizoram Mercie Gangte notes, 'daughters are carefully monitored from birth in such a way that they are indoctrinated to possess a sacrificing nature and fully internalize the feeling that they are somehow inferior to their brothers' (2009, 41)⁵. Needless to say, such an ideology is not only highly constraining to women, but also *sits ill at ease in a competitive milieu* where achievement is the goal and confidence, independent judgment and ability to adapt to the changing times are the route to success.

Inequality reinforced: Education and the culture of silence

If the family has been instrumental in propagating an ideology that relegates women to a subservient position, it is aided and abetted by the educational system. As the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu notes, education far from being a liberating agent as generally perceived, in fact serves as an instrument of social inequality by reproducing the culture and values of the ruling class⁶. In the context of the Northeast this finds vivid reflection in the content of courses taught in colleges and universities which are marked not only by the virtual absence of women but also lack of regard to the people's history, culture and society. In a recent paper, Subrat K Nanda brought into sharp focus the failure of universities in the region to address the socio-cultural and geo-political specificity of the region. Pointing to the continued dominance of conventional courses, which largely revolved around ideas developed by European and American thinkers, in the Sociology syllabi of many universities he states, 'like elsewhere in the country, in this region too, sociology of the common person, minorities and the marginalized sections does not find place (2010, 146)⁷. Though there are signs of attempts to integrate the regional dimension in some of the courses, huge gaps remain⁸.

The disconnect between the subject matter fed to the students and the specificity of the region comes out most sharply in Indian Sociology, a compulsory paper taught at both the under-graduate and post-graduate levels. Heavily influenced by the Dumotian perspective, which views Indian society as coterminous with Hinduism, there is little of the Northeast in the course that mainly focuses on mainstream Hindu culture, religious institutions and social order. This Hindu-centric approach not only ends up marginalizing cultures and traditions that lie outside the pale of Hinduism, but also seriously

affect the quality of knowledge and the capacity of students to translate what they learn in the classroom and text books into tools for their betterment. According to Nanda, tribal students in particular, exhibit discomfort in relating to several aspects of Indian Sociology as the categories and concepts used in the discourse, such as, 'caste stratification', 'sanskritization', 'jajmani system', 'karma', 'dharma', etc. which are deeply embedded in Brahminic ideology and ethos appear alien to these students (ibid, 149).

Independent observation by this author shows that courses on gender are saddled with the same problem. Like in the rest of the country, in the few departments where the course is offered most of the core readings reflect the reality of the western woman. Even attempts at indigenization made by Indian feminists proved of little help to students in the Northeast as the focus of attention shifted from the western woman to women in Hindu 'texts', and urban middle class women in the context of modernization, both of which are distant to the everyday reality of the Northeastern students.

The problem is compounded by the paucity of materials on women in the region. Ethnographic accounts of many communities prepared by the colonial administrators are marked by the absence of women. Though many of the monographs provide detailed account of the culture and tradition of the people there is hardly any space for women in these accounts. The few references to women tend to focus on their physical characteristics⁹ or depict them as beasts of burden. The contributions that women make to the economy and society at large hardly figured in these accounts.

Even after the collapse of colonialism and attainment of independence the culture of silence towards women continues. Though studies on gender entered the Indian universities in the 1970s there was hardly any work that focus on women of the Northeast. It was only towards the end of the century with the strong initiative taken by the UGC to engender the universities, which saw the establishment of Women's Studies Center in many universities in the country, including the Northeast, that research on gender received attention albeit largely among women scholars. However, quality work on the subject continues to be lacking. Most of the studies tend to be descriptive lacking in criticality and analytical rigour. Especially works conducted by insiders tend to fight shy of questioning the position of women or to interrogate the system that contributes to their subordination, which has resulted in reinforcing gender stereotypes, such as, women in the Northeast do not suffer from discrimination.

While this lack of criticality could be attributed to the

pervasiveness of the patriarchal ideology in the society, it cannot be de-linked from the failure of the educational system to conscientize the people about gender inequality and equip the students with proper intellectual tools to uncover and map the problem. The disjuncture between what the students learn in the class and their everyday reality not only deprives the learners of a concrete base of knowledge, which could serve as the baseline for research, but also creates confusion in their mind about what the correct picture is – what they see and experience or what they learn in the abstract from textbooks. Further, the continuing dominance of the positivist method, with its accent on externally observable and quantifiable behaviour, in the methodology course of many departments has also worked to obscure the importance of subjective issues and feeling state, such as, hurt, suffering, denial, and deprivation which constitute important data for analysis especially in the study of women and ethnic minorities.

Edwin Ardener has developed the theory of 'muted groups' to explain the male bias inherent in explanatory models of social anthropology (this is true of sociology and other social science discipline as well). According to Ardener the dominant groups in society generate and control the dominant mode of expression. Muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies. It is not only in the practice of fieldwork, Ardener avers, that women and other marginalized groups are muted but also in the theories and concepts that constitute the backbone of the discipline¹⁰.

Women and State Policies: Systematic neglect

The suppression of women's voices in the academia, coupled with what feminists called the 'invisibilisation'¹¹ of women in official statistics and national accounting systems, has not only perpetuated their subordination but also contributed to the short shrift given to women and their concerns in state policies. The problem is particularly acute in the case of tribal women, who by dint of the special constitutional provisions directed to protect their personal laws and customs, place them outside the orbit of general laws, therefore denying them the benefit of reformist laws and policies enacted by the state from time to time for the general population. Given that Northeast India has a high concentration of tribes in each of the eight states that constitute the region, ranging from 12.41 percent in Assam to 94.46 percent in Mizoram (2001 census), the implication for women is grave indeed. A case in point is the exclusion of the *Seventy-third*

Constitution Amendment Act, 1993 (Panchayati Raj Act in popular parlance) from many parts of the Northeast. While the Act, which contains many progressive provisions for the empowerment of women, was made compulsory for all states in the country the tribal/Scheduled Areas were exempted and left to the discretion of the state legislature within which they are located. While pressures exerted by rights-based groups and NGOs working for tribal-self rule got the Act extended to the Fifth Schedule areas, vide the *Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996* (PESA), the same was not done in the Sixth Schedule areas due to opposition from the predominantly male political elite (more on this later).

The state's indifference to the rights of women also finds clear reflection in the *Draft National Policy on Tribals*, proposed for the first time since the country achieved Independence by the Government of India. The policy whose stated objective is to bring Scheduled Tribes into the mainstream of society through a multi-pronged approach for their all-round development, and a list of measures to preserve and promote the tribes' cultural heritage, women and their concerns figure nowhere in it. Except for a single statement that the female literacy rate among the tribal population was 18.19 percent compared to the national female literacy rate of 39.29 percent (1991 Census), the Policy makes no other reference to women either as agents or consumers of development.

The same approach underlines the *North-East Forest Policy, 2001*. The policy which was piloted by the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India came in the wake of the indiscriminate harvesting of forests by timber contractors and merchants, with the stated objective of 'conserving the natural heritage of the region by preserving the remaining natural forests with the vast variety of flora and fauna that represent the remarkable biological diversity and genetic resources of the region'. To achieve this goal, it charts out a number of measures to be followed both by the state and the forest users. Its objective, however, is blighted by the short shrift given to women's needs. Whereas the policy recognizes the importance of women's involvement in conservation movement (this is the only role the policy envisages for women) it fails to take into consideration the effect of the measures on them. The policy, which was clearly underlined by an economic agenda, *conservation for greater productivity*, not only totally ignores women's role in forest related activities but also fails to come up with any mechanism to safeguard their interests. Indeed, some of the measures advocated by the policy are clearly detrimental to the poor in general and women in particular. Specifically, the emphasis given to scientific

management of forest, value addition to timber and other forest produce, and change from shifting to settled cultivation through promotion of perennial economic crops like tea, teak, rubber etc. *without spelling out parallel programmes for skill upgradation and financial assistance to women* could intensify their marginalization from forests, which is a major source of livelihood for many rural and tribal households. Studies focused on forest and people in Northeast India and elsewhere reveal that with the commercialization of land and forest women's access to these resources has gradually declined. For example, in Meghalaya where women traditionally enjoy rights over property; with the increase in the economic value of land and forest resources the title/ownership is gradually slipping away from women into the hands of men (Cf. Nathan, 2000)¹².

The scant regard shown to women and women's concerns in the policies outlined above speaks volumes about the state's attitude towards women. Given that both the policies focus on vital issues that affect the life of indigenous women in particular the absence of any guideline/measures relating to women is not only indicative of their lack of clout but also of the state's indifference to their well being.

It is not only the Central Government and its ministries that pay scant attention to indigenous women state governments are no better. Even in a state like Meghalaya where the dominant communities follow the matrilineal principle, women are excluded from many of its policies. A perusal of the Meghalaya Industrial Policy of 1988 and 1997 reveals a complete silence on the issue of women's development. While both the policies emphasized the need for promoting entrepreneurial development as a means to increase employment avenues and eradicate economic backwardness in the state, not a word is uttered about programs or actions for the economic empowerment of women.

Notwithstanding the presence of the matrilineal system which transmits descent and property rights through the female gendered ideology ensured women's continued subordination. By selectively emphasizing on women's nurturing role, along with restrictive and conditional practices, such as, denial of property rights to elder daughters and the obligation on the heiress to discharge lifelong service to the family, women's economic contribution to the household, however substantial, is rendered invisible. It would not be far wrong to say that it is this undervaluation of women's work by the family that accounts for the virtual blackout of women's concerns in state policies.

Similar process is visible in the other states of the Northeast. For example, in Nagaland, the Nagaland

Environment Protection and Economic Development (NEPED) a donor sponsored programme for environmental protection and development through people's participation reveal that the activities were primarily oriented for men.

Mention has already been made about the exclusion of the Panchayati Raj Act (Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment, Act) from the Sixth Schedule areas and other tribal dominated states in the Northeast due to the resistance by the tribal political elite on the ground that tribes have their own political institutions that function on the principle of co-operation and egalitarianism, despite the fact that among many tribes women are traditionally excluded from participation in these bodies.

Another argument advanced by the male political elite is that the Act has no relevance to tribes in the northeast as they are already placed under the protective shield of the constitution. It however needs to be noted that the special constitutional provisions for the Northeast whether under the Sixth Schedule or under Article 371 A that was envisaged for Nagaland and later extended to Manipur (Art. 371-C) and Mizoram (Art. 371-G), differ in many important respects from the provisions of the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act. Even with respect to the Sixth Schedule, where an elected body in the form of the District Council is in place, closer examination reveals that it falls short of the progressive provision of the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act. While the accent of the Sixth Schedule is on the district, as it presupposes the existence of the traditional political institutions at the grass roots level, the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment gives formal recognition to the 'village' by designating it as the *gram sabha*, and treats the same as the pivot of development and self-governance

Most importantly, the Seventy-Third Constitution Amendment Act contains the specific provision of reserving one third of the seats at all levels of the panchayats for women, in addition to those specified for Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes. This revolutionary provision, which gives explicit recognition to the organic link between women's empowerment and the development of society, has special relevance for indigenous women because the Sixth Schedule (this applies to the Fifth Schedule as well) is completely silent on the empowerment and development of women. Unfortunately the political elite in the region seems to have failed to see the significance of this provision. This exclusion has not only denied women access to political participation, but also to take part in the formulation of policies that affect their interest¹³.

This fact comes out sharply in the state of Meghalaya where women's request to be consulted in the constitution of the State Commission for Women (SCW) was met with downright rejection by the state. The matter took an ugly turn when the federation of several women's organizations in the state under the umbrella of '*Ka Lympung ki Seng Kynthei*' staged a walkout during the Chief Minister's speech at the inauguration of the commission (SCW) in the presence of representatives from the National Commission for Women (NCW) on 30th October 2004. The occasion, which should have been a source of pride and elation for all women in the state, resulted in deep acrimony between the women's organizations and the government. The cause of the conflict was the peremptory and dictatorial manner in which the Commission was constituted through a hurriedly passed Ordinance with no discussion in the Legislative Assembly or prior consultations with women's groups and NGOs who in the last seven years submitted a series of memoranda to the state government for the constitution of the State Commission for Women so that it could take up women's issues with state agencies and provide a forum where women could seek redress for their problems.

When the representatives of the women's groups protested at the undemocratic manner in which the commission was constituted the Chief Minister rebuffed the protesters and authoritatively asserted that it is the government's prerogative to constitute or set up commission and in doing so the cabinet is not bound to consult any group or people for whom it is meant. That the government's authoritarian manner hurt the sensibilities of even those who received its favours is reflected by the refusal of the Vice-chairperson designate and Padmashri awardee Theilin Phanbuh to accept her nomination to the commission.

To be sure, the prerogative to set up the SCW, as is the case with other commissions and committees, lies with the government. But if the step taken by the state is to be credible and the government serious to address the rights and needs of women, consultation with women's groups on important policy matters is a definite step in the right direction. Of course, there are bound to be divergent views on what constitutes the woman's problem, the prioritization of issues, and/or how these are going to be resolved, however, excluding potential dissenters from the consultation process and ignoring their legitimate demand for effective participation in the process can defeat the very objective for which the commission was set up

Faulty Ordinance

A close examination of the matter reveals that the government is not only guilty of transgressing the norms, expected to operate in a democratic society, in the formation of the commission, the entire exercise appears to be an eyewash mainly intended to impress the visiting NCW team. This fact comes out clearly in the ordinance relating to the constitution of the commission, namely, *The Meghalaya State Commission for Women Ordinance, 2004*. A close reading of the ordinance brings to the fore a number of lacunae in the provisions, which reduces the SCW to an ornamental body with no teeth to carry out the functions spelt out in the national Act (*National Commission for Women Act, 1990*).

If the language used in the order is any indication of the intention of its promulgator the objective of *The Meghalaya State Commission for Women Ordinance, 2004* appears highly suspect. While the ordinance in question was specifically created to deal with matters relating to women, the language reverberates with masculinist overtones. For instance, in the Chapter on the Constitution of Commission (Chapter II, section 4. clause 2) the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and members are all referred as *his*, instead of 'her'. Even with reference to the post of a Member Secretary who shall be appointed from amongst the officers of the state government, there is no stipulation that the candidate *should* have experience in the field of women welfare, only to the effect that a person with such experience is *preferable* (the word used in the ordinance is 'preferably'), clearly suggesting that the criterion is not binding (Section 2, Clause 2(c)). There is also no definition of the duties and functions of the Member Secretary anywhere in the ordinance. This silence provides scope to the state to use the position to subvert any act or decision taken by the commission if it perceives to be contrary to its interest.

Further, while the functions of the commission appears to be broadly in line with those included in the *National Commission for Women Act, 1990*, some of the clauses that are critical for the empowerment of women have been omitted in the Meghalaya ordinance. For instance, in the former (NCW Act) clauses (h) and (i) of Section 10 clearly empower the members to:

undertake promotional and educational research so as to suggest ways of ensuring due representation of women in all spheres and identify factors responsible for impeding their advancement, such as, lack of access to housing and basic services, inadequate support services and technologies for reducing drudgery and occupational health hazards and for increasing their productivity (emphasis supplied);

participate and advise on the planning process of socio-economic development of women (emphasis supplied).

The omission of these two clauses from the Meghalaya ordinance substantially weakens the power of the SCW and its ability to function as an effective instrument for the social and political empowerment of women. The role of educational research is particularly important in the present context because of the dearth of reliable and accurate information on many aspects of women's life, leading to all kinds of distorted and misleading opinions about their status in society which has contributed to their continued marginalization from all important spheres. The omission of sub clause (i) from the ordinance takes away the commission's opportunity to participate in policy decisions in matters relating to the development of women.

The Politics of Empowerment

That the omissions are not accidental but clearly premeditated came out in the Chief Ministers inaugural speech at the NCW consultative meeting with NGOs mentioned earlier. While proudly announcing the constitution of the State Commission for Women a day before the NCW visit to the state the Chief Minister laced the announcement with the pointed remark:

[T]he ...thing about the empowerment of women is that I do not know how far we shall empower them but *I believe they will not supersede men's power otherwise men will lose their identity in the long run* (personal observation and Television News Footage¹⁴, emphasis supplied)

Though delivered with a tinge of humour the statement clearly reveals much more than what the speaker intended. In the first place, the statement lucidly brings out men's image of themselves not only as the legitimate power-holders in the society but also their very identity is tied to this role. Therefore, a challenge to this role from the female sex could sharply erode men's identity hence the identity needs to be carefully protected.

The statement also reveals in no uncertain terms the state's vacillating attitude towards the empowerment of women. While the empowerment of women is clearly a national agenda strongly endorsed by successive governments at the centre, which the federal units could ill afford to ignore, the means of empowerment and the degree to which women would be empowered remains the prerogative of the [male] power holders in the state. The mode in which the SCW was constituted and the arrogant manner in which the CM responded to the expression of concern aired by various women's groups clearly sends the message that women are but passive

recipients of the 'benevolent' acts of the government devoid of voice and agency of their own. Such a perspective not only goes against the spirit of the national policy but also defeats the feminist goal to bring about a transformation in the unequal power relations between women and men.

Further, implicit in the above statement is the association of empowerment with dominance. In other words, the statement hints at the belief that by empowering women this could propel them into a position of dominance vis-à-vis men - thus posing a threat to the traditional balance of power in which men hold the dominant position. This association of empowerment with dominance poses a major constraint for women and lies at the root of men's inherent opposition to their integration into the system of governance and political decision-making process.

It is necessary to demystify this belief. While empowerment is inherently linked to power, it does not necessarily lead to dominance or the exertion of authority and/or influence over others. In the context of women, 'empowerment' broadly refers to a process by which change in a given societal balance of power is made possible. It does not privilege women at the cost of men but strives towards the equal balance of power between them.

What is more, though the main goal of women's empowerment is to achieve equality with men its target is not confined solely to those structures and institutions that perpetuate gender inequality, but directed at all structures of oppression such as those that perpetuate class, caste and race inequality. In other words, empowerment seeks to bring about a re-distribution of power in all structures that perpetuate in-equality - at the family, community and state levels.

The facts highlighted above suggest that women are not only victims of state processes but also of their own men. Despite the fact that Meghalaya is a predominantly tribal state with the state machinery in the hands of the local leadership women continue to be isolated from the decision making process, strongly indicative of their powerlessness. There is, however, a silver lining to the above mentioned process. While the state has had its way in putting the newly constituted SCW in place, with not a whimper on the ordinance from the newly appointed members, its hurried and secretive promulgation and the wide lacunae in its provisions have roused the consciousness of many of the generally complacent female population in the state who till the other day had little idea what 'social' and 'legal right' means, so used were they to being ruled by men that expression of dissent

with public policy was viewed not only with fear but as a sacrilege¹⁵.

The high publicity that the event (contestation by women's groups) received has catapulted women's issue to the centre stage prompting many women's groups and NGOs which thus far were mainly engaged in focusing on women's socio-economic needs (what western feminists described as *practical gender needs*) to add on demands for women's legal and political rights in their agenda (*strategic gender needs*)¹⁶.

The process has also brought together women's groups belonging to different communities and region, to fight for women's democratic rights with one voice irrespective of difference of language, religion or ethnicity.

Facilitating the process and aiding in creating public awareness about the matter is the print media, which gave wide coverage to the events both in the vernacular and English papers. Although the state-run electronic media ignored the momentum generated by the women's movement in the state the newspapers clearly played a supportive role by diligently reporting each and every development on the matter as they occurred.

Other challenges

Apart from the deeply entrenched gender bias, persistent poverty, disease and illiteracy, new forms of exploitation of women are emerging. This finds vivid reflection in the increase in the number of cases of domestic and sexual violence. Though such violence was relatively unknown in the Northeast, today women and children are at the receiving end of attacks. This problem is not confined to the hills but widely prevalent among the plains dwelling communities as well. According to Sanjoy Hazarika, today Assam tops the chart in the number of abuses perpetrated against children.¹⁷

Trafficking in women has also emerged as a major issue among many communities. The problem is accelerated by the geo-political location of the region, lying as it is at the junction where the borders of several countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar) meet, resulting in constant movement of population across the international border for various reasons, including the search for livelihood. The same holds true internally, where the opening of roads and rapid extension of commerce have intensified the movement of people and goods between states. This opening up of the region has increased the vulnerability of women especially those from poor families, as driven by poverty many girls from the rural areas sought their livelihood by setting up petty shops along the highways that are frequented by

hundreds of trucks, which stop for refreshments and rest. Weary from their long journey and weeks of separation from their wife and family, many men lured the girls with false promise of marriage and better jobs but ended up reducing them into unwed mothers and sexual objects. The Supreme Court ban on timber logging and the economic crisis it created for poor households has further aggravated the problem, as hundreds of families who were rendered jobless by the SC order flocked to the towns and commercial hub along the highways to look for alternative source of livelihood.

The problem is not unique to the northeast. In fact, tribal women in the central tribal belt have experienced a long history of economic and sexual exploitation. In states like Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand where the indigenous peoples have been forced out of their land and forest by revenue-hungry colonial laws and the Nehruvian temples (dams and factories) of independent India many girls have been lured to the metropolitan cities to work as domestic maids, in the process many are unwittingly forced into the flesh trade.

These processes not only grossly violate the principles of human rights and gender justice that underline the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) to which India is a party, but also strongly interrogate the role of the state and its dominant population. The ratification of CEDAW and allied instruments has little meaning unless the state enforces them to protect the rights and interests of the vulnerable and hapless section of society.

Another problem that affects women of the Northeast but finds little space in the agenda of the mainstream women's movement or the state is the continuing militarization of so called 'politically disturbed' areas which has given rise to gross human rights violations and violence against women by the armed forces in the form of rape, murder, kidnapping etc. While these processes have brought to the fore a number of women's organizations in the region, which are engaged in attempts to restore human rights and peace, in many areas women continue to be victims of politically premeditated violence. The reason for this is not far to seek. In conflict situations centering on ethnicity and state power, perpetrating violence on women through acts of rape, abduction or murder provides the perpetrator/s a psychological sense of victory over the victim and the group it belongs to. What is a matter of concern is that issues linked to ethnic and nationalist conflict are so deeply coloured by stereo-type ideas about insurgents and national security that even when such acts of violence against women occasionally find their way into the

national news they elicit little sympathy from state bodies or civil society.

Contestation and resilience

Notwithstanding the various constraints that surround their life what is remarkable about the Northeast is the high resilience exhibited by its women. Despite the deeply entrenched gender bias, spate of violence, deficit in democracy, good governance and development the people have learnt to move on. As noted above, while insurgency continues to be rife in many pockets of the region, the yearning for peace and stability is explicit in the concerted attempts made by grassroots organisations to negotiate for peace and restoration of normalcy. Notable in this regard are the *Naga Mother's Association* who trekked down hundreds of miles to the rebel bases in Burma to give the militants lessons on peace, and the *Tangkhul Shanao Long* and *Meira Paibis* of Maipur who acted as mediators between the insurgents and the government with their slogan 'No more blood' addressed to both parties. A close observation of the situation reveals that the culture of subjugation and silence perpetrated by the dominant groups when carried out to unreasonable limits serve to foster the germination of the 'culture of protest' in the oppressed. The rise of Irom Sharmila as an 'Icon of Peace' is an attestation of this fact. Sharmila who has been on a voluntary fast unto death for the last ten years as a mark of protest against the militarization of the region by the central government and human rights violations by state and non state agencies, has not only kept the culture of protest alive among women of the Northeast but has also attracted national as well as international support from peace groups.

The protest launched by the women's organizations in Meghalaya against state authoritarianism can be seen in the same light. The arrogant and dictatorial response of the state to their peaceful demand for consultation converted the traditionally compliant and passive women into a vocal and assertive group. What these protests suggest is that women are no longer willing to be silent spectators and passive recipients of the arrangements made by the state or by men. They want to be part of the decision-making process particularly in areas that affect their life. They seek to do this by non violent means, through a process of negotiation and dialogue, and by forging solidarity with all the oppressed cutting across ethnicity, culture, language, religion and gender, thus marking a shift from the traditionally ethnic or community based movement launched by men to a more

inclusive issue-based movement. To what extent this development can put a check on the hegemony exercised by men remains a moot point. But if small gains are to be counted, the contestation by women and the movement it generated, albeit still at a nascent stage, has led not only to greater awareness about the rights of women, ethnic minorities and marginalised groups in general, among a larger section of the population but also sends a strong message that the dominant, be it the state or segment/s of the population, cannot permanently take the oppressed for granted.

Concluding remarks

The processes documented in this paper reveal the complex and multifaceted character of the problems faced by women in India's Northeast. While the study explodes the myth that women in the Northeast are free from inequality, their subordination is not a consequence of patriarchy alone but a culmination of a number of factors. This is particularly true of women in tribal societies whose cultural and political distinctiveness not only place them outside the orbit of general laws but also exposed them to other forms of discrimination that go beyond gender. While gendered ideology upheld by the community pushes women into subordination it is reinforced by the indifference of the dominant groups in society to those who lie at the margins. The culture of silence that marked pedagogical and state practices both at the central and federal levels are illustrative of this fact. The problem is compounded by the region's historical and political isolation and its strategic location at the confluence of international borders, making it a point of migratory influx and a hub of intense political and military activity. The culture of protest outlined in the preceding section had their roots in these multi-layered processes. The long years of subjugation perpetrated by men through the institutional mechanism of the family, community and the state, and the threat posed to their survival by social and political violence and militarization of the region forced women to come out of their inertia and fight for their rights.

Notes

1. The different forms of exclusion include: discrimination, oppression, exploitation, segregation and marginalization.
2. In this paper the concept 'patriarchy' is used in a broad sense to refer to a system of social organisation in which authority is vested in the hands of men, irrespective of the principle of descent adopted by the society patrilineal or matrilineal.
3. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York, International Publications
4. For a fuller discussion on the role of reproductive ideology on the construction of gender see in particular L Dube, 'Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production' in Leela Dube et al (eds), *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1986 pp. 22-53 and L. Dube, *Kinship and Gender in South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi, Vistaar Publications, 1994
5. Mercie Gangte, 'A Sociological Study of Women and Society in Mizoram', M.Phil dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010. See also Lucy Vashum Zehol's paper, 'Status of Tribal Women' in T.B. Subba and G.C. Ghosh (eds), *The Anthropology of North-East India: A Textbook*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 2003 pp. 293-306 for information on discriminatory practices against women in Naga society
6. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction' in R. Brown (ed), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*, London, Tavistock, 1973
7. Subrat K. Nanda, 'Sociology in Northeast India: A Synoptic View' in Maitrayee Choudhury (ed), *Sociology in India: Intellectual and Institutional Practices*, Jaipur & Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2010.
8. It is not only colleges and universities that reproduce inequality schools too play an important role in the reproduction of gender and other forms of social inequality. In her study on education in Mizoram, Lakshmi Bhatia shows how the school curriculum shapes the gender identity of the students through the representation of sex-role stereotypes of adult personalities with which they are conditioned to emulate and identify. (L. Bhatia, *The Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes through Modern Education*, in Sumi Krishna (ed) *Women's Livelihood Rights, Recasting Citizenship for Development*, Delhi, Sage Publications, 2007. See also Lakshmi Bhatia, *Education and Society in a Changing Mizoram: The Practice of Pedagogy*, New Delhi, Routledge, 2010)
9. The description of women in some of these works is characterised by strong racist and sexist undertone. For example, Hunter in his widely read book *A Statistical Account of Assam Vol II* states, 'Garos women are remarkable for their ugliness'. In his opinion, 'Garos are excessively ugly and rare to find a Garo woman with any pretension to beauty'
10. E. Ardener 'The problem re-visited' in S. Ardener *Perceiving Women*, 1975, 21-23.
11. The tendency to define work in purely economic terms, that is, in terms of 'exchange value' rather than 'use value', has contributed to the invisibilisation of women's work. Since the large majority of women generally produce for subsistence and not for the market they get excluded from the category of workers (on this subject, see in particular Andrea Menefee Singh, *Invisible Hands: Women in Home Based Production (Women and the Household in Asia Series, Vol. 1)*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1987.
12. Dev Nathan, 'Timber in Meghalaya', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 35, No.4, January, 22-28, 2000.
13. For a fuller discussion on the relative merits of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules and the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act and my critique on the exclusion of the latter from the Sixth Schedule Areas see Tiplut Nongbri, *Development, Ethnicity and Gender: Select Essays on Tribes in India*, Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2003, pp. 213-225.

14. Peitngor Cable News (PCN), Shillong, 31 October 2004
15. A slightly different version of this event can be found in Chapter 7 of Tiplut Nongbri, *A Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in Meghalaya* - Report of a study commissioned by and submitted to the National Commission for Women in 2005.
16. 'Practical gender needs' relates to needs of basic subsistence, such as, food, water, health, shelter, and livelihood. To satisfy these leads to improvement in women's lives and poses no danger to existing structures of society and sex-based division of labour. 'Strategic gender needs', on the other hand, are needs that would help women overcome their subordination by dismantling/removing institutionalised forms of discrimination, such as, patriarchy, caste and class hegemony, and/or discriminatory land and property laws that are detrimental to women (Bina Agarwal, 'Why do women need independent rights in land? in 'Mary John (ed), *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*, Delhi, Penguin Books, 2008, p 182.)
17. Statement made at the seminar, '*Resurgent North East: Constraints and Opportunities*' at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, November 18-20, 2010.

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