From the Editor

Dear colleagues,

The humankind is going through a testing time today. The Covid 19 pandemic has already impacted our traditional social relations and norms in many ways and the future we are moving into is somewhat uncertain. Social scientists have a challenging responsibility ahead in analysing and conceptualising the changing social realities. We hope to see some insightful and illuminating research in that direction in the near future.

It is my pleasure to present the eighth issue of *Explorations*. The present issue consists of seven papers published under the 'Articles' category, one interview, one commentary and three book reviews.

The first article, titled *Negotiating Public and Private: Women as Movement Actors*, by Gayathri O. and Biju P.R. investigates the degree of critical consciousness that women get through their participation in an organisation and the extent to which movement activism changed the worldview of women within the family. The attitude of members of a leading women's organisation in Kerala – All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) forms the premise of analysis in this paper.

The second article, titled *Rethinking Conflict Prevention through Grassroots Activism: Narratives of Women Building Peace in Rural India*, by Ivy Dhar and Diksha Poddar explores the existing experiences of grassroots peace activism, drawing on the narratives of a civil society group, *Mahila Shanti Sena*, where women have taken the role of transformers in preventing inter-personal conflicts within households and those that lead to neighbourhood and community tensions. The paper argues for the need to widen the scope for decentralised participatory interventions while contextualising the gender discourse of conflict prevention and peace-building.

The third article, titled *Food Culture and Identity in Northeast India: Prospects for Social Science Research*, by Hoineilhing Sitlhou argues that though often considered an insignificant subject of study, a study of gastronomical practices, dietary customs and practices can tell us much about the 'Northeastern self', the

community, identity, intercommunity dynamics and relationships, as also the role of food in producing social meanings. The paper brings to fore the lack of scholarship on food as a politico-cultural item and urges the need to study not only the instrumental value of dietary practices but also their intrinsic value, as a means to an end.

The fourth article, titled *Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood: Caregivers in the Neo-liberal Economy*, by Sarmistha Das and Obja Borah Hazarika explores the intricate relationship between two categories of working women, one who goes out to work leaving her child with the caregiver and the other who comes in to fill the space of the working mother. The paper is an attempt to look at 'motherhood' as a concept and the role of caregivers in the neo-liberal economy; it attempts to understand the nature of relationship, built on mutual understanding, to create an environment of manufactured motherhood vis-à-vis their everyday negotiations.

The fifth article, titled *Exploring Participation of Women in Self-Help Groups: A Study of Two Blocks in Darjeeling District*, by Pema Lama examines the participation of women in Self-Help Groups (SHG) and argues that the SHGs are a fundamental pre-requisite for women empowerment and enhancement of their socio-economic status. The paper shows that despite the difficulties they confront right from the grassroots level to the higher authorities, the SHGs have come a long way in terms of being initiated to the 'participatory culture' and that they have great potential to be a salient channel of a participatory approach.

The sixth article, titled *Fragmented Identity of the Chakmas in Mizoram: Citizens or Illegal Immigrants?*, by Partha Pratim Baruah and Bikash Deka articulates the challenges faced by the Chakmas politically and socially in Mizoram due to their fragmented identity, both as citizens and illegal immigrants. The paper raises the question of state intervention to embark on a mechanism to detect the illegal immigrants (if any), regulate cross-border migration so that the Chakmas who are the authentic citizens of India and are indigenous to Mizoram are not susceptible to continuous discrimination.

The seventh article, titled *Understanding the Alienation of Indigenous Ethnic Groups during the Assam Movement of 1979-1985*, by Tonoya Mahanta and Barnali Sarma attempts to look into the experiences of indigenous ethnic groups of Assam, focusing on the Bodo tribe, during and after the Assam Movement. The

paper argues that the Assam Movement, on one hand, united a large section of the Assamese population on the issue of identity but on the other hand, the assertion of the Assamese identity also muffled the voices of the smaller ethnic communities of the state and caused them to drift further apart from the larger Assamese community.

This issue carries an interview of late Professor Yogendra Singh, one of the most well-known Indian sociologists, with Dev Nath Pathak and Biswajit Das.

The commentary by Amit Singh, *Normality is an illusion: Crisis is not*, argues that COVID-19 pandemic may have redefined the 'idea of normality' to the privileged one, but for the excluded, marginalised and discriminated, comfortability of normality is just an illusion.

This is followed by three book reviews: *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (2018) reviewed by Yogesh Mishra; *Writing Social Science: A Personal Narrative* (2019) reviewed by Shefali Bedi; *Matchmaking in Middle-Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage* (2020) reviewed by Sristi Mondal.

Explorations invites your contributions for future issues of the journal. We will appreciate your feedback or suggestions on the journal.

Stay safe.

Chandan Kumar Sharma
Department of Sociology
Tezpur University
Editor, *Explorations*
Email: explorationsiss@gmail.com
October 2020

Negotiating Public and Private:
Women as Movement Actors

--- Gayathri O. and Biju P.R.

Abstract

Women's public appearance is critical in the process of women's emancipation. Collective action can break the ideology of misogyny that women have internalised in a patriarchal set up; the experiences of women in the South Indian state of Kerala are a testimony to this. This paper assumes that the first step in the way of emancipation should begin within the family. Consequent to the entry of women into the public domain, the traditional boundary between private and public has changed. This is true regarding women's life in Kerala. But the question of changing the power relationship within the private domain, say the family is still unsettled. This article investigates the extent to which movement activism changed the worldview of women within the family. The attitude of members of a leading women's organisation in Kerala – All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) forms the premise of analysis in this paper.

Key words: AIDWA, Critical Consciousness, Empowerment, Family, Identity, Patriarchy

Introduction

Women's movements are playing a critical role in the whole process of women's emancipation. These movements are spaces of collective action through which they question the anti-women tendencies existing in the society. One of the main hallmarks of women's movement is their diversity, and this diversity can be seen in their ideology, nature of organisation and also on cross-cultural differences. This diversity and varied nature of the movement attracted academic attention since the inception of organised collective action for women. For instance, Shirin Hassim (2004) observes that women's movement takes different forms in different contexts, operating at some moments as a formalised structure and at others as a loose network. This variety of organisational forms is accompanied by a variety in the range of tactics used, from assimilative to confrontational and

even violent. She also stated that women's movements were not homogeneous entities characterised by singular and coherent sets of demands. Rather, by their very nature they tend to be diverse, embracing multiple organisational forms, ideologies which may at times even be contradictory (ibid.).

Lisa Baldez (2002) also shares an analogous opinion on women's movement. Women organise for various reasons and protest in multiple contexts. For instance, in the work, *Why women protest: Women's Movement in Chile*, Baldez observes that not all women organise along feminist lines. It may be in response to their interests as women either to defend traditional interests centering on children and the family or interests in achieving equality that they organise. In her opinion, what unites them is their appeal to women as a source of collective identity, thereby meaning that gender as a unifying category is important in gathering women as a movement constituency. In the same way, it is evident from a comparative analysis of women's movements that significant differences exist between geographical locations in terms of their character, timing, influence and effectiveness (Molyneux, 1998).

But in spite of the diversity, all movements share the fact that women are an oppressed category of people and in order to change women's social condition and marginalisation, they should be organised and form collectivities to challenge their subordination. This means that identity, once an important benchmark of women's vulnerability, now has become a source of activism and mobilisational appeal to a large conglomerate of women of all social strata. Their movements, therefore, try to concentrate on generating awareness among women of the evil effects of material and ideological system which made them passive. It was/is also believed that the ideology of misogyny that women have internalised in a patriarchal set up could be broken by a collectivity. Theories on women's empowerment emphasize significance of women's transformation from a position of powerlessness to one of liberation as its inherent objective. The necessary first step in the transition of any subjugated category of people is that their subordination is not natural but it is constructed.

Therefore, transformation of women is more than acquiring capabilities and resources, rather it is about developing critical consciousness from a women's vantage point. In a fundamental sense, empowerment is a process rather than a product. Further, there is also a near unanimity among scholars that empowerment has both individual and structural dimensions. As Shirin Rain (2007) points out

individual empowerment is conditioned by the broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which it takes place and hence they also need to be arbitrated. Couple of scholars like Saraswathi Raju (2005) and Naila Kabeer (1999) have raised the same issue. For example, Saraswati Raju (2005) observes that empowerment is likely to be counterproductive when it is merely confined to enhancing individual access to resources without effecting change in the socio-cultural and political structure which include, apart from the state, social institutions like family, caste, etc. Empowerment will be incomplete without changing the attitudinal consciousness of women.

The preeminent task of organisations committed to the cause of women is, therefore, to make them aware of the unequal social system in which they are embedded. Accordingly, women's movements across the world put more energy to raise women's consciousness which, in the words of Bell Hooks (2000), is the process of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination and the manner in which it is institutionalised and perpetuated. It is the starting point of creating a sense of solidarity and sisterhood which is necessary for women's politics. Investigating the extent to which movement participation facilitates women's awareness on the gendered nature of the society is paramount in any inquiry on women's movement.

In the light of the above theoretical proposition, the article investigates how the members of a women's organisation responds to a couple of questions which decisively have an impact on deciding their worldview. It thus looks into how the participants of one of the leading women's organisations in Kerala developed critical consciousness – the process by which people in movement question their inferior social position from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical perspective on it. The data collected by the authors from the members of a leading women's organisation, All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), which is affiliated to CPI (M) is used for this purpose.

Before going into explaining the ideological and organisational specificity of AIDWA, it is pertinent here to take a look at the development of women's movement in India. India had a rich tradition of women's mobilisation in different historical periods, be it during the time of social reform movements or during the national freedom struggle. But the women's movement in India entered into a very critical phase in its whole existence during the 1970s, especially after the publication of the *Report on the status of women in India* (1974). The report

unmasked the reality of women's life in India by pointing out the failure of the constitutional guarantee of equality in addressing the problems of women and brought to discussion the deplorable conditions of women. Consequently, the political landscape in India witnessed the emergence of a strong women's movement. This phase was different from the earlier period. Organisations of women were formed in different parts of the country which were ideologically and organisationally different from the earlier organisations of women. Ideologically they were more radical and organisationally they developed their own style of functioning and stood independent from any other institutions or political parties (Desai, 1985). In short, the country witnessed the advent of autonomous women's activism in India. The women's movements intervention is very significant as it intervened in issues which surround women's existence in the domestic domain such as dowry deaths, rape and amniocentesis for selection (Basu, 1992).

As explained in the beginning of the paper, diversity is the hallmark of women's movement and in India different types of organisations exist which can be broadly categorised as autonomous and affiliated organisations. Affiliated organisations are characterised by their affiliation with a political party or any other institutions. AIDWA comes under the second category and it is affiliated to a political party. It is the women's wing of the CPI (M) which was formed at a meeting held on March 10-12 at Chennai in 1981. It was formed at a time when there was an atmosphere of increased visibility of identity politics in general and women's movement in particular at the national level, which questioned state led development that relegated subaltern sections to the periphery. Interestingly, this period was also marked by the militancy of women's movement. Therefore, formation of AIDWA has to be viewed against this changed political landscape of the country. In the initial meeting, there were members from fifteen different Indian states, who were chosen from among those who were in the forefront of various struggles across India, which aimed to alter the feudal social system and establish in its place an egalitarian social order.

AIDWA, as one of the biggest women's organisation in the country, perceives itself as a frontal organ of Indian women which stands for emancipating them and ensuring gender parity through mobilising them, and also taking help from progressive sections among men. It has an organisational presence in twenty-three states in India with a current membership of over one crore (see, http://www.aidwaonline.org/). Though in terms of appeal it cuts across class and

related divides, about two-thirds of its membership is derived from poor rural and urban women. This is a crucial point which shows that its major constituency is constituted by that section of the oppressed gender which is marginalised. The objective of forming AIDWA was to build a broad based movement for the betterment of women. Its focus is on mobilising women against the multi-layered oppression they confront in a capitalist semi-feudal society in India. The organisational guidelines of AIDWA claim it as a multi-class organisation in spite of its priority to address the problems of women at the lower rungs of the society. The organisation considers poor women as the worst victims of socio-economic inequalities in India. It is conceived as a mass organisation and the guidelines state that mass membership is the main method to increase its organisational reach among women. AIDWA seeks to address the problems of women from a perspective of gender, citizenship and class and by engaging in a host of activities. As a very significant women's group in India, it has recognised the importance of women's participation in the general democratic movement without which their emancipation or the emancipation of working people could not be achieved (Ranadive, 1990).

The Kerala unit of AIDWA, which is one of the most active units of the organisation, has been in the forefront of the women's organisations in Kerala. Kerala unit of the organisation is one of the strongest at the national level. In the state also, it has its organisational presence in all the fourteen districts of the state and it is also the largest women's group in Kerala in terms of membership and has its branches all over the state. The organisation has 20,741 Local Units, 1,900 Village Committees and 203 Area Committees. The Tenth Working Report, 2013 documented the size of the organisation in Kerala in terms of membership as 46 lakh which, in fact, means it has within its fold about 27 per cent of women population of the state as per the latest census data.

However, there is considerable confusion among scholars with regard to the efficacy of party affiliated organisations in addressing the issues of women because of its limitations in organising activities independent of their parent organisations. For instance, the scholars like Devika and Kodth (2011) observed that AIDWA is the largest women organisation in Kerala in terms of its membership, but it could not make its substantial presence in the political public. But the significance of the organisation lies in its ability to reach out to the women who reside even in remote areas. Devika and Thampi (2012) observed that the pre-eminence of AIDWA in Kerala is because of its success in mobilising

women at the grassroots and also its intervention in taking up women's issues at the grassroots level.

Methodology

For the purpose of collecting empirical data on understanding the effectiveness of movement activism, convenient sampling frame of hundred members of an organisation, i.e., All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) were selected from four districts and a structured questionnaire was served to the respondents. It may be noted that rather than serving the questionnaire to the respondents in a sterile and technical fashion, in most cases they were encouraged to elaborate the responses to important questions. That means a mixed method was adopted. As already stated, four districts – Kollam, Kannur, Malappuram and Kottayam – were selected for this purpose to get a geographical representation of the state. These districts are also geographically important as they represent both the southern and northern regions of Kerala. Moreover the selection of these districts was given due consideration owing to factors such as religion, education, gender, class, ideological leniency of the respondents.

Analyses

The following section of the paper is an analysis of the data gathered from sampling frame of hundred members of AIDWA. Seven themes are used. These themes are considered an obstacle for women getting a fair role in the public sphere in Kerala. Responses of the respondents to questions based on these themes are discussed under separate sub-headings. These include: [1] Recognition, [2] Empowerment, [3] Family and Patriarchy, [4] Politics as Male Bastion, [5] Views on Women's issues, [6] Socio-Political Awareness, and [7] Family Support and Organisational Activism**.**

Dilemma of Recognition

Social recognition is an important variable of empowerment. Hence, it was decided to invite the attention of the respondents on the issue of social recognition accorded to women by the society. It may be recalled that by recognition what is meant here is the preparedness of the society to accept women as equally useful members of the society like men. To understand this, therefore, a couple of questions were put across to the respondents.

From an analysis of their perception, it is clear that, overall, the respondents were dissatisfied with the unequal treatment meted out to women by the society. 71 per cent of the members held the view that society in Kerala was not giving women proper recognition. To 16 per cent there was limited recognition and to the rest − thirteen per cent – the same was fully satisfactory.

Taken together, 87 per cent of the respondents are, in some way or other, not satisfied with the society's attitude towards women. It is clear that cutting across religious, regional, caste and economic backgrounds, there was a near unanimity of opinion in this regard and this points towards a less well-known facet of Kerala's social reality. Women, irrespective of their differences, value social esteem. As noted by the socialist feminist Nancy Fraser, gender is a 'bivalent collectivity'. Understanding and redressing gender injustice, therefore, requires attending to both 'distribution and recognition' (Fraser, 1996, pp. 15-17). This largely underscores the need for a cultural politics, rather than merely concentrating on the material redistribution of resources. The field experience also unravels this – the fact that the women's question cannot be addressed simply by distributing material benefits, but it has also to be a politics of recognition.

The dissatisfaction of women with society's insensitivity towards them puts a serious question mark on the so-called positive indicators of women's development in Kerala. This study, thus, corroborates the findings of many of the earlier studies in the area, all of which vehemently questions the development paradigm in Kerala and speaks about gender paradox and the myth of Kerala Model.

Empowerment of Women

57 per cent of respondents related empowerment to a condition of self-sufficiency – economic, educational and social. 22 per cent others related it to participation in public affairs so that women could be visible in the public sphere. Those of the respondents who shared this perception also believed that empowerment meant gender parity in political affairs and recognition of personhood. Yet 21 per cent related it to organisational consciousness as well as awareness about the systems and structures that inhibited women's development. In short, it is apparent from the field study that the respondents' notion of empowerment is a mixture of acquisition of certain skills and resources and elimination of the anti-woman tendencies that permeate every walk of human life.

This shows that most of the members of AIDWA share a notion of empowerment which has more in common with the already available literature on the subject. Empowerment is freedom, opines majority of the respondents. The concept is more or less related to independence in all areas of social life: a question of choice and capacity to take decisions, opportunity for women to participate in public life, social mobility, capacity to stand on one's own feet and courage and boldness – their understanding went like this.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the members have heard about empowerment and have some notion about it. An important reason for this terminological familiarity is the widespread use of the word in all official documents and discussions on women, especially in the micro-credit programmes which have a special appeal as far as ordinary women are concerned. It is another thing, that in reality, the term is merely meant as a strategy to incorporate women into the development process simply by making them beneficiaries. Such a simplistic notion of the term not only undermines the potential of women's emancipation, but undoubtedly leads to the internalisation of official ideology by ordinary people which are somewhat benevolent, leaving serious gender issues unaddressed. In the case of the respondents of this study also, the situation is more or less the same.

Family and Patriarchy

Members of AIDWA share the view that family is patriarchal. There was a near unanimity among the respondents on the question of gender inequality in the family. It largely confirms the prevalent feminist thinking that family is an arena where women's subordination exists in its most visible form (Jain & Banerjee, 2008). Division of labour within the family gives rise to unequal relationship between men and women in the society. Only 13 per cent of women in the survey believe that family system in Kerala is not gendered, whereas 46 per cent hold the opposite view. At the other end, 41 per cent toddle through the middle path as they speak about the limited nature of equality available within the family.

In order to probe further into their tryst with equality, the respondents were asked to narrate their experience in their own families in this regard. Their responses were absolutely different from their general impression of gender equality in Kerala society. A whopping 80 per cent answered the query positively. Only 16 per cent have the bitter experience of not having equality within their own

families. The responses were also cross-tabulated by age, education and employment status. Highest number of respondents who said that equality existed in their family came from the following categories: education-wise, 96 per cent of them are degree holders, 88 per cent having pre-degree/plus two qualification and 83 per cent of them post graduates; age-wise, 93 per cent of the older generation; and on the basis of employment status, 88 per cent of them unemployed. The lowest in this regard was that which came from the primary educated – 50 per cent. On the other side, among the 64 per cent who gave a negative response to this question, 81 per cent of the response came from the employed, followed by 81 per cent from high school educated and 56 per cent from 36 to 45 age groups.

To bring out the further ramifications of the gender relations within family, two more questions relating to decision-making power and economic independence were included in the questionnaire. The answers to these questions are really revealing. Among 80 per cent of members who claimed that there was equality in their family, only 70 per cent said that they took decisions on their own matters. Likewise, only 63 per cent said that they have economic freedom. This shows that despite a brute majority of women claiming that their family is democratic, when it comes to economic freedom and discretion in making decisions in personal matters, there is significant variation in the responses. This means that equality, which majority of the respondents claim, is more nominal than real. An interesting experience which the authors had during this field study is worth recounting here. They were witness to an active member of the organisation, a Gram Panchayat member, and one who deposed positively to the question on women's equality, was seen consulting her husband on majority of the questions in the questionnaire. Surprisingly, even to the question as to whether women needed reservation, the respondent consulted her husband who was a Local Secretary of the CPI (M).

Interestingly, two active AIDWA members, one of whom was serving as a Block Panchayat member and the other as a Panchayat member at the time of the survey, responded to the question on identity in a manner one would have never expected them to say. Their reply was that they privileged their identity as wife of so and so rather than on their own individuality. Even after officiating as elected representatives and further working as active members of an organisation committed to the cause of women, they could not shed the influence of patriarchal ideology to which they were subjected to. To them what gave them more social recognition was not their belonging to AIDWA or their own individual standing,

but their identity as wives of somebody. This naturally meant that despite the belief of the majority of the respondents on their own distinct identity, leadership at the grassroots level, to a certain extent, was/is highly patriarchal and the ideology of male dominance was/is directly or indirectly reflected in their thinking. The reply given by these women are not in away emancipatory; but the reality is that women, who underwent a long period of socialisation process in their life, are going with the assumption that it is better to be known in the identity of the husband rather than their own individual identity, thereby reproducing the ideal women set by the society.

In yet another instance, a woman having more than 30 years of involvement in movement activism, expressed her deep dissatisfaction over the issue of gender relations within her family. In the entire question on equality in the family, she came out with negative answers. Even though she served her locality for five years as a ward member, she has only an inferior social standing in the family. In a similar vein, a respondent from Malappuram said that she could become active in AIDWA only because her husband was a party activist. All these mean that movement activism *per se* is not a game changer for women, as it could make only marginal changes in the life situation in which they are placed. For instance, as Devika (2012) observed that even though feminist organisations in Kerala intervened in significant issues affecting women, they were not able to contribute much on addressing the micro-politics of gender in everyday social life.

Politics as Male Bastion

Women in general have a clear notion that politics is a male-dominated affair. This is evident from the responses of the respondents to the question as to whether political parties give due recognition and representation to women. Many of them hold the view that political parties incorporate women only because of the compulsions of reservation at the grassroot level. This small gesture aside, male dominance is prevalent in almost all the political parties in the state. Most of the respondents were also critical about this. However, a minority among those who responded negatively to this question shared the idea that CPI (M) was an exception in this regard. This does not mean that the participants of the survey were uncritical of CPI (M) and unaware of entrenched patriarchy in the party. There are many critical insiders in the organisation who share the view that CPI (M) was also a party which has patriarchal mindset. A case in point is the opinion aired by an Area Secretary from the southern part of Kerala about the way in

which CPI (M) selected the candidate for the Alappuzha Parliamentary Constituency in the General Election held in 2014 by sidelining an able women candidate, who had a better chance to win the election than the male candidate, who lost the election subsequently.

Coming to the actual result of the survey, 56 per cent came out with the opinion that political parties are male dominated. Only 32 per cent had a different view that political parties in Kerala give due recognition to women. Alternatively, 11 per cent chose the centrist position that women are accommodated in politics to a certain extent. Interestingly, one could notice here a difference in perception of the respondents in terms of their geographical spread. The respondents belonging to the district of Kannur, which is considered as a citadel of the CPI (M), believe that the party takes care of its women more than other parties. As one moves towards the south, one could notice that the vehemence with which the respondents argue for CPI (M) mellows down. Having said this, a rejoinder is in order here. The above mentioned statement is not made on the basis of any statistical data obtained from the survey, but on the basis of field observation. Considering the nature of the CPI (M) and the party education it gives to its members, there is nothing surprising in the respondents taking such a position. But what is really surprising is that despite all this, one could hear lone voices here and there, especially in the southern districts, pointing out an accusing finger against the party.

Views on Women's Issues

In order to understand the nature of the problems faced by women in Kerala and to elicit a context specific answer, an open-ended question was asked to that respect. The answers to the question having many things in common reflected a combination of problems, which can be called as strategic and practical gender concerns. They include the problems of dowry, sexual harassment and issues which arise out of the cultural and social restrictions imposed on them by the society, including lack of mobility, freedom of opinion and recognition. All these come under what could be termed as strategic gender issues. Further, there was also a common understanding that the problems of women are largely shaped by their proximity to socially ascribed roles. All these, however, do not mean that they are not bothered about their livelihood concerns. A section of the respondents pointed towards issues like price rise and unemployment as well.

At the same time, their silence on issues posed by the division of labour and unequal social relation that exists in the family is noticeable. What matters to them is only domestic violence, but they are not able to realise the invisible power that is operating in the domestic domain. This points towards a lack of awareness on their part that *personal is also political*. This is also an indictment on the failure of the organisation in making them aware of such issues.

To understand the members' perception on dowry, two questions were asked. Majority of the respondents believe it to be a serious issue and 97 per cent are of the opinion that it should be avoided. They also expressed their firm resolve not to practice the system in their personal life. It is another thing that even though majority of respondents are against the system of dowry, some senior members have told that they have given gold and other material things to their daughters. Some of them even justified it by saying that they did it before they came to the organisation. This illustrates the fact that despite the organisational influence on them to take an anti-dowry position, the social environment in which they are embedded compels them to make compromises.

Regarding the question of age at marriage, 48 per cent preferred to marry their daughters at an age between 20 and 25 and 42 per cent only after 25. These people believe that only after completing their education and obtaining a job, girl children need to be given in marriage. 10 per cent of the respondents, however, got their daughters married even before the age of twenty and they did it before they became members of AIDWA. It proves the fact that the women interviewed are very particular in getting their daughters educated and making them self-sufficient and are also fully aware that education will positively change the conditions of women.

Socio-Political Awareness

An attempt was also made to elicit the political outlook and awareness of the respondents for which a couple of questions were asked. These questions ranged from their reading habit, awareness about institutional and legal support available for women, voting habit, and knowledge about women politicians of the state.

Reading habit of the respondents is better compared to the ordinary womenfolk. Even though many of them are not getting enough time to spare for reading because of their pre-occupation with domestic responsibilities, still most of them

make it a point to read daily newspapers. Apart from such reading, they also read women's magazines and in particular *Sthreeshabdham*, a weekly published by AIDWA. Besides it, certain popular women's magazines such as *Vanitha* and *Grihalakshmi* are also on their reading list. Apart from all this, they are regular viewers of television serials.

On the institutional aspects, the respondents reported that they were aware of many institutional apparatuses committed towards the cause of women. Needless to say, such awareness is considered crucial for their future involvement in the public sphere as informed citizens. The women involved in the organisation are aware of laws relating to crimes against women and the existence of institutions like the Women's Commission, Human Rights Commission, Family Court and Women's Cells in the Kerala Police. They are also aware of legislations such as Women's Reservation Bill, Dowry Prohibition Act and Prohibition of Domestic Violence Act. Further, in the matter of their political participation, they testified to their taking part in the electoral process regularly.

However, some disturbing trends were also spotted. Some of the women, especially those who hail from remote areas, lack awareness. For instance, they are not able to say anything about women's reservation. An interesting thing is that a fraction of the respondents who came to public life through the policy of reservation themselves are unaware of the controversy on Women's Reservation Bill. Even though their number was statistically very negligible (2 per cent), this is serious considering the fact they are holding leadership positions either in the organisation or in the decentralised bodies. For example, a Panchayat member from northern part of the state has reported that she did not know anything about Women's Reservation Bill pending consideration before the Parliament. Similarly, a CPI (M) Local Secretary belonging to this area stated in the very presence of his wife, who was also a ward member, that there was no need for reservation for women in the elected bodies. His rationale for this is lack of awareness and political skill for women. He was saying that, without basic skill in raising questions in a meeting or without any initiative to mingle with the neighbourhood, these women representatives are merely ornamental appendages. On the whole, however, the respondents were well-informed about the institutional and legal securities available to women. This was mainly because of their involvement in the organisation.

Family Support and Organisational Activism

Women's participation in the public life often becomes problematic, mainly due to the lack of support from their family. This is so because of the gender-specific roles they have to perform in the private sphere. Hence, it was decided to elicit the views of the respondents on this respect. 92 per cent of the respondents say that they receive support from the family to take part in the organisational activities of AIDWA. To the question as to whether they would terminate their membership in the organisation if it was opposed by the family, the responses were really vague. While 22 per cent of the members say that they would not, 68 per cent of them exude confidence that they would not face such an opposition from the family. Two observations could be made here: 10 per cent of the respondents actually skipped the question in order to hide the dilemma that might arise out of such a contingency. It is to be seen that 82 per cent of women are coming to the organisation with the whole-hearted support of the male members of the family, especially husbands, who were associated with CPI (M). Besides, the members were optimistic in continuing in the organisation as long as they were not compromising their familial role. It is another thing that dependence on husband to sustain their membership of the organisation puts a serious question mark on AIDWA's potential to spread the ideology of women's emancipation properly.

All these show that members in effect internalise the male-centric idea that women's freedom consists of 'giving out' rather than assuming. Even this depends on the mercy of men or on the complete acceptance of their domination within the family. Here the observation made by Nivedita Menon (2009) becomes significant. She has observed that women have been incorporated into the process of development without making any kind of changes in the prevailing gender relations in which they were situated. What this conveys is that organisations are founded in a patriarchal social space in which family life, organisational activism and party go hand-in-hand. Support from the family is a pre-condition for the involvement in the organisation. In short, associational involvement in a way is the price they were getting for performing their assigned roles in the family perfectly.

Attendance of the members in organisational activism was also looked to assess its regularity and if irregular, the reasons thereof. Most of the participants (59 per cent) claimed that they had regular attendance at the meetings of the organisation. Quite a few, however, opined to the opposite and cited lack of time as the core

reason for the same. Further, the members also made a general observation that regularity of attendance in organisational activities is on the decline. Paucity of time because of the pre-occupation with domestic chores is the reason pointed out for the lack of attendance. Serious look at all these issues necessitates a deep analysis of the private domain, which in Kerala is left untouched even by the largest and strongest women's organisation like AIDWA.

12 per cent of the members had the opinion that misconception about women's movement and the ignorance on the part of women constitute the major obstacle in the mobilisation process. According to them, taking part in an organisation in the public arena is still a stigma and the issue of women's location is a significant factor in deciding their entry into the public arena. This study, therefore, reveals that women who are located in the margins, women who are socially and economically backward find it difficult to come out of their socially assigned space to the public. Here, the private-public dichotomy still exists and those who emerge out of it have to prove themselves to the society that they are ideal women. The structural impediments these women face are greater than those faced by women who are situated in the mainstream. As Sreelatha Batliwala (1997) rightly pointed out, people who are oppressed somehow know that they are oppressed and only need a social environment which induces them to articulate the feelings against oppression. This study definitely corroborates this fact. And the problem here is the lack of social and political environment to give vent to their opposition. This is in spite of the best efforts of AIDWA. One of the most important problems is that the field, in which the organisation is embedded, in some way or other, restricts its potential to become effective and raise the strategic gender interests of women (Rai, 2000). What Gerson and Peiss (1985) had observed is relevant here also. Women have crossed the boundaries that have kept apart the private and the public due to their exposure to education and voluntary associational activities. But they are doing it within the confines of familial expectations of the society, thereby rationalising their public activities as just an extension of their familial role.

Discussion

An analysis of the responses shows that women are not at ease with the way society treats them. They are able to understand that women are not getting the recognition that they deserve. Even after the entry of women into the public domain and also civil society activism, societal attitudes are not substantially

changed. The movement activism in a way enabled them to look at the society through a woman's point of view. Supplementing to this, women also developed their own perceptions on women's empowerment and the idea of empowerment is also popular among the studied population, in spite of the divergence on their perceptions on it.

But on the other side, family and gender relations is also a cause of concern in the sense that no democratic transition has taken place in the institution of family. So here the striking point arises, women who are associating their life with family, unknowingly, view that it has decisive influence in an individual's life in general and in a woman's life particular. Democratic transition of family is required for realising the positive change in a society. So it points to the fact that a mere presence in an organisation alone is not sufficient in making women understand the way power operates in their everyday life. Here also women's own internalisation of patriarchal ideas, in relating women's subjectivity to the family rather than an independent identity, will discourage them from questioning patriarchy in all its senses.

It is also evident from the study that even though women are able to understand the fact that parties are male-dominated, but they are not capable of understanding the misogyny that is prevailing in the party to which their organisation is affiliated. This means they are in a way not developing a critical attitude towards the party, which is really problematic. Here, in spite of the existence of some critical insiders in the organisation, the affiliation of the party is really problematic in the sense that it really inhibits women from understanding the anti-women tendencies in an independent manner. As such, it is to be seen that women as a category is mobilised, but mobilisation alone will not equip them to look everything through a women's lens. So, here the analysis shows that women who are working in the affiliated organisation have to face both patriarchy in general and also patriarchy that is existing in the institutions they are associated with. Here the problem of gender in the everyday life and also the influence the institution they are affiliated to is equally problematic in the process of women's social transformation.

Conclusion

The question that is investigated in the study is the degree of critical consciousness that women get through their participation in the organisation. The

intent was to analyse the movement activism in bringing change in the worldview of women. The analysis carried on the responses of the members made it clear that AIDWA as an organisation has succeeded in reaching out to the women in the backward sections and also succeeded in inculcating some liberatory ideals in them. In other words, women have developed a sense of self along with a collective consciousness by which they are able to realise the misogyny that is existing in the society. The analyses of the various responses prove that they developed a consciousness with regard to their identity, empowerment, their social recognition, their understandings on women and politics and also with regard to their social existence.

But here also, the problem is with regard to their standing in the family and their understanding of women's role in the family. The study also communicates that family as an institution still stands in the way of women's full-fledged participation in the public life. It is evident from the somewhat vague responses and also the observations made during the study that the structures of patriarchy is kept intact. The movement activism has not made them capable of realising the power relationship that is operating in their domestic life. Women's own acceptance of their familial role as taken for granted, even after their involvement in the organisation, has not changed considerably. Therefore, AIDWA as an organisation has succeeded in penetrating the mindset of women and also instilling in them women-centric ideas. But, at the same time, it has failed in addressing the issues of women that is arising out of patriarchal social relations. It can be seen that the gender relations in the family is very complex and further research is needed to understand how these women negotiate with their everyday life.

REFERENCES:

Baldes, L. (2002). *Why women protest: Women's movement in Chile*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Basu, A. (1992). *Two faces of protest: Contrasting modes of women's activism in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Basu, A. (1999). *The challenge of local feminisms: Women's movement in global perspectives*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Batliwala, S. (1997). What is female empowerment? Paper presented in the *International Seminar on Women's Empowerment*. Stockholm: Swedish Association for Sexual Education.

Desai, A.R. (1985). Women's movement in India: An assessment. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *20*(23), 992-995.

Devika, J. (2012). Sthreepaksharashtreeyavum, sthreeprashnathinte sarkarvalkaranavum. Keralathil: Sameepakalacharithram (M). *Sangaditha*, *3*(1), 6-10.

Devika, J., & Thampi, B.V. (2012*). New lamps for old: Gender paradoxes of political decentralization in Kerala*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Devika, J., & Kodoth, P. (2001). Sexual violence and the predicament of feminist politics. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *36*(33), 3170-3177.

Erwer, M. (2003). *Challenging the gender paradox: Women's collective agency in the transformation of Kerala politics*. Goteborg: Goteborg University.

Fraser, N. (1996). Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition and participation. *The Tanner Lectures on Human values*. Stanford: Stanford University.

Gerson, J.M., & Peiss, K. (1985). Boundaries, negotiation, consciousness: Re-conceptualizing gender relations. *Social Problems*, *32*(4), 317-331.

Hasim, S. (2004). Voices, hierarchies, and spaces: Reconfiguring the women's movement in democratic South Africa (A case study, The UKZN Project on Globalisation). *Marginalization and New Social Movements in Post-apartheid South Africa*. Natal: Centre for Civil Society and the School of Development Studies.

Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminist theory from margin to center*. London: Pluto Press.

Jain, D., & Banerjee, N. (2008). The tyranny of the household. In M. John (Ed), *Women studies in India: A reader* (pp. 411-413). London: Penguin.

Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, *30*(3), 435-464.

Kabeer, N. (2005). Is microfinance a 'magic bullet' for women's empowerment? Analysis of findings from South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *40*(44/45), 4701-4718.

Malhotra, A. (2003). Conceptualizing and measuring women's empowerment as a variable in international development. Paper presented at the *Workshop on Measuring Empowerment: Cross-disciplinary perspectives*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Menon, N. (2009). Sexuality, caste, governmentality: Contests over 'gender' in India. *Feminist Review*, *91*, 94-112.

Menon, N. (2015). Is feminism about 'woman'? A critical view on intersectionality from India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *50*(17), 37-44.

Mohanty, C.T., & Alexander, M.J. (Eds.). (1996). *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. New York: Routledge.

Molyneux, M. (1985). Mobilization without emancipation? Women's interest, the state and revolution in Nicaragua. *Feminist Studies*, *11*(2), 227-254.

Jeffery, P. (1998). Agency, activism and agendas. In P. Jeffery and A. Basu (Eds), *Resisting the sacred and the secular: Women's activism and politicised religion in South Asia* (pp. 221-244). New York: Routledge.

Ranadive, V. (1990). Feminists and women's movement. In Maithreyi Krishnaraj (Ed), *Feminism: Indian debates* (pp. 50-69). Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies.

Rain, S.M., Parpart, J., & Staudt, K. (2007). (Re) defining empowerment, measuring survival. Paper presented at the *Workshop on Empowerment: Obstacles, Flaws, Achievements*. Ottava: Carleton University.

Rai, R. (2000). *Fields of protest, women's movement in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Raju, S. (2005). Gender and empowerment: Creating 'thus far and no further' supportive structure: A case from India. In N. Lise and J. Seager (Eds), *A companion to feminist geography* (pp. 194-207). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Sanghari, K. (1995). Politics of diversity: Religious communities and multiple patriarchies. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *30*(51), 3381-3389.

Gayathri O. *is Assistant Professor & Head in the Department of Political Science, Government College Madappally, Kerela.*
Email id: gayubijuspeak@gmail.com
Biju P.R. *is Assistant Professor & Head in the Department of Political Science, Government Brennen College, Thalassery, Kerela.*
Email id: bijugayu@gmail.com

Rethinking Conflict Prevention through Grassroots Activism: Narratives of Women Building Peace in Rural India

--- Ivy Dhar and Diksha Poddar

Abstract

The peace-building initiatives adopted by India has been criticised for its lack of engagement with women and their interests despite an assurance to promote gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention. Activists have responded to it in both individual and collective capacities. This paper explores the existing experiences of grassroots peace activism where women have taken the role of transformers in preventing inter-personal conflicts within households and those that lead to neighbourhood and community tensions. It draws on the narratives of a civil society group, *Mahila Shanti Sena*, based in rural areas – reflecting women's concerns for everyday episodes of violence and emphasising a close cohesion of action through livelihood, education and empowerment. It argues for the need to widen the scope for the decentralised participatory interventions – contextualising the gender discourse of conflict prevention and peace-building.

Key words: Conflict prevention, Grassroots activism, Peace-building, Rural, Women

Introduction

A recurring gap in India's peace-building process is about institutionalising women's involvement in conflict prevention and peace processes. In the recent times, at global forums, India has underscored that women's involvement is sought not only in the normative form but has an urgent need to initiate capacity-building at the ground level (PTI, 2019). The progress is slow and lacks continuity. Studies have reasoned out that much can be gained from women's agency and activism and have documented their contributions in the civil society space (Manchanda, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2010). These outputs are primarily discussed about regions that record a history of assertions to insurgency problems than elsewhere. Women's participation remains under-represented, with much less attention given to peace-building capacities at the village level. Further, a

large amount of resources is considerably directed to address the immediate crisis by demobilising the conflicting actors; whereas, the emphasis is often laid to strategise towards long-term prevention of conflicts and sustainable peace by mobilising the democratic participation of stakeholders.

One of the crucial aims enumerated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 16 is about enabling peaceful societies, providing justice, and building inclusive institutions; pledges to leave no one behind. The indicator framework discusses reducing all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation as relevant issues to be addressed (Behar, 2016). The possibility of bridging the prevalent gaps and realising the shift of focus from states controlling conflicts to societies enabling peace needs wider exploration in India's rural spaces.

The global responsiveness to a broad range of threats and violence[i] has given room for reimagining the scope of conflict prevention. Scholars have argued to look for peace as a lived experience rather than treating it as an abstract political affair and calling for the inclusion of everyday peace in the peace-building objectives (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). Further, they discuss strengthening the bottom-up approach that involves local preventive actions, the inclusion of social and ecological needs of the communities in the peace process, and building the local capacities for reconciliation (Scholten, 2020). Reviere (2007) has found that one of the crucial contributions of women's involvement in the process of peace-building worldwide has been sharing personal narratives that bring forth issues of conflict that have remained unnoticed. Understanding peace and conflict from a gender perspective is not new. However, the role that women take to voice and act needs broader consideration and is strategically important to anchor their institutional role for bringing into focus the ground narratives.

This paper mainly attempts a two-fold purpose. First is to examine the gender concerns in the contemporary discourse of conflict prevention and peace-building. It broadens the discussion by looking at the bottom-up participatory approach as a method of peace-building, and locating it in the context of India. Discussion on the conceptual aspect is drawn from studying perspectives that involve alternative methods of contextualising conflicts, where the grassroots lens is emphasised. Second, by referring to a case-study of peace activism led by a community action group in the rural areas, the paper draws upon the existing intervention in which women have played a significant role in preventive action. Reflections are gathered from the Women's Peace Brigade, *Mahila Shanti Sena* (MSS) which has

been working with the rural women. Concerning the stated aims, the authors dwell on the idea that there is immense scope to gather indigenous experiences from states like India, where the concept of grassroots governance is fundamental. Despite inadequacies due to the embedded marginalisation of socially weaker sections, grassroots space can be organically nurtured for communities to realise what threatens their existence.

Although the feminist scholars had been discussing violence against women theorised through the lens of victimisation, it has also started paying attention to the path-breaking experiences where women can transform themselves as agents of change (Motta, Fominaya, Eschle & Cox, 2011). Women may tread ways to empower themselves and others through comraderies to find meanings in the resistance and critically engage with the surrounding (Alvarez, 2019). In this article, we draw upon the personal narratives of women who have taken the role of transformers. By reflecting on the views of the MSS members, the study tries to discuss the nuances of conflicts and meanings of development. By contextualising how women construct and visualise peace from everyday life experience, it tries to capture views where they speak about incorporating their role as change agents. The mobilisation of peace activists on issues confronting rural women's lives is rarely discussed or seen as side-issues, though the relevance is not unknown. Most of the available literature covers the MSS work in Northeast India, and barely any academic discussion has been written on its other regions of intervention. The emphasis in this paper is to shed light on the rural participation in peace-building with cases drawn from the villages of Odisha. It is a descriptive-analytical work which is primarily based on the secondary sources, supplemented with interviews of MSS activists through the web-based interactions. In the later sections, we will discuss the process of interaction.

The Gender Dimension of Conflict Prevention and Peace-building

Conflict itself, being a mix of variables, does not provide a simple explanation for its occurrence. Aggression is one type of engagement in conflicts, which is often associated with men (Jones & Fabian, 2006). The sanctioned use of aggression and resulting violence may be a means to preserve male dominance, but it is also shaped by class and other social locations. Therefore, feminist scholars challenge the constructions of all simple binaries that were earlier applicable to this subject, including the distinct identity of victims and perpetrators based on the biological divisions. The emphasis is on adopting gender analysis of the experiences of

conflict without losing sight of the vulnerability faced by women (Giles & Hyndman, 2004; Cockburn, 2004).

Structural factors can be an important driver of conflicts and may define how one may experience power relations, access the social environment, exercise rights, and get represented within various institutions, such as market, polity, and community. The segmentation may be replicated in many forms; one of the concerns is gender inequality. The more significant the gender gap in terms of opportunities and outcomes, the higher is the possibility of violence. It has been a constant concern for India that its performance in the gender gap is dismal, including low workforce participation of women. It might take almost a century to narrow and close the gap (PTI, 2019)[ii]. The socio-economic dependency of women underlines that they face violence that continues to rise (Chauhan, 2019). Cockburn (2001) has mentioned that societies that have faced political violence have often ignored the predisposing conditions. Both economic distress and instances of gender-based violence invigorating patriarchy are equally propounding for major political threats. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to devote attention to the gender dimension of conflict prevention.

Conceptually, conflict prevention began with an emphasis on addressing immediate crises through military sanctions and state operations. Later, as stated in the 2001 Report of the Prevention of Armed Conflict, submitted by the Secretary-General to the United Nations General Assembly, the preventive action aimed 'to address the deep-rooted socio-economic, cultural, environmental, institutional, and other structural causes that often underlie the immediate political symptoms of conflict'. The prevention paradigm has moved from its 'earlier toolkit symptomatic approach towards conflict to a more inclusive one that embraces several of the activities associated with conflict transformation practices' (DasGupta, 2008, p. 23). Practitioners may employ a range of activities that are not restricted to a certain concept. In the contemporary analysis, treating conflict prevention as a separate linear process from conflict resolution[iii], and/or transformation[iv] is avoided. They are complementary and, in many ways, are seen as the inseparable aspects of peace-building (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005). A few studies may prefer to use the term transformation rather than resolution. Theoretically, the former channelise ways of transforming relationships and interests, and the later strategise ways to transcend conflicts submitting to peace as the final status (Miall, 2004). However, these are intensely connected as the key is to make people aware of the needs and redefine interests. Particularly,

Burton and Duke's notion of seeing human dimensions of conflict and not merely about the conditions, and working towards creating cooperative relationships states a juxtaposition of these concepts (Wani, Suwirta & Payeye, 2013).

In the last two decades, post-Beijing Conference on Women (1995), there has been a broader acknowledgment for increased women's role and access to conflict prevention. The forum had documented one of the essential subjects for consideration was violence against women, which needs to be addressed through gender mainstreaming of all policies (Women Watch). Another landmark resolution that talks about strengthening women's capacity as central actors in prevention, protection, and participation in adverse situations of conflicts is the Unites Nations Security Council Resolution 1325[v]. Its understanding rests on the basic premise of gender equality so that decisions taken encompass women's rights and views. India is yet to come up with a national action plan on the resolution. This particular resolution is focused on armed conflicts, and therefore there is an aversion of adopting it, as India does not want to draw unnecessary international attention in its 'disturbed areas' (Rajagopalan, 2016, p. 2). However, the presence of conflicts in various other forms, such as communal violence, organised crime, caste violence, and domestic violence, also needs determined action plans if one has to respond to the global pledge on peaceful societies.

Despite the constraints of responding to the universal frameworks, women, have been proactively taking part in activism, and leading peace initiatives in India. 'Peace to them is not just a political phenomenon but also economic and social in nature' (Banerjee, 2008, p. 215). Such attempts, however, have not been without women's share of struggles and pitfalls. Ever since the times of the national movement for colonial independence, this part of the world presents examples where women have struggled to demolish the stereotypical images of the division between the private world of family, domesticity, and reproduction, and the public world of production, politics, war, and peace. The majority remained confined by these socially constructed boundaries. For the peasant women, even if they can access the sphere of production, but peace and political activity were out of their reach (Stree Shakti Sangathana, 2008). If one studies the trajectory of Indian women's activism, it was not challenging patriarchy separately in the public and private spheres. However, while aiming to draw more solidarity in their assertion of rights in the public realm, the women's movement had to compromise to not come in the way of women's familial obligations. There were limitations, and the

movement could not fully resist patriarchal norms. In the 1920s, Indian women's movement entered a new phase with the creation of localised associations that worked on women's education and livelihood strategies. They possessed a distinct identity blended with the progressive ideas of women's upliftment in all fronts, including home space. These were led by elite women but remained inclusive of rural women and society (Deka, 2013; Banerjee, 2010; Gangoli, 2006). Within the national debate, local issues were receiving attention, and today these are part of the contemporary globalised narration of peace and development.

Priyabadini (2012) stated that from the late 1980s, women's movement in Odisha took up several issues related to women's oppression, violence, family matters and marital injustices for pursuing collective actions. Later, in the 2000s, active grassroots organisations gave a radical turn to the women's movement by creating space for the inclusions, and mobilisation of the landless and rural women. Though armed conflict had gained considerable attention due to the presence of the Maoist group in Odisha, there are ample gender-based violence cases that need to be prevented. In a study focused on Odisha, women have revealed that they continue to face violence even after returning to peace through the control of the armed conflict. Threats and verbal abuse were among the most widespread violence, and the perpetrators were mostly known to them, belonging to the same village. In some cases, their identity was different from that of the perpetrators who belonged to another tribe, caste, or religion (Adsule, Balakrishnan & Chettiar, 2010).

One of the issues tabled for attention in the NFHS-4, 2015-16, was domestic violence. In Odisha, of the 35 per cent reported facing domestic violence and abuse, only 3 per cent have sought help from the police, and 13 per cent sought other forms of help, and the remaining never told about it. It was found that the most common perpetrator was a male figure. However, cases of female relatives mistreating or subjugating women to violence were not uncommon, positing the need to shed-away the single image of perpetrators (National Family Household Survey [NFHS-4], 2017). Along with the physical violence in the domestic space, perpetration in the form of insults, abuses, and psychological violence is severely present in the state. Women tend to feel the shame, suffer from self-blame and fear the violence, rather than discussing their experiences (Das, 2013). There could be further ignorance of 'intimate terrorism', a term coined to understand aggressiveness, coercive control, and intimidation by a partner (Johnson, 2008, p. 25). The culture of patriarchy is endemic; such forms of

violence may be common in Indian households. With less access to the state-level institutions, low levels of reporting, and taboos impinging on social life, the process of identifying household violence can be challenging. It magnifies when any interventions are managed from outside because 'women are very likely to under-report the actual experience of violence when asked by an unfamiliar person' (Jejeebhoy, 1998, p. 4). Here, we are trying to understand whether community-based groups committed to peace-building and working on the challenges in the societal structures and societies can be an answer to the prevalent gaps raised above? The women in India cannot come under a universal experience; the specificities are too many to fit in a standardised role. In a bit to address the diversities, the communities in the rural areas need further attention. It is necessary to understand how peace can be built in the grassroots space. An analysis of the method of engagement is discussed in the next section.

The Participatory Approach: A Few Clarifications and the Inquiry Method

A decentralised participatory approach is receiving wider acclaim since the 1990s' due to its in-built elasticity to prevent and resolve conflicts. Such an approach discusses change through a people-centered method that aims to assess and accommodate the local needs, enhance community dialogues, and carry a sense of cultural sensitivity. Rather than imposing narratives and robbing the people of their agency, such an approach aims to gather local stakeholders' opinions. Henceforth, the everyday experiences of ordinary people and the inclusion of indigenous systems in peace processes have been gaining ground.

Lederach school of thought had started looking for the potentialities of grassroots in peace-building because it comprises the majority (Paffenholz, 2009). Methods need to be related to the importance and complexity of cultures. Though there could be a certain amount of universality, the resources used and the facilitation can evolve using culture as the foundation (Lederach, 1996). Mac Ginty et al. (2016) discussed using this approach for peace, safety, and social change in their project on everyday peace indicators. The aim was to allow the community's voices to comprehend conflict and identify the localised definition of peace. The bottom-up community-based peace-building approach can make a difference in the quality of peace apropos the top-down processes where implementation is often determined by the mainstream leadership that could be overbearing and ill-informed (Reed & Del Ceno, 2015).

The top-down approach may have a typical outlining that imposes the imaginaries in which values are not representative of the collective lives of the surroundings. Some studies have discussed that social imaginaries [vi] can be a key point of engagement with the communities to understand the context of violence and unfold the people-focused space that will make the transition from conflict or prevent it (Page & Sosa, 2019). Without (shared) narratives of the past, aspirations, sense of responsibility, and exchanges of views, leaders may not succeed in overcoming deep social dissensus of the communities (Stephenson Jr., 2011). The participatory approach is read to be more relevant to come close to the textures of imaginaries. However, scholars are not arguing for dismissing any specific approach. Rather, it discusses the alternative method as complementary, where efforts will be made to gauge a spectrum of views (Mac Ginty et al., 2016).

The concept of local is often referred to as a village or community level interaction. However, the strong compartmentalisation of the local from other national and global spaces may be a false dichotomy because there are overlaps. Local, when suggested instead of national peace-building, may be understood in terms of implementation rather than their inception confining to an area of sub-national level (Hauge, Doucet & Gilles, 2015; Hellmüller, 2018). There is a need to bring the historical sense and not begin only with the intervention itself and allow, wherever possible, the interaction of local with other spaces to evolve (Hellmüller, 2018; Mac Ginty, 2011). Critiques have underlined that the bottom-up approach might also suffer from setbacks of individualist purposes. Its de-politicised nature is a myth as even the local involvement can rarely be free from social and political constraints (Lefranc, 2011). There could be a tendency to romanticise or essentialise the local, customary, and traditional as an inclusive decision-making space carrying a homogeneous entity. The political detachments and a sense of homogeneity were found in the activist language of the MSS.

The above discussed participatory approach was examined at a micro-level. By focusing on the MSS and the women who are associated with it, it is understood that the grassroots rural setting is both the home and the field for the members. They aim to accomplish changes in villages. Looking at the limitations of defining the local, where a sharp separation with other spaces and with broader socio-economic contexts is difficult to observe, it justifies that we use of term 'grassroots' rather than local in this study. The MSS brings academicians and villagers together who work on peace, non-violence, development, and democracy, and with women at the centre. The brigade evolved as a hope that

Indian women can emerge as a creative social force for creating a new culture of peace (Singh, 2012). The first Sabha meeting saw an attendance of around a hundred women, and subsequently, MSS meetings led to a further increase in the number of its followers and activists. It has been primarily active in Bihar, Assam, and Odisha, though it has a presence in a few other Indian states. The rural areas of eastern India had been the seedbed of the movement. However, it has hardly acquired popular attention, unlike many other women's peace groups. Few relevant discussions need a mention.

Chaudhury (2016) discusses the MSS women's peace activism in rural Assam and shares the members' narratives whose lives have seen transformation after associating with the movement. There are success stories where MSS members had persuaded their family members who were directly involved in internal conflicts to explore livelihood options. And, there are also examples where they could create cooperation among different ethnicities in the neighbourhood. Through its 'preventive, mitigative, and adaptive methods', MSS tries to address the issues of a plural society (ibid., p. 124). Carrying a model of conflict prevention and transformation, the MSS activists have used self-evolved methods to initiate change in the community while negotiating with the incidences of violence. Similarly, Banerjee (2014) notes the active role of MSS in counter-insurgency sensitisation in Tripura. The Sena activists in villages used the forum to negotiate peace and adopted livelihood generation strategies to further the cause.

To cover a more inclusive discussion of its various units, one of the ways that MSS tries to communicate about its work is by publishing newsletters from time to time. In most of these writings, contributions of social activists who have inspired the MSS thinking combined with reflections on the community-level strategies for empowerment are highlighted. The approach to peace, conflict prevention, gender, and social justice could be gathered through these newsletters. The discourses for action revolve around resisting patriarchy, ending poverty, domestic violence, family tensions, and conflicts at the community level, which they consider are most detrimental to progress. The MSS has often discussed the lack of formal education and concerns about the physical and mental health in villages and among its members. One of its prime objectives is to build a peaceful neighbourhood to ensure the upliftment of women, and thereby the community, by using the technique of non-violence (Mohanty, 2018; Singh, 2005). It tries to operationalise its approach by working in smaller groups of *dasta* (group of

10) and *panja* (group of 5), which are village action groups looking at the immediate complications in the vicinity. These groups forge the idea of sisterhood and try to string support of the community against discrimination and violence.

The MSS aims to connect with the issues of violence beyond the rural, as they acknowledge their solidarity with the global and national concerns. But no concerted effort is seen to expand to India's urban spaces. The declaration of using 'silent language' could be at times problematic though they talk of 'stepping in the bigger courtyard of society' (Singh, 2005, p. 3); meaning they will never attempt to become revolutionary except for their ideas. The activists' personal narratives are not accounted for in the MSS writings, though these could have significantly contributed to their committed discourses.

After reviewing the literature, the MSS newsletters, and mapping the intervention areas, the next step was to approach it to participate in the study. Introducing the purpose to the participants and giving open-ended queries, we initiated discussions for sharing their ideas. The definition of conflict and peace was not pre-determined. The MSS members who participated in the research identified issues that they saw relevant in their village or neighbourhood. The study did not aim to test research inquiries by using the sampling method. The scope was laid open to the organisation to gather views from as many activists who intended to participate. One member led the discussion that carried views from a group of around ten members and shared the observations with us. Over-looking the relevance of the number, what is essential is the content-specific component added by the respondents.

The study's locale was chosen based on an area where activism has been most intense and has a duration of operation of more than ten years, till 2015. Therefore, the presence of the MSS unit in the Indian state of Odisha led by *Unnayan*, among the marginalised tribal community, served as the second filtering for the survey. It allowed including the voices of women who are the most under-represented in many ways. The study intended to get a participatory lens from the MSS activists, but limitations remain. The responses gathered were mostly in the form of a collective voice, and only a few had separately documented their views. A detailed discussion is carried out in the next segment; the women activists share how the MSS objectives are brought into practice by identifying the problem areas in the villages.

Reflections on the Grassroots Preventive Action: The Odisha *Mahila Shanti Sainiks*

Initiated by a social activist and a Gandhian[vii], the MSS calls itself as a movement rather than an organisation. It carries the historical discourses of decentralised peace and constructive village-based development. Mahatma Gandhi coined the concept of the grassroots soldiers of peace (Shanti Sena)[viii]. He had discussed the objectives of raising a band of workers who would maintain peace among people (Weber, 1996). The insight has been revisited by Gandhians[ix], and the MSS serves as a living example in the contemporary times. As a sequel to the 1992 amendment in the Indian Constitution, when the one-third reservation was provided for women in the governance, the MSS planned the Vaishali Sabha (2002)[x], from where the journey began. Aimed towards grassroots peace governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (village governance bodies) and to revolutionise the accorded passive role of women in governance settings, the MSS members undertake overlapping roles as Panchayat members. R. Singh, an academician and a pioneer of the MSS movement, stated that:

> *Since we did not want MSS to become an NGO, we refrained from starting it as one; rather we collaborate with existing organisations, citizens groups and individuals. The Unnayan of Odisha is one such example, focusing on income generation and conflict resolution*. (personal communication, May 27, 2015).

He also stated that, at times, the movement had faced setbacks, like the intensity became weak in Bihar and they were trying to revive it with some financial help from the state. The personal journeys of the women activists of Odisha are worth documenting. Between 2005 and 2015, more than five thousand women associated themselves with the movement from Angul, Puri, Sambalpur, Mayurbhanj, Balasore, Jagatsinghpur, Nuapada, Kendrapada and Raygada districts of Odisha. The leadership evolves from the team whose aim is to submit to activism. In this study, the documentation is mainly gathered from the Mayurbhanj activists.

When asked, what are the main problems and conflict issues in the villages of Odisha? R. Mohanty (personal communication, July 10, 2015), who has been with Unnayan since 1995 and later became the Secretary of the Odisha wing of MSS, had identified poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, abuses, and violence

against women as the concerns; other issues are bride-price, gambling, and broken homes. Most of the respondents stated that they see education as an essential catalyst for bringing the change in their communities and countering violence. MSS became a platform for addressing local issues and overcoming distresses in the everyday lives of villages, a primary reason for many to have embraced its membership. They are continually trying to break the stereotypical gender divide by emphasising on transformations during formative years of childhood. Alcoholism among men is a reflection of patriarchal power, and the women's collective strength has been harnessed for participation in the anti-liquor movement. The Mayurbhanj MSS had taken drastic steps to abolish *Mada Bhati* (country-made liquor center) in their village.

Realising that individuals' potentials can come forth only when the basic needs are met, a focused attention is laid on health, safe drinking water, and education (Darshan, 2013). R. Mohanty reiterates the vision of generational change in the quality of life. She has stated:

> *The MSS members are monitoring their village school as a member of the school management committee for quality education. In the village level, MSS members are also members of different committees like Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC), and forest committee.* (personal communication, July 10, 2015).

Advocating for girls' education, motivating common playgroups among boys and girls, raising activism against early marriage and child trafficking are ways in which traditional mind-sets are challenged. There is a consensus in strengthening the pillars of participatory democracy and development through capacity-building activities and raising the level of consciousness of women. It also seeks to empower women economically through schemes of providing micro-loans, self-help groups (SHGs) and skill-based training. The significant participation in the drive was coming from the labourer class.

Among the various incidences of change by the Odisha wing of MSS, the residents of Majhi Sahi, which is part of Jhatiada village in Mayurbhanj, needs a mention. The *Majhis* were trying to meet their needs through wage labour. Living as landless and socially marginalised, the community members got involved in anti-social activities, and men got addicted to alcoholism. They had to be

dependent on money lenders for survival and emergency needs. The MSS initiated mobilisation of women to form SHGs together with their male counterparts. The initial men's reluctance and women's fear to manage SHG were overcome through a continuous persuasion. Later, they extended incremental changes in livelihood, health, education, and water issues of the community. The ousted community found acceptance from neighbouring villages, and a significant behaviour change occurred in the men (Mahila Shanti Sena, 2009). During our interaction, the activists inferred that violence is a by-product of the faulty development process, and building self-reliance through income-generating activities can be a step towards reducing violence.

The MSS trains its members to enact the role of transformers. The meetings use a combination of methods, like that of lectures, discussions, and role-plays. Women share their experiences and insights, and each participant learns from their co-participants. Activists have shared the benefits of the mutual learning process. They stated that the training camp helps them introspect about their responsibility as a leader. It creates an environment where they think beyond themselves. Peace rallies, human chains, and travels across villages are used to draw upon broader connection with their concerns of violence. MSS has been raising corps for a *Tatpar Mahila Shanti Sena* or the Rapid Action Force, which was created as a response to the understanding that women's involvement is indispensable at the initial stages of the crisis. The training schedules are not meant to disrupt women's routine chores, and these training initiatives try to bring forth women-related concerns and those that affect the local policy-level issues. The MSS has tried to ensure that there is not much resistance from the households for their participation (Pearson, 2004). Discussed in the previous section about Indian women's activism, the nature of MSS engagement is no different. Participation in the action group is open to both men and women, with the focus laid on the conflicts faced by women.

The presence of MSS in some areas may have overshadowed the role of the state agencies. R. Mohanty takes pride in accounting that in Rasagovindapur block of Mayurbhanj district:

> *Whenever a problem arises, the local authorities advise people to go to MSS first. In other districts also, police are supporting MSS leaders of the concerned district. Sometimes MSS leaders have to*

convince the police boldly. (personal communication, July 10, 2015).

The work of MSS acts as a supporting role in many state interventions. During elections, they become active in addressing crisis and field their candidates for Panchayat elections. It also acts as a partner to Panchayat, wherever possible, supporting it by monitoring government-induced projects and prepares the beneficiary list for different schemes meant for the people. For creating a more significant social presence, it has conceptually refrained from alignment with political parties. R. Mohanty has stated that:

> *During the elections, when political problems arise in the villages level, MSS members play an important role in solving the problem.* (personal communication, July 10, 2015).

It was not clear, though, how political problems could have been resolved with a completely non-political attitude and a uniform approach. Nonetheless, the MSS's idea to bridge the gap of people's power and state power is being attempted by intervening in the space of politics.

Narratives of a few Shanti Sainiks (peace corps), who have been part of the movement for a decade, are documented here. They were asked to reflect on why they joined the movement, their role, the challenges faced, their idea of peace, and the support they have gathered. I. Mohanty was moved by the prevailing conditions of domestic disturbances in the village, and so she joined the group of Sainiks. She is from Kakabandh village, Mayurbhanj and has taken the role of a trainer. It allows her to learn and replicate experiences with other women. Talking about conflicts, she has stated that:

> *Domestic violence (between husband and wife, mother-in-law and son-in-law) and disturbances in SHGs are the major problems in our village. I have tried to resolve a few family feuds at Tambakhuri village and the in-fighting of the Tarapur village SHG. She views that peace can come to villages when souring family relations are transformed. I am happy that my work has received support from my own family. The MSS program generates courage, hope, and believes among women.* (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

The challenges of making an impact on family relations needs sustained effort. For her, transformation at her personal level is immense. The movement has given her a feeling that she is not alone.

A respondent from Tambakhuri village, Mayurbhanj, B. Kabi, has been introduced to the movement through SHGs. Her central role has been with dasta and panja, and among many, she sees gender-based discrimination as a significant impediment to peace and has participated in promoting girl-child education. She says:

> *The use of alcohol, domestic violence, and lack of unity in villages are the major problems. I have raised a voice on the girl child trafficking, in stopping child marriage and resolving the domestic fights. The members of the Zilla Parisad (district level governance), Sarpanch, and village leaders are sometimes approached in case of domestic violence. I have seen many changes happening, and that is why I discuss and persuade other women to be a part of the MSS movement.* (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

She measures peace achievement through success stories of stopping child trafficking and reducing political tensions among villagers.

Encouraged by the idea of seeing women as self-independent, coming from the Thailo village in Jagatsingpur, R. Parida took the role of a Sainik. She has taken the task to encourage women to fight for their rights, not to shy away from expressing views and raise their voice against injustice. She sees petty party politics as an impediment and claims a stake at resolving such crises at the organisational level. She has specifically mentioned MSS's role in resolving tensions among villagers during cultural events, their participation in anti-liquor campaigns, and domestic violence issues. About the personal experience, she states:

> *My family is my source of encouragement in this mission. I have got exposure to various places and got experiences by interacting with the MSS members of different districts of Odisha. It gave me*

an opportunity to reach out to people that has now translated as my leadership skill. (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

The narratives have an in-built idea of resistance and change and enter a loop in the chain of preventive action. Domestic violence, economic dependence, and abuses dominated their localised definitions of conflict. The resolving of each is to enable transformation in the organic whole of self, family, village, and nation; hence, the incremental change method is the first resort, and any duress is avoided. As MSS believes in courageousness towards building peace, the Shanti Sainiks wear an orange scarf while taking the oath. Sustaining the ideals and demanding participants to think beyond themselves is shared by activists as the most challenging tasks. Family is the common support for the activists, and social peace is the common narrative. The distinctive aspect of such involvement is that the activists draw their agency from both the social and institutional spaces.

Conclusion

The conceptual discussions and the grassroots experience reveal that the discourse of violence is central to a gender approach in conflict prevention. The scope of prevention, including reducing the vulnerability of women in household violence, needs determined action. The idea of peace-building cannot be separable from overcoming forms of domination and subordination, both in the public and personal spaces. The contemporary women-led peace activism is an attempt in such a direction. The activists have influenced their own lives and also legitimised their leadership roles. This paper has tried to bring to the fore the stakeholders' view on field-practices that challenge gender relations to negotiate for peace, though not all aspects of interventions are easily tangible.

The scholars discussing the bottom-up method to peace-building have urged that it is more meaningful to locate community-based indicators that can accurately reflect on-the-ground situations rather than relying on state-induced broad-based indicators (Mac Ginty, 2013). We found in this study that participation can be further deep. To begin with, the lens of self, and it is self-driven indicators that have guided the activists to enact the role of change-makers. It cannot be overlooked that the women-led peace activism, like the MSS, is also a reflection of the stark reality of struggles against social disadvantages to evolve as torchbearers of peace. Joshee and Sihra (2013) mention in their work that MSS women are generally from impoverished rural areas and many lack formal

education. Likewise, the activists of Odisha have emphasised a close cohesion of action between livelihood, education, and empowerment, while documenting their concerns for everyday peace. In the macro understanding, the issues raised by the local entity could be easily suppressed, and even by its mundane nature may fail to get the required attention. Hence, more advocacy must be raised by bringing in reflection from rural spaces, from where the processes for conflict prevention and peace must mark a beginning rather than an end.

_____

Notes:

[i] Johan Galtung had introduced an alternative framework for the analysis of violence by discussing that violence is much more than killing or causing physical harm. Violence exists when the potential scope of development is held back due to conditions and relationships that emerge from the unequal distribution of resources and power. Structural violence can be defined in the forms of exploitation and marginalisation in the institutionalised structures. Its permanence or its static conditions in basic culture comes as cultural violence. Poverty, caste deprivation, domestic violence, etc. is violence [Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, *27*(3), 291-305; Cockburn, C. (2004). The continuum of violence: A gender perspective on war and peace. In W. Giles & J. Hyndman (Eds), *Sites of violence: Gender and conflict zones* (pp. 24-44). Los Angeles and London: University of California Press].

[ii] As per the World Economic Forum's gender gap index, 2020, India ranks 112th globally in terms of the gender gap. It may take 99.5 years to close the gender gap narrowed from 2019. Only one-quarter of women, compared with 82 per cent of men, constitute the workforce. Violence, forced marriage, and discrimination in access to health remain widespread [PTI (2019, December 17). India slips to 112th rank on WEF's gender gap index, in bottom 5 on health, economic fronts. *Hindustan Times*].

[iii] Conflict resolution means de-escalation of conflicts or successful further prevention of conflicts. It may mean settling the incompatibilities triggered by the causes of conflict [Swanström, N.L.P. & Weissmann , M.S. (2005). *Conflict, conflict prevention and conflict management and beyond: A conceptual exploration*. Concept Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program. Sweden: Uppsala University].

[iv] The conflict transformation has been discussed since the 1980s'. It emphasises the need to study conflicts as a dynamic phenomenon and inherent in human relationships. It is the way of seeing a social conflict by using multiple lenses – seeing the immediate context, relationships, and structures that inform the context and finally, envision a way in which conflicts can be addressed. It discusses the transformation from unpeaceful to peaceful relationships [Lederach, J.P. (1996). *Preparing for peace: conflict transformation across cultures*. New York: Syracuse University Press].

[v] Eighty-four countries have drafted a national action plan in support of the Unites Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, (UNSCR), 2000, and Nepal and Bangladesh are the only South Asian countries among them (National Action Plans, 2020).

[vi] A heterogeneous and complicated term, social imaginaries, has been informed by a range of intellectual inputs. It may not be possible to give it a fair space of discussion here due to its limited use in the paper. It is centrally concerned with the collective forms of social interaction and practices, change and continuity that make up our social life [Stephenson, Jr., M.O. (2011). Considering the relationships among social conflict, social imaginaries, resilience, and community-based organization leadership. *Ecology and Society*, *16*(1); Adams, S., Blokker, P., Doyle, N.J., Krummel, J.W.M. & Smith, J.C.A. (2015). Social imaginaries in debate. *Social Imaginaries*, *1*(1), 15-52].

[vii] Acharya Ramamurti, a Gandhian, had been working for the people in Bihar. He was behind the inception of *Mahila Shanti Sena*. Few academicians from Canada in collaboration with Unnayan initiated the MSS movement in Odisha in 2005.

[viii] Gandhi was on his way to the creation of Shanti Sena in Sevagram in February 1948. He was assassinated, and the concept remained unrealised until Vinobha Bhave took it in his hands. In a meeting in March 1948, Vinoba Bhave, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, and others acknowledged that Gandhi had suggested the organisation of Shanti Sena [Weber, T. (1996). *Gandhi's peace army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press].

[ix] From the 1950s till the 1970s, the Shanti Sena under the leadership of Bhave was active in re-integrating criminals into the society, intervening in communal riots in villages, and carried humanitarian works during the refugee crisis. Later, Jay Prakash Narayan took it forward and integrated it with the resistance to the National Emergency in 1975. Its last know history was recorded in the 1980s' [Lynch, D. (2004). Three peace forces: The khudai khidmitgars, shanti sena and nonviolent peaceforce. *Asian Reflections*].

[x] The rationale behind choosing Vaishali (Bihar) for the origin of the MSS was because of its historical association with the Champaran movement of Gandhi. The place has also been a witness to Vinoba Bhave's 'Land Gift movement' and Jay Prakash Narayan's Total Revolution of 1974. [Pearson, Anne N. (2004). The Mahila Shanti Sena: New women's peace movement in India. *Peace Magazine*, *20*(1)].

REFERENCES:

Adams, S., Blokker, P., Doyle, N.J., Krummel, J.W.M., & Smith, J.C.A. (2015). Social imaginaries in debate. *Social Imaginaries*, *1*(1), 15-52.

Adsule, J., Balakrishnan, G., & Chettiar, A. (2010). *Study of the conditions of women affected by communal violence in Kandhamal district, Orissa*. Report. Mumbai: College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan. Retrieved from https://www.countercurrents.org/orissa_tribunal.pdf

Alvarez, P.T. (2019). Resisting the dichotomy victim vs agent: Theorizing young women's agency. In D. Hutchinson & L. Underwood (Eds), *Women, social change and activism: Then and now* (pp. 59-68). London: Lexington Books.

Banerjee, P. (2008). The space between: Women's negotiations with democracy. In P. Banerjee (Ed), *Women in peace politics* (pp. 201-217). New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Banerjee, P. (2014). *A report, women conflict and governance: The case of Tripura. Making women count for peace: Gender, empowerment and conflict in South Asia*. Kolkata & Oslo: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group & Peace Research Institute. Retrieved from http://www.mcrg.ac.in/m_women/a_report_making_women_count.pdf

Banerjee, S. (2010). Debates on domesticity and the position of women in late colonial India: Women and domesticity in late colonial India. *History Compass*, *8*(6), 455-473.

Behar, A. (2016). *Peace, justice and institutions to ensure no one is left behind, Report. India and Sustainable Development Goals: A Way Forward*. Delhi: Research and Information System for Developing Countries. Retrieved from http://ris.org.in/pdf/SDGs_Report_Chapter_16.pdf

Bhattacharya, J. (2010). Gender, peace-making and the case of northeast India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, *71*(1), 233-239.

Chaudhury, S. (2016). *Women and conflict in India*. Oxon: Routledge.

Chauhan, N. (2019, September 17). How gender-based violence in India continues to rise. *Yourstory*. Retrieved from https://yourstory.com/socialstory/2019/09/gender-violence-india

Cockburn, C. (2001). The gendered dynamics of armed conflict and political violence. In C.O. N. Moser & F.C. Clark (Eds), *Victims, perpetrators or actors?: Gender, armed conflict and political violence* (pp.13-29). London: Zed Books.

Cockburn, C. (2004). The continuum of violence: A gender perspective on war and peace. In W. Giles & J. Hyndman (Eds), *Sites of violence: Gender and conflict zones* (pp. 24-44). Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Darshan. (2013). Voicing the voiceless: Mahila Shanti Sena. *SEEDS*. Retrieved from http://www.seedsnet.org/mahila-shanti-sena

Das, K. (2013). Violence against women. Odisha Review, June. Retrieved from http://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2013/jun/engpdf/59-63.pdf

DasGupta, S. (2008). Security, gender and conflict prevention. In P. Banerjee (Ed), *Women in peace politics* (pp. 20-53). New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Deka, M. (2013). *Women's agency and social change: Assam and beyond*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, *27*(3), 291-305.

Gangoli, G. (2006). *Indian feminisms: Law, patriarchies and violence in India*. Aldershot & Hampshire: Ashgate Publications.

Giles, W., & Hyndman, J. (2004). Introduction: gender and conflict in the global context. In W. Giles & J. Hyndman (Eds), *Sites of violence: Gender and conflict zones* (pp. 3-23). Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Hauge, W., Doucet, R., & Gilles, A. (2015). Building peace from below: The potential of local models of conflict prevention in Haiti. *Conflict, Security & Development*, *15*(3), 259-282.

Hellmüller, S. (2018). *The Interaction between local and international peacebuilding actors: Partners for peace*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jejeebhoy, S.J. (1998). Wife-Beating in Rural India: A Husband's Right? Evidence from Survey Data. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *33*(15), 855-862.

Johnson, M.P. (2008). *A typology of violence*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Jones, M., & Fabian, A.C. (2006). Introduction: Arenas of conflict. In M. Jones & A.C. Fabian (Eds), *Conflict* (pp. 1-7). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joshee, R., & Sihra, K. (2013). Shakti as a liberatory and educative force for Hindu women. In Z. Gross, L. Davis & A.K. Diah (Eds), *Gender, religion and education in a chaotic post-modern world* (pp. 73-82). New York and London: Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg.

Lederach, J.P. (1996). *Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Lefranc, S. (2011). A critique of 'bottom-up' peacebuilding: Do peaceful individuals make peaceful Societies? Retrieved from https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00646986/document.

Lynch, D. (2004). Three peace forces: The khudai khidmitgars, shanti sena and nonviolent peaceforce. *Asian Reflections*. Retrieved from https://www.asianreflection.com/npsskk.pdf

Mac Ginty, R. (2011). *International peace building and local resistance: Hybrids forms of peace.* Hamsphire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mac Ginty, R. (2013). Indicators+: A proposal for everyday peace indicators. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *36*, 56-63.

Mac Ginty, R., & Firchow, P. (2016). Top-down and bottom-up narratives of peace and conflict. *Politics*, *36*(3), 308-323.

Manchanda, R. (2005). Women's agency in peace building: Gender relations in post-conflict reconstruction. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *40*(44), October-November, 4737-4745.

Miall, H. (2004). *Conflict transformation: A multi-dimensional task*. Berlin: Bergh of research centre for construction conflict management. Retrieved from https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/71735641.pdf

Mohanty, G. (2018). Mahila shanti sena: A new dawn. *Mahila Shanti Sena Newsletter*, *9*(1) , 1-5.

Motta, S., Flesher Fominaya, C.M., Eschle, C., & Cox, L. (2011). Feminism, women's movements and women in movement. *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements*, *3*(2), 1-32.

Paffenholz, T. (2009). Understanding peacebuilding theory: Management, resolution and transformation. *New Routes: A Journal of Peace Research and Action*, *14*(2), 3-6.

Page, P., & Sosa, C. (2019). Diary of a documentary in the making: Filming the local imaginaries of post-dictatorship Argentina. *Comunicación y Medios*, *39*, 186-197.

Pearson, Anne N. (2004). The Mahila Shanti Sena: New women's peace movement in India. *Peace Magazine*, *20*(1). Retrieved from http://www.peacemagazine.org/archive/v20n1p15.htm

Priyabadini, S. (2012). Voices of women of Odisha. *Odisha Review*, *68*(7-8) 31-36.

Rajagopalan, S. (2016). Openings for peace: An introduction to the volume. In A. Hans & S. Rajagopalan (Eds), *Openings for peace UNSCR 1325, Women and security in India* (pp.1-8). Delhi: Sage Publications.

Reed, M., & Del Ceno, J.S. (2015). Mediation and conservation conflicts: From top-down to bottom-up. In S.M. Redpath, R.J. Guttierez, K.A. Wood, J. Young (Eds), *Conflicts in conservation: Navigating towards solutions* (pp. 222-232). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reviere, R. (2007). Reflections from the board of editors. *Critical Half: Bi-annual Journal of Women for Women International*, *5*(2), 5.

Richmond, O. P. (2011). *A post liberal peace*. London & New York: Routledge.

Scholten, G.M.V.I. (2020). *Visions of peace and professional peace workers: The Peaces we build*. Netherlands: Palgrave Macmillan.

Singh, R.S. (2005). An introduction to mahila shanti sena. Retrieved from https://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/gandhi/mss/MSS-Intro.pdf

Singh, R.S. (2012). MSS in action: reports from the north-east (India). *Mahila shanti sena newsletter*, *4*(2), 1-5.

Stephenson Jr., M.O. (2011). Considering the relationships among social conflict, social imaginaries, resilience, and community-based organization leadership. *Ecology and Society*, *16*(1). Retrieved from http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art34

Stree Shakti Sangathana. (2008). Afterword. In P. Banerjee (Ed), *Women in peace politics* (pp. 78-96). New Delhi: Sage.

Swanström, N.L.P., & Weissmann, M.S. (2005). *Conflict, conflict prevention and conflict management and beyond: A conceptual exploration*. Concept Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program. Sweden: Uppsala University. Retrieved from http://www.mikaelweissmann.com/wp-content/uploads/Conflict_Conflict_Prevention_and_Conflic.pdf

Wani, H.A., Suwirta, A., & Payeye, J. (2013). Conflict resolution and conflict transformation: Some reflections. *Atikan*, *3*(1), 35-44.

Weber, T. (1996). *Gandhi's peace army: The Shanti Sena and unarmed peacekeeping*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Web sources:

Fourth World Conference on Women Report (1995). Women Watch. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/beijing/reports/

Mahila Shanti Sena (2009). The catalyst within: Women SHG that transformed a community. Retrieved from http://www.seedsnet.org/mahila-shanti-sena.

National Action Plans for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2020, June). Peace women. Retrieved from https://www.peacewomen.org/member-states

National Family Health Survey-4, 2015-16 (2017). Retrieved from: http://rchiips.org/NFHS/NFHS-4Reports/Odisha.pdf

PTI (2019, October 22). Urgent need to institutionalise involvement of women in conflict prevention: India. The Economic Times. Retrieved from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/urgent-need-to-institutionalise-involvement-of-women-in-conflict-prevention-india

PTI (2019, December 17). India slips to 112th rank on WEF's gender gap index, in bottom 5 on health, economic fronts. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-slips-to-112th-rank-on-wef-s-gender-gap-index-in-bottom-5-on-health-economic-fronts/story

Resolution 1325 (2000) Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting. (2000, October). UN peacemaker. Retrieved from https://peacemaker.un.org/node/105

***Ivy Dhar** is Assistant Professor in the School of Development Studies, Ambedkar University, New Delhi.*
Email id: ivydhar@gmail.com
***Diksha Poddar** is a Research Scholar at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.*
Email id: dikshapoddar09@gmail.com

Article: Food Culture and Identity in Northeast India: Prospects for Social Science Research

Author(s): Hoineilhing Sitlhou

Food Culture and Identity in Northeast India:
Prospects for Social Science Research

--- Hoineilhing Sitlhou

Abstract

The paper is an analysis of the research being done on food culture and dietary practices in Northeast India. It identifies the research gap, points out the lack of scholarship on food as a politico-cultural item and also points out the scope for future research on food culture and identity in Northeast India. This paper is divided into three sections: Firstly, it explores the existing studies on dietary practices in Northeast India in order to identify the research gap; Secondly, it highlights the close linkages between the dietary ideals of Northeasterners and the region from which they come; and Thirdly, it studies the centrality of dietary practices of the Northeasterners in defining their basic rights of living to the larger issues of citizenship.

Key words: Citizenship, Discrimination, Emotion, Food culture, Northeast India

Introduction

The utility of food goes beyond mere sustenance. It is in itself a marker of identity in lieu of the close linkage between consumption patterns and culture. This holds true in the context of a regionally and culturally diverse society like the Indian society. Though, food is 'the symbolic medium par excellence', there are diverse cultural meanings and discourses on food practices and preferences in all human societies (Lupton, 2007, p. 317). 'Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day' (ibid.). The culinary practices, eating behaviours, notions of food and determinants of taste are often socially tailored. Food can also be a powerful symbolic resource for the expression of patterns of social differentiation (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

The article is a critical overview of the existing research conducted on food, culture and dietary practices in Northeast India. With an aim to identify the research gap, the research points out the dearth of study on food as a politico-cultural item while also highlighting the scope of research on food culture and identity in Northeast India. The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section explores the existing studies on dietary practices in region. The second part of the paper highlights the close linkages between the dietary ideals of Northeasterners and the region to which they belong. The third section focus on the centrality of dietary practices of the Northeasterners in defining their basic rights of living to the larger issues of citizenship.

The first section of the paper made use of secondary literatures mostly. The second section of the paper is based on the project, 'Food culture and identity: A cross-cultural study of dietary practices of students in university hostels of Hyderabad' conducted in 2014-2015[i]. The study is an attempt to understand the gastronomical experiences of students in university hostels of Hyderabad. Three universities in Hyderabad have been chosen for conducting purposive sampling[ii]: Hyderabad Central University, English and Foreign Language University and Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University. These universities were chosen because it accommodates students from different states across the country, belonging to different religious background, class, caste, creed, tradition, etc[iii]. There were 278[iv] respondents who responded to the scheduled open-ended questionnaire based on purposive sampling or non-probability sampling technique. The third section is based on a survey that was conducted for another project, 'Archiving Marginalities in North East India', in 2016. The data presented in this paper is based on the response of 95 respondents chosen via snowball sampling method, who responded to the scheduled open-ended questionnaire on the problems of the Northeast populace outside Northeast region, taking the case of New Delhi.

Research on Dietary Practices: Identifying the Research Gap

The American Anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz (1996) made an interesting observation on the writings of anthropologists studying different communities all over the world. In Mintz's opinion, food and eating have not received enough attention as anthropological subjects. For instance, B. Malinowski studied the Trobriand Islanders and discussed about yam cultivation, feasting, magic and chiefhood. But the discussion on food was more in terms of what food did for the

social order. Many anthropological studies on food have a tendency to study food as a part of the social order or as a means to an end, viz. for its instrumental value. This approach is replicated by many researchers of and on Northeast Indian food.

Though studies on food and eating have received negligible attention, food has always played an important role in shaping the historiography of the region. For example, rice is the most popular staple food in the eight states of Northeast India. The history of the region records of a recurring 'bamboo famine' in Mizoram, in 1882 and 1959 respectively (Pachuau & Schendel, 2016). The famine was caused by rodents feeding on the bamboo flowers, multiplying rapidly; and upon finishing the bamboo flowers they would then prey on agricultural crops and village granaries. The famine changed the political landscape of Mizoram. The inability of the Assam government to give adequate and timely response marked the beginning of a political revolt in the region. In 1961, the voluntary organisation coordinating the relief work (Mizo National Famine Front) transformed into a political party, the Mizo National Front (MNF) (ibid., p. 302). Another rice-centred movement was the second *Nupilan* movement or women's agitation in 1904 in Manipur. It was caused by the export of rice from Manipur by Marwari monopolists with the support of British rulers, resulting in a famine-like situation for the local people. While the original demands of these women were confined to the banning of rice export, later their demands also included changes in the Darbar and the administrative set up (Yambem, 1976, p. 331).

There is scope for comparative studies too. Take the case of 'feasting' as a socio-cultural and religious activity. In the pre-colonial period, spiritual and social activities did not have a fine dividing line. Worship of gods involved sacrificing, cooking and eating, and sometimes abstinence from food in the form of fasting prayers. The 'Feast of Merit' was performed among the Chakesang Nagas after the harvesting season, between November and January (Tinyi, 2020). There would be competition among the feast-givers to outdo each other in terms of their generosity as 'honour' and 'respect' was conferred on them. There was also the informal practice of labeling 'shame' to a wealthy couple for not performing the feast of merit. The ultimate goal was to enhance one's status within the community. The Mizos also have *Thangchhuah Feast* somewhat similar to the 'feast of merit', yet different in terms of its religious goals and purpose. The title of Thangchhuah is a revered and honorable title holding tickets not just in the present life but in the afterlife as well. To attain the title of Thangchhuah, a man has to perform six stages of sacrificial feasts. An able hunter could attain this title

without performing the sacrificial feasts (Ram Lama Thangchhuah) but he would have to kill the following prescribed animals and birds: elephant, bear, wild bison, demote deer, wild boar, king cobra, eagle and lemur. He has to perform a ritual (*Ai* ceremony) to appease the spirit of the animals and birds killed and request them to escort him to *pialral*, the abode of the dead, a place similar to the concept of heaven in Christianity, devoid of pain, hard labour or toil and suffering [v] (Malsawmdawngliana, 2012). A feast for the whole village was mandatory to complete the ritual.

In examples like these, we find that food, though often taken for granted because of its image as an everyday activity, plays a crucial role in holding the society together by mending and maintaining bonds. During 2008 to 2010, I conducted fieldwork in two Kuki villages, Motbung and Tujang Vaichong, and an urban town, Kangpokpi. I noticed that pigs play a fundamental role in their customary life. Every Kuki village has a customary court, also called *Khosung Inpi Thutanna*, even in areas that are not under chieftainship system[vi]. It is a traditional law enforcing body which has as its constitution the traditional customary laws that are unwritten, retained and transmitted orally. The redressive mechanism or punishment for breach of law or non-conformity to the norms of the society was the killing of a pig, followed by a meal hosted by the guilty party in honour of the victim's party. The custom is still relevant today among the various Kuki group of people to adjudicate cases like bloodshed, feud, land dispute, divorce due to adultery, etc.

When I visited Motbung village in the year 2009, the customary court, locally known as Motbung Village Authority, comprises of the following organisational positions who assists the village Chief: Chairman, Secretary, Joint-secretary, Accountant, Custom in-charge, two members in-charge of forest (forest land regulation and distribution), four members in-charge of defense, and Information Secretary or *Lhangsam.* For the proceeding to take place, the victim's party has to write a letter to the Chief through the authority members. They also have to pay court fee of rupees fifty. The members of the village authority listened to both plaintiff and respondents and witnesses who were present at the time the incident occurred. The guilty party being decided, this is followed by negotiation on the fine or penalty to be paid by the party who loses the case. Usually, as a peace treaty, after the cases are decided, there is a tea-party consisting of members of the village authority and the litigating parties. This is a change influenced by Christianity from the traditional practice of drinking local wine made of rice

called *Zu*. Penalty is stringent and heavy in cases that involved bloodshed or adultery, where the highest is paid in terms of a pig, along with a sum of money, the amount of which depends on the severity of the crime committed. Bloodshed is classified into two types: *Bil Tan Deh Keh* (injury in the ear and the forehead) and *Thi-kiso* (murder) (Sitlhou, 2011). The slaughter of the pig and the ensuing feast are not without their symbolic and ritualistic meanings. Firstly, the pig is necessary to perform *tol-theh* or ground-cleaning. The blood of a pig, or a mithun in the past, has to be shed in order to cleanse the ground or the village because an injury or a murder has been committed. Secondly, the pig is necessary to perform *kosa,* meaning purification of the house and prayers for the bereaved family in order to prevent similar calamity from befalling the house thenceforth. After the dead body is taken out of the house, it is customary for the family of the deceased to feed the guests who had come to condole or to participate in the funeral. Gifting the bereaved family with a pig, would compensate them from these customarily necessary expenses.

Similarly, among the Kuzhami[vii] Nagas of Nagaland, customary food transactions play an important role in the construction and maintenance of kin relations. Kin-like relationship could also be started with non-kin members through food exchange (Sakhrie, 2016). *Ningol Chakkouba* is an occasion in the Meitei community of Manipur in which married daughters and sisters are invited to their parental house for a feast. Therefore, food or feasting or shared eating is used as a medium for forging and maintaining relations. 'Stories about food are not solely about sharing and feasting – such accounts are also fundamentally tied to social practices that reinforce hierarchies and order in society' (Kikon, 2015, p. 332). The existing studies and research in the context of Northeast India study food for its instrumental value, as '…instrumental for the study of other things; like cementing loyalties, reminding people who they were in relation to others, fortifying them for their tasks, and linking them to their gods… It is not the food or its preparation that was of interest, so much as what, socially speaking, the food and eating could be used for' (Mintz, 1996, p. 4).

Food and Emotion: Memory and the Taste of Home Food

Roland Barthes (2008), in the paper 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,' writes about the feeling of nostalgia for one's food when one is outside one's own country or state of origin. This is very relevant to the experience of Northeasterners staying outside their home state. McDuie-Ra[viii]

writes that the experience of the Northeast migrants in Delhi is a good example of how food or the memories of 'home food' frequently accompanies people in their travels outside their own regions. He makes the following crucial points on the subject (McDuie-Ra, 2012, pp. 153-156):

a) North easterners cannot get by in Delhi without access to food found in the region, particularly in their own home state. Their food varies from those of the mainstream Indian society. Northeast food, especially from the tribal areas is far closer to food found to the east, in Burma, and to the north, in China (Yunnan).

b) There are several restaurants serving Northeast food in Delhi. To this point I would like to add, the existence of 'migrant neighbourhood' in localities like Kotla, Motibagh, Munirka, Vijay Nagar and Kisan Garh, etc. In Kisan Garh especially, there are many shops, owned by the North easterners themselves, selling food, clothing, etc. that would cater to their palette and needs.

Deborah Lupton (2005), going by the social constructionist perspective, argues that phenomena that are understood to be biological like hunger, taste and food preferences are the products of the socio-cultural environment in which we are born. Thus, while humans enter the world with the need to eat to survive, from the moment of birth the ways in which individuals interact with other people and with cultural artefacts shape their responses to food. What is interesting from the findings of my survey was the gastronomical experiences of students in Hyderabad who hail from one of the eight states of the Northeast of India. The findings gave very interesting insights on the following points:

1) Religious and regional background played an important role in determining the dietary ideals of a person from Northeast India;

2) Food can act as both a means of communication and as a marker of differences between different cultural groups of students in the University;

3) Food is a socially constructed category rather than merely a biological activity, and therefore, there is a close relationship between food, culture and identity.

Based on the findings, the dietary ideals of the majority of the Northeasterners, with the exception of the conservative Vaishnavite Hindu communities in Assam and Manipur (who observe food taboos according to their religious beliefs), were highly influenced by non-vegetarian diet. The majority of the Northeasterners

were hunters and gatherers during pre-colonial and early part of the colonial period. They were intermittently at war either with their neighbouring tribes or with the colonial government, and were often persuaded to shift their geo-political locations due to raids and feuds from time to time. It was not conducive for them to engage in sedentary form of cultivation and at the most they could practice shifting cultivation. Non-vegetarian diet was not only more conveniently available to them as a source of sustenance, but over time it also played a very important part in their culture, customs and tradition. The massive conversion to Christianity in the 19th century also ensured the continuation of this gastronomical preference as Christianity did not prohibit non-vegetarianism. The plains of Assam and the valley area of Manipur were already highly influenced by Hinduism and so the Christian proselytisation mission in these regions were not as effective (Sitlhou, 2017). In Manipur, vegetarianism was introduced into the local culture due to the conversion to Vaishnavism (Hinduism) in the later part of the 17th century by a Bengali scholar and Brahmin priest Shantidas Goshai. This inniated a change in the dietary habit of the Meiteis as their traditional religion *Sanamahi* did not have strict principles regarding food habits. Interestingly, the Meitei *Bahmon's* (Manipuri Brahmin) abstinence from meat in most cases does not include the intake of fish (Singh, 1963, pp. 68-70).

For Robin Fox (2002), the notion of nutrition is a myth and our taste has never been governed merely by only the taste-bud. The practice of 'eating' displays code of messages about selves and status, role and religion, race and nation. Ethnic identifications in food have not disappeared and a relative conservatism of food habits persists in all countries. Putting them all together, respondents from Hyderabad Central University, English Foreign Language University and Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University wanted the inclusion of pork, beef, chicken, eggs, fish, mutton, potatoes (fried without spice), sea-food, boiled vegetables and fried curries with less oil and spice in their hostel menu. Interestingly, many of them included the local (South Indian) food items like *dosa, sambhar, payasam, biryani, chutney,* etc. in their dietary ideals. This is an interesting case in which there is communication between two cultures via food habit as meanings are shared through non-verbal means.

There were a lot of hostellers from the Northeast region in all the three universities who were dissatisfied with the hostel food[ix]. The core reasons for their discontentment were the longing for cuisines, gastronomy of their home state or simply food cooked in their homes, all of which determine or define their food

ideals. The term 'home food' can have two different meanings: food cooked by one's immediate kin or personal cook at home, or, food items prepared and available in the home state or region to which one is affiliated. For a 21-year-old post-graduate student from Hyderabad Central University who belongs to a Hindu family in Hyderabad, no food is comparable to the food cooked by one's own mother. Home depicts a sense of security and an irreplaceable emotional bond. Even students hailing from the same state (Andhra or Telangana) such as Guntur, Vijayawada, Kakinada, Warrangal, Khammam, etc. responded that they still missed home food, though hostels provide similar but not the same type of food. Firstly, they were dissatisfied with the quality of hostel food in the mess. The common complaints were: an overdose of spices or oils, overcooked food or undercooked food, untrained cooking staffs in the kitchens of hostels, unhygienic food preparation and storage, repetition of same food items, etc. Secondly, it is not exactly technical proficiency or expertise in cooking that qualifies as good food but also the emotional attachment or rapport between the one who prepares it and the one consuming it. Therefore, food that one eats brings back memories of either a home or homeland.

Within the campus spaces, students get the opportunity to partake in such food through the associations that organise programmes on occasions like freshers' meet, farewell parties, Advent Christmas, *Chakkouba*, Northeast Food Fest, Northeast Cultural Nite and some state level festivals. Through these programmes, students preserve their ties to a homeland and participate in traditional customs and rituals of consumption. These occasions provide them opportunities to come together to enliven their sense of belongingness to a particular region, culture or religion. The traditional or regional foods prepared are necessarily cultural badges as they are regional or religious specific. The menu in the Northeast Food Fest in Hyderabad Central University includes Naga-style pork with *akhuni* (fermented soyabean), Mizo *sawhchiar* (chicken with rice), Manipuri *singju* (salad) and *aeronba* (with bamboo shoots and fermented fish or *ngari*), Tripuri dish *Aakranmosodeng* (dry fish and mashed chillies), Khasi *Khlehnei-lieh* (vegetable salads) with perilla seeds and plain boiled vegetables (a favourite in all the states of Northeast India). Students from other cultures and regions are invited to partake in the food consumption as a mark of friendship and exposure to one's culture.

In Hyderabad Central University, another example of cross-cultural encounter is during the campus fest *Sukoon*, in which beef biryanis are sold every year in order

to assert Dalit food rights since the year 2006. Students from different states of Northeast India have endorsed and supported the stall set up by the Ambedkar Students Association. In May 2011, some Dalit and Muslim students tried to organise a 'beef festival' in the campus of English Foreign Language University in Hyderabad. They also wanted to include beef as a regular food item in the hostel menu (Das, 2015, p. 106). Though the project ended abruptly due to opposition from Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the students' wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the prospect of the inclusion of a non-vegetarian diet was well-received by the Northeastern students. This provides a ground for politico-cultural solidarity on the basis of a shared food habit. As Arjun Appadurai (1981) writes, food has the ability of acting as the medium and message of social conflict, while also enabling the communication between human beings. Food is therefore a marker of identity for the different groups of people, as identities and belongingness are re-enforced and constructed through food. Thus, the university campus provides spaces not only for homogenisation of cultural influence but also the confluence of food habits and diet.

Northeastern students studying in Hyderabad Central University receive food/delicacies from home either through the mail or brought by friends or family members on visits. The types of food can be divided into three categories: dry meat, fermented fish, bamboo shoot, pickled fruits or vegetables, etc. (chilly pickle is popular); and sweets, cakes (made of sticky rice); and other local produce, not found in Hyderabad, that mark religious occasions or cultural festivals. Though these foods might produce feelings of revulsion to some, for others, the same smell invokes feeling of comfort or remembrance of home, especially in unfamiliar surroundings (Kikon, 2015). There are some foods that produce immediate local knowledge and trigger the sensory aspects of food. 'This linkage may take place at a subconscious or unconscious level, at which certain tastes and smells of food may evoke emotional responses derived from previous experiences without that connection being consciously recognised' (Lupton, 2007, p. 321).

Food and the Question of Citizenship

In the final section, I would like to deal with the centrality of dietary practices and ideals in defining the complicated relationship between Northeasterners and the host communities in metropolitan cities. The quotidian consumption practices are important venues for understanding the development of prejudice and stereotypes

against certain social groups. In popular normative perception, we tend to associate certain identities with certain types of food habits (Das, 2015). For the transnational Hindu, India is equated with Hindu land. Caste system in India is considered as a defining characteristic of Indian society. The purity and pollution theory in the Hindu caste system prescribes rules of eating and cooking food (Saunders, 2007). For example, *Manusmriti* prescribes that menstruating women should stay away from the Brahmin while he is having food (Das, 2015, p. 106). Therefore, food – both as an unquestionable need for survival and as a 'taboo' – determines our perceptions of 'normal/ abnormal'; 'cruel/ non-cruel'; 'violent/ non-violent'; and 'pure/ polluted' (ibid.).

In this context, I will discuss the discrimination faced by Northeasterners in metropolitan cities, especially on matters ranging from basic rights of living to larger issues of citizenship. I will substantiate my discussion with findings from a survey that was conducted in 2016[x]. Many respondents agreed that they were subjected to discrimination and humiliation when it comes to their accommodation in Delhi. They are denied houses by house owners as they are deemed unfit for the prescribed life style and food practices. Their food practices, especially meat cooking such as pork and beef, often lead to conflict and end in humiliation by the house owner and neighbours. Babu P. Ramesh, in a project conducted by the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, interviewed 402 respondents during June to December, 2010 in four localities with a large concentration of Northeast migrants – Kotla, Motibagh, Munirka and Vijay Nagar. Out of the 402 respondents interviewed, there was only one who did not stay in a rented accommodation. The majority of respondents cited discriminatory practices related to rented accommodation.

Getting a room/flat on rent is the most difficult task for migrants from Northeast. A good chunk of the local landlords do not even consider Northeasterners as potential clients to rent out their room/flats – as they look down on Northeast people citing differences in culture. 'They have loose morals'; 'They eat pigs and dogs'; 'Their presence will pollute our children', etc. are the justification given by many of the local room/flat owning people (as reported by some of the respondents). Some of the respondents got the rented accommodation only after ensuring that they will cook and eat only vegetarian food in their rooms. A very few also shared instances of eating 'smuggled' non-vegetarian food in their rooms, without the knowledge of their landlords (Ramesh, 2012, p. 18). However, there are a few cases in which landlords prefer Northeast migrants as tenants as

they pay their rent regularly without a fuss and they could also charge them with higher rents compared to others. They, therefore, contribute in maintaining the host's political economy.

The book *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas (1966) talks about the rejection of certain kinds of animals as an explanation of the Hebrew dietary laws which were regulated by fear of defilement and hygiene. Pork is considered to be an unclean animal. As Hindus are taught not to eat beef since the cow is considered to be a sacred animal, Muslims are restricted from eating pork which is considered to be a defiled animal by the Holy Quran. Marvin Harris writes, 'By 1000 A.D., all Hindus were forbidden to eat beef. Ahimsa, the Hindu belief in the unity of all life, was the spiritual justification for this restriction. But it is difficult to ascertain exactly when this change occurred' (Harris, 1978, p. 202). Therefore, the inclusion of beef and pork in their diet, a sacrilege to the Hindus and Muslims, demotes some communities in Northeast India to a remote position in the national social and culinary order and imagination. Dolly Kikon made an interesting analysis on this and she writes, 'if one roughly maps the trajectory of modernity on dominant food and dietary habits, particularly the promotion of a national cuisine of India via cookbooks, a singular version of Indian modernity appears, reflecting a singular version of Indian history – which, in turn, dictates the dietary imagination. The food practices of dominant groups are presented as the national cuisine while relegating others to the margins or erasing them altogether' (Kikon, 2015, p. 321). There is the tendency of attributing notions of remoteness and backwardness towards tribal societies from Northeast India in contrast to the rest of India. 'Here, the visible manifestations like dietary cultures, along with race, religion and history, are used to reiterate tradition and remoteness' (ibid.).

In a study conducted by Nongbri and Shimreiwung (2017), it was found that though food is a source of tension between Northeast tenants and their landlords, culture of reciprocity and food sharing exists between Northeasterners and their colleagues from 'mainland India' in the office precinct. Sharing of food among co-workers is a mutual process and a majority of them share the food they pack to work, while also accepting food from their colleagues. 'The workplace as a site that brings together heterogenous social groups, fostering camaraderie and conviviality across caste' and social boundaries are apparent (Baviskar, 2019, p. 366).

Beginning from the colonial times, the state had the power to advance changes in food habits. Travelling back in time, in the 1940s, under the colonial missionary, non-drinking became popularly accepted as the outstanding mark of a Christian. Candidates to be baptised have to pass an examination on knowledge of Christian doctrine and furnish evidence that they had not participated in any 'heathen ritual' nor drank any rice beer for three months (Eaton, 1984, p. 13). 'Because of these conflicts between Naga culture and the norm upheld by the Baptist missionaries, many converts appeared to do a good deal of wavering and wobbling in terms of religious allegiance' (ibid, p. 15). Mills wrote:

> *And one finds many men who have changed their faith as often as seven or eight times, or even more. A man will become a (nominal) Christian and be baptised. Then his soul yearns for 'madhu' (rice beer) and, since anyone who touches alcohol is expelled from the Baptist community, he often goes the whole hog and joins the non-Christians again. Later he may change his mind, give up his 'madhu' and heathen practices and be readmitted to the Baptist Church* (as documented in Eaton, 1984, p. 15).

Similarly, in the present day, the Indian government under the Ministry of Home Affairs had constituted a Committee in 2014, chaired by Shri M.P. Bezbaruah, retired IAS and member of the North Eastern Council, to look into the various concerns of the citizens hailing from the Northeastern states who are living in different parts of the country and to suggest suitable remedial measures, including legal measures which could be taken up by the Government (Sitlhou & Punathil, 2017). On the subject of food and eating habits of the Northeasterners, the Committee stated,

> *It was submitted before the committee that many landlords also consider the people from the Northeast as difficult tenants because of their food habits and resent pungent smell that Northeast cooking has due to the use of fermented seasonings like bamboo shoots and soya beans.*

The attempt by the state to moderate the relationship between Northeasterners and mainland India fails to understand the integral role that food habits play in Northeast culture, history and identity. Mention may also be made here of the controversial booklet by the Delhi police in 2005. It was conveniently titled,

Security Tips for Northeast Students/Visitors in Delhi, laying down the Dos and Don'ts that people hailing from Northeast India should adhere to. Northeast migrants were advised to avoid using bamboo shoot and akhuni (fermented soya bean). If they were to cook it, they should do so without creating ruckus in neighborhood[xi]. As Dolly Kikon (2015) rightly said, such official directives reiterate how the state plays a significant role in legitimising or prohibiting certain foods that particular social groups in contemporary India consume. The argument is that certain food and smell ought to be eliminated from the public space by claims of functional necessity. The problem is that the understanding of the dietary practices of the Northeasterners is often predicated upon their dissimilarity to Indian cuisines – particularly the absence of oil and masala, which indicates a lack of refinement, technique and sophistication. However, food and people's histories are intertwined. To shame or humiliate the dietary practices of a particular social group is to also shame and humiliate their history (ibid.).

The right to choice of food was a subject that was highly debated in the Bombay High Court's judgement in Shaikh Zahid Mukthar vs. State of Maharashtra (2017). Though the judgement was meant to challenge Section 5D of the Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act, 1976, it was also significant to the cause of the Northeasterners. The points that were put forward were: Firstly, the state has no business interfering in a person's choice of food. Secondly, the only exceptions to this general principal are cases where a compelling public interest exists, such as matters of health and safety (Parthasarathy, 2017, p. 44). Therefore, everyday consumption practices are important locations where notions of citizenship, belonging and democratic spaces are constantly being challenged and redefined in powerful ways (Kikon, 2015).

Conclusion

Though often considered an insignificant subject of study and not given the importance it deserves, a study of gastronomical practices, dietary customs and practices would tell us much about the 'Northeastern self', the community, identity, intercommunity dynamics and relationships, as also the role of food in producing social meanings. There is a need to study not only the instrumental value of dietary practices but also their intrinsic value, as a means to an end. Lastly, there is a truth in what Fox says, that there is a greater homogenisation of food habits today and '…the world is an exciting state of mixing and mingling and transferring of tastes' (Fox, 2002, p. 21). Therefore, there is a greater scope to

study food culture of the people from Northeast India today than there was ever before.

Notes:

[i] The survey was done via a project, *Food culture and identity: A cross-cultural study of dietary practices of students in university hostels of Hyderabad*, under UGC-SAP, with the department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, 2014-2015. My informants gave the following information among other questions: a) religious background; b) food ideals and food culture at home and their home state; c) the level of their receptivity, adjustment and tolerance to the food served in the hostel, which is often similar to the local Hyderabad cuisine; d) and most importantly, the alternative ways by which they negotiate the changes of food and differences within the means available to them.

[ii] It is a type of non-probability sampling technique.

[iii] As the three selected hostels are geographically located in South India, food served in their respective hostel mess are mostly South Indian food items. The hostels of most of the institutions allied to the Government of India are also particularly sensitive to the overall religious sentiments of diverse religious groups in the country. Pork and beef are a sacrilege to a Muslim and a Hindu, and are therefore not served in the hostel mess, whereas common staple food like rice or roti are made mandatory in the menu.

[iv] 85 in EFLU, 90 in HCU and 103 in JNTU respectively.

[v] The Kukis of Manipur have a similar practice known as *Sa-Ai ritual* in which the hunter has to kill a tiger, an eagle, a wild bear, a squirrel and a jungle cock or partridge (Sitlhou, 2018, p. 6).

[vi] The third field area Kangpokpi is an urban town. The Customary court is governed by elected members of the Kangpokpi Urban Town Committee. It is under Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council Administration.

[vii] Chakesang Nagas is the union of Chokri, Khezha and Sangtam community and Kuzhami is derived from the word 'Khezha'.

[viii] Duncan McDuie-Ra's article *'North-East' Map of Delhi* and the book *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* are the result of an ethnographic study of migrants from Northeast India to Delhi from 2010 to 2011.

[ix] I think this is a common phenomenon because through all of my student life, I had stayed in different hostels for 14 years and I was warden in two ladies' hostels in the University of Hyderabad for another 2 years. There has never been a hostel with the perfect food menu, i.e., a menu that satisfies every hosteller's palate.

[x] The data used in this paper was derived from the project titled *Archiving Marginalities in North East India*, which was funded by UGC-UPE, Phase-II, University of Hyderabad and was jointly undertaken by Department of Sociology and Centre for Regional Studies. Though the project begun in the year 2015 and ended in 2017, the data used in this paper was collected in the year 2016.

[xi] Dholabhai, Nishit. (July 9, 2007). Delhi 'profiles' to protect – Police booklet for Northeast students betrays prejudices. *The Telegraph Online*.

REFERENCES:

Arpadurai, A. (1981). Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia. *American Ethonologist*, *8*(3), 494-511.

Barthes, R. (2008). Toward a psycho-sociology of contemporary food consumption. In C. Counihan & P.V. Esterik (Eds), *Food and culture* (pp. 28-35). New York: Routledge.

Baviskar, A. (2019). New cultures of food. In S. Srivastava, Y. Arif & J. Abraham (Eds), *Critical themes in Indian sociology* (pp. 361-374). New Delhi: Sage.

Beardsworth, A., & Keil, T. (1997). *Sociology on the menu: An invitation to the study of food and society.* Routledge: London.

Das, K. (2015). To eat or not to eat beef: Spectres of food on Bengal's politics of identity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *50*(44), 105-114.

Douglas, M. (1972). Deciphering a meal. *Daedalus – myth, symbol, and culture*, *101*(1). 61-81. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/20024058.pdf (accessed on July 15, 2013).

Eaton, R.M. (1984). Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *21*(1), 1-39.

Fox, R. (2002). *Food and eating: An anthropological perspective*. UK: Social Issues Research Centre.

Harris, M. (1978). India's sacred cow. *Human Nature*, *1*(2), 200-210.

Kikon, D. (2015). Fermenting modernity: Putting akhuni on the nation's table in India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *38*(2), 320-335.

Korsmeyer, C. (2007). *The taste culture reader: Experiencing food and drink*. New York: Berg.

Lupton, D. (2007). Food and emotion. In C. Korsmeyer (Ed), *The taste culture reader: Experiencing food and drink* (pp.317-324). New York: Oxford/ Berg.

Malsawmdawngliana. (2012). *Aspects in the cultural history of the Mizos during the pre-British period*. Ph.D. Thesis. Department of History, University of Hyderabad.

McDuie-Ra, D. (2012). *Northeast migrants in Delhi: Race, refuge and retail.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

McDuie-Ra, D. (2012). The 'North-East' map of Delhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *47*(30), 69-77.

Mintz, S.W. (1996). *Tasting food, tasting freedom*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Nongbri, T., & Shimreiwung, A.S. (2017). *Migration, identity and conflict*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

Pachuau, J.L.K., & Schendel, W.V. (2016*). The Camera as witness: A social history of Mizoram, Northeast India.* India: Cambridge University Press.

Parthasarathy, S. (2017). The right to choice of food: Shaping privacy jurisprudence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *52*(51), 43-46.

Ramesh, B.P. (2012). *Migration from Northeast to urban centres: A study of Delhi Region*. Noida/Delhi: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute.

Roy, P. (2002). Reading communities and culinary communities: The gastropoetics of the South Asian diaspora. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, *10*(2), 471-502.

Sakhrie, A. (2016). *Food and kinship: A case study of the Kuzhami of Leshemi Village in Phek District, Nagaland*. Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad.

Saunders, J. (2007). 'I don't eat meat': Discourse on food among transnational Hindus. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, *41*(2), 203-223.

Singh, K.B. (1963). Manipur Vaishnavism: A sociological interpretation. *Sociological Bulletin, 12*(2), 66-72.

Sitlhou, H. (2011). Continuity and change: The setting of a customary court amongst the Kukis. In N. Haokip & M.L. Haokip (Eds), *Kuki society: Past, present and future* (pp. 364-382). New Delhi: Maxford Books.

Sitlhou, H. (2017). *Deconstructing colonial ethnography: An analysis of missionary writings on Northeast India.* New Delhi: Ruby Press.

Sitlhou, H., & Salah P. (2017). Racial discrimination and violence against Northeasterners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014. *Explorations (ISS e-journal)*, *1*(1), 91-102.

Sutton, D.E. (2007). Synesthesia, memory and the taste of home. In C. Korsmeyer (Ed), *The taste culture reader: Experiencing food and drink* (pp. 304-16). New York: Oxford/ Berg.

Tinyi, V. (2020). Megalithic culture of the Chakesang Nagas: Reinterpreting the self. In H. Sitlhou (Ed), *Identity and marginality in Northeast India: Challenges for social science research* (Forthcoming). Delhi: Orient Blackswan.

Turner, V.W. (1996). *Schism and continuity in an African Society: A study of Ndembu village life*. Washington D.C.: Oxford/Berg.

Yambem, S. (1976). Nupilan: Manipur women's agitation, 1939. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *11*(8), 325-331.

Hoineilhing Sitlhou is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad.
Email id: hoilhing@gmail.com

Article: Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood: Caregivers in the Neo-liberal Economy

Author(s): Sarmistha Das and Obja Borah Hazarika

Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 4 (2), October 2020, pp. 67-89

Published by: Indian Sociological Society

Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood:
Caregivers in the Neo-liberal Economy

--- Sarmistha Das and Obja Borah Hazarika

Abstract

The paper explores the intricate relationship between two categories of working women, one who goes out to work leaving her child with the caregiver and the other who comes in to fill the space of the working mother. Thus, the paper is an attempt to look at 'motherhood' as a concept and the role of caregivers in the neo-liberal economy. The relationship between the caregiver and the mother has always been delicate. Hence, an attempt will be made to understand the relationship in terms of employer and employee, and the nature of relationship built on mutual understanding to create an environment of manufactured motherhood vis-à-vis their everyday negotiations. The issues such as the making of boundaries by the mothers, division of work between the mothers and the caregivers, their fears and anxieties are addressed in the paper.

Key words: Caregivers, Employer, Employee, Motherhood

Introduction

While motherhood is seen as an emotion, it has always been conflicting. There are boundaries which are set in terms of the rules that the mother defines for her child's cognitive development vis-à-vis the caregiver. The dilemmas and the conflicts within a mother often set the relationship between caregiver and the mother in action. The journey of becoming a mother to giving the child away for mothering to another person involves a lot of anxiety. This paper attempts to look at motherhood and its changing discourses vis-à-vis caregivers in the neo-liberal Indian economy. The socio-cultural understanding of motherhood has enormous difference when we look at India or other parts of the globe. In the Indian context, extended families and neighborhoods filled in for the day care centers for a long time. This, however, does not hold true today, in the global economy where women are constantly going out of their four walls to make a living. Here comes in the caregivers, who have become quintessential in the Indian working middle

class families. The concept of a caregiver is new in the Indian context as the neo-liberal economy in the Indian scenario started in the late 1990s. Now when mothers go out to work, there is another category of working women who come in to fill the absence of working mothers to care for their children. The relationship between the caregiver and the mother has always been delicate. Therefore, in this paper an attempt will be made to understand this relationship in terms of employer (mother) and employee (caregiver). Further, an attempt will be made to examine the complexities and the nature of relationship built between them as they create an environment of manufactured motherhood, owing to the requirement of the mothers to venture out of their house in order to resume their other jobs in the paid workforce.

Review of Literature

The concept of motherhood has been explored by many scholars over the years. While the concept itself has undergone shifts, it continues to be a matter of persistent investigation. Chodorow (1978), in her classical work *The Reproduction of Mothering*, refers to the coming of the neo-liberal economy and increased participation of women in the paid work force. The changes in the traditional image of the Victorian mother and the emergence of the moral mother as signs of the shifting political economy address the crisis of motherhood. The roles of the mothers changed as they started participating in the economic order. Mothers were missing from nursing their children, their nursing roles were taken up either by the caregiver or by the bottle. This marked the beginning of a new economic order. But the constant engagement of women in care giving role also indicated the social stereotypes of motherly chores. The popular American image of a housewife and mother was also broken by the works of Betty Friedan (1963), *Feminine Mystic*. She refers to the popular imagery of women with children and husband and how it has become repressive for the women in general; however, there has been a search for a new space and alternative by these women which is outside of this popular social imagery. Oakley (1974) in *The Sociology of Housework* focused on the binaries of women in terms of her participation in the work force and the obligations of being a mother. She argues that the pressure on every woman to become a mother, have a child and to look after her child is nothing but a myth of motherhood. Such orientations on motherhood leave no space for other caregivers in the journey of motherhood but the biological mother. But such preferences come contrary to the lived experience of women in the 21st century.

The journey stared with the early 19th century when men left home based economies to participate in the wage labour market. Almost after a century woman also left their homes to go and work in the paid labour forces. Earlier the fathers who went out of homes to participate in the labour market were replaced by the homemaking mothers. It was only when the home bound mothers went out to participate in the work force that the other caregivers came into the light. Hays (1956) referring to the concept of *intensive mothering* talks about the intensification of the problem of childcare with an increase in working mothers. Rather than helping the working mothers, society tries to intensify the binaries of motherhood and the complexities. This resulted in a model wherein the white American middle class women were considered the primary caregivers to the child till the age of three or four. The only silver lining in her journey of motherhood could come from the father who would participate in most of the odd jobs.

Tamara Hareven (1982) talks about the economic transitions in society and links it with the growing industrial economy that precedes in seizing time away from the family. Fixed working hours has led to the inflexible timings with family and subsequently making way for a *conflict of guilt* in the mother. In order to overcome the guilt in the working mother, the search for caregivers begin which is often been filled by another set of women. Horchschild (2000, 2003) draws on the penetration of capitalism and its impact on the care work. She refers to the categories of professional childcare workers and how they migrate across countries to provide care by leaving their children home. This creates a void of mother in the formative years of her child, but the caregiver in search of employment and better wages moves across boundaries. They care for the affluent family's children at the cost of their own children. Horchschild describes this as the First World robbing the Third World of love and affection. Colleen (2008) talks of the global restructuring of care and the coming up of nannies from the Third World. While at a broader level, women's participation in the formal economy has increased over the decades, her domestic duties too have increased in manifolds. Scholars suggest that public policies are also responsible for reproducing gender inequalities (Teo, 2016). The studies cited above indicate that the women from lesser developed countries have come and taken over the jobs of care giving in developed countries. Yet, the dependence on such care workers complicates the issues of social inequality as it brings in the intersectional inequality between ethno-nationality and class. With commercialisation of domestic work, there is an increase in the informal employment market (Teo,

2016). Zdravomyslova (2010) indicates that in the Russian society, the informal nature of the contract which revolves around the child leads to further social inequalities between people.

Studies also suggest that the hiring of help for domestic work also becomes counterproductive for women. Julian (2012) suggests that both men and women view domestic help differently. While men see it as a contractual service, women feel emotionally responsible for supervision and ensuring emotional needs and support to the helper. Horchschild (1983) uses the concept of *emotional labour* to explain the ways of selling one's emotion vis-à-vis capitalism. This contrasts with the arguments put forth by the supporters of the *Prisoners of Love* framework where Stone (2000) indicates how the caregivers get emotionally attached and engage in altruism while providing childcare. This eventually puts the care workers in a conceding position, as they get attached emotionally with the child or the patient and cannot demand more remuneration for the emotional labour that they provide.

In India, the context and the experiences are somewhat different. Childcare has never been institutionalised in the Indian context as in the West. The concepts of childcare homes and paid caregivers in India, however, have been a product of the 21st century and the neo-liberal economy. Women in India were unconditionally treated as agents of procreation. The use of the metaphors like *seed* and *earth* (Dube, 1988) brings up such binaries of entrenched gender inequalities in the Indian society where women were assumed as agents of procreation. Such structural differences of patriarchy get manifested in the families too as it gets intensified with stringent rules of endogamy and caste.

Referring to the essay on *Mask and Faces*, Veena Das (1976) talks about the rich cultural meanings associated with the purity of mother's milk and nursing the child. It is asserted that the process does not only help the children grow but also build the character of the child; and that the process of nursing and shaping the baby in the womb helps the child develop a bond with the mother which is permanent. While the neo-liberal economy called for women's participation in the work force, it created a void in the traditional familial roles especially in the case of caring for the children. Several studies from India point out the layers of challenges which confront domestic workers who, apart from doing other household chores, also look after the children of the employers. India's 2004-05 National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) highlights that there is an increase in the

paid domestic workers who are women and underscores that women account for 3.05 million of the 4.75 million of the employed workers in households (NSSO 2004-2005). It is also claimed that this data does not provide the actual data of domestic helpers which are far higher than the numbers reported (Neetha, 2009).

Chamraj K. (2007) who carried out a study of domestic workers in Karnataka shows that although they work for a fixed wage, they are made to do additional tasks and their salaries are cut if they ask for leave. It is also noted that women domestic help are prevented from touching vessels where the food of the employers are kept and are even prevented from entering the kitchens. There is an intersectionality of class, caste and gender which is evident in the profile of domestic workers who take care of children of employers as well. As domestic help became inevitable in the urban Indian scenario there is a vulnerability of class which permeated into the household spaces Dickey (2000). In India, Neetha (2010) notes that the majority of domestic workers, including those who take care of children of employers, are illiterate. Rao (2011) observes that they are also generally female and first-generation rural migrants. It is reported that such domestic service, conducted mostly by women, is an occupation to which stigma is attached and is viewed as a service carried out by low-caste and 'untouchable labour'. In India, Grover posits that paid domestic workers including '"ayah", "wet nurse", "maid", "cook" and "female sweeper" has long signified class and caste distinctions' (Grover, 2018, p. 3).

Rao (2011), in her research of domestic workers hired by households in Delhi, found that kindness and support by employers of hired helpers led to the better emotional state of the employee; but it was also found that kindness and support shown towards employees was leveraged by employers to extract unpaid labor from such workers. It has also been noted by Kundu (2008) that those domestic workers who lived with the employers developed social and emotional bonds with the employers. It has also been found by Gill (1994) that since the hired domestic helpers were often in the personal space of the employers and developed closeness to the personal activities of the employer, this, at times, led to frictions between the employer and the employee. These findings can be applied to those rendering childcare services in India as well as they also fall in the unorganised sector of domestic workers. Apart from these intersectionalities, Gurtoo (2015) stresses that women who work as domestic help are disadvantaged by inequalities caused by feminisation of such caregiving work which is considered as labor natural to women given their supposedly innate caring characteristics.

There is still no official recognition of paid domestic work in India. Agarwala (2015) notes that domestic workers in India are divided into two groups: those who are 'live-ins' and those who are 'live-outs'. Live-ins are often young, unmarried migrants from rural areas who live in the house of the employer or an attached house, and their food and housing is included in their salary. Live-outs are those who work for the employer but stay in their own homes and are often married and older women. Live-outs are either part-time or full-time depending on the hours of work they put in everyday. Part-timers can work for multiple employers for a few hours and full-timers work for one employer for a range of tasks and for longer hours. There is still a lack of comprehensive legislation to regulate the payment and working conditions of domestic workers including those who render childcare services in India. This makes their working conditions and lives extremely precarious.

Methodology

The focus of the paper is on two categories of women – one set are the mothers and the other are the caregivers they hire to take care of their children while they attend their professions outside their house. Therefore, personal experiences and everyday struggles of making each other's lives safer are considered as a vantage point of entry in this study. As the topic discussed addresses a range of issues, it requires an amount of flexibility in the methods used. Hence, along with the interviews, personal anecdotes and experiences have also been considered valuable responses for the study. The working women addressed in this paper includes the categories of a). the hired caregivers and b). the mothers who had to step out of their homes to pursue their professional lives and therefore required outside help to care for their children. A total of six caregivers and six employers are taken into consideration for this paper. Within the category of caregiver, three *kongs*[i] and three local caregivers and their journey into the world of care giving has been explored. The kongs were selected because of the label that they have earned over the years of being professional in the field of care work in the state of Assam.

A Brief Profile and Background of the Hired Caregivers

This section briefly describes the profile of the hired caregivers which were interviewed. This helps locate the hired caregivers in their socio-economic and educational backgrounds which provides a framework to understand their entry into these jobs and professionalisation of this line of work. The hired caregivers

interviewed showed a sense of being in these jobs as a way of escaping more troublesome lives in their own homes and they noted that life as a caregiver also had its own perks which made it worth their while to stick on.

Kongs

A kong narrates:

> *We were anyway having a lot of problems at home. My workplace has at least given me a space to stay away from my family. My family thinks I am a trouble for them, that is the reason why they got me married so early. But now that I am earning they want to stay connected to me and I like that. Moreover, I like this place where I work. I have my own room, TV, and space.*

Another kong rues:

> *At times when I get scolded for whatever reasons, I feel bad and wish to leave my work, but then when I think of home I feel I should not. This life has at least given me income and the baby helps me overcome the sorrows.*

Being abandoned by husbands and being uneducated on account of being poor was another reason for the entry of women into the jobs of hired caregivers. As one kong states that her journey as a hired caregiver began when she was 25 years old; today she is 39 and mother of a 20-year old. Like most, she got married early and didn't have any formal education. After her daughter was born, her husband abandoned them, so she was left with no financial support. Being in a matrilineal community, her close association with her mother and her natal family helped her gather the emotional support. She decided to work when her daughter was able to do a few things on her own. But without any formal education, the only option left for her was childcare. Another kong states that she entered the service of hired caregiver as she felt she was inclined by nature to get along well with children. She stated that she is unmarried and hence does not have much reservation in leaves and other such issues. The extended family which included her sister and her children were all that she had in the name of family. Though she never gave birth on her own, she has been very affectionate and engaged with kids. She often felt that maybe because she could not give birth on her own, God sent her into the profession of childcare. Most mothers preferred hired caregivers that fit her

profile – unmarried, without kids of their own, without much family and got along with children. The third kong respondent joined the services on a more professional footing as they were hired by people who began such businesses to cater to the needs of urban working homes which have become nuclear over the years.

Local hired caregivers

A hired caregiver who was interviewed was a married 27-year old Bengali Hindu woman who is also a mother of two boys aged 10 and 5. She herself is a single child and hence, after the death of her father she had to relocate from her husband's house to stay with her mother. The husband is cooperative and takes care of most of the household chores when she leaves home for work. He runs a small grocery store in the neighbourhood. Her mother too looks after her boys when she moves away from home for work. She works to supplement the family income.

Another hired caregiver who was interviewed was a 19-year old unmarried Bengali Muslim woman. She has had a troubled childhood with her father marrying two women and having many children. For her, it is her elder brother who acted as the father and helped all the siblings in every step of their lives. Now that her brother is married with his own children, she finds staying at home difficult. Hence, she decided to come out and earn an income. Such children coming from broken homes are commonly destitute and their entry into the line of hired caregivers is a way of escaping the penury in which they often find themselves.

Another hired caregiver interviewed was a 19-year old Bengali Muslim woman who was once married at the age of 14 to an old man who was three times her age. She had always been very against this marriage and hence, within a day of being married she left the husband and came back to her mother's house. Her mother is separated with four children and always had many difficulties managing the house. So, she wanted to get her daughters married early. The plight of her family did not end there with the marriage; the mother went through a cycle of debt. She had borrowed money from a *gut*[ii] in order to help one of her distant relative, who was supposed to return the money on time. But, as fate had it, the relative absconded with the money and the mother had to repay the gut at huge interest rate. This is when the journey of care giving started.

The Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood

Few questions often come to mind: *Who are the new age mothers? What dilemmas do they face? Can a working mother be equally committed to her work like her husband?* Or as Adelson and Fraiberg (1977) say that every child has the right to get mother's unconditional attention till 3 years (if so, who pays for her in case her maternity leaves have been exhausted). How about the recent changes in families (divorces, single mothers and the women who stay away from husband for work)? With all these complexities how does a mother work?

While women have worked before, such concerns were addressed by the support which came from the extended families that consisted of paternal grandmother, extended network of siblings and a host of kin members. In the neo-liberal economy, women no longer consider giving birth to a child as an end to her professional life. But at the same time, it is becoming a hard reality of our times when not only the family, but the spouses also do not stay together. Thus, begins the anxiety of a mother! What am I doing? Am I making the right kind of 'choice'? Often this leads to a conflict within the mother as the working mother and the mother as an employer. The emotional connect between the caregiver and the child also becomes a point of anxiety among the working mothers.

While women undergo so much anxiety, what happens to the men? Do fathers also go through the guilt of not giving enough time to the child? Perhaps they do! But the whole social construction of motherhood is such that it puts so much restrains on the whole experience of motherhood that it becomes a point of *guilt*, a *sad emotion* for women who must leave their babies behind and go out for work. When women started going out of their homes for their work, the need for the caregivers became essential and inevitable.

Construction of Boundaries between the Mother and the Hired Caregiver

At a certain point, the relationship between the mother and the caregiver is based on interpretative rules which are established in order to maintain a manufactured motherhood (MacDonald, 1998). There is a division of work between the mother and the caregiver which is established through a set of rules which are being interpreted in different ways by the mothers and the caregivers. A mother who was interviewed narrates that the caregiver is very protective of her child. At times, the mother feels insecure by her presence and has to make sure that the caregiver leaves as soon as the mother is back from work. A kong who was

interviewed responded that the family she worked with was very good but whenever the madam gets back from work she behaves differently. The kong feels unwanted for a while when the mother returns from work. While there are no confrontations, yet there is a subtle silence between the two categories of women which is based on interpretation and mutual understanding.

In the process of creating the essence of motherhood, the working mothers in their absence from home try to create a space bereft of their physical presence. In this process, the caregivers become the quintessential part of their everyday lives. The questions addressed to the mothers in this regard revolved around the process of making the boundary and marking the space and everyday negotiations. The mothers interviewed ensured that most of the chores (feeding, bathing, playing) are completed by the mothers themselves when they are around.

The struggle begins when the mothers have to leave the child with the caregiver and at the same time ensure that when they are away the caregivers perform all the tasks at par with the mother. This is where the struggle or negotiation begins. There is a class angle to this way of understanding the care work. The mothers in their absence try to create a *manufactured motherhood*, a space which is strictly in accordance with the ways of nursing and raising their child in their own terms. One of the respondents laments her fear from the caregivers who may influence her child towards their beliefs and practices. One respondent calls in for *mindful parenting*, in which there is an intervention from the parents, mostly the mother, time and again. The fathers on the contrary were found silent on such issues; besides in a few instances where they negotiated salaries, the men were silent.

In order to maintain the boundary, the mothers often lay down a set of rules. The respondents (mothers) narrate that when the caregivers were professional, meaning kongs, there wasn't much trouble in making them understand their work. They took over the work as soon as they joined the job. But the mothers felt this was missing when it came to the caregivers from the nearby areas. There are also moments when the mothers get anxious of the caregiver's relationship with the child. A mother recounts:

> *I did not have any such clear cut boundary. I helped my caretaker in every possible way, so that she can take care of my child properly. I remember that in the evening, both of them watched TV together. I brought many nursery rhymes videos and ABCD*

learning videos, and both of them watched together on TV. My child gradually started to learn all these quite easily, and the caretaker was with her, while doing all these. Before going to teach her how to write letters, I allowed her to listen and observe how to write letters through these videos. Initially I was more concerned with the activities of the caretaker. But, as my child grew older, I have started to trust my caretaker fully. She stayed with me for a long period of 7 years.

Most mothers who were interviewed had specific work which was to be covered by the hired caregiver. They ensured that the caregivers they hired did not overstep the limits of the work which they had directed them to follow with regard to caring for their children. This is established through a set of rules which are being interpreted in different ways by the mothers and the caregivers. Even within care work there is a clear division between the works to be done strictly by the mother and the ones to be done by the caregiver.

One of the respondents (mother) says:

I used to go out before 8 a.m., when I had a morning class. Except on Sunday, I woke up before 7 a.m. Most of the time, my daughter also woke up with me. I mostly prepared the morning breakfast, rest of the things like take her to bath, preparing lunch, playing with her, everything was done by the caretaker until my arrival. I sent her to play school at the age of 2 years 8 months.

Another mother says:

I would prefer to do everything myself since my baby is my baby and I would want to do everything for her. However, since I try to balance taking care of her along with managing work, I do not really have the luxury of time to do everything. However, reading to her, playing, taking her out for walks/exercise is something I look forward to everyday and manage it somehow even with the worst form of time crunch.

Overstepping of the work limits by the hired caregivers was a cause of irritation for some of the mothers interviewed. A mother narrates:

I feel hired caregivers in general try to push boundaries and overstep. With nannies this is harder because of the children involved. When they use an attachment to the child as a way to overstep, they need to be told firmly but kindly, when they are out of line. There are some activities I like to do with the children. The children sleep with parents not nannies. The children also observe everyone working at their jobs/ tasks, etc. so they tend to be aware of the different roles people have in their lives.

Some of the mothers elaborated on the strict boundaries and limits which they have instructed to their hired caregivers with regard to their duties towards their children. These strict boundaries were on account of the fears and anxieties they held regarding possible bad influences on their children, ranging from sexual harassment to impaired development. Mothers in the process of setting the best environment for their children, especially in their absence, undergo a lot fears when it comes to leaving their children with the hired caregivers. They suggested that leaving their children with hired caregivers could have lead to the hampered development of their children. A mother narrates:

Religion, language and physical space are three important areas where I wish to draw the boundary. I intend to bring up my daughter as a non-believer – the way I was brought up. Therefore, imposition of religious/superstitious beliefs is not acceptable. Communication in any language except English/Hindi/Assamese/Bengali is not acceptable since our baby will speak to us only in these four languages. Other languages are of no use to her or us. The nanny is not supposed to kiss the baby, purely because of the fear of infection and sending wrong signals to the baby that it is okay for others to kiss her without her consent. Also, I fear sexual harassment, which is why maintenance of physical boundaries is important.

Anxieties and Fears: Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood

The mothers interviewed were mostly anxious of the neglect that the caregiver may possibly commit while the mothers are away. One of the biggest fears of the mothers revolved around the caregiver's fixation with the television and mobile phones. This may lead to lesser interaction between the child and the caregiver

which may lead to delay in speech, picking up words and formulation of sentences. Some mothers also fear that the caregivers may hit the child, also be abusive to the child. In order to address these two issues, the mothers who were interviewed have installed CCTVs in their houses. This may not be a hundred percent relief but it is an assurance to the mothers who are time and again anxious of their work and child. Thus, trust becomes a sensitive topic of confrontation between the two sets of working women. A mother narrates:

> *The shortcoming that I found with my local help was that most of the time she engaged my child before the TV. I asked all the time to play with her or talk with her, but it was reported to me by my landlords that she kept my child busy before the TV set. May be this is one of the reason that my child learnt to speak at almost 1 year and 5-6 months of age. Now I feel that as she was not surrounded by many people who can talk with her, even I also talk less, she spoke less at that time. I received this complaint from her schools also up to the age 6-7 years that she does not interact much with students and speaks less. Only recently her class teacher told me that she is becoming a little bit open now.*

The everyday negotiations of the mothers and the caregivers are interesting. For a lot of us they may seem inconsequential and trivial but in the everyday life of a mother such issues are of enormous importance. The mothers lament that food becomes an area of conflict between the two categories of women. What food will and should be given to the child is an area of dispute in the kitchen. Many a times, even after being told, the caregivers slip and give junk food to the child. This concern is also accompanied by the ways in which the child is fed. A respondent has also spoken on the hygiene issues which are over and again missed by the caregiver, which then irks the mothers. For instance, one of the respondents narrates that the caregiver often misses out on washing the hand before feeding the child. The mother understands that this is not done on purpose but when such acts are often repeated it becomes difficult.

The level of anxiety among the mothers was so high that it also gradually started to affect their performance level. A mother narrates:

> *Initially I felt a little bit disturbed, and most of the time while at work I was thinking whether she maintained proper hygiene or not,*

whether she washed her hands or not and many more. But gradually I found that all these have created a kind of anxiety and tension in my life that affected my professional life too. I could not concentrate on my studies, class or anywhere. I used to call her on phone after every half or one hour or requested my landlords to go and have a look at what she is doing. All this disturbed me a lot. But gradually I realised that I need to keep a balance between my professional and personal life, and there is no other option left at my hand other than trusting her. My colleagues, especially who have children of my daughter's age, helped me a lot to overcome those anxieties and fears. Two of my colleagues also had children of my daughter's age, and they also relied on caretakers and husbands were not with them; we decided to make a friendship among them, which also gave me some kind of relief that each of them started to visit to each other's place during day time also when we were not present.

The emotional connect with the child also acts as a space of anxiety for the mothers availing hired caregivers for their children. A mother recounts:

The previous nannies did not know boundaries and have tried to form bonds with the child – which of course did not happen since my baby loves me the most. The relationship between my daughter and her current nanny is based on love, and the love is definitely genuine. There have been instances when the nanny has worked beyond her work hours when she has heard the baby crying inconsolably. It is the love for children in general that motivates the current nanny. She is definitely performing her duties for monetary compensation, yet at the same time it is evident that she actually loves the child.

A mother who was interviewed said she was concerned about her first child being over-attached to the nanny when she was expecting her second child. During this period, her first child began to sleep with the nanny in her bed in the nanny's room. This became a habit; after the second child was born, it was difficult for the mother to make her first child sleep with her as the child continued to prefer sleeping with the nanny. The mother became concerned that the continuation of the child sleeping with the nanny was leading to the child imitating the

behavioural antics and manner of language of the nanny. The mother was also worried as the child would seem to become lost in an imaginary world due to the stories which the nanny would tell her at night. The mother had to brainwash her child to make her sleep with her and not the nanny. Even when the child began to sleep with the mother, the nanny would drag her mattress to their room and insist on sleeping in their room. This degree of attachment of the first child with the nanny and vice-versa was a cause of great concern for this mother.

Many of the mothers interviewed raised the point of possible over attachment of their children with the hired caregivers which they lamented, especially when these helpers would leave for short durations or forever which would then lead their children to be inconsolable. This remains a worry for those mothers whose children are already extremely attached to their hired caregivers. At times, their child throws tantrums and cries uncontrollably if the hired caregiver is removed from the child's line of sight. Such obsessive attachment is a cause of great concern for these mothers. A mother narrates:

> *The Kong, I was fortunate to have for roughly two and a half months (with one month gap in between), she was a willing and trustworthy worker. I was comfortable leaving my children with her. She was an all-rounder and helped with the children, did their laundry, baths, etc. and when the children were at daycare or school, she would clean the house. She left saying someone in her family was ill and that she would give us news in two to three days (or be back in two to three days). This did not happen; I did not know she wanted to leave. This left us in a fix as my child got attached to her. It was very difficult for us to manage our child initially.*

This indicates that mothers are unsure and not at ease to leave every child related chore to the caregiver. Mothers who were interviewed narrated that it is their husbands who are more trusting and always push them to trust the caregiver in their absence. The caregivers also do not appreciate too much of interference. They find it offensive and demeaning when it comes to questioning their working style. All the kongs who were interviewed narrated, '*dada bur bhalei baidew olop khong kore*' (the man in the house is good but madam gets angry). This indicates the anxieties of the mother and the ways in which she looks at the whole journey of motherhood.

At another level few mothers go through another anxiety of being judged by others for hiring caregivers for their children. A mother describes her experiences:

> *I was less appreciated and more judged for having a nanny for the job which otherwise I was supposed to perform. People around me specially my relatives, not judged actually; they put remarks such as 'How would you be so tension free for the whole day by keeping your child with a nanny?' 'You are really a carefree woman…If I would be in your place I would never leave my child alone at home'. 'Why don't you just take leaves, your child is more important than your work?' 'Give more time to your child, forget about Ph.D.' …these kind of comments I heard mostly.*

Another instance she shares:

> *In 2012, I went for my orientation course in Gauhati University; my child was 2 years 1 month old at that time, my husband assured me that he and the care taker would take the responsibility of the child, so no need to take her with me to Guwahati. I agreed, as we are living in a joint family in Dibrugarh, and I left the child with her father. After reaching Guwahati, I went to one of my relative's home, the first thing that I heard from them was that 'What kind of mother you are, leaving two year old child alone?' 'Is this orientation too necessary for you right now?' I cried for the whole one day and requested my husband to take her to Guwahati….first he refused…but I insisted…then he managed to take her to Guwahati with the care taker also…..and my caretaker, me and my child three of us completed the orientation course…you can imagine how I managed everything to complete the course.*

Concerns of the Caregivers: Where Emotion meets Profession

Throughout the interviews, there was a difference in the ways the employers assessed the kongs versus the local hired caregivers. The professional caregivers knew what they wanted and what it is that they were expected to perform. They did not perform anything extra nor did they work extra besides the child related chores. On the other hand, the local helps were more affectionate and were engaged in a lot of other domestic chores in the household beyond childcare.

The kongs interviewed were very vocal about their rights and the working hours, while the local caregivers were flexible with the timings and were very satisfied with the work. There is a network in which the kongs work; it is based on village contacts and getting in touch with the local leader who helps them find a job. This lady is referred to as kongmaam; she gets a commission for every new appointee. It was also learnt that the kongs do not prefer to work with toddlers as there is a lot of running around; they prefer an infant as it involves less physical activity. They usually follow a cycle. The usual time to find a kong is in December and January; they demand paid leave for Christmas during this time and visit home for 15-20 days. They meet their respective kongmaams and negotiate their work. This is the time when they leave most of their previous employers if they wish to discontinue and search for new work place. This is very different for the local caregivers who get easily attached to the employer and the child.

There are also instances when the kongs used the child as bait. A mother rues, that in spite of giving the best to the caregiver, she used the child as a pretext to increase the salary. It was also noted during the field work that kongs were not only professional but are also a product of what Horchschild calls the *emotional labour* in which the emotions are sold for money. Thus, the affection and emotion towards the child are considered as a product of the market and economy. On the other hand, the care and emotion of the local caregiver is more altruistic. The respondent (mothers) were very satisfied with the level of their (local caregivers) emotional connect with the child. The local caregivers never used the child as bait and were always satisfied with the salary, and never demanded a hike, unlike the kongs who were always thinking on the lines of economic benefits.

There were also certain challenges which were predominantly echoed by the hired caregivers interviewed when asked about their work. For instance, a respondent (hired helper) noted that often times her employer used harsh statements like '*nijor matha nologabi*' (do not use your brains) or '*nijor jegah janibi*' (know your place); at the same time she felt that her work was appreciated by the mother who gifted her new and expensive clothes every once in a while. This duality was a constant refrain in the interviews of all six hired helpers. While they felt that they contributed immensely to the care provided to the children, yet they felt that their contribution could have been appreciated in greater ways by their employers, not just in terms of money but in terms of general overall approval and trust. This sense of undervalued has been elaborated by Stone (2000) who indicates how caregivers get emotionally attached and engage in altruism while providing

childcare. This eventually puts the care workers in a conceding position, as they get attached emotionally with the child or the patient and cannot demand more remuneration for the emotional labour that they provide.

Like the mothers, the caregivers also undergo a dilemma. For instance, one caregiver lamented that while she was working as a *come-in caregiver* (she would come in the morning and go in the evening) in Guwahati, she felt awkward and felt that *baidew* (the madam who was otherwise very nice to her) didn't wish her to stay a minute longer once she was home from work. The caregiver felt that there was unease between the two of them which was unspoken but carried a lot of meaning. She felt she was invisible in the whole journey of mothering other's children.

Another important aspect brought to light while speaking with the hired women helpers is that they need to go and work in more affluent women's house due to financial needs; this also means that they have to abandon their own children in doing so. A kong and a local help who were interviewed shared that because they do not want a similar future as theirs for their children, they had to come out and take care of others' children. Horchschild (2000, 2003) draws on the penetration of capitalism and its impact on the care work. Horchschild (2000) describes this as the first world robbing the third world of love and affection. The need for care workers has multiplied as the transition from agrarian to industrial economies grew. This has been borne out by this study as well as most of the mothers interviewed are first generation 'career' women.

Findings and Conclusions

The two categories of women studied share a story of mutual dependence. When one category of women (caregiver) takes care of the children for a payment; the other (employer) can move out of their homes to pursue their professional lives which results in their financial independence. Leaving the children in the hands of a hired caregiver gives rise to a host of challenges for both parties. From the interviews and small scare interactions conducted with both parties, the contrast in their approach towards caregiving become apparent. While, the mothers have their own rules when it comes to the child, the caregivers also seem to understand the enormity of the situation. There are often clashes, which occur on the ways in which the two parties wish to extend care to the child. While sometimes both, achieve an understanding at times; a resolution remains out of reach leading to

friction between them. The employers (mothers) whose responses have been used have a relatable account. They represent similar socio-economic status and life choices. They consider it important to have a professional life for which they are left with no choice but to hand over their children to hired helpers. In the absence of the extended network of family members the caregivers came to salvage their families. The caregivers also acted as a buffer, gave enough confidence to the working mothers so that they could venture out of their homes.

Despite the shortcomings which were pointed out by the mothers, the hired helpers have also been vastly been appreciated by the mothers for the extensive work carried out by them. They have mostly agreed that without the hired helpers they would be severely handicapped in pursuing their careers. They also did not bother much about the religious affiliations of the caregivers and had no reservations on the salaries to be paid. The range of salary, however, varied from five thousand rupees to twenty thousand rupees a month. This again is an indication of the similar socio-economic life choices of the women under study. It also reflects the class of the women who can hire help for their children and also indicates the business of providing such hired help which has mushroomed owing to the rising phenomenon of a class of career working women such as a the mothers who were interviewed. Tamara Hareven (1982) talks the fixed timings in the industrial economy and its impact on the quality family time which was earlier flexible has now become rigid. She argues that it is this feeling which eventually gave birth to the *conflict* of *guilt* in the mother.

The mothers in their absence from home try to recreate an environment of intensive mothering with the help of a set of dos' and don'ts which is to be followed by the caregivers all the time in their absence. While the whole concept of hiring a *caregiver* suggests that the mothers sought the best in the profession for their children and therefore, settled for the caregivers who would only engage in care work and not on any other domestic chores. But the rules and boundaries again at another level question whether non maternal childcare is possible and is it flexible? The mothers often feel that the mother work is never shared and cannot be recreated by an outsider. While the caregivers often felt neglected and unappreciated for the care they provided towards the child. As they believe that they did not receive the desired respect for the work done. There is always a class angle to the whole idea of socialization and childcare which also gets reflected in the process of childcare.

Thus, the dilemma of motherhood and childcare continues even after either having the best in the profession or training the caregiver in the best possible way. This, however, is a class-based idea. This gets highlighted when we look at the reactions of the mother towards both the categories of the caregivers. While, the mothers felt more comfortable with the kongs then with the local helps when it came to the childcare alone. While both the categories of women try to create and recreate intensive motherhood, the binary of employer and employee continues to overshadow the processes. To a certain extent the kongs work has been appreciated by the mothers yet there was a line which made them rethink the boundaries of employer and employee. There are various points in which they negotiate at an emotional level. The mothers often bereft of a choice accept the caregiver while, on part of the caregiver they negotiate for money and the emotional connect with the child. It is, however, subjected to interpretation whether we see them in terms of class (employer and employee) or the mother taking out her catharsis on the caregiver.

Notes:

[i] The Khasi women who have attained puberty are given the salutation of kong. In case of this paper the category is used to refer to the women who came as caregivers.

[ii] Usually a women's group which is formed as a self-help group, here women contribute money every month and develop a corpus. When in need the women from the same group can borrow money from it either by not paying interest or by giving minimum interests.

REFERENCES:

Agarwala, R. (2015). Re-defining exploitation: Self-employed workers' movements in India. *International Labour and Working Class History*, *89*, 107-130.

Adelson, E., & Fraiberg, S. (1977). An abandoned mother, an abandoned baby. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, *41*(2), 162-180.

Chamraj, K. (2007). The domestic workers of silicon city. *Info Change Agenda*, *9*, 20-21.

Chodorow, N. (1978). *Reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. California: University of California Press.

Colleen, M.C. (2008). The global restructuring of care: The third world nanny phenomenon. *Journal of Association of Research on Mothering*, *10*(1), 107-118.

Das, V. (1976). Masks and faces: As essay on Punjabi kinship. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, *10*(1), 1-30.

Dickey, S. (2000). Permeable homes: Domestic service, household space, and the vulnerability of class boundaries in urban India. *American Ethnologist*, *27*(2), 462-489.

Dube, L. (1988). On the construction of gender: Hindu girls in patrilineal India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *23*(18), WS11-WS19.

Friedan, B. (1963). *Feminine mystique.* W.W. Norton and Company.

Gill, L. (1994). *Precarious dependencies: Gender, class and domestic service in Bolivia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Grover, S. (2018). English-speaking and educated female domestic workers in contemporary India: New managerial roles, social mobility and persistent inequality. *Journal of South Asian Development*, *13*(2), 1-24.

Gurtoo, A. (2015). Workplace conditions and employer relationships as predictors of economic well-being: Female domestic workers in India. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, *10*(1), 61-75.

Hareven, T. (1982). *Family time and industrial time*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.

Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hochschild, A. (2000). Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In T. Giddens & W. Hutton (Eds), *On the edge: Globalization and the new millennium* (pp. 130-146). London: Sage Publishers.

Hochschild, A. (2000). The nanny chain. *The American Prospect*, *11*(4), 32-36.

Julian, M. Groves, & Lake, L. (2012). The 'gift' of help: Domestic helpers and the maintenance of hierarchy in the household division of labour. *Sociology*, *46*(1), 57-73.

Kundu, A. (2008). Conditions of work and rights of the female domestic workers of Kolkata. *MPRA Paper No. 7636*. Munich: Personal RePEc Archive.

Macdonald, C.L. (1998). Manufacturing motherhood: The shadow work of nannies and au pairs. *Qualitative Sociology*, *21*(1), 25-53.

Neetha, N. (2009). Contours of domestic service: Characteristics, work relations and regulation. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, *52*(3), 489-506.

Neetha, N. (2010). Self employment of women: Preference or compulsion? *Social Change*, *40*(2), 139-156.

Oakley, A. (1974). *The sociology of housework*. Pantheon Books.

Rao, N. (2011). Respect, status and domestic work: Female migrants at home and work. *The European Journal of Development Research*, *23*(5), 758-773.

Teo, Y. (2016). Not everyone has 'maids': Class diferentials in the elusive quest for work-life balance. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *23*(8), 1164-1178.

Zdravomyslova, E. (2010). Working mothers and nannies: Commercialization of childcare and modifications in the gender contract. *Russia Anthropology of East Europe Review*, *28*(2), 200-225.

Sarmistha Das *is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Assam.*
Email id: sharmishtha.k@gmail.com
Obja Borah Hazarika *is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Dibrugarh University, Assam.*
Email id: obja11@gmail.com

Article: Exploring Participation of Women in Self-Help Groups: A Study of Two Blocks in Darjeeling District

Author(s): Pema Lama

Exploring Participation of Women in Self-Help Groups: A Study of Two Blocks in Darjeeling District

--- Pema Lama

Abstract

Self-Help Groups, with its roots in rural India, caters to the socio-economic development of women. The objective is not only to implement programmes designed for the rural people but also to boost their participation to achieve a more sustainable community development. This paper, based on select rural segments of Darjeeling Hills of the state of West Bengal, examines the participation of women in Self-Help Groups. The purpose is to explore the space and scope for people-centric development with the specific methodological vantage point being participatory development. It seeks to reveal that despite Darjeeling's political instability and slow progress in rural development, there is considerable scope for the effectiveness and efficiency of participation in Self-Help Groups in improving women's life.

Key words: Darjeeling hills, Participation, Rural development, Self-Help Groups

Introduction

Development has many approaches and forms, but in the sense of transformation for the better, it bears little meaning unless appropriate approaches are adopted to mobilise the local people. However, such programmes and projects cannot be successfully achieved without the co-operation and partnership of the people for whom the programme is intended. 'It is a process initiated through the people for the people. Communities are seen as stakeholders rather than beneficiaries' (Meribe, 2013, p. 51). Thus to equip the poor, downtrodden and the marginalised to profoundly participate in the programmes meant for their upliftment recognises their importance in the overall development and welfare of the community as a whole. The focus of attention in development, in a more categorical structure, would therefore be directed towards alleviation of poverty, providing primary health care, education amongst others. Above all it also means widening the arena for people's participation in their socio-economic upliftment.

The very essence of participation lies in the involvement of the people in the various processes of identification, formulation and implementation of development policies and programmes. It needs to be underlined that the major intention of developmental activities is to look at people as *active participants* for sustainable progress and welfare. At the same time, we cannot ignore situations where people are not comfortable with the methodology adopted by the concerned authorities which as White rightly observes, 'It is not at all, unusual for authorities to try to dictate what should happen throughout a project and let the participatory process fall by the wayside' (White, 1999, p. 339). Therefore, 'It is now accepted that rural people have the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. They need to be empowered – as the stock phrase – to realise their self-worth, and to have their opinions heard and factored into the development dialogue' (Quebral, 2006, p. 36).

In this scenario, the concept of women development has also undergone a drastic change due to the introduction of new policies, programmes and even projects by the government. The Government of India, therefore, has introduced several schemes, one of them being Self-Help Groups (SHGs). It has been identified as one of the flagship programme for poverty alleviation of the Government of India. Since April 1999, the SHGs scheme under the then Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) was restructured as National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)[i] – Aajeevika initiated by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India was again renamed as Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana (DAY) in 2016 and since then known as DAY-NRLM. The core belief of DAY-NRLM as reflected in its mission – 'To reduce poverty by enabling the poor households to access gainful self-employment and skilled wage employment opportunities resulting in appreciable improvement in their livelihoods on a sustainable basis, through building strong and sustainable grassroots institutions of the poor' (DAY-NRLM, 2016, p. 3). The government therefore recognises the importance of linking livelihood actions to the lives of the downtrodden and the marginalised, particularly the women and help them to rise above the poverty line.

Women's participation in SHGs may lead to their empowerment because of improved income, gradual savings that can be utilised for several of their household expenses besides others. They also get equipped with various forms of skills for economic activities. Empowerment would also mean exposure to group support, exposure to various forms of trainings and social responsibilities. A study on empowering SHG members through apple cultivation in highland Ethiopia

concluded that 'Participation increased the mobility of the women and their ability to make purchases and major household decisions, their political and legal awareness and ownership of productive assets' (Alemu, Kempen & Ruben, 2018, p. 313). This process enables women to transform their choices into desired actions, changing patterns of spending and saving that results not only in the socio-economic but also psychological empowerment. The emphasis has been laid on *group approach* with the belief that through appropriate support and organisation, the group members can become self-reliant and eventually empowered. 'The program's improvement to the poor's savings behaviour and association through SHGs are important achievements in themselves' (Ban, Gilligan & Rieger, 2017, p. 28).

Why Darjeeling Hills

It is against this backdrop that a study was undertaken to explore the extent of women participation through SHGs for their socio-economic development. Before we further explore the study undertaken, there is a need to understand the political background of rural Darjeeling. The political instability, as a result of the demand to split from West Bengal for creation of a separate state, has put the hill region and particularly the local rural people at the receiving end. Over the years, political development in Darjeeling hills has taken various twists and turns which also engulfed the Gram Panchayat (GP) in 2005.

Elections to the GP were supposed to be held in 2005, however, the unfolding of political events which looked 'unconstitutional' and 'undemocratic' culminated in the withholding of elections. Thus, the GP body stands dissolved with no sign of elections over the horizon – purely a political crisis that has gravely impacted the socio-economic development of the rural people. Keeping this situation in mind, the most important issue that constituted the research problem is whether the rural poor, particularly the women and their participation in SHGs were efficient and effective.

The significance of the study, being intensely of local character, provided vital clues from the field itself to identify the take-off stage of popular empowerment in an underdeveloped area. It would also seek to reveal the significance of participatory development interface based on a specific locale with focus on participation of women in SHGs, which has not received adequate attention of researchers in the study area.

Objectives of the Study

i. To what extent participation of women in SHGs in the rural areas of Darjeeling hills provides for socio-economic development,
ii. To explore the changing role of women as participants in SHGs,
iii. To examine the challenges and constraints that impedes participation in SHGs.

Methodology

The study focused on eight GPs: Chongtong, Nayanore, Jhepi, Relling are the GPs from Darjeeling Pulbazar (DP) Block and Samtar, Upper Ecchey, Seokbir and Lower Ecchey from Kalimpong I Block[ii]. The theme and spirit of the study mostly relied much on the local field data that constitutes its primary source. The data (a select number of both qualitative and quantitative methods) collected from the field were applied to gain an understanding of perspectives. Both semi-structured (with the aim to determine the demographic situation) and open-ended interviews have been undertaken. The questionnaires were preliminary tested to detect possible oversight and lapses.

Eight per cent of participants with different age, sex, economic and occupational profile, caste were purposely selected to represent diversity of voices and experiences within the boundaries of a defined population based on Purposive Sampling. In-depth interviews, as an essential qualitative tool, became instrumental for data collection. It helped to delve into their sentiments, perceptions, mind-set, and speculations of the poorest of the rural poor about various issues or matters. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also used that allowed study of the target group in their 'natural' surrounding. The interview list also includes visits and interviews with officials and staff of GP and block office.

Regarding the relevant literature, notwithstanding the difficulty in obtaining them, such secondary source were relevant official records and documents such as handbooks, governmental orders, government reports, articles, websites, notifications, and gazettes.

Self-Help Groups: The Strategy

Before we begin to analyse the findings of the study, it becomes pertinent to understand some of its features. The plan of action of SHGs differs from the

conventional modes. It is unique because it is formed with thrift and credit that gives the poor the platform to enhance and improve their income level. 'There are reasons to believe that given the necessary financial support and guidance, the Self Help Groups can succeed in facilitating microenterprise development and thereby influence the employment environment and socio-economic status of their members' (Suprabha, 2014, p. 420). The SHGs generally pass through three levels in the development process:

i. Formation of the group which includes establishment of the group, growth and strengthening them to become independent systems at the grassroots level.
ii. Capital formation through revolving fund and skill development.
iii. Undertaking economic activities for income generation.

DAY-NRLM states that at least one member from each identified rural poor household, preferably a woman, is brought under a SHG with the ultimate target of 100 per cent coverage of Below Poverty Level (BPL) families. A few members (suitably thirty percent) who are apparently poor but not in the BPL list are also allowed to join the groups. The groups usually comprise of 10 to 20 members. A code of conduct has to be formulated by the members in the pattern of regular meetings (usually four meetings in a month) operating in a democratic mode that will allow participation of the members in the decision-making process as well as exchange of opinions.

Another very important aspect is regular collection of savings from amongst the members. This savings shall remain the principal fund of the group, the fixed amount of which shall be decided by the members. Participation of members in the decision-making process, with regard to all loaning operation and maintenance of the group account with the concerned bank, also forms an important exercise of this programme. We can well see from its operation that SHGs are 'village-based organisations that focus on building the savings and credit as well as social empowerment of their (mostly female) members' (Desai & Joshi, 2013, p. 493).

Provision for Training

The SGSY project recognised that for 'success of self-employment endeavours and also for their sustainability, the required skill to successfully run the enterprise is a pre-requisite' (Ministry of Rural Development, 2005, p. 37). This

has been undertaken with the objective of elevating the capacity of the individual members in the group activities. Therefore, 'training is concerned with developing a particular skill among members of self-help groups to a desired standard by instruction and practice' (Kaur, Sachan & Sulibhavimath, 2017, p. 342).

In this context, two types of training have been recognised for their development. Extensive information on the working of a SHG and their duties towards its functioning are provided through Basic Orientation Programme (BOP). Skill development training is also rendered to arm them with new skills needed to enhance their economic activities. Generally such trainings are imparted by government institutions or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Training on piggery, goatery, bee-keeping, dairy, catering, pickle, jam, bakery, soft toy making, to name a few, are imparted to the SHG members. Thus, training has been a whole new experience for the SHG members and has been discussed in the latter half of the paper.

Who make up the SHGs

It is imperative to understand the background of the SHG members of the study areas. Interaction with the staff of the selected GPs and according to the data they provided, around ninety two per cent of the members of the SHGs belong to the BPL category, and the rest eight percent comprise of members who are either wives of primary teachers, retired army personnel and rich farmers amongst others. As observed, the eight percent do not comprise of any exclusive groups but are members of other several groups of their village.

As expressed during interviews with the SHG members, their aspirations at times are cut short by the inconsiderate behaviour of their husbands. The situation seems worse with alcoholic husbands. They hinder their wives from routinely going for the meetings or sometimes even for the trainings, but will not hesitate to demand money to spend unnecessarily. Sometimes the cooperation from the family is so negligible that the mothers have to bring their children to the meetings.

There are also situations where the poor, for whom this programme is particularly targeted, cannot participate. A sad scenario for which they have an honest explanation, 'We work as *khetala* (agricultural labour). We don't get the time to attend the meetings'. This was revealed during FGD at Upper Sumbuck, Jhepi GP

(February 10, 2018) with people in the study areas who are non-members. Illiteracy and poverty provide ground for such a situation, as they prefer to work to earn that extra income to sustain rather than attend meetings. Some also divulge that they are already poor and loans can be burdensome, if for some unknown reason they are unable to repay, so they prefer not to join. They also feel that that the educated ones tend to dominate the groups.

Another important aspect is the presence of male members in the groups. The total number may not be much but we cannot disregard their presence. The state government too encourages men to be a part of SHGs, though fifty percent of the groups formed in each Block should be solely for the women. The women in the study areas do not show any kind of resistance to induct male members. Given the present situation where political turmoil never seems to leave the hills, the women felt that all rural people should get an opportunity to rise above poverty. The role of male members in the groups is diverse. A few characteristic responses as observed during survey are placed below:

> *It is either the case that the male member is the most educated among them or is 'cleverer' and tends to underestimate the abilities of others.*
> (Women member of Surya Jyoti SHG of Mandal Goan, Lower Ecchey GP, Interview, March 02, 2018)

> *We work together and every member of our group, whether male or female, is given a responsibility. For instance, bank work is done in rotation.*
> (Women member of Amar SHG, Allay Dara, Relling GP, Interview, April 07, 2018)

> *Though we have three male members in our group, we prefer to manage the important affairs of the group ourselves.*
> (Women member of Salong SHG Chuikhim, Seokbir GP, Interview, March 03, 2018)

The study seeks to understand the variation in the age group and their participation in SHGs. The women members in the age group of 28-38 years of age, as mentioned in Table 1 and 2 below, are in majority. Generally they are

married, have children and face financial constraints. They have a common explanation for being part of the SHGs:

> *We have been able to save, meet children's expenses and fulfil the other unforeseen expenditure in the house.*
> (FGD, Upper Dong, Samtar GP, May 13, 2018)

Most of the women interviewed have developed the urge to be financially independent.

Referring to Table 1 and 2 again, members in the age group of 39-49 years have also show the enthusiasm to work. The percentage is less because most of them have little or no education. At the same time, we cannot overlook the percentage of the members who are above 50 years (Table 1 and 2). They are eager to join and earn money. Referring to Table 1 and 2 again, young members in the age group of 18-27 years display less enthusiasm simply because they are either studying, or their mother or elder sister or the sister-in-law is already a member of the SHGs. Many young women get married and move to another place.

Table 1

Age-wise segregation of female SHG members in the four GPs – DP Block

Name of Gram Panchayat	18-27 years	28-38 years	39-49 years	50 years and above
Jhepi	30	59.02	28.20	8
Relling	27.02	52.05	20	2
Nayanore	18.08	32.22	12.20	None
Chongtong	21.22	46.42	23.09	3

Note: Data has been collected jointly from the resource persons and the GP staff of the four selected GPs.

Table 2

Age-wise segregation of female SHG members in the four GPs – Kalimpong I Block

Name of Gram Panchayat	18-27 years	28-38 years	39-49 years	50 years and above
Samtar	32.33	61.32	30.26	7.40
Seokbir	28.29	42.32	20.30	3
Upper Ecchey	26	58.23	10.11	7
Lower Ecchey	30	59.05	30.04	5

Note: Data has been collected jointly from the resource persons and the GP staff of the four selected GPs.

The study also dwells on the background of the members. Education is an important factor needed for the smooth and democratic functioning of the SHGs. Proper management of the groups is crucially dependent on the level of education. It has also been seen that the illiterate, or the ones with primary education, always look upon the more literate in the group for running the show; however, it has its disadvantage. There are a few among the educated members who have a tendency to exert shrewd or devious influence within the group. This is one of the important causes for the group to split. The number of literates in each group in the study areas is minimum, thereby making the situation complex. Amongst the members, only one per cent has education at the graduation level, three per cent at the senior secondary level, five per cent at the secondary level and another ten per cent have primary level education or no education.

Another important component is the occupation where in all the eight GPs, ninety five per cent of the women members are homemakers, engaged in domestic chores. Life in the rural areas is not easy so they are highly dependent on agriculture and livestock, which is their income source as well as for home consumption. In some cases, the women members also work as khetala. Five per cent are also involved in domestic work but run small business within the villages, such as, grocery stores or small eateries. Wives of government school teachers, retired army personnel and rich farmers are also in this list and they usually do not work full-time in the field.

The occupational pattern of the male members' show that they are mostly engaged in agricultural activities. Agriculture and livestock constitute their major source of livelihood. Ten per cent are engaged as carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, small business and college and school students.

Findings: Why SHGs are a Turning Point?

The then SGSY programme was launched only in the year 2003 in the Hills, though of late the programme has elevated the life of the rural masses. This people-centered approach, based on micro-level income generation, has enabled the rural poor to some extent to free themselves from the clutches of abject poverty and destitution. It has been rightly observed by Cornish and Dunn when they say, 'It more directly influences the capacity and capability of citizens to assert their own needs and act upon those needs' (Cornish & Dunn, 2009, p. 112).

However, several instances during communication with the members were recorded which addressed inequality, exploitation and gender discrimination. One such instance that justifies is the case of a 35-year old, who is now a member of Prerna SHG (Upper Kizom, Nayanore GP), whose husband citing excuses like looking after their two children, tending to the cows, cooking, working in the fields, displayed no desire to allow her to join. Relentless persuasion by members of other SHGs bore fruit and now she contributes to the family's income. Another instance was the behavioural change as observed in community meetings like the Gram Sansad. The members seem to have developed the ability to speak, though not a case where they were completely passive earlier, but now with one another's support the number of women speaking in such meetings have increased. They seem to be at par with men in an important platform like a Gram Sabha. 'Even the mere presence of other women can help make the public space less male dominated and provide women the silent strength of numbers' (Agarwal, 2010, p. 107).

A common response observed amongst many SHG members is that it has, to some degree, sown the seeds of self-confidence and the need to become financially independent. People at the grassroots level, as well as government officials, agree that SHGs appear as a prospective channel for facilitating people's participation at every juncture of development, with a purpose to check and minimise the ordinary people's burden of poverty for a better life. Amidst the

political disturbance in the Hills, the programme seems to have given some scope to the rural masses, particularly the rural women, to fight the odds.

The Changes

Another very important aspect shows that the initiation of SHGs has brought opportunities in the lives of the rural poor, particularly the women in Darjeeling Hills. The change may not be tremendous but it has helped them to go a bit further. For instance, a 40-year old homemaker, with very little education, has found confidence in her work-binding broomsticks. She has learnt to utilise the earning and the importance of saving. She has also become 'mentally elevated' as a member of the group (member of Srijana SHG, Paschim Sherpa Goan, Upper Ecchey GP, Interview, March 05, 2018). Another respondent, also a homemaker, claims that the group has changed her life. She feels there has been a lot of improvement as she has learnt to speak up, undertake bank work and recognise the local government functionaries (member of Saipatri SHG, Lower Sumbuck, Jhepi GP, Interview, February 11, 2018). Thus, with several interviews taken with the group members of the four GPs, each of Kalimpong I Block and DP Block, the following has been observed as the most commonly felt changes:

i.   A number of SHG members have at least learnt to write their names.
ii. The members today are in a comparatively better position to recognise the GP and the Block officials than before.
iii. The most important change the members amicably point out is their ability to speak. Earlier they would 'shiver at the thought of raising their voice'. Now, to some extent, they have developed the confidence to speak at the village community meetings like Gram Sansad and with government and bank officials.
iv. The saving habit of the members has also improved to an evident degree. It has helped them to 'see money in own hands' as well as meet the unforeseen expenditures of their houses. Consequently, the frequency of going to their neighbours or the local money-lender to borrow money has become less frequent.
v.   Unlike before, there has been some change in the social activities at the village community level. The members have become 'one another's support' at times of need and make every effort to ease the other person's burden.

This reveals the necessity to understand that people's participation becomes an innovative method to empower the rural masses, particularly the women, both socially and economically. It has not only given them economic freedom but also helped them to participate in the community affairs as well as in the local government process. The changes have not been drastic, yet it is no less important. Kabeer described that, 'when women collaborate in self-help groups with the goal of creating social change, they are empowered and become agents of change' (Kabeer, 2011, p. 522).

However, eighty five per cent of the SHG members of the study areas have mentioned that they had never done any transaction with banks. Interaction with a 36-year old of Lungchakro village, Nayanore GP (member of Himali SHG, Interview, February 04, 2018) expressed that her financial condition was too low to think of a bank as she was not in a position to save. The same was echoed by another 40-year old member of Pipli Dhura, Chongtong GP (Cheli SHG, Interview, February 08, 2018). Today, however, the SHGs have not only made them familiar with the bank proceedings but also given them the opportunity to save, draw loans at a very low rate of interest, independently fill application forms, interact with the bank staff, to name a few. It is also pertinent to mention the few but visible 'associated' social trends which were observed during survey across all the eight GPs. Such trends that are taking place with the emergence of the SHGs:

i. Greater awareness on health, hygiene and nutrition.
ii. Increased awareness on the necessity of sending children to school.
iii. Reduction in the exploitation of women.
iv. Providing help to the poor and needy, the sick and the old.
v. Reaching out at the time of a natural calamity, particularly landslide.

Working with the Government

The SHGs participation in the working with the government has also been closely observed. The SHGs contribute and portray an important role at the grassroots level as it operates in the rural areas of Darjeeling Hills. Unlike other organisations, they share a specific relation with the GP office. In fact, the GP is always in dire need of the SHGs which can extend help and co-operation. Compared to the non-members, the SHG members share a different kind of rapport with the GP and Block functionaries. In fact, the GP staff agrees that the

SHGs have become an important medium of disseminating information to the masses and reaching to the poorest of the poor. Most of the activities and programmes in the villages are undertaken with their help and have become *the* conduit of communication. Secretary of Upper Ecchey GP, Kalimpong I Block (Interview at GP office, March 05, 2018) opines that 'SHGs have become a part and parcel of the GP and they cannot think of working without them'. Such reliance continues to grow. However, this also gives the members the opportunity to understand the working of the GP and the kind of programmes that come for the welfare of the rural population.

Besides the GP, the SHGs have also developed a rapport with the block office. Earlier the members had no interest in this office, the frequency of the visits was less, and they were apprehensive as to what to say, how to say and when to say. In fact, they were not even familiar with the local officials. The rural women specifically had no experience and exposure to the block, and more miserable was that they had no idea about its location. But today the situation is not as despairing as it was few years back. The SHGs have given them the opportunity to get familiar with the block office, thereby facilitating their participation and increasing transparency in the form of two-way communication. It has given them the confidence to place their problems and gain knowledge about the functions of this office. The visits of the SHG members are mostly related to the groups' work, which have also given them the advantage to enquire and gain awareness of other programmes and benefits, what kind of problems can be solved here, and the kind of assistance they can receive. This acts as a 'cycle' as the same is circulated by the group members amongst other people in the villages. Block Welfare Officer (BWO) of Kalimpong I Block Development Office (Interview at Block Office, March 09, 2018) agrees that the implementation of this programme has opened up avenues for improved communication with the rural lot. He also admits that today they are in a better position to reach the ordinary people of the far-flung villages through these groups. But the highs and lows of interacting with the government agencies cannot be ignored, as revealed during interaction with the members.

Block Development Officer (BDO) of DP block calls it a 'social revolution' (Interview at Block Office, February 05, 2018). This is true to some extent as a social environment has been at least initiated that trains the ordinary villagers for a less oppressive social life. The 'distance' has started to melt as communication becomes steadier. SHGs have in some instances taught them to come together, help the poor and those in need, and raise their voice not only for themselves but

also for the weak and for the society. Though not all village dwellers are a part of the SHGs, yet it has helped to create an association that stretches beyond the groups. Interactions with a 69-year old woman reveal her little substantive knowledge on SHG but she remarks that they are more helpful than the GP. This is because one of the groups in her village helped with her old-age pension (non-member, Dara Goan, Relling GP, Interview, February 09, 2018). A 55-year old homemaker too is thankful as the groups of her area provided tremendous assistance while she was critically ill (non-member, Rai Goan, Lower Ecchey GP, Interview, March 04, 2018). Instances like these are several which exhibit SHGs as their strength and dependency for any kind of information. Bessette significantly observes: 'Each time we must look for the best way to establish the communication process among different community groups and stakeholders, and use it to facilitate and support participation in a concrete initiative or experimentation driven by a community to promote change' (Bessette, 2004, p. 26).

Discussion

SHGs provide a fresh orientation as it moves towards *bottom-up* and *grassroots level* communication. It is gaining greater importance in rural development and is working its way into people's participation, their responsibility and encourages them to take part in the programmes and issues that affect their lives. The SHG has become a tool for empowerment and socio-economic change. The women who form the majority in the group are in the process of participating and addressing the issues that affect their life and others in the community. As they participate they communicate and as they communicate they develop the ability to interact effectively with others. It is a shift from the dominant paradigm of top-down to self-development wherein villagers and poor are the primary stakeholder (Kheerajt & Flor, 2013).

As revealed in the preceding discussion, many SHG members recollect the 'neglected and monotonous life' they led before they became a part of it. However, it is worth mentioning again that groups have to struggle even harder to translate 'change' into 'transformation'. A 38-year old member of Sagar SHG of Gairi Goan, Nayanore GP, welcomes the programme as it has brought 'solace' in her life. She states that in the 'chaotic situation' of under-development and ignorance, SHGs gave her the 'hope and opportunity' to fight poverty and injustice (member of Sagar SHG, Interview, February 03, 2018). Narratives like

these are there, but at the same time we cannot undermine the difficulties that stand in the way of their greater success.

Sometimes the literacy factor itself tends to put barrier across the members of the groups. Though it has not been experienced by all the groups, it has been a major cause of fallout in the groups. There are groups in which the literate members have the inclination to dominate and take decisions without consulting the rest. Groups like Ashirbad of Lower Relling, Relling GP are on the verge of collapse as all the group members have little or no education except for the group leader who has studied till the tenth standard.

Banking transaction has been a 'new experience' for the SHG members, but if only the banks were in close proximity to the villages. The members usually travel in local vehicles to reach the banks which are at least ten kilometres away from the GPs. The study areas being rural, vehicles are not available at the wave of a hand. Usually the vehicles leave for the towns in the morning and return back in the late afternoon. Thus the members have to keep in mind both the vehicle and bank timing. Although the banks have fixed the days for SHG consultation, it is not necessary that the members will get their work done or meet the in-charge on the specified days. Members of Kasturi SHG of Bara Suruk, Samtar GP, reveal, 'The time factor is important to us because we are engaged not only in household activities but also agricultural work as well as attend to our animals' (FGD, March 11, 2018). Despite the hurdles, they display the zeal to get their work done in the bank.

The existence of the economically weaker rural sections, their pre-occupation with work, often acts as a hindrance as they often face difficulties to participate in the SHG activities. Circumstances are such that they prefer to till whatever little land they own, grow crops, vegetables and domesticate animals. A 40-year old homemaker gives a practical explanation that because they are poor they cannot afford to attend four meetings in a month (non-member and villager, Upper Samsu, Relling GP, April 08, 2018). Like her, another homemaker also accepts the fact that SHG has improved her economic condition but at the same time she cannot afford to neglect the agricultural work which has always been the means of sustenance (member of Shingalila SHG, Bujel Basty, Samtar GP, Interview, May 12, 2018).

As mentioned, the very major purpose of the programme has been to ameliorate the socio-economic condition of the local rural people. They have been encouraged to make new items like potato chips, pickles, dried meat, noodles, phenyl and soft toys and the like, which can be sold for a profit for which training has also been provided. However, the problems become apparent when it comes to marketing the products and the SHG members face hardships to find a proper channel. This has veritably been a genuine problem and with marketing at a snail's pace, it has made a negative impact on the capital transaction, skill, effort and socio-economic upliftment of the local rural people. The SHG members have placed their plea to the government officials but not much attention has been given. The members themselves have no idea as to how and where to take their goods. As a result they are compelled to switch over to other economic activities.

Still the fact remains that despite the difficulties they confront right from the grassroots level to the higher authorities, the SHGs have come a long way in terms of being initiated to the 'participatory culture'.

Concluding Remarks

It is accepted that SHGs, in their own little way, have helped to build up the lives of the local rural people of Darjeeling Hills. They appear to have found some kind of 'outlet' of interaction and articulation in the SHGs. This paper, remaining cautious of the tendency to romanticise the SHGs, points out the constraints and limitations of the SHGs, but ultimately finds lot of possibilities in SHGs of utilising the power of participatory approach to rebuild lives of the people in the study areas in particular, and the Darjeeling Hills in general.

Compared to their urban counterparts, the SHGs may not be as 'smart' and as 'instantaneous' and 'voluminous', yet again they intensely aspire for a more proficient and competent governance. This yearning can be realised if the government understands that the 'ordinary' people are prepared to cooperate with the government and non-government agencies for activities that go beyond 'one size fits all' approach. It can go a long way in boosting and enhancing participation of women in such a resourceful scheme with the capacity to strengthen and accelerate women entrepreneurship, their self-employment and empowerment. It is an opportunity for them to be at the center and not at the periphery in the local development-related decision-making They move from

being not only 'women-in-themselves' to 'women-for-themselves', but further to 'women for the larger public good' (Agarwal, 2014, p.14).

The study, therefore, displays the SHGs as a fundamental pre-requisite for women empowerment and enhancement of their socio-economic status. It is important for the concerned authorities to comprehend that SHGs can be a dynamic and potent tool for effective participatory activities with the rural people related to their daily life and local surroundings. They have great potential to be a 'salient' channel of a participatory approach for the rural people of Darjeeling Hills.

Notes:

[i] Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), which was functioning since 1999, was reoriented as National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)-Aajeevika by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. NRLM was launched in June, 2001 with a greater focus on eradication of rural poverty by adopting a 'Livelihood Approach' with women as the target group. NRLM was again renamed as DAY-NRLM (Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihoods Mission) from March 29, 2016. This flagship program aims to reduce poverty through building strong institutions particularly for rural poor women which gives them access to a range of financial and livelihoods services.

[ii] Kalimpong district (the 21st district of West Bengal with effect from February 14, 2017) has been divided into three development blocks – Kalimpong I with 18 Gram Panchayats, Kalimpong II with 13 Gram Panchayats, Gorubathan with 11 Gram Panchayats and Kalimpong Municipality with 23 wards.

REFERENCES:

Agarwal, B. (2010). Does women's proportional strength affect their participation? Governing local forests in South Asia. *World Development*, *38*(1), 98-112.

Agarwal, B. (2014). The power of numbers in gender dynamics: Illustrations from community forestry groups. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *42*(1), 1-20.

Alemu, S.H., Kempen, L.V., & Ruben, R. (2018). Women empowerment through self-help groups: The bittersweet fruits of collective apple cultivation in Highland Ethiopia. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *19*(3), 308-330.

Ban, R., Gilligan, J.M., & Reiger, M. (2015). Self-help groups, saving and social capital: Evidence from a field experiment in Cambodia. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 7382. Retrieved from http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/475161467996993025/pdf/WPS7382.pdf

Bessette, G. (2004). *Involving the community - A guide to participatory development communication.* Penang/Ottawa: Southbound/IDRC.

Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission. (2016). New Delhi: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

Desai, R., & Joshi, S. (2013). Collective action and community development – Evidence from self-help groups in rural India. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 6547. Retrieved from http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/866851488362290319/pdf/112411-JRN-PUBLIC-WBER-2014-28-3-collective-action-and-community-development-evidence-from-self-help-groups-in-rural-india.pdf

Kabeer, N. (2011). Between affiliation and autonomy: Navigating pathways of women's empowerment and gender justice in rural Bangladesh. *Development and Change*, *42*(2), 499-528.

Kaur, L., Sachan, D., & Sulibhavimath, A. (2017). Women empowerment through self-help groups: Case study in Jalandhar district of Punjab. *International Journal of Bio-Resource and Stress Management*, *8*(2), 340-345.

Kheerajit, C.A., & Flor, G. (2013). Participatory development communication for natural resources management in Ratchaburi Province, Thailand. *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*, *11*(2), 87- 102.

Laura, C., & Dunn, A. (2009). Creating knowledge for action: The case for participatory communication in research. *Development in Practice*, *19* (4-5), 18-28.

Meribe, N. (2013). Indigenous African communication systems and participatory development in rural Africa. In P. Thomas (Ed), *Challenges in participatory development in contemporary development practice* (pp. 51-54). Australian National University: The Development Studies Network (Development Bulletin, 75).

Quebral, N.C. (2006). Participatory development communication: An Asian perspective. In G. Bessette (Ed), *People, land and water: Participatory development communication for natural resource management* (pp. 36-50). London/Ottawa: Earthscan/IDRC.

Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana – Guidelines. (2005). New Delhi: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

Suprabha, K.R. (2014). Empowerment of self-help groups: Towards microenterprise development. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, *11*(6), 410-422.

White, S.A. (1999). So what's all the limping about? In S. A. White (Ed), *The art of facilitating participation: Releasing the power of grassroots communication* (pp. 338-352). New Delhi: Sage Publication.

Pema Lama *is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, New Alipore College, Kolkata.*
Email id: pemalama737@gmail.com

Article: Fragmented Identity of the Chakmas in Mizoram: Citizens or Illegal Immigrants?

Author(s): Partha Pratim Baruah and Bikash Deka

Fragmented Identity of the Chakmas in Mizoram:
Citizens or Illegal Immigrants?

--- Partha Pratim Baruah and Bikash Deka

Abstract

The paper articulates the issue of framing the Chakmas in Mizoram as illegal immigrants or illegal settlers from Bangladesh by the Mizo society. This empirical study is based on the interpretations of oral narratives in order to explore the nuances and dynamics involved in framing the Chakmas as illegal immigrants. The study has also attempted to examine the subtle effects of discrimination and alienation on the religious conversion of the Chakmas from Buddhism to Christianity. Finally, the paper raises the question of state intervention to embark on a mechanism to detect the illegal immigrants (if any), regulate cross-border migration so that the authentic Indian Chakmas do not become victims of discrimination and alienation.

Key words: Chakmas, Cross-border migration, Illegal immigrants, Religious conversion

Introduction

The Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) are originally descendants from the Arakan valley of Myanmar, when the Chakma King Marek Yaja left his kingdom in the Arakan valley during the 15th century due to dynastic struggle for the Arakanese throne (Talukdar, 1994, p. 12; 1988, p. 26); later on, he established his kingdom in the CHT. The Chakmas belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of people. According to the Burmese, the Chakmas are known as *TSak* or *Thek* people, as the Burmese sometimes pronounced 'S' as 'Th'. Again, *Ma* or *Mi* (*Mian*) means man or people in the Arakanese languages. Thus, the word *Sawngma* or *Chakma* or *Chukma* means people of Tsak or Thet clan (Talukdar, 1988, pp. 5-6; Chakma, 2019, p. 19).

The might of the Arakanese Kingdom, when it was at the pinnacle of its power in 1133 A.D., was acknowledged by the Kings of Bengal, Pegu, Pagan and Siam

(Talukdar, 1988, p. 25). But in the subsequent years, due to internal feuds to ascend the Arakanese throne, some Chakmas under the leadership of the Chakma King Marekyaja fled to Bengal in 1404 A.D. and established his first capital at Alikadam in the upper part of Matamouree River; Marekyaja is claimed to be the first Chakma King in the CHT. Since the 15th century, the Chakmas had ruled the region for 300 years amidst consecutive raids by the Portuguese, the Arakanese, the Afghans, the Pathans and the Mughals (ibid., p. 31). The Mughals, who had predominantly ruled a large part of the sub-continent since the 16th century, had many conflicts with the Chakma kingdom. However, it is pertinent to mention in this context that during that period many Chakma kings and princes adopted the 'Khan' title in order to show their solidarity with the Mughal rulers but never converted to Islam (Talukdar, 1988, 2010).

The advent of the British to the region had altered the dominance of the above mentioned groups. By the end of the 18th century, the western part of Nizampur road of Chittagong was received by the British through a treaty with the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Khan. Albeit, the Chakma Chief King Sher Must Khan had received a portion of Chittagong by a proclamation made by the British dated 6th *Sraban* (1763 A.D.), but the conflict between the Chakmas and the British perpetuated over the issue of paying tribute, until in 1787 when the Chakma King Dharam Baksh Khan (Juan Baksh Khan) was forced to sign an agreement by the British after nearly ten years of protracted war. According to the treaty, the Chakma King had to pay 500 maunds of cotton, which is approximately 18,500 kg. of cotton, annually to the Company as revenue (Paul & Biswas, 2014, pp. 41-42; Prakash, 2013, p. 12). It was only in 1860 that the CHT was fully made a part of the British Empire. This act brought an end to the independent rule of the Chakmas and the whole of the erstwhile Chakma Kingdom was amalgamated as a part of British India. Meanwhile, the Southern Lushai Hills, which formed a formidable part of the CHT, was included as a part of the Lushai Hills district of Assam on April 1, 1898 (Talukdar, 1988; Chakma, 2019; Singh, 2010).

However, the declaration of Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Bengal Boundary Commission, on August 16, 1947 to annex the CHT with East Pakistan was opposed by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samiti (PCJS) (Singh, 2010, pp. 33-35; Chakma, 2013, pp. 1-4; Talukdar, 1988, p. 47). In fact, prior to the declaration of independence and demarcation of boundaries, PCJS which was an association of the tribal people of CHT had begun to articulate their political future by discussing with the British Authority and the Congress High Command

at the Shimla Conference in 1945 (Chakma, 2013, p. 1). Consequently, a memorandum was submitted on February 15, 1947, and initially Indian leaders like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Sardar Vallavbhai Patel had assured the PCJS leaderships that CHT would be included within India. Meanwhile, the PCJS leaderships had even hoisted the Indian National Flag on August 15, 1947 at Rangamati, on the basis of the Indian Independence Act of 1947. However, on August 17, 1947, the PCJS were appraised that the CHT was included within the East Bengal boundary, i.e. in East Pakistan (ibid., p. 5; Singh, 2010). The fate of CHT was changed as a consequence of the deal with the Sikhs regarding the partition of Punjab, which made a Muslim majority district of Ferozepur in Punjab a part of India (Singh, 2010, p. 35).

The Pakistan Government also took measures to integrate the Buddhist minority by sponsoring large number of Muslim-Bengalis to migrate and settle in the CHT (Singh, 2010; Chakma, 2013). The racial and religious disparity between the immigrant Muslims and the ethnic Chakmas, and the sponsored policy of the government to settle the Bengali speaking Muslim population in CHT, had caused ethnic tensions and conflicts, leading to displacement of the Chakmas (Chakmas, 2013; Weiner, 1993; Singh, 2010; Ghosh, 2016; Prasad, 2013). Simultaneously, the exploitation of natural resources of the CHT and the subsequent policy of development of the region (construction of Kaptai dam) have also alienated the indigenous populace from their traditional lifeworld dependent on the hills and natural resources for economic self-sustainability, leading to systematic displacement of the people (Singh, 2010, pp. 39-46).

The chronicle of marginalisation, systematic persecution and displacement of the Chakmas had reached its summit when the Kaptai dam was constructed during 1959-1963 sponsored by USAID (Singh, 2010, pp. 41-42). Furthermore, the victims of the catastrophe estimated to be more than 1,00,000, with 90 percent of them being the Chakmas, were not compensated and rehabilitated properly in contrast to about 8,000 Bengali settlers who also were displaced but were re-settled in fertile land of the Kasalong tract (ibid.). The Chakmas who were dependent on agriculture for their livelihood were affected due to loss of about 52,000 acres or nearly 40 percent of agricultural land of CHT as a result of flood caused by the Kaptai dam (ibid.). It is also pertinent to mention here that during the British period, the CHT was declared as a 'totally excluded area' under the Government of India Act, 1935 (Singh, 2010, p. 30; Paul & Biswas, 2014, p. 44). But the abolition of this provision in 1964, due to the passage of a Constitutional

Amendment Bill in 1963, had privileged the non-tribal Bengali-Muslims to acquire land and settle in the CHT (Weiner, 1993, p. 1740). This had also facilitated the Pakistani regime to abolish the tribal police force that was constituted under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Frontier Police regulations of 1881, and the administration of the CHT was at large replaced by the Central Government. The demographic pattern of the CHT was changed due to increasing settlement of the Bengali-Muslims, and gradually the Chakmas became minority in their own land (Singh, 2010).

Thus, it is seen from the above discussion that the Chakmas in the CHT, especially in the aftermath of 1947, had to undergo perpetual discrimination often emanating from the very ethos and legacy of the 'two-nation' theory. Following this legacy, the CHT which was a predominantly Non-Muslim region, and constructed as a peripheral excluded area, had to face paradigm shift within the new Pakistani regime from its peripheral status to identifying with the larger national identity (Singh, 2010). The abolition of the special status of the CHT in 1964 had not only affected their economy but also their traditional social life, as the CHT was made open to non-tribal Muslim-Bengalis from the plains with whom they had many cultural differences (ibid.). As it is mentioned in a study by Sopher (1963), there was hesitation on part of the Bengali boatmen to transport pigs along with the Chakmas, and even the consumption of alcohol and the dressing pattern of the Chakma women were seen as culturally inferior by the newly settled Bengali-Muslims. Nevertheless, inadequate compensation and rehabilitation policy, discriminatory administrative policy, religious persecution and military abuse had forced the displaced Chakmas to finally migrate and seek refuge in India (Singh, 2010). Thus, the displacement of the Chakmas from the CHT in 1964 is rooted largely as a consequence of partition of the Indian sub-continent.

In response to the catastrophic phenomenon in the neighboring East Pakistan, the Government of India had opened the border gate and allowed the displaced Chakmas to enter India. The displaced Chakmas from the CHT were settled in the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh), particularly in the Miao and Vijaynagar region, under a special settlement policy of the Indian Government in the late 1963 (Chakma, 2019; Singh, 2010; Prasad, 2013).

Moreover, the debacle faced by the Indian Army during the Indo-China War in 1962 due to hostile terrain in the eastern periphery of NEFA, and the policy of the

Indian State to populate those impenetrable terrains with their own people had also marked the settlement of the Chakmas in NEFA, India (Chakma, 2019). In fact, the Tirap Frontier Division of NEFA was very sparsely populated due to which the Indian Government, during that time, had formulated this special settlement policy to settle the Chakmas as a 'buffer population' in order to be used as a protection against further Chinese aggression (Singh, 2010, p. 69). Therefore, the Chakma refugees were given valid migration documents and were even officially allotted 3-5 acres of land since 1973 under special rehabilitation scheme of the Central Government (Prasad, 2006, p. 479; Chakma, 2019, p. 15; Prakash, 2013, p. 3). Simultaneously, these re-settled Chakmas in the erstwhile NEFA were also given other facilities like ration card, educational facilities and even employment in central government departments. However, the fate of the Chakma people changed when NEFA was upgraded to a full-fledged state of the Indian Union, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh in 1987 (Ghosh, 2016, p. 20).

In addition to the above reasons, the Bangladesh war of Independence in 1971 was also instrumental for the displacement, migration and further settlement of the Chakmas in various Northeastern states of India (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura). The then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had played a crucial role in not only helping the creation of Bangladesh through military and financial assistance (an estimated 7000 crore rupees was spent), but she also took initiative in gaining international support from European countries like UK, France and the USSR (Andrio, 2016, pp. 736-744). Meanwhile, the Bangladesh-India border was opened to allow the war victims to take refuge in India, and the Chakmas were also among the various war victims that entered India during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In this regard, Mrs. Indira Gandhi on June 15, 1971 declared in the Rajya Sabha that, 'We will have to go through hell to meet the challenge passed by the developments in Bangladesh' (Prasad, 2006, p. 484). Similarly, echoing her support for the recognition of Bangladesh as an independent country, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on December 6, 1971 said in the Lok Sabha, 'Pakistan had declared war against India. There is no importance of peaceful solution. Bangladesh people are engaged in their struggle for existence and India is fighting against aggression. They are, like us, fighting against a common enemy. I am pleased to inform the Houses that in the existing situation and due to repeated request of Bangladesh Government, we have carefully decided to grant recognition to People's Republic of Bangladesh' (Andrio, 2016, p. 740). Hence, following the above developments and in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the Indira-Mujib

Agreement of 1972 was signed with a view to establishing friendship, co-operation and peace between the two countries. It is pertinent to mention here that under this peace agreement, it was decided that the Chakma refugees who came to India from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) before 25/03/1971 will be considered for grant of Indian citizenship (Prasad, 2006, p. 480).

Besides, the migration and settlement of the Chakmas in the various states of Northeast India (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Tripura), a large majority of the Chakma population has already been living in Mizoram since the pre-independent period (Singh, 2010, p. 113; Chakma, 2019, p. 15). The fact that the Chakmas have been living in Mizoram since the pre-independence era can be traced back to the event of annexation of a narrow strip on the eastern periphery of the CHT to the Lushai hills district in 1900 (Singh, 2010, pp. 113-114). This annexed part includes the present day Demagri (South-Western Mizoram now) and also included a population of 1500 who became subjects of the erstwhile Lushai hills district (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908, p. 323). Thus, this historical event of annexation of a portion of the CHT to the erstwhile Lushai hills district was instrumental in the making of the Chakmas as Indian citizens after India attained independence in 1947 (Singh, 2011, pp. 13-114; Chakma, 2019, pp. 38-39). However, on April 15, 1993 in an all-party meeting summoned by the then ruling Congress(I) Government, where regional parties like the Mizo National Front (MNF) and Mizo Janata Dal (MJD) were also present, took an unanimous decision to detect and exclude the 'foreigners' from the electoral rolls. Simultaneously, student organisations like the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) also intensified their movement against the issue of illegal Chakma immigrants since the early 1990s (Singh, 2010, pp. 114-115). In fact, in mid-1984 due to military crackdown on the Chakmas of the CHT, an estimated 1800 Chakmas fled and took refuge in Mizoram, and albeit most of these refugees were repatriated on January 29, 1986, but more than 4000 of them were given shelter at Tibira Ghat and Tagalak Bag in the Demagiri Sub Division of the Lunglei district of Mizoram (Paul & Biswas, 2014, pp. 100-101; Prakash, 2013, p. 135).

Therefore, following such incidents of continuous migration and settlements in Mizoram, the Chakmas at large are often susceptible to a subtle identity as foreigners, illegal settlers or Bangladeshis despite being recognised as Indian citizens and one of the Schedule Tribes of Mizoram (Lianchhingia, 2004; Rosanga, 2004; Chakma, 2019). In such a quagmire situation, the Chakmas in Mizoram are stranded in between blurred identity of being a citizen and also

labeled as an illegal immigrant or settler. Therefore, the present study has been conducted in order to explore the answers of three research questions viz.:

- What are the factors responsible for labeling the Chakmas as illegal immigrants in Mizoram?
- How are they subjected to exploitation and discrimination due to their blurred identity in Mizoram?
- What are the factors responsible for negotiating their cultural spaces?

Methodology and Field

The study is qualitative in nature and has been conducted in Aizwal city, Kamalanagar town, Tlabung town, Nunsury village in Mizoram and Thegamukh market of Rangamati district, Bangladesh. Kamalanagar town is the Headquarter of the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) situated in the southern part of Mizoram in the Lawngtlai district and is approximately 335 km. away from Aizwal city. Tlabung town is situated in the South-Western part of Mizoram in the Lunglei district bordering Bangladesh and is approximately 332 km. from Aizwal city. However, both the Nunsury village in the Lunglei district and the Thegamukh market in the Rangamati district of Bangladesh are situated across the Karnafuli River of the Tlabung town.

Aizwal city is home to a few Chakmas who are basically working in the private sectors, daily wage earners, government employees and students, alongside the predominantly Mizo population. The Kamalanagar town is predominantly inhabited by Chakma population with villages of various Mizo tribes like the Lai and the Mara. The Tlabung town has a mixed population of Mizo, Bengalis, Chakmas; and both the Nunsury village and the Thegamukh market are the last Chakma or the first Chakma hamlets in their respective countries.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the help of an interview schedule were conducted with the respondents belonging mostly to the Chakma community, though a few respondents from the Mizo community were also interviewed in the Tlabung town. The respondents' names have been kept anonymous using pseudonyms, and the place and date of the interviews are also mentioned. The field study was conducted in the period between November, 2019 and March, 2020. For identifying respondents, snowball sampling technique was used and the study was based on oral narratives, practical experiences and focus group discussions.

Blurring Identities as Citizens and Illegal Immigrants

The Chakmas are labeled as illegal immigrants or illegal settlers from Bangladesh in the mainstream Mizo discourse in contrast to their constitutional status as Indian citizens and also an indigenous tribe of Mizoram (Chakma, 2019). This main narrative of the Chakmas 'as not belonging/non-indigenous to Mizoram' has also resulted in not only political alienation but they are also excluded from all sort of state assistance like appearing for entrance for higher studies, competitive examination, financial assistance, displacement and even social exclusion (ibid.).

In a study by Lianchhingia (2004), it is stated that the first Chakma immigration to Mizoram took place in between 1895-1905. The migration and settlement of the Chakmas during the early 1900 era was influenced by their habit of shifting cultivation and presence of fertile cultivable lands in the region under the Mizo Chiefs. Therefore, the Mizo Chiefs gave the Chakmas permission to settle in their areas in lieu of local tax to be paid to the Chiefs. However, after the Government came to know about the settlement of the Chakmas, it issued a Standing Order No. 16 of 1928 that 'Non-Lushais should pay a Foreigner Tax of Rs. 5 per year to the Government, two baskets of paddy or Rs. 2 per year per house to the Chief and if they have *jhums* Rs. 3 per year to the Chief by those who keep cattle for trade in addition to usual Grazing fee to be paid to government' (ibid., p. 18-19). Although the Chakmas were imposed with foreigner tax by the Government in 1928, in the post-independence period, the Lushai Hills District (Revenue Assessment) Regulation 1953 exempted the Chakmas from paying the foreigners tax of Rs. 5 and instead was allowed to pay Rs. 2 like the Mizos. Thus, the Chakmas in Mizoram were also allowed to vote by the Mizo Union Party in 1948 in the first election of Advisory Council and in 1956 the Chakmas of Mizoram were also included in the Schedule Tribes list by the Government of India (ibid., p. 22). But the study concluded by stating that 'the Chakmas were mistakenly admitted as citizens and settled with an institution of local self-government (Autonomous District Council) by the power of the administration. The land was formerly and originally the land of the Mizo Chiefs' (ibid., p. 26).

Similarly, in another study by Rossanga, it is stated that 'the population of Mizoram is, with the exception of immigrants like the Chakmas and Reangs/Brus, all one race or tribe. The Mizos are mostly Mongoloid stock in origin. The language spoken by the bulk of the population throughout the state is Mizo language. The Chakmas who had recently crossed the border from Bangladesh

(formerly East Pakistan) since the early twentieth century are mostly found in the western belts of Mizoram bordering Tripura and Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh' (Rossanga, 2004, p. 96). Thus, both the above studies categorically discussed about the menace of the settlement of the Chakmas in the erstwhile land owned by the Mizo Chiefs and even highlighted the apprehension of continuous Chakma migration to Mizoram.

But on the other hand, a study by Poritosh Chakma has mentioned that 'the Chakmas were the first people to live in the western and south-western parts of what constitute the political boundary of Mizoram today. Therefore, they are known as *Bhumiputra* meaning sons of the soil' (Chakma, 2019, p. 35). The apprehension among the Mizos regarding the continuous influx of the Chakmas from Bangladesh got more focus when in 1995 a memorandum was submitted by some Chakma leaders to the then Prime Minister of India mentioning the presence of about 80,000 Chakma population in Mizoram and that they are discriminated against by the Mizoram Government (Singh, 2010, p. 114; Ghosh, 2016, p. 107). Furthermore, the memorandum also included the demand to put these 80,000 Chakma population under a common administrative unit administered separately through a suitable Central Government agency for all-round socio-economic and political development of the Chakmas in Mizoram (Rajya Sabha Committee on Petition, 1997, p. 3). In pursuance of the memorandum submitted in 1995, the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions in 1997 made the following recommendations:

- To treat the Chakmas with sympathy and give humanitarian assistance
- To expand the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC)
- CADC to be administered directly under the Central Government
- Allocation of more development funds for the CADC
- To grant citizenship to the Chakma refugees who came to Mizoram prior to March 25, 1971
- To grant citizenship to those Chakmas who are born in India and those Chakmas who are granted Indian citizenship should also be declared as belonging to the schedule tribes
- To grant citizenship to the Chakma refugees who came to Mizoram after March 25, 1971 on the basis of negotiation between the Government of India and the Government of Bangladesh on the lines of the Indira-Mujib Accord.

These recommendations of the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions caused severe resentment among the various political parties and the civil society organisations. In the same year, the Government of Mizoram prepared a report in which it was shown that during the period 1951-61, the decadal growth of the Chakma population in Mizoram was 67 per cent, which surpassed the state's overall growth rate (Ghosh, 2016, pp. 107-108). Similarly, the influential Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) and the Young Mizo Association (YMA) also took strong stand against the recommendations of the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions by demanding the deletion of 'doubtful voters' from the electoral rolls[i] (Singh, 2010; Ghosh, 2016). Thus, these political developments in Mizoram during the 1990s led the Mizoram government to insist that the Chakma problem in Mizoram was one of illegal immigrants and not one of refugees. Moreover, the Mizoram government also alleged the Chakmas of including illegal immigrants as bona fide Indian citizens in order to enhance their bargaining strength (Ghosh, 2016, pp. 108-109).

Dynamics of Cross-Border Movements

Tlabung (or Demagri, as called by the Chakmas) is a border town located between India and Bangladesh, and it has been an epicenter of trade between India and CHT, even before the international borders came into existence in 1947. The Khawtlangtuipui or the Karnafuli River that flows through Tlabung is not only the natural terrain dividing India and Bangladesh but it has also been an important route of trade since the colonial period. The strategic location of Tlabung received more importance when on December 10, 2011 a Border Trade Facilitation Center was jointly inaugurated by the visiting Bangladesh state minister for CHT, Mr. Dipankar Talukdar, and Mizoram Trade and Commerce Minister, Mr. Lalrinliana Sailo (The Hindu, 2011).

Cross-border movement of people are influenced by various factors like inter-village relations, clan linkages, trade and agriculture that might surpass the national boundaries or what is deemed to be national (Samadar, 2012). In fact, in a study by Samadar (ibid.) on the trans-border migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal, he mentioned how the locals on either side of the border have normalised its existence and border has never been an exception to pause their daily movements for trade or other requirements. He further argued that lack of roads, schools and other means of decent livelihood compel the people living in the borders to look for trans-border communication as a means of support (ibid.).

Thus, such nuances make the border more flexible by allowing such trade and movement of people, though on small scale but on a continuous basis.

Similarly, it is in this context that during our field study in Tlabung, we tried to explore the nuances of cross-border movement of the Chakmas. Therefore, in our interaction with the various stakeholders of the Chakma society in Mizoram, they have revealed the fact about the cross-border migration of the Chakmas but denied the settlement of these migrants in Mizoram permanently. Adding to this paradox, an interviewee said:

> *In the absence of any clear demarcation in many areas in the Lunglei and Mamit district bordering Bangladesh, there are cross-border movement of people for selling their agricultural products, medical treatments, other trading purposes and even marriages also happen between the families across the borders, but they do not stay permanently and return back after completion of their task.* (Mr. Arun Chakma, age 42, Nunsury village, February 26, 2020).

He further argued regarding the claim of Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), Young Mizo Association (YMA) and other civil organisations since the early 1990s about illegal immigrants and settlement of the Chakmas:

> *The Claims of MZP, YMA and others framing the Chakmas as illegal immigrants or settlers is baseless; it is the Mizoram Government who enrolls and update the voters' list, therefore, if they think then they should stop harassing the real citizens and find a mechanism to identify, detect and deport the illegal migrants. But only blaming the whole Chakma community as illegal immigrants and harassing us should not be the way in a democratic system.* (Mr. ArunChakma, age 42, Nunsury village, February 26, 2020).

Moreover, during our field visit in Tlabung bordering Bangladesh, when we boarded a boat to the next market place, i.e. Thegamukh in Rangamati district of Bangladesh, we found that there is no such restriction on either side regarding the movement of people on boats which is the mainstay of transportation via the Karnafuli River. In fact, en route to Thegamukh, we also found that it was required to only register in the Border Out-Post controlled by the Border Security

Force (BSF) by producing the boat permit. We were also told by the locals that under such phenomenon, the small traders and local farmers cross the borders either side to sell their products. Again, we were also told by the local Chakmas that though there exists free movement of people across the borders but the Chakmas never settle in the Indian side and return back as soon as their task gets completed. However, the Mizos completely hold an opposite view and in this regard a Mizo resident of the Tlabung region said:

> *Cross-border migration should be checked and there should be proper checking and verification of documents. Because often there are marriages between the people of the villages across the borders and one cannot identify even if he or she gets settled within the Indian Chakma villages.* (Mr. Ralte, age 43, Tlabung, February 27, 2020).

These two factors viz., the submission of memorandum in 1995 by the Chakmas and the cross-border movements of the Chakmas, have contributed in making their blurred identity. This has also resulted in the discrimination and exclusion of the Chakmas in Mizoram.

Experiences from the Field: Discrimination and Exclusion

Keeping in view the above factors responsible in labeling the Chakmas as illegal immigrants, we have tried to explore the problems of discrimination and exclusion faced by them as a minority community. When the Chakmas were interviewed we identified two major aspects viz., education and employment and incidents of evictions that have been repeatedly advocated by our respondents in the field that reflects the way they are subjected to discrimination and exclusion due to their blurred identity.

Incidents of Discrimination in Education

In a study by Myron Weiner (1993), it is mentioned that the Government or dominant ethnic group may pursue many discriminatory policies that may make the life of the religious or ethnic minorities vulnerable. In this context, he highlighted six such cases of forced migration of people in the South Asia that he termed as 'Rejected Peoples'. By 'Rejected Peoples' he mentioned about the forced migration of an estimated six to seven million Muslims from India to Pakistan and nearly eight million Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India in the

aftermath of the partition of British India, migration of about 1,50,000 Indian origin Burmese from 1948 to mid-1960s, the displacement of Tamil Estate workers in Sri Lanka, the stranded Urdu speaking Muslims in Bangladesh after its independence, the displaced Rohingiya Muslims from the Rakhine State of Myanmar and the displaced Chakmas from the then East Pakistan between 1964-1969. Since, the Chakmas are also a minority group in Mizoram, therefore they might also face discrimination and exclusion. In fact, the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) in its report *India Human Rights Report 2009* accused Mizoram Government of practicing 'systematic discrimination' against minorities. The ACHR further alleged in its report that the Chakmas are subjected to more discrimination in terms of education, basic healthcare, employment and other rights (Paul & Biswas, 2014, pp. 119-121). It is in this context that in the present study an attempt has been made to explore the various incidents of discrimination faced by the Chakmas in Mizoram. Adding to this, one of the interviewees said:

> *It remains an apprehension among us that though we are citizens of India since India became an independent country, we the Chakmas are always treated as foreigners. We even find difficult to get rented house in Aizwal city and other places where the houses are owned by the Mizos. However, in our common interaction or in our everyday life we have a friendly relationship, at school or colleges, and even when at need we are helped by them. For example, if we get stranded at highways or somewhere then they are very hospitable and kind and help us. But, the problem lies while getting access to our constitutional rights or rights to get state assistance. For example, in 2017, four of the Chakma candidates were among the 38 candidates from Mizoram who cleared the National Eligibility Entrance Test for qualifying to study MBBS. But the Mizo Zirlai Pawl and other civil organisations had protested against the inclusion of the Chakma candidates at equal par with the Mizo candidates. Hence, regarding jobs also we are discriminated.* (Mr. Krishna Chakma, age 27, Aizwal, November 23, 2019).

Citing another example, an interviewee, who is also a student leader, said:

> *In 2015 State Technical Entrance Test, 13 Chakma students were selected, but they were deprived and were not allowed to appear*

for the personal interview. The MZP, YMA and other civil organisations of the Mizos had opposed their selection and there were many protests by them opposing the same. However, we the Mizoram Chakma Students Union (MCSU) had filed a petition in the Guwahati High Court and the court gave verdict in favor of us allowing the students to appear for the personal interview. (Mr. Rohit Chakma, Aizwal, age 31, November 23, 2019).

Another interviewee said that in Mizoram, the government had classified three categories of people in regard to employment or education in the higher and technical educational institutions viz., the first category are the indigenous tribes, the second are the non-indigenous permanent tribes and the third category includes the children of the employees employed in the Central Government departments and posted in Mizoram. According to him, there was an attempt to alienate the Chakmas from the first category through a change in the government service rule. Moreover, the interviewee also told us that in order to be eligible to apply for a government job under the Mizoram Government, one must study Mizo language till Class 8, but again this remains a problem among the Chakma areas because in CADC students are taught in Chakma language.

Thus, in regard to the above incidents of discrimination in terms of education and also access to employment, an interviewee said:

> *As education is the basic requirement for human beings to achieve enlightenment and also to move forward with the pace of time, therefore, excluding us from such facilities has made us remain backward. Moreover, the various criteria required to apply for a government job like to studying in Mizo language till class 8 also exclude many Chakmas from applying in the govt. job. Thus, exclusion from educational privileges is one of the most important and basic form of discrimination that the Chakmas are facing.* (Mr. Amar Chakma, age 25, Aizwal, February 12, 2020).

In terms of facing continuous discrimination, an interviewee said:

> *Although the Chakmas are an indigenous tribe and also have been recognised as one of the STs in Mizoram, we are still discriminated or viewed as illegal immigrants. The reason behind this may be*

due to the fact of cross-border movements which have imprinted in the minds of the Mizos that migration is still continuing. Therefore, in this regard, the government should pass a law to detect if any illegal Chakma immigrants are present in Mizoram. Because due to this blurred identity, the indigenous Chakmas also become victims of discrimination and exclusion. (Mr. Bikash Chakma, age 34, Kamalanagar, February 25, 2020).

Incidents of Conflict and Evictions

The present settlement of many villages in Mizoram (both Mizos and Chakmas) can be traced back to 1967 when the scheme of 'grouping' of villages was introduced by the Indian Government as a strategy to counter the insurgency activities of the Mizo National Front (MNF). The main objective of the scheme was to cut off the main bases of the MNF that they had in the Mizo villages located in the hilly interiors. Another purpose of the grouping of villages was to segregate the population and keep them under the watchful eye of the Indian security forces. Thus, by doing so it was aimed to facilitate the security forces to expatiate their counter-insurgency operation (Nunthara, 1981; Lintner, 2012; Goswami, 2009; Paul & Biswas, 2014). This scheme was modeled on Sir Robert Thompson's regrouping of villages in Malaya during the communist insurrection there in the 1950s (Lintner, 2012, p. 115).

The scheme was categorised into four distinct parts – Protected and Progressive Villages, New Grouping Centres, Voluntary Grouping Centres and Extended Loop Areas under the provisions of the Defense of India Rules, 1962 and the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953. However, the grouping of villages had serious impact on the social, political and economic life of the Mizos. The relocation of people from their ancestral villages had not only physically displaced them from their homes, but it also alienated them from their traditional social life, practice of jhum cultivation and most importantly from the freedom that they used to enjoy before the regrouping (Nunthara, 1981).

Moreover, an estimated 45,107 villagers of 109 villages were relocated between January 4 and February 23, 1967 into 18 'group centres' on the main road through the Mizo Hills, which connects Vairangte on the border with Assam proper and with Aizwal and Lunglei (Lintner, 2012, p. 114).

The relocation of villages also caused acute food shortages throughout 1968, 1969 and 1970 as the people were alienated from their ancestral cultivation lands. This led to a transitional effect on their occupation as most of them were compelled to work as daily wage labor, resulting in further disintegration of traditional village solidarity as people were forced to move out of their villages in search of new occupations (Nunthara, 1981; Goswami, 2009). Thus, the Chakmas also are not an exception to the effects of the grouping of villages in 1967 and the following incident of eviction related to the scheme of grouping of villages.

Moreover, in December 2019, a village named Kamalabagan in Lunglei district was evicted as it was declared illegal and the villagers had no land documents. In this eviction, about 750 persons and 140 families were displaced, and they were settled with the help of some Chakma civil organisations and local villagers in the Nunsury village bordering Bangladesh in the Lunglei district (Interview, 2020). On our visit to the Nunsury village we saw many makeshift camps of the displaced families. On interacting with one of such displaced persons, we were told that as they did not have land documents and were living in the private land owned by some Mizo landowners for which they were asked to vacate the land. He also said that though they have not destroyed any of their property, they are alienated from their land and farms. Now, they are left with no alternative but to work only as daily wage earners or to migrate to other places for livelihood. Another interviewee of the Nunsury village who helped the evicted villagers to settle within the Nunsury village said:

> *During the Mizo movement way back in the early 1960s, there was a system implemented by the Government in 1967 to group various small villages scattered erstwhile in hilly region within a single village unit, and under this system the Kamalabagan village was established and the Chakma people settled there. But the people were not conscious that they should register their land. In contrast to the Chakma villagers, three Mizo persons had registered the land on their behalf in the period 1994-95 under Tlabung Village Council and renamed it as 'Serhuan', which is a Mizo term for 'Kamalabagan' or 'Orange garden'. As the villagers who have been living there did not have land documents, they were evicted by the landowners. However, there was no clash or destruction of property. But the people had to get leave their main source of livelihood, i.e. jhum cultivation, and their children were also*

forced to drop out of their school. (Mr. Debo Chakma, age 52, Nunsury, February 26, 2020).

In fact, in our focus group discussion with the villagers at Nunsury on February 26, 2020, we were appraised by the villagers that the framing of the Chakmas as foreigners, illegal immigrants or Bangladeshis often result in such incidents of eviction, violence, discrimination and even mass deletion of eligible voters from the electoral roll in 1995. And this incident in 2019 was not the first incident when the Chakmas were displaced; in 1992 another similar incident of displacement and eviction had happened where the Chakmas of Marpara area bordering Bangladesh became victims of ethnic violence, due to a personal scuffle that occurred in a Chakma village of Bangladesh where two Mizo persons from Mizoram were killed as they were accused of assaulting a village women there. Following this incident, rumor spread in Mizoram that Mizos were attacked in Bangladesh by the Chakmas resulting in burning down of Chakma houses in Haolung Sara, Bogakali, Marpara, Naba and Erengsuri villages and many Chakma families became displaced and were forced to take refuge in the camps of the Border Security Force (Focus Group Discussion, 2020).

Similarly, an interviewee narrated:

> *In 2016, a scuffle broke out between some Chakma students of Demagri High School and local Mizo men of Tlabung town, where the Chakma students had beaten the Mizo persons as the former had been physically assaulted by the latter. Again in 2018, there was an incident where a temporary gate was made near the Demagri State Bank of India by some Mizo locals and any Chakma person who crosses the gate was beaten by them without any reason. However, later on the administration had removed the gate.* (Mr. Debo Chakma, age 52, Nunsury, February 26, 2020).

These incidents narrated by the victims themselves and other villagers who had witnessed the violence, discrimination and eviction done to their fellowmen told us that they are in no position to oppose or counter such activities as they remain an ethno-religious minority group in Mizoram. Moreover, the framing of the indigenous Chakmas as illegal settlers from Bangladesh also acts as a catalyst in instigating such conflicts and discriminatory norms. We found that the framing of Indian Chakmas as illegal settlers and the subtle discrimination against them are

inter-related. If any mobilisation by the Chakmas occurs demanding equal access to constitutional rights, such mobilisations are used by the Mizo leaders to organise the common Mizos against the Chakmas. However, as argued by our respondents, the relationship between the Chakmas and the Mizos at the personal level are rather cordial, and differences arise only when matters turn political.

Negotiating the Cultural Spaces: Alienation and Conversion

Following the above discourses on how the Chakmas are labeled as illegal immigrants and the incidents of discrimination and exclusion, the present study also attempts to examine the impact of these factors on the religious conversion of the Chakmas. As minority groups, who are positioned inferior to the majority mainstream socio-cultural attributes or even in unfortunate political phenomenon, they are prone to social stigmatisation due to skin color, dialect or language, religious belief, food habits, dress patterns, gender and so forth (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Similarly, such visible attributes concerning the skin, religious belief, dress patterns or even their life style contribute towards group predilection, just as even though second or third generation individuals having dark skin or middle-eastern features in America may still be perceived as Arabs and are susceptible to discrimination (ibid.). However, acculturation is also largely influenced by factors such as family structure, individual status, power relationship between majority-minority and so forth. In many cases, these factors or the vulnerable social, political and economic phenomenon faced by a minority group acts as a catalyst for certain cultural changes or adaption, in concomitant with the dominant culture that may elevate them from their current vulnerable situation, and therefore acculturation process is susceptible to various above mentioned dynamics rather than only merely the effect of interaction between two groups (Marin, 1993).

Therefore, in context to the above discourses on acculturation process and also the dynamics of majority-minority relationship, we have attempted to examine the impact of discrimination and exclusion on the religious conversion of the Chakmas from Buddhism to Christianity based on oral narratives and practical experiences.

While interacting with our interviewees, who belong to both Buddhist Chakmas as well as Christian Chakmas, we found many dynamics that have triggered their conversion. One of our interviewees, a Buddhist Chakma, said:

> *Conversion from Buddhism to Christianity is influenced by many factors like lack of education, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and even political discrimination. Because it is observed that the Chakma people who are economically poor and lack education are more inclined towards being converted to Christianity. As the Christian Missionaries provide the poor people with educational assistance or even financial help, the people from the remote villages and also those who are victims of poverty have adopted Christianity. Moreover, it may also be due to the feeling that their social position may elevate like that of the Mizos and that their stigmatisation as an inferior group may end. Because still many among the Chakmas think that both Christianity and the Mizos are superior to the Chakmas.* (Biswa Chakma, age 45, Kamalabagan, March 2, 2020).

Adding to this argument, another interviewee said:

> *Due to political negligence and our vulnerable position, many of our educated youths who are unemployed are also convinced for conversion. Recently, my friend who is a graduate was offered a job in their institution if he gets converted to Christianity. However, he did not get converted.* (Mr. Sunil Chakma, age 38, Aizwal, February 23, 2020).

Thus, social exclusion, lack of access to state assistances like education facilities, employment and others often lead to religious conversion. A study done by Akcapar (2019), regarding the religious conversion to Evangelism from Islam by the Afghans refugees in India and Iranian refugees in Turkey, has also revealed these factors acting as catalysts in their conversions. In fact, another interviewee said that:

> *Sometimes even the material attraction of going to the Sunday Church wearing colorful traditional dresses and men with formal suits also attracts our Chakma people to follow this trend, as it exhibits a kind of cultural superiority. Thus, many among us, who feel socially excluded otherwise by the dominant culture, have also converted thinking that conversion would integrate them with the*

dominant society. (Mrs. Sunali Chakma, age 47, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

Interestingly, during our interaction with the people, many also admitted certain cases like:

> *If someone from the Chakma community is convicted of any crimes, the missionaries approach the concerned individual and convince in such a way that if he/she gets converted then their conviction would be condoned or reduced.* (Mr. Bikash Chakma, age 34, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

Another interviewee argued:

> *The missionaries also try to convince the poor and needy people to convert into Christianity by offering them financial help for medical treatment or any such other emergencies.* (Ms. Rupali Chakma, age 43, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

However, on interviewing the Christian Chakmas, we found contrasting facts from them regarding the reasons for their conversion to Christianity. While the elder persons were of the view that factors like lack of education, poverty, social exclusion and non-availability of other assistance from the state have compelled them to get converted in their younger days, some of the members of the younger generations argue that it is the ethical and religious teachings of the Bible that they are more convinced in order to follow Christianity. In this context, an elderly Christian Chakma said:

> *As I was not educated and did not know much about the worldly affairs, I remained concerned only with my livelihood as a jhum cultivator, just like most of my fellowmen. But the Christian Missionary came to our village, and like many other villagers, I too was convinced to get converted as they promised that it would help us in our life, work and also protect us from diseases and evils. Now, I am okay with my identity as a Christian but I also have good relationship with both my Buddhist Chakma brothers and also with my Christian Mizo neighbours. I believe that God is one and he is watching us, therefore we should always live as*

human beings no matter what our religious or ethnic identity is.
(Mr. Thomas Chakma, age 66, Tlabung, February 26, 2020).

But one younger interviewee, who is a Christian, argued little differently:

> *I believe that it is the faith and the good thing in the preaching of the Bible that have convinced the Chakmas to get converted to Christianity, rather than the opportunity to get employment, education or other material assistance.* (Mr. Jonas Chakma, age 23, Nunsury, February 27, 2020).

Nevertheless, various socio-political and economic dynamics are at play in the context of the conversion of the Buddhist Chakmas to Christianity; but another apprehension was also noted by the interviewees that if such continuous conversion happens then it might even be a challenge for them to maintain their identity as Chakmas in the future, because according to them the Chakma ethnic identity is related to Buddhism (as the Chakmas are said to be one of the descendants of the Sakya Clan where Gautama Buddha himself was born (Talukdar, 1988). In this regard, an interviewee said:

> *The Chakmas are one of the oldest Buddhist community and we are largely identified as such. Perhaps, this is also one of the reasons why we are still persecuted in Bangladesh because of our religious minority status in a Muslim dominated country. But the conversion of our brothers and sisters to Christianity have deep impact on our identity, as after being converted many of them cease to participate in community meetings or gatherings along with their Buddhist brethrens. Moreover, even in the celebration of our cultural festival, i.e. Bizu, they tend to celebrate it separately in the Churches. Thus, such differences may affect our community solidarity by creating the notion of 'self' and 'other'.* (Mr. Bijoy Chakma, age 44, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

Thus, in context to the above narratives from various sections of people, i.e. Buddhist Chakmas, Christian Chakmas and also from elder and younger generations, we have found that factors such as economic backwardness, poverty, educational deprivation, social exclusion, political alienation, etc. have

contributed towards the religious conversion of the Chakmas from Buddhism to Christianity.

Conclusion

The above discussion examines the factors that have played an important role in labeling the Chakmas as illegal immigrants. The making of this blurred identity of the Chakmas have also resulted in the subsequent discrimination and exclusion of the Chakmas from educational facilities, employment and they have remained victims of various incidents of violence and evictions.

Hence, the discussion reveals the challenges faced by the Chakmas politically and socially in Mizoram due to their fragmented identity, both as citizens and illegal immigrants. It is important that the state evolve a mechanism to identify and detect or regulate the cross-border migration of the Chakmas to Mizoram. In the absence of any such measure till date, the Chakmas who are the authentic citizens of India and are indigenous to Mizoram are susceptible to continuous discrimination.

---

[i] On 14 August 1997, Mr. O. Raja Gopal, the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petition presented the 105th Report of the Committee on Petition in the Rajya Sabha. The report was based on a petition jointly signed by Smt. Snehadini Talukdar of Mizoram and Shri Subimal Chakma of Delhi. This petition was submitted by the Chakma leaders highlighting to the various problems faced by the Chakmas of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Some of the issues mentioned in the petition were regarding the inclusion of nearly 8,000 Chakmas of Mizoram under a single administrative unit administered by a Central Government Agency, to enroll all the eligible Chakmas in the voters' list, to provide security to the life and property of the Chakmas and to undertake developmental programs under the Border Area Development Program in the Chakma inhabited areas; whereas, in regard, to Arunachal Pradesh, issues of granting Indian citizenship to the Chakmas and Hajongs, to withdraw ban on ration cards, admission to schools and colleges, employment, medical facility, trade and commerce concerning the Chakmas and Hajongs of Arunachal Pradesh, to compensate the victims of arson in the Bijoypur village and other Chakma settlement areas.

REFERENCES:

Akcapar, S.K. (2019). Religious conversions in forced migration: Comparative cases of Afghans in India and Iranians in Turkey. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *10*(1), 61-74.

Andrio, D. (2016). India's role in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state. *Vestnik RUDN- International Relations*, *16*(4), 736-744.

Chakma, D.K. (Ed.) (2013). *The partition and the Chakmas*: *And other writings of Sneha Kumar Chakma*. Published by D K. Chakma.

Chakma, P. (2019). *Chakmas: Indigenous peoples of Mizoram.* Published by Paritosh Chakma.

Ghosh, P.S. (2016). *Migrants, refugees and the stateless in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Goswami, N. (2009). The Indian experience of conflict resolution in Mizoram. *Strategic Analysis*, *33*(4), 579-589.

Lianchhinga, F. (2004). The coming and settlement of Chakmas. In Sangkima (Ed), *Cross-border migration: Mizoram* (pp. 15-29). New Delhi: Shipra Publication.

Lintner, B. (2012). *GREAT GAME EAST: India, China and the struggle for Asia's most volatile frontier.* New York: Harper Collins.

Marin, G. (1993). Influence of acculturation on familialism and self-identification among Hispanics. In M.E. Berral & G.P. Knight (Eds), *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (pp. 181-196). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nunthara, C. (1981). Grouping of villages in Mizoram: Its social and economic impact. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *16*(30), 1237-1240.

Padilla, M.A., & Perez, W. (2003). Acculturation, social identity and social cognition: A new perspective. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *25*(1), 35-55.

Paul, D., & Biswas, N.B. (2014). *Chakmas in India: An ethnographic approach to human studies.* New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications.

Prakash, A. (2013). *Chakma refugees*. New Delhi: Sumit Enterprises.

Prasad, C. (2006). Migration and the question of citizenship: People of Chittagong Hill Tracts in Arunachal Pradesh. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, *67*(3), 471-490.

Prasad, C. (2013). *India's refugee regime and resettlement policy*: *Chakmas and the politics of nationality in Arunachal Pradesh.* Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.

Rosanga, O. (2004). Impact of Chakma settlements on Mizoram. In Sangkima (Ed), *Cross-border migration Mizoram* (pp.95-109). New Delhi: Shipra Publication.

Samaddar, R. (2012). *The nation form: Essays on Indian nationalism*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Singh, D.K. (2010). *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Sopher, D.E. (1963). Population dislocation in the Chittagong Hills. *The Geographical Review*, *3*(3), 337-362.

Talukdar, S.P. (1988). *The Chakmas*: *Life and struggle.* New Delhi: Gyan Publication House.

Talukdar, S.P. (1994). *Chakmas: An embattled tribe.* New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.

Talukdar, S.P. (2010). *Genesis of indigenous Chakma Buddhists and pulverization worldwide*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.

Weiner, M. (1993). Rejected peoples and unwanted migrants in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *28*(34), 1737-1746.

Web Sources

Border trade facilitation centre inaugurated. (2011, December). *The Hindu*. Retrieved from www.thehindubusinessline.com

The Imperial Gazetteer of India (Vol. 10). (1908). Retrieved from https://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/gazetteer/ (Accessed on 08/10/2020).

Rajya Sabha Committee on Petition. (1997). Hundred and Fifth Report. Retrieved from https://elibrarychakmas.wordpress.com/ (Accessed on 25/08/2020).

Indira-Mujib Agreement. (1972). Retrieved from www.mea.gov.in (Accessed on 25/08/2020).

Partha Pratim Baruah *is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at the Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University.*
Email id: partha15baruah@gmail.com
Bikash Deka *is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University.*
Email id: bikash.dk01@gmail.com

Understanding the Alienation of Indigenous Ethnic Groups during the Assam Movement of 1979-1985

--- Tonoya Mahanta and Barnali Sarma

Abstract

The Assam Movement which started in 1979 and was supposedly resolved in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord, had its roots in the contention between sections of the Assamese population and the Central Government regarding the unchecked and large scale influx of immigrants into Assam and the threats it posed to the greater Assamese culture and their aspirations. However, one of the unexpected outcomes of this Assamese nationalistic fervour was the alienation of the indigenous ethnic groups that resided in Assam. With the mainstream Assamese organisations like AASU and AAGSP at the helm of the movement and the call for Assamese to be the state language and medium of instruction throughout the state, many of the ethnic groups of the area felt immensely under-represented and their culture threatened. This paper attempts to look into the experiences of indigenous ethnic groups of Assam, focusing on the Bodo tribe, during and after the Assam Movement.

Key words: Alienation, Assam Movement, Ethnic identity, Identity politics

Introduction

In societies like that of Assam, where many ethnic groups exist to share political and economic control, some form of stable power-sharing is always essential; if that is not possible, the group in the position of political power needs to make efforts to safeguard the economic well-being of the rest in order to maintain stability. However, as Myron Weiner points out such an arrangement is so fragile that '...demographic changes – the result of differential natural population growth rates among ethnic groups, emigration, or immigration – can disrupt the political system' (Weiner, 1983, p. 279).

The sudden demise of Lok Sabha member Hiralal Patwari on March 20, 1979 necessitated the conduct of by-elections in the Mangaldai constituency of Assam.

The electoral rolls thus prepared revealed a shocking and massive increase of electorate which could not have possibly been a result of natural increase of population. The only explanation that seemed plausible was that illegal immigrants and non-citizens, mainly from Bangladesh, residing in the state were being inappropriately enfranchised and were somehow able to sneak their names into the electoral rolls. This issue soon caught the attention of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) who noticed the dangers it posed to the demographic profile of the state as well as its economy, society and its identity. Organisations like AASU and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) took it upon themselves to stand against this threat. The Assam Movement was thus launched in 1979 demanding the eviction of undocumented foreigners and the declaration of Assamese as the State Language by mobilising mostly Assamese-speaking population.

The Assam Movement went on to become the most significant recent event in Assam's history which left deep impacts on the future political as well as social spheres of the state. The number of communities expressing dissent and demanding a state separate from Assam visibly increased. The separatist movements are noticeably rooted in social conflict caused by the marginalisation, alienation and oppression felt mostly by the indigenous tribal communities of Assam at the hands of the dominant Assamese-speaking population. To limit the scope of the paper, this study will specifically focus on the experiences and testimonies of the Bodo community which is the largest indigenous plains tribal community of Assam. In order to understand the genesis of this social conflict, the study would also need to trace back the social interactions and relations between the communities throughout their shared history. To accomplish this, the study would rely on the analysis of existing academic works related to the subject, oral testimonies from a few people who were directly involved, government reports, newspaper reports, and public as well as organisational appeals, memoranda, etc.

Identity Consciousness, Preservation and Assertion

The issue of identity, its assertion and preservation, which played a major role in the Assam Movement, had already been lingering in the Assamese consciousness. This acrimony between the Assamese-speaking and the Bengali-speaking people had been brewing ever since the annexation of Assam by the British. With the establishment of numerous tea gardens, the demand for hard-working and low-

cost labour also increased. The British sought to employ local people but they were reluctant to work in the gardens as labour. Owing to the abundant nature of the region's resources, the general population of Assam neither had the necessity nor the attraction towards toiling in the tea gardens. Thus, in the initial phase, mostly workforce from the Bodo community was employed in the plantations. However, as the remuneration never increased proportionately to the work-load, even the Bodo workforce started opting out of working as tea garden labour. But, as the demand for cheap labour-force kept increasing, the British resorted to bringing in labourers from the then poverty-stricken regions of India. Labourers were brought in mostly via the s*ardari*, *thikadari* and *arkattiya* systems, where a class of professional recruiters (arkattis), headmen of groups (sardars), and contractors (thikadars) would indiscriminately bring in labourers from impoverished and famine-stricken areas with the siren song of prosperity (Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931). Soon labourers started to pour in to work in other production and industrial sectors as well. They started working in the fields, factories as well as households. This influx of 'outsiders' however, was quite welcomed owing to their ability to perform back-breaking manual labour on behalf of the local population which was increasingly getting acclimatised to an easier life. The indigenous society started to prefer office jobs, especially government jobs, as they considered those to be more prestigious.

Along with the labourers, there also came an educated, mostly Bengali-speaking, middle-class work-force to be engaged in the British government offices as well as the tea gardens. In 1836, Assamese was replaced by Bengali as a language of government offices, courts and schools. As a result, there gradually emerged bitterness among the Assamese elites against the Bengali-speaking population, although, it was not as critical yet, as a majority of the Assamese society was still mostly engaged with agriculture. But as the influx of migrants kept growing with different groups coming to Assam, the problem assumed a much serious proportion on the eve of India's independence in 1947. Apart from the few who tilled their land by themselves, a sizeable portion of the society enjoyed the benefits of owning large areas of fertile land tilled by immigrant agricultural labourers.

After Independence, when the bulk of the Sylhet district except portions of Karimganj subdivisions was ceded to Pakistan, Assam came to be constituted of the plains districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, the belt of the autonomous hill districts constituted by the Garo Hills, the United Khasi and

Jaintia Hills District, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills and the Naga Hills, the Cachar district in the Barak River Valley and the Lushai Hills to its South and the large stretch of mountainous country in the frontier tracts under the North East Frontier Agency.

Meanwhile, the need for re-organisation of states was felt throughout the country with the awakening of identity consciousness of distinct cultural units. This led to the appointment of the State Reorganisation Commission in 1953. Emphasis on the breaking up of states on linguistic lines was linked to the growing realisation of the need to strike a balance between the linguistic and geo-political constraint for the sake of administrative convenience, economic considerations, national unity, security and defence. This decision for the linguistic division of the states, however, turned out to be problematic for the newly established province of Assam.

Problems of Accommodating Diversity

Assam has been inhabited by a highly diverse population comprising of different tribes and communities. There also existed a sense of distinctiveness between the 'hills' people and the 'plains' people. While Assamese or Bengali (mainly in the Barak Valley, but also in many parts of the Brahmaputra Valley) was more widely spoken in the plains; most of the hill population spoke one of the many 'tribal languages' (Church, 1969, pp. 727-732). Including all these different communities, each with their own distinct sense of identity, into one unified state proved to be quite challenging as proper and total representation of each and every community was not a feasible goal.

Additionally, the problem of accommodating refugees was also troubling the state government. Gopinath Bardoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam, in a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, expressed his concerns regarding the problems the state was increasingly facing with this unabated settling of East Pakistani refugees since the partition. To that, Nehru replied 'if Assam adopts a policy of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam for financial help would obviously suffer' (Sinha, 2007, p. 159). In the years that followed, the Central government seemed to maintain this attitude towards the region which slowly led its people to feel more and more alienated. Troubled by this unending influx, sections of Assamese population started criticising the Central government as

being apathetic towards the issue of preservation of their identity and their economic well-being.

But as mentioned before, the influx of 'outsiders' had been steadily going on for decades. There was no passionate mass mobilisation of the Assamese population, both tribal and non-tribal, to oppose said influx previously although intermittent anti-outsider sentiment was articulated. So, what changed now? The matter appears to be a case of late realisation and short-sightedness on the part of the Assamese leadership. When it was just the state government struggling to rehabilitate the massive influx of refugees or to deal with land encroachments by illegal immigrants, the bulk of the general population did not see it necessary to get involved directly in helping the state government convince the central government to put a check on the influx. It was only when they started seeing their own land and jobs being threatened by the presence of said 'outsiders', that they realised the critical nature of the issue.

Understanding the Identity of the Tribal Communities of Assam

It is necessary to discuss a few terms before moving forward with this study. The first concept to look into is that of 'identity' itself. According to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, the concept of 'identity' bears a hint of 'sameness or continuity of individual self-concepts through time' (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000, p. 6). A person's self-concept however, is usually a dependent variable – it depends on context and interaction. From a socio-cultural and political aspect, the concept of 'identity' tends to be closely attached to one's ethnicity which can be conceptualised as a social construct that encompasses various tangible aspects, such as a shared history, language, religion, customs or traditions. These aspects of ethnic identity allow differentiating between who belongs to their group and who does not (Wolff, 2007).

It is also necessary to understand the term 'indigenous'. According to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, indigenous people refer to the:

> *Descendants of the peoples who inhabited the land or territory prior to colonization or the establishment of State borders; they possess distinct social, economic and political systems, languages, cultures and beliefs, and are determined to maintain and develop this distinct identity; they exhibit strong attachment to their*

> *ancestral lands and the natural resources contained therein; and/or they belong to the non-dominant groups of a society and identify themselves as indigenous peoples.* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 3)

Francesco Capotorti, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in 1977, provided a definition of a 'minority group' as:

> *A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 2)

The Constitution of India in Article 29 regarding protection of interests of minorities, defines minority groups as 'any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own...'.

Therefore an indigenous ethnic minority may simply be defined as an ethnically distinct group of people who may have been naturally or forcibly marginalised in a particular geographical or conceptual space either in terms of their strength in number or in terms of their share in the power structure.

In this understanding, while ethnicity and indigeneity of a community for most parts can be considered a constant variable, the status of minority would be dependent on comparison and context. For example, in India, the Muslim population is officially considered to be a minority. In fact, whenever the term 'minority' is mentioned, most people often assume that it implies the Muslim community only. However, this assignment of exclusivity to a term is immensely limiting and flawed. The term minority refers to a status or state of being. It is not a fixed label that can only be claimed by a single group. This status is subject to change when put under different contexts and comparisons. So even if in context

of population in India, when put in contrast with the Hindu community, the Muslim community does qualify as a minority, however, if put in the context of world population, the Muslim community clearly becomes an indisputable majority community, being the second largest religious group in the world.

Similarly, while both the Bodo and Karbi tribal communities have a sizeable population in terms of existence in Assam, if put in the context of the number of members from any of these communities in positions of power or political representation in the state, then this number is disproportionately small. Therefore, it would not be wrong to refer to these tribal communities as a minority in the political scene of the state of Assam.

Impact of the Assam Movement on Indigenous Tribal Communities

In the 1979 mobilisation, even the indigenous tribal groups, such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Tiwas, amongst others came forward in support of the eviction of the foreigners and also participated in the movement. However, as the movement progressed, its nature started to get altered. The definition of 'who was an Assamese?' became narrower, and as stated by Uddipana Goswami, gradually came to be hijacked by the dominant Assamese-speaking Hindu community (Goswami, 2014, p. 6).

This growing chauvinism within the movement was criticised by Hiren Gohain as he pointed out that despite various episodes of violent mob attacks, the state and national leaders were keen on presenting a peaceful image of the movement. The Assamese press, according to Gohain, further aggravated the atmosphere of terror and anxiety by prevaricating the movement to justify it and make it more palatable to the public (Gohain, 1980). The movement also no longer remained focused on the issue of the eviction of illegal immigrants and transformed into an ethnic conflict between the Assamese-speaking, the Bengali-speaking and the many indigenous non-Assamese speaking communities. This garnered a lot of opposition and criticisms from political leaders and section of the public alike.

This noticeable obsession of the movement with the reinforcement of the Assamese identity left many indigenous ethnic communities feeling grossly alienated. The initial draw of the movement, owing to its aim to rid the land of illegal immigrants and to preserve the identity of its native residents, soon wore off. Although the movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985,

it left in its wake a host of unresolved ethnic unrest within the state. Despite starting out as a politically inspired movement, the Assam Movement had soon converted into a complex socio-political catalyst.

Indigenous ethnic communities of Assam like the Karbis and the Bodos felt more conscious of their own ethnic identity and the need to assert and preserve it. First, the language movements launched by the dominant Assamese-speaking community and later, the Assam Movement also led by the dominant Assamese-speaking community and their call to impose Assamese as the medium of instruction in all levels of education throughout the state and the attempts to enforce this upon the linguistic minorities, came to be perceived as a cultural threat, 'to "ASSAMISE" the linguistic minorities by wiping out their distinct language, culture, traditions and ways of life' (Action Committee of the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Separate State Demand Committee, 1993, pp. 49-54). The non-Assamese speaking communities were overwhelmed with indignance and the only solution they saw to end this marginalisation was in their separation from Assam. Thus, in the post-Assam Movement period, Assam witnessed an exponential increase in secessionist movements and anti-state militant organisations.

This feeling of alienation, however, did not manifest itself overnight. Most tribal communities, throughout the history of this region were never completely assimilated into the dominant Assamese-speaking community. Owing to their geographical isolation and inaccessibility of their habitation, they were able to maintain their distinct tribal culture (Hussain, 1987). Years of being at the periphery of the political, economic as well as social pursuits of the state, most non-Assamese speaking communities did not feel a full sense of belongingness towards the state. Assam's post-Independence history is laced with demands for separation and autonomy by various tribal communities.

Identity Consciousness and Assertion of the Bodo Tribal Community

One such tribal political organisation, known as All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL), had come into existence in 1933 with the objective of safeguarding the interest of the tribal communities residing in the Assam plains during India's struggle for independence. However, after Independence, the Tribal League gave up its political character and took to social and cultural matters and came to be known as Tribal Sangha. Dissatisfaction regarding the land settlement for

indigenous tribes and their lack of political representation however continued to exist.

In the second half of the 1960s, a secessionist movement was launched by the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) representing the indigenous hill tribes. On January 13, 1967, the Indian Government declared its decision to re-organise Assam on a federal structure within six months. Consequently, the indigenous plains tribes were also inspired to ride this political wave and raised the demand for an autonomous administrative unit for the plains tribes as well. The tribal leaders of the plains held a meeting at Kokrajhar on February 27, 1967 and formed an organisation known as Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) to take their demands for autonomy forward (Assam Police Department, Special Branch, 1970).

The PTCA, which was mostly led by the Bodo elites, was one of the first political organisations to shed light on the political marginalisation of the Bodo community. Right after its formation, in 1967, they submitted a memorandum to the President of India demanding for the 'separation of the northern tracts of certain districts of Assam' and the creation of separate administrative units for the plains tribes of Assam. On May 20, 1967, they submitted another copy to the then Home Minister Y.B. Chavan who had arrived on May 19, 1967 to address the demands of various communities regarding the re-organisation of Assam (The Assam Tribune, 1967). The party also contemplated to launch a mass movement for achievement of their demand for a separate autonomous unit, re-delimitation of Parliamentary tribal constituency, eviction of non-tribal people from tribal blocks and belts, etc. As the restlessness and dissatisfaction grew, the leaders, according to government reports, started giving inflammatory speeches on the policy of blood for blood, etc. A booklet captioned *Janajatir Tez Kiman Ranga* (How Red is the Blood of Tribals) written and published by two PTCA leaders invited the Communist Party to work among the tribal communities. Information was also recorded by the police about PTCA trying to manufacture guns and explosives in jungle hide-out in Goalpara district with the intention of staging an armed rebellion (Assam Police Department, Special Branch, 1970).

As a second stage to this political assertion, they launched an agitation for introduction of Bodo language as medium of instruction on February 28, 1968. There were a few cases of assaults and intimidation of non-tribal headmasters and teachers. The Bodo students also threatened to disrupt the School Leaving

Certificate Examination scheduled to be held soon. The agitation only stopped when the Government agreed to introduce Bodo language in the school up to the stage of class VI (ibid.).

In 1968, the PTCA boycotted the by-election in Kokrajhar (Goalpara) Parliamentary Constituency seat on the ground of unjustified delimitation of the constituency. On the date of polling, the PTCA volunteers interfered in the polling stations and started picketing in front of the polling booths. As a result of these disturbances, polling had to be suspended in 107 polling centers. A number of persons, including top leaders were arrested. The arrest of the PTCA members only further infuriated the tribal protestors who went on to protest more aggressively to the point where, in one instance, the police had to resort to lathi charge and firing. After the arrest of the top PTCA leaders and the repressive measures of the police, the by-election was successfully conducted at a later date, although very few Bodo people participated (ibid.).

On this, the Chief Minister at the time, B.P. Chaliha, was asked by Y.B. Chavan to look into the genuine grievances of the plains tribes and take appropriate action. Chavan emphasised the need for giving them 'a feeling of satisfaction that their genuine grievances were receiving sympathetic consideration from the government of Assam' (ibid.). However, the state government was unable to properly address this issue or send a proper report back on the matter and in time this issue went back to the side-lines.

In 1972, the PTCA, under its General Secretary, MLA Charan Narzary, submitted another similar memorandum repeating their demands for the creation of an Autonomous Plains Tribal Region, comprising of the northern tracts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Lakhimpur districts. It pointed out that these northern areas were all tribal inhabited areas and that the proposed autonomous region would only include those tribal areas. Accordingly, the State Government furnished a report comprising the *Development Schemes for the Welfare of the Scheduled Tribes (Plains) Implemented during the various Plan Periods* which summarised the various development schemes that were apparently in progress, contrary to the claims of the PTCA leaders (ibid.). Yet again the claims and demands of the Bodo community were gradually pushed back into the margins as the popularity of the PTCA also declined.

About six years later, when the Assam Movement was launched in 1979, it garnered enthusiastic support from almost all communities of Assam. The Bodo community's participation in the Assam Movement was led by prominent leaders like Upendranath Brahma and Prem Singh Brahma. While they supported the motive of the movement to evict illegal immigrants out of the electoral rolls and encroached lands, they were becoming increasingly wary of the direction the movement was seen to be moving towards.

The growing obsession of the movement with a narrow definition of Assamese identity and imposition of the Assamese language, against the backdrop of severe underdevelopment in the tribal areas, left a bitter taste for most of the indigenous non-Assamese speaking communities of Assam (Hussain, 1987). They criticised the irresponsibly aggressive methods of the Assamese leaders. They also condemned the AASU and AAGSP's boycott of the 1983 elections and criticised it as being a ploy to 'Assamise' the state government (Weiner, 1983, p. 280). When AASU leaders refused the demand of the All Bodo Students Association (ABSU) to acknowledge Bodo language as the Associate Official Language of Assam, it came as a huge disappointment to the community and gave them the impression that the AASU leaders were anti-Bodo. Distressed by the lack of opportunities and representation in the political sphere, and negligence and deprivation in the economic sphere, the Bodo-speaking community decided to bifurcate from the mainstream Assam Movement. This initiative was mostly spearheaded by the ABSU. The intention was not to disrupt the Assam Movement but to carry out a parallel movement that would assert their demand for autonomy as well as support the initial goal of the Assam Movement to oust the illegal immigrants (ABSU, 1987).

However, even amidst this strain, there were instances and efforts of unifying the masses of Assam by keeping aside their ethnic differences. Smt. Putali Kayastha, who was immensely active during the Assam Movement, recollected during an interview that there was both support and condemnation for the movement in the hearts of the Bodo and the Karbi communities and others as well. She mentioned that AASU and AAGSP both elicited different responses from the different non-Assamese speaking ethnic communities. AASU was unable to keep the non-Assamese speakers feel represented or satisfied. These communities were vehemently opposed to AASU and their functions within the tribal regions. However, AAGSP was successfully maintaining their position with the indigenous tribal communities. With the efforts of leaders like Nibaran Bora and

Prasenjit Brahma, many Bodos, Karbis and Rabhas not only supported but were also actively involved in the Assam Movement and many even sacrificed their lives as martyrs fighting for the cause. A delegation comprising of activists like Putali Kayastha, Jyotsna Sonowal, Paresh Barua, Ganesh Pegu, Binanda Deka, Iswar Barua, Gautam Bordoloi, Rajat Rabha, Mitradev Mahanta, Jagadish Patgiri and many more, travelled from corner to corner of Assam rallying support from all masses for the movement. They were able to win over large scale support and involvement from diverse communities (Kayastha, 2018).

After the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, situations only took a turn for the worse. Although there were Bodo signatories in the Assam Accord, they found a serious lack of provisions explicitly meant for safeguarding the interests of the tribal communities. The clauses which did indirectly have some semblance to tribal welfare or protection were very vague and susceptible to loopholes.

In the 1985 elections, the leaders of the Assam Movement became leaders of the state. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the erstwhile President of AASU, took the reins of the State Government as the Chief Minister. The people of Assam had high hopes now that power was in the hands of someone who emerged from among them, their aspirations would get the utmost attention and priority. However, it did not take long for the people to get disappointed and disillusioned with the new popular government. The diversity of communities that came together when participating in the Assam Movement was not reflected in the sharing of power of the new government. Most statements and recollections made on this phase of Assam history states that once they had secured positions of power in the state government, the new leadership quickly lost sight of its original goal that was the eviction of illegal migrants and efficient governance of the indigenous people of Assam. Similar to the propagated narrow definition of Assamese identity, the political scene also remained dominated by the already dominant Assamese-speaking community. According to Uddipana Goswami, the earlier imposition of Assamese language and the 'expressions of cultural and social superiority' by the Assamese-speaking Hindu community, created a potent anti-Assamese feeling among the non-Assamese speaking autochthonous communities (Goswami, 2014, p. 7).

On February 28, 1986, the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) issued a circular stating that learning the Assamese language would become mandatory for all Secondary School students. This was seen an imposition and further infuriated

the indigenous communities who no longer identified with what the Assamese identity had evolved into (ABSU, 1987).

Another significant development that deterred the common people from maintaining faith or getting more involved in the political scene was the emergence of militant secessionist organisations during and after the Assam Movement. Two of the most significant militant groups relevant to this study were the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), formed in 1979, and the Bodo Security Force (BdSF) formed in 1986. The modus operandi of both the groups was similar – wage an armed struggle for independence against the Government of India. According to police records, both groups also 'had bases in Myanmar, Bangladesh & Bhutan and with the blessing of the ISI who provided all sorts of logistical support for destabilising India by way of assisting in procurement of arms & explosives etc. from the international arms cartels' (Home and Political Department, 2014). The violence unleashed by these groups, especially ULFA, largely destabilised the internal security matters of the state to a point where during the end of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta's tenure as Chief Minister, in November 1990, the entire state of Assam was declared as 'Disturbed Area'.

Assam thus continued to be in a perpetual state of upheaval and tension ever since the launch of the Assam Movement and even after its supposed resolution. Being a part of a nation trying to rebuild its political and economic status after the ravages of colonialism, these disturbances and the inability of the state to resolve it, dealt heavy blows to the progress of the state which only added to the frustration of the general public. Thus, continued a vicious cycle of discontentment with the state.

Demand for a Separate State

Exhausted by the delay in progress and the feeling of betrayal amongst the Bodo community, especially due to their near exclusion from the political power-sharing, eventually led them to launch the Bodoland Movement in 1987. With ABSU at its helm, the movement demanded a separate state of Bodoland. The Bodoland Movement adopted and innovated on the lessons learnt from the Assam Movement itself; one of the most important lessons being that 'the state does not listen to peaceful petition making; noisy agitation was the only course of action if redress of grievances was sought' (Goswami, 2014, p. 8).

Goswami identifies two phases within the Bodo Movement. The first phase stemmed out of a feeling of betrayal when the Bodo community, who despite participating in the Assam Movement, found themselves to be ignored both in the Assam Accord and by the new government formed by their fellow Assamese-speaking agitators. This phase was pacified with the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993. The second phase stemmed out of frustration and disappointment from the inefficiency of the BAC settlement. This phase was finally subdued with a second settlement that is the Bodo Accord of 2003, also known as the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), which led to the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (Goswami, 2014).

The genesis of the Bodoland Movement can be attributed to Upendra Nath Brahma who led ABSU during the Assam Movement, and was later posthumously conferred the title of *Bodofa* (Father of the Bodos), and Premsingh Brahma who was actively involved with the AAGSP during the Movement. Forsaken by the post-Assam Movement developments, both the leaders realised that the only way to uplift the condition of the Bodo tribe was to take control over their own political and economic conditions; and in order to take this control, they had to form a separate autonomous state. Upendra Nath Brahma thus launched the demand for an equal (fifty-fifty) division of Assam to create a separate Bodoland. He claimed that the Bodo community had long been pushed to the margins by the Assamese leaders.

In the beginning of 1987, ABSU, with Upendra Nath Brahma as its president, submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi elucidating on their demands for a separate state, with the hopes that the young Prime Minister would be empathetic towards their genuine grievances. In the memorandum they stated that the Bodo community was one of the earliest settlers of the region along with some other Mongoloid tribes. Even the word 'Assam' had its roots in the Bodo language, asserts the document. During the Ahom rule, the Bodo speaking community was able to maintain their own separate niche of a kingdom. The memorandum also claimed that the people who did fit the current chauvinistic definition of Assamese, that is, the non-tribal Assamese-speakers, had actually only started arriving in the 13th and 14th century and were therefore 'Artificial Assamese'. In the words of ABSU:

> *...the present artificial Assamese captured Assam and its administration through the process of silent aggression and engulfment policy. The plains tribal people now want to regain the lost ownership and administration of Assam.* (ABSU, 1987)

They thus suggested that the state of Assam should be divided fifty-fifty and using the Brahmaputra river as the natural boundary, the Northern valley of the river should be given to the plains tribes. The memorandum also condemned the 'chauvinist', 'anti-tribal' and 'repressive' policies of the contemporary Assamese government.

In August of the same year, ABSU issued a booklet titled *Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty: Fifty three questions and answers* which reiterated the factors and basis of their demand for autonomy. Through the booklet, ABSU pointed out the various grievances of their tribal community and why the creation of a separate state was essential for the all-round protection and development of the plains tribal people of Assam. According to ABSU, their community had to be separated from the seemingly anti-tribal and repressive rule of the Assamese section. A separate state, it was hoped, would help protect the ethnic identity of the Bodos, enable them to preserve and flourish their language and culture, and make it possible for them to achieve equality of status, justice, constitutional rights, and political, economic and social self-determination. The booklet was supposed to address the most frequently asked questions related to their demand for separate state in an attempt to both justify and further clarify their aspiration. Most notably, through the booklet, ABSU clarified that their movement was not a secessionist one as they did not want to break away from India but only to organise themselves into a separate state or a union territory within the Indian nation. ABSU also expressed their support for the creation of a separate state of Karbi Anglong (ibid.).

In November, ABSU submitted yet another document to the then President, Prime Minister, and the Home Minister of India advocating for the creation of a separate state. This document was a book titled *Why Separate State?* which offered explanation of their demand including the historical background, reason, legitimacy, feasibility, and, the ethnic, linguistic and political factors justifying the creation of Bodoland (ibid.).

In a press conference in Mumbai in 1990, U.N. Brahma stated that most of the positions of power in the Assam Government, its officials, bureaucrats, ministers,

policemen, etc. were held by the Assamese people and hardly any by those belonging to the tribal groups. As a result, their tribe was facing gross negligence and suffering from lack of employment opportunities, land alienation, and the lack of proper educational facilities. He also pointed out that 'these economic plans or developmental schemes [that] are sorted out or chalked out, cannot be sincerely implemented in the true sense' under the non-tribal government and its bureaucrats, and hence the only 'solution is the separation, division of Assam and creation of separate state of Bodoland' (UN Brahma, video footage of interview, 2015).

The movement gradually became violent and fell prey to ethnic cleansing of the Assamese-speaking population in the Bodo dominated areas as well as brutal killings of Assamese administrative officers. This violence was mostly carried out by the Bodoland Security Force (BSF) under Ranjan Daimary and an armed branch of the ABSU called ABSU-Volunteer Force (ABSU-VF) or Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF). In 1990, Upendra Nath Brahma passed away leaving the Bodoland Movement without proper direction or leadership. In the meantime, the Congress party came back in power and with the aim to restore stability and appease the agitating masses, hastily drew up an agreement with the ABSU leaders. BSF was declared as a banned and unlawful militant association in 1992 by the Central Government. With the mediation of the Central Government, in 1993, the Assam Government and the ABSU leaders signed the Bodo Accord which laid the foundation for the formation of the BAC (Sinha, 2007).

However, this understanding was very short-lived as the demand for a separate state still held strong. The BSF, which had rechristened its political front as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), also took to carrying out their separatist demands vigorously (Institute for Conflict Management, 2001). The number of violent episodes of agitation increased exponentially. In 1996, Prem Singh Brahma, who was actively involved with the AAGSP during the Assam Movement, established the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF). In 1997 ABSU declared its intention to resume the demand for the creation of a separate state. The People's Democratic Front (PDF) sought the intervention of the United Nations in support of the Bodo Community (Sahni, 2002).

It is worth noting that while most of these groups shared similar grievances, their goals were not similar. While others aspired for the creation of a separate state

within India, NDFB aspired for a secessionist outcome – to create a sovereign state independent from India (Goswami, 2014).

In the 1997 elections, the AGP came back to power by forming alliances, with the PDF as one of the allies backed by NDFB. Both NDFB and BLT continued their violent means and the state witnessed brutal episodes of violence and ethnic cleansing in the Bodo-dominated areas.

Exhausted by the perpetual state of instability and law and order problems, the Central Government and the Assam Government finally signed another accord with the BLT – the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003. Through this memorandum, the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District was established which was to have almost similar powers as that of a state and minimum interference from the Assam Government. The Bodo leadership was given considerable political and administrative power under this agreement. Consequently, BLT surrendered arms and ended its separatist movement. NDFB continued its operations until the tripartite signing of the Bodo Peace Accord on January 27, 2020 with the Central and the State Governments (Jain & Kalita, 2020).

Examining the Role of *Identity* in Social Conflicts

The issue of identity, its assertion and preservation thus came to play a central role in the aftermath of the Assam Movement. Although the movement never explicitly went against any indigenous community, the threat of losing their identity was uniformly felt by the various groups. It is worth noting that the need for preserving ethnic identity exists in varying degrees among various communities depending on their strength in number and position of influence in multicultural India. For instance, communities which do not necessarily face any direct challenge to their existence or position as a whole usually do not experience a need to actively safeguard their ethnic identity.

Here, it would be helpful to understand the concept of 'thymos' adopted by Francis Fukuyama from the Platonian tripartite theory of the soul, where the term basically means 'spiritedness' or loosely, the 'competitive spirit'. In the context of identity, Fukuyama defines 'thymos' as the 'the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity'. In the same lines, 'isothymia is the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people, while megalothymia is the desire to

be recognised as superior' (Fukuyama, 2018, p. iv). Most social movements or identity movements in India seem to stem from isothymia. The main issue that most marginalised communities base their movements upon is either erasure or mistreatment of their identities in the social sphere or negligence or exclusion in the economic or political spheres.

There is also a factor of relative perception when it comes to interpreting a socio-political movement. The Assam Movement, for instance, through the perspective of the Assamese-speaking community putting forward their demands to the Central Government, would seem as an isothymic movement. However, from the perspective of the marginalised indigenous communities of Assam, with the demands of Assamese to be declared the state language, the denial of other languages like Bodo from being declared the associate state language, and the concentration of administrative, educational, and economic positions of privilege in the hands of mostly the non-tribal people, the Assam Movement seemed like a megalothymic movement.

It can be safely assumed that a person's quality of life is influenced by the cultural identity he or she is affiliated to. The strong feeling of cultural in-group thus generated is also accompanied by a strong guardedness against the cultural out-group. No matter what the essence of the grievances may be, be it negligence, deprivation, political or economic oppression, or even targeted violence, but in order for a social movement to take shape, there has to be a sense of shared or collective identity among the ostracised group of people. This collective identity may be an 'imagined' one where, as propounded by Benedict Anderson, despite never having met or known each and every member personally, a group of people may share a sense of belongingness and 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006, p. 5).

The leaders of both Assam's State Government and the Assam Movement were mostly unable to maintain the trust or confidence of the diverse indigenous communities. This feeling of discontent with the Assamese speaking community was already brewing amidst these communities, but the increasingly chauvinist nature of the Assam Movement seemed to be the last nail in the coffin of unity and coexistence within the state, as is evident in the numerous memoranda, publications, public speeches, and oral testimonies emerging from these communities. And as stated by Fukuyama, no economic or political threat can elicit a similar scale of mass mobilisation as a threat to the collective identity of

the group. It is the idea of belonging to one imagined community that awakens and unites its members transcending all other social or class disparities.

After all, identities compete for expression (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000). When any of the groups feel that the expression of their identity is subdued under the 'mainstream' discourse, there develops a feeling of an identity crisis. The anxiety surrounding this feeling of identity crisis often manifests itself in the form of identity movements and social movements. In case of the Assam Movement, on one hand, the question of identity united a large section of the Assamese population but on the other hand, the assertion of the Assamese identity also muffled the voices of the ethnic communities of the state and caused them to drift further apart from the larger Assamese-speaking community.

REFERENCES:

Action Committee of the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Separate State Demand Committee. (1993). Memorandum demanding an autonomous state comprising Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts in Assam, under the provision of Article 244(A) of the Constitution of India - Submitted to the Prime Minister of India (1980). In P.S. Datta, *Autonomy movements in Assam (Documents)* (Edition I) (pp. 49 - 54). New Delhi: Omsons Publications.

All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). (1987). *A Memorandum to Shri Rajiv Gandhi, the Honourable Prime Minister of India, New Delhi, on the Long-standing Demands of the All Bodo Students' Union*. Kokrajhar: ABSU.

All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). (1987). *Divide Assam fifty-fifty: Fifty three questions and answers*. Kokrajhar: ABSU.

All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). (1987). *Why separate state?* Kokrajhar: ABSU.

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised Edition). London: Verso.

Assam Police Department, Special Branch. (1970). A note on the Plains Tribal Council of Assam. *Home Confidential File No S.B. XI/20/70*. Assam.

Church, R. (1969). Roots of separatism in Assam hill districts. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *4*(17), 727-732.

Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment.* London: Profile Books Ltd.

Gohain, H. (1980). Cudgel of chauvinism. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *15*(8), 418-420.

Goswami, U. (2014). *Conflict and reconciliation: The politics of ethnicity in Assam.* New Delhi: Routledge.

Government of Assam. (1954, May 31). *Memorandum to the State Reorganisation Commission - Submitted to the State Reorganisation Commission*. New Delhi.

Hussain, M. (1987). Tribal movement for autonomous state in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *22*(32), 1329-1332.

Jain, B., & Kalita, P. (2020, January 27). Centre signs tripartite peace accord with Bodo representatives. *The Times of India.*

Kayastha, S.P. (2018, January 4). Personal Interview conducted at her Guwahati Residence regarding herexperiences related to the Assam Movement. (T. Mahanta, Interviewer).

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2010). *Minority rights: International standards and guidance for implementation.* New York and Geneva: United Nations.

Royal Commission on Labour in India. (1931). *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India-Presented to the Parliament by Command of His Majesty.* London: His Majesty's Stationary Office.

Sahni, A. (2002). Survey of conflicts & resolution in India's Northeast. *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict & Resolution*, *12*, 39-112.

Sinha, S.P. (2007). *Lost opportunities: 50 years of insurgency in the North-east and India's response.* New Delhi: Lancer Publishers.

Stryker, S., Owens, T.J., & White, R.W. (2000). *Self, identity, and social movements.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The Assam Tribune. (1967, May 20). Search for a solution of hills problem: Chavan arrives in Gauhati today. *The Assam Tribune*, pp. A1, A8.

Weiner, M. (1983). The political demography of Assam's anti-immigrant movement. *Population and Development Review*, *9*(2), 279-292.

Wolff, S. (2007). *Ethnic conflict: A global perspective.* Oxford University Press.

Web sources:

Mwdan Owary Youtube Channel. (2015). *U N Brahma (video footage of interview).* Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDkNmCix6YM

State Reorganisation Commission. (1955). *Report of the State Reorganisation Commission.* Retrieved from The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) – Official Website, Government of India: http://mha.nic.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/State%20Reorganisation%20Commisison%20Report%20of%201955_270614.pdf

Home and Political Department. (2014). *Important dates.* Retrieved from Assam Police Department – Official website: https://police.assam.gov.in/about-us/detail/important-dates

Institute for Conflict Management. (2001). *National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB).* Retrieved from South Asia Terrorism Portal: https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/ndfb.htm

Wild Films India Youtube Channel. (2017, July 27). *Assam: The current political scene – Archival footage of Assam Accord 1985.* Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZLY8GdFBIQ

Tonoya Mahanta *is an M.Phil. Research Scholar at the Department of History, Gauhati University.*
Email id: tonoyamahanta@gmail.com
Barnali Sarma *is Associate Professor in the Department of History, Gauhati University.*
Email id: barnalisarma11@gauhati.ac.in

Yogendra Singh in conversation with Dev Nath Pathak and Biswajit Das

[Transcript of the interview held on January 15, 2018]

Introduction

Yogendra Singh (1932-2020), the founder Professor of Center for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, and author of a well-known book titled *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, passed away during the pandemic lockdown in 2020. Two sociologists from varied generations namely Biswajit Das and Dev Nath Pathak had conducted an elaborate interview with Yogendra Singh in 2019. The edited interview brings forth the issues that were central in the intellectual journey of Yogendra Singh. Nostalgia, reveries, repartees, defense, and moments of self-critical realisations are milestones in this conversation. Many questions were tangentially answered. And many others were left unanswered. The key takeaway was however the re-affirmation of the dictum: sociological practice of the professional sociologists is a product of historical encounters and it would be adjudged for the vision it entailed.

This conversation is more than a mere tribute to an institution builder and one of the original thinkers in Sociology in India.

Biswajit Das (BD): What kind of vision did you have initially when you came to Delhi and you were asked to setup the center (CSSS, JNU)? What was the idea behind it?

Yogendra Singh (YS): Actually various centers in JNU were envisioned as multi-disciplinary centers. The focus of the disciplines in the school of social sciences was regional studies. Prof. Moonis Raza and his team emphasised geography and regional area studies; and at that time economics did not exist. Economics comes later but scholars with interest in it were there.

Dev Nath Pathak (DNP): How do you come into picture?

YS: The second important center was of course CSSS, and the science policy center and regional center had already come into existence. My coming was an interesting story because I was not in Delhi. I was in Jodhpur and G. Parthasarthi, the Vice-Chancellor was looking for someone to head the center dedicated to sociological studies; the JNU ordinance provided for founding new centers in the

university only if there was a competent group. There was no selection committee at that time. There had to be a Head of Department to chair such a selection committee. There was none, so it was not through a selection committee. This was around 1971, or perhaps 1972. Before that I was at Jodhpur University.

DNP: What was the vision with which you joined?

YS: G. Parthasarthi sent me a postcard saying he wanted to see me. When I went to meet him, he had all my books on his table. Parthasarthi was a very meticulous person. He was recommended about my name, but meanwhile he wanted to explore and ensure that eligibility. So I think he had talked to half a dozen of scholars in India about me, which I got to know later.

DNP: *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, your famous book, had come already?

YS: Yes it had come. *Modernization of Indian Tradition* was a product of my frustration with the social sciences at that time. It was very interesting. I was teaching social change in Jaipur, in Rajasthan University for four to five years; I used to look for material to teach about India; most of the available materials were from America!

DNP: This must be late 1960's.

YS: Yes, the village studies and community studies were the important areas. There was no single writing which could encompass the entire country as a unit; as a result, a long standing understanding was that India was a fragmented reality, not an organic whole. This was perpetuated by the colonial influence; primarily, the British influence and the Census of India only enhanced this mistaken idea (of fragmented India). In Census, there was some rethinking. In a seminar in Delhi, Prof. VKRV Rao read a paper, and so did I, followed by a group discussion. Prof. Rao edited the discussion in a book form later. In that discussion, during the seminar, there was a division between the Chicago orientation and the Left Liberal orientation. The Chicago approach was purely laissez-faire approach and the Indian approach was of planned development. Anyway, in the discussion a Professor in Economics, who joined as a member of planning commission later, vigorously pleaded for giving up planning in India. Raj Krishna criticised it and I delivered a long defense of Raj Krishna's criticism of the Chicago approach to India.

DNP: Some of us feel that it's only today that one gets frustrated with sociology but it's nice to hear that even in 1960s and 70s it was frustrating, and you responded to that creative frustration!

YS: My orientation was from the Department of Economics at Lucknow University. There was no exclusive department of sociology at that time. There was a however a Department of Social Anthropology which Prof D.N. Majumdar was heading. So sociology was taught as a part of economics.

DNP: Since Radhakamal Mukherjee's time at Lucknow University?

YS: Yes. Sociology unfolded through Rural Economics and village studies. My own interest was in literature. It was my first preference.

DNP: English literature?

YS: As a subject for study, for creative work, literature appealed to me right since early graduation days. I did my Bachelors in Arts in English literature, Hindi literature and Economics. In fact, I joined Department of English at Lucknow University as a student in Economics and started listening to lectures in English department because I had read critical Greek writings, Shakespearian tragedies, etc. I was hardly excited by lectures in my own department, the Department of Economics.

DNP: Was it ever dry and boring Economics?

YS: Yes, in English too within a week I got frustrated because most of the literature of the teachers was more dramatic than intellectual. They would excessively dramatise, that made me a little unhappy. So what could I do? I was not happy in literature, which was my first choice. A floor down was where D.P. Mukherjee, the famous sociologist, was the Head of the Department of Economics! I came down, figuratively, and told Prof. Mukherjee all my travails and he said, 'Ok young man, I will admit you, but I will admit you not to pure Economics'. It is because Economics had two branches, Pure-Economics and Economics with Philosophy and Sociology. It was called B-Stream. The former was called A-Stream.

DNP: That's the layer in the story.

YS: So he said, 'I will admit you to B-Stream'. 'Thank you sir', I said. So I joined Economics, with Sociology as my major. That time in sociology, the main

primary teachers were Dr. A.K. Saran, other than D.P. And Dr. Saran was a Philosopher and Sociologist at once; he was the most philosophical and tradition oriented in his lectures. The other courses were purely on the economics side. Lucknow University permitted the students to go to the other departments and to take courses. So I took a course taught by Prof. D.N. Majumdar in anthropology, as well as another course with Dr. Kali Prasad in psychology.

DNP: So if I can bring you back to the first question, you came from Lucknow school, if one can call it a 'School', since T.N. Madan in some of his essays considered it a problematic usage. Be that as it may, Lucknow sociology was vibrant and you imbibed an idea about what sociology should be doing in India. You also interjected and read about the debate on Indology and Sociology. If I am not wrong, you defended Dr. A.K. Saran's seemingly nationalist ideas. And that explains your commitment to the idea of planned economy in India.

YS: The important factor was that British Anthropology was taught an approach to sociology was which was ambiguous; for example, Oxford and Cambridge never started sociology as a department. It was only in London School of Economics that sociology happened. The Cambridge and other older institutions had a bias against sociology; it influenced the Lucknow University too. So we were oriented to a combination of sociology and economics.

DNP: With philosophy and psychology?

YS: Yes. My own orientation was in empirical studies. I remember after my coursework, when I had to plan for Ph.D. I was confused as what to do and where to work? The only other person I could approach was Dr. A.K. Saran. However, he was not interested in empirical studies. He believed in philosophical approach and particularly in a very conservative manner, the *Sanatan Dharma* (a Hindu social ideology). The *dharma* became an important factor in his views if one wanted to study social structure and ideas; the study of tradition was important. I wanted to do empirical work with my experience of growing up in a village-based joint *zamindar* (landowning) family.

DNP: Where is the village?

YS: It is in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh called Chaukhara. And I saw how change took place in the village, how the old regime of landlords was replaced and new forms of leadership emerged through elections. Like many others, we witnessed the emergence of the Congress leadership, and other leadership

replacing them, and how a conflict situation stemmed in the village. The older order and new order, the Congress party and the other political party, gave a sense of dynamics. I wanted to further explore it in systematic study. I told Dr. Baljeet Singh because he was the only man in the department with an orientation in sociology and economics both. His first reaction was, 'Go and meet Dr. Saran'. I said, 'No sir. I do not want to work on theoretical or philosophical areas. I have come to you because you have done empirical field work'. He laughed and consented. That was how my study of the village started; I chose six villages based on the land settlement pattern. Sociology to me is a very challenging discipline and that is why Indian Sociology came through the British and American influences.

DNP: A village study, then, was also inspired by the American community studies?

YS: Well, that did not penetrate into India. Only much later the community studies came. Village studies as community studies and community development projects.

BD: The person who promoted village studies was himself a community studies expert at Cornell University and he became the first Ford Foundation Chief in India. (Unable to recall the name) he became a close friend of Pundit Nehru, the Prime Minister, and through him actually he pursued the idea of community development projects in India!

DNP: I wanted to know that in those initial years at CSSS, how was it for you to establish a brand new sociology? How was the collegial environment and how could you pursue your own orientation? Was it difficult?

YS: I joined as a Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences when CSSS was an idea. Subsequently, I was appointed the Chairperson of CSSS. The important thing was how to start the courses? How to formulate the courses and how to have a faculty which is collectively oriented enough; there were very few people at that time. J.S. Gandhi and T.K. Oommen were there in the school. Others joined too. They were not like-minded because their orientations were different and they had autonomy. As the chairman, I gave them full autonomy. Diversity in methodology, courses and empirical traditions of work influenced the faculty. However, we were free to formulate courses under the framework of the overall development of India. India had a vision and the vision about intellectual progress. All interpretations of India were colonial as the only source was the

census. I was aware of that limitation and the idea was to liberate it. Liberation to me, and to our small group, meant not disassociation, but creative association; that is, we have to offer you something and you can offer us meaningful things. It is not only one way that you give us knowledge and we go out peddling and saving it.

India must generate its own sociological tradition, intellectual orientation in social sciences and it must relate this knowledge to the actual problems in the country and offer solutions.

DNP: Safe to say, CSSS at that point was by and large positivist in methodology, approach and its contributions. It was a positivist tradition that came from somewhere else?

YS: It could not come from outside. Most of the American writing about India was community studies, because it was haunting them in the US. In India, the British tradition was trying to continue and they had an advantage. Yet another was the German tradition, the Weberian and Kantian influence in India. By the time I came to sociology, all these orientations had begun to be visible. More particularly, they influenced the ideas of Sociology in India. The idea of sociology emerged from this multiplicity.

DNP: But French tradition then benefitted Indian Sociology more than any other, given that Louis Dumont became a sublime ghost for most of the sociologists!

YS: Well indirectly, Durkheim and the following practices in sociology, and alongside, the German tradition came through Kant and Max Weber. So the Indian Sociology had the influence of the German as well as other traditions.

BD: The American influence perhaps cannot be denied. Your writings inform us about the pre-sociological terrain. Even the idea of inter-disciplinarity is owed to the American social science.

YS: The problem is that when you look at sociology and intellectual tradition, Britain does not offer a model. The British universities laughed at sociology as a discipline. If at all, they only taught *sexology* (about sex and marriage). These were the only two realities that sociologists dealt with. The only help that came from the British to sociology was London School of Economics.

BD: Not anthropologist like M.N. Srinivas?

YS: It was only London School of Economics, and the influence was that of Karl Mannheim. Sociology thus became an economics-oriented pursuit. D.P. Mukherjee was deeply interested in the ethics.

BD: What about D.N. Majumdar?

YS: Prof. Majumdar joined the Department of Economics at Lucknow and he ironically taught monetary economics to other graduate students. Acharya Narendra became the Vice-Chancellor, and noticed the problem. Prof. D.N. Majumdar was known for empirical studies, tribal studies and he was the only anthropologist who mapped the tribal life in India. He had a few volumes of published works, and one of them was *Tribe in Transition*. It is a very important work. So Acharyaji created a Department of Anthropology and shifted D.N. Majumdar from economics to anthropology department. I was an M.A. student at that time. He was a humorous and non-serious teacher. A teacher who was very learned in empirical analysis fieldwork data, but not oriented towards the theoretical framework and issues of sociology and anthropology.

BD: Why was that sociologists in India emphasised on village? As a result, anthropology more or less collapsed. Today if you look at India, there is hardly any proper anthropology department, so to say.

YS: The main problem was about pedagogy, of teaching and learning anthropology in India. In fact, anthropology departments do not want to have any relation with sociology. If you are an anthropologist, you will be so busy doing your field work and this is what Prof. D.N. Majumdar did. He was the only man who started studying the tribes and the Jaunsar Bawar became a very famous area for gender studies; gender and tribal groups became a burning topic. I remember I was a student. But D.N. Majumdar was not a great teacher. He was not very articulate.

DNP: Whereas D.P. Mukherjee was a legendary teacher?

YS: He was a very good teacher. D.P. Mukherjee was a contrast because I used to attend his lectures and I was his student in anthropology. Whatever we expected from Prof. D.N. Majumdar, we used to get from D.P. One only expected fun from D.N. Majumdar. He would come with a big book by the anthropologist called Herskovits. It was a big-fat book on anthropology. He would bring this book and put it on the table, and open and read one and a half page. Then he would go to

his anecdotal social sciences and we would have lot of fun. That is what Majumdar was. We liked him because he was a great field worker.

DNP: At some point, you engaged with the idea of South Asia in social sciences. Was there some kind of regional consciousness at CSSS that one had to go beyond India in sociology? I am not referring to the hollow claims of internationalism.

YS: Well, I think the idea of taking sociological studies beyond India did not gel much in India because here was so much within India itself that anyone who was engaged in the studies in India, did not think of communities beyond India.

DNP: So there was a regional blindness prevalent in sociology in India? Did sociologists ever engage with the scholars from Sri Lanka, Pakistan who were very important at that point of time; any engagement even with Nepal?

YS: One reason that I can easily think of is the politics of partition of the country. It is because that biased the mindset of how one looked at the region. Region, instead of being seen as a sociological entity, began to be seen as a communal entity; so this communal orientation of the Hindu-Muslim distorted the trajectories of integrating regional realities with all India national sociological reality; the language was another issue, one has to know so many languages. It is very difficult to study so many languages for anthropologists as some had to learn tribal language in order to study them.

DNP: That is a valid challenge, but one can expect academic partnership with like-minded scholars from other university in South Asia!

YS: I told you about the partition and communal tension. Dhaka for instance is close to west Bengal. The Bengalis hardly like to associate with non-Bengalis.

DNP: But even non-Muslim countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka (if we can consider them so looking at majority-minority demography) did not attract Indian sociologists and anthropologists.

YS: Sri Lanka has a very different problem and because I have worked in Sri Lanka, I know the coastal areas.

DNP: Colombo! Candy?

YS: Beyond Candy, the Buddhist area, you see the great Buddha statues if you travel further. There is different orientation. The coastal Sri Lanka is more

westernised. The Candian area is typically Buddhist and beyond Candy, you have Buddhist-tribal mix, which goes up to the end of Jaffna side. There is variety of orientations and the self-consciousness among the scholars of Sri Lanka; they look at India as a big brother. They were extreme isolationists. When I worked for one week in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan radio Ceylon published an editorial, something like, *What are the Indian anthropologists doing in Sri Lanka?* Such suspicion; why have they come?

DNP: It could be the case. So, it means there was some kind of sociological nationalism at CSSS, a territory-bound intellectual consciousness!

YS: I don't think that way. Sociology is a circumscribed by other factors. For instance, if we think of Sri Lanka, Indians were looked at with suspicion.

DNP: But did researchers in sociology take up various thematic issues showing any interest in region beyond India at CSSS?

YS: Yes, right from the beginning, when I was given the freedom to appoint people at the centre. There was an idea of multi-disciplinary interest. Gradually, it has weakened but not disappeared at CSSS.

DNP: Weakened in what sense?

YS: Weakened in the sense that the depth of studies of region, and varieties (of issues), has not happened to the expected extent. I hope it will change.

DNP: It has become too politically correct, too safe. Nobody wants to take an intellectual risk. Why is that?

YS: No, I don't think intellectual tradition and politics are two different streams of thought. They become more creative and productive (when correlated). Politics immediately gets stratified as soon as it enters into the intellectual tradition because it means multiple boundaries. There is a contradiction between the two, to my mind, and I don't think one spills negative consequence on the other. They exist independently.

DNP: I hope you are not simply defending the centre you founded?

YS: No, that is not the case.

DNP: Did you see much value in the writings by the scholars at CSSS? Could they all further the intellectual departure that you envisioned?

YS: One reason that I can think of is that each generation is oriented to knowledge and studies in a different manner. For instance, when I was writing *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, I was bothered about the uni-modality of interpreting India in the western writings. We witnessed this in British and American writings. This was a limited vision, and I revolted against it. Now there was a generation oriented to this phenomenon sensitively. But when you become independent country and have your own system, you become a little lazy and cocksure about yourself. You don't feel bothered about anything! That is what is happening with the later generation; it is not bothered about anything.

BD: When we say we indigenise, we try to develop a sense of Indianness and the Indian identity; if at all, in the name of South Asia, it is actually India all over the world. It is because India is relatively more documented. Other countries such as Sri Lanka and Nepal are less documented in comparison with India.

YS: Yes it is less significant for them.

BD: This is why institutions will collapse; every institution undergoes ups and downs.

DNP: Even the individual publications lack the requisite risk in formulating refreshing propositions. Nobody wants to take up the devil's perspective unless it pays back, instantly, well.

YS: I think it is very speculative situation. But much of this is because of the dynamics of social science knowledge itself and its relation with the society. I think the relationship with social sciences, with society is changing because of the changes in the economy, market, employment structure and over all orientation. There are the new institutional areas that we did not anticipate at that time, but they are the challenge today. The social scientists will have to come together and work out some models and methods so as to understand how to accommodate this reality. Market is such an important force that no one can reject. Unfortunately it is not being done. It will have to be done by some committed and concerned people, and that is what we need.

DNP: So you are hopeful that one can still continue to believe in the dream of decolonising sociology in India?

YS: Well, two or three things happened which did not happen in my time. One thing was that what we call colonial influence has weakened so much that they

really do not matter and secondly, they are not interested. They themselves are indifferent because there are other major factors, which have come into play.

DNP: But there can be new colonial masters who can re-colonise the former colonies, intellectually and academically?

YS: I don't think any new colonial master can emerge because of the dynamics of change, movement, market and mobility – all these new factors are there. So these liberate individual from control.

BD: What I am trying to say is that at least there was a purpose to contest the colonial claims so as to develop a counter narrative, a nationalist claim. That category has weathered away. What we find now is that there are various kinds of indifferences masquerading as schools of thought. What is happening in India at the moment is that the academic celebrities are only translating the previously formulated ideas and re-selling them as original or counter-narrative. There is a lack of substance. They are sellable as they are accepted in the West as if they were true representatives of the Indian scholarship.

YS: There were always such scholars accepted by the West as per the western interest. Now even that is declining; as they have so many other issues to resolve. For example, nuclear issue is there. Issue of distributive justice is there. These issues are taking new shapes, and hence some motives and patterns of thought are self-limiting in nature. It fails to penetrate or touch the heart of the matter. It marginally touches our mind, but hardly overwhelms. I think there should be a group of like-minded scholars, working out the thematic areas and write.

BD: Why is it not happening?

YS: It should; in case it does not, intellectuals can alone be effective.

DNP: Lastly, how did you individually as a scholar respond to the political situation in which JNU was implicated in the early years? What kind of response emerged from CSSS? Was JNU considered anti-national even then?

YS: JNU was never anti-national. It could not be because right from the beginning, JNU has been built on the base of nationalism and internationalism. The political situation in JNU during the National Emergency of 1975 was interesting. During that time my faculty and staff were very supportive of me and felt that whatever I was doing was in the goodwill of everyone and they were very cooperative of it. I was in the administration at that time. I was given the

Deanship and there was a problem in terms of admission of the students. The protest was due to the involvement of the government in the selection of the students for admission purposes. The students started protest and house-arrested the registrar and the VC and many others. I made sure during my time that both the students and the administration reconciled and agreed to re-admit the students because of which the protest was taking place.

DNP: Else, for all practical purposes, JNU was thoroughly nationalist, and that may have impacted the sociological agenda too, which we have discussed in this conversation. We thank you Prof. Singh for your time and wonderful conversation.

Dev Nath Pathak is Assistant Professor at The South Asian University, New Delhi.
Email id: dev@soc.sau.ac.in
Biswajit Das is the founding Professor & Former Director of Center for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.
Email id: biswas.das@gmail.com

Normality is an illusion: Crisis is not

--- Amit Singh

Commentary

The disruption of daily life, due to COVID-19 pandemic in India, reminded me of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's shock decision in November, 2016 to scrap 86% of India's currency (demonetisation); the abrupt disappearance of cash crippled supply chains and led to system-wide job cuts, which made life worse for the poorest in India – disrupted their normal lives – in a similar manner, this health pandemic is also affecting. Due to COVID, Indian state, like others, faced an abnormal situation-suspension of normality. What does normality mean for the marginalised Indian population? Whom does normality serve? We need to ask this question.

Well, for the millions of daily wage workers 'normality' may be an illusion. During the Indian lockdown, hundreds of migrant workers have died and disappeared from the surface of society without any trace. What normality would have meant for them, I just wonder! Professor Boaventura de sousasantos (2020) thinks their lives were not an exception to normal situation. Daily wage labours, vegetable sellers, poor farmers, street vendors, homeless people – all are part of this normality of exception. They have been living in dire situation – abnormal life – being normal for them. These people from abject spaces, as Julia Kristeva (1982) would call them, survive on meagre daily wages, face police violence and receive apathy of general society on a daily basis; possibly normality is just an illusion for them.

India's nationwide lockdown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has critically dislocated its migrant population. The pandemic is not a crisis situation clearly opposed to a normal situation; for thousands of migrant's workers, unable to cope with hunger, were forced to walk to their villages, hundreds of kilometers, barefoot, with no food, and transportation shut down – with some dying during the journey – this crisis is permanent; they are not an exception of this so-called normality. They have already felt the disruption of their daily lives so many times that 'normality' has lost meaning for them.

Their lives have been hijacked by discourse of normality; making it appear that they are living a normal life like most of their compatriots. However, the fact is that they have been trapped in the circle of crisis by the State, by the Corporate, by the privileged middle classes. Mainly living in slums, they feel the crisis through extreme poverty, starvation, disease, and wage inequality; crisis, being an essential part of their lives, where the idea of 'normal life' is absent.

They are the invisible foundation of visible societies on which nation and state stand; from manual scavenging to farming, without them, Indian society would not function. For 450 million of India's informal sector's workers, life was never normal. Their existence mattered to the Indian State – I seriously doubt it. With no health insurance, poor working condition, crammed living conditions, lack of social security and low wages, their lives have always been in a permanent state of crisis – even in so called 'normal times.'

During the lockdown, it was mainly the dead bodies of the hungry, the poor, the beggars, the unemployed, the migrant workers, women and children, were scattered all over the country. Even in normal times, they have been dying like that, due to starvation, lack of health care, malnourishment, burden of debt, state violence and caste discrimination. Nevertheless, it was during these abnormal times when their deaths get more attention and sympathy. However, those who are alive, would gradually die because of unemployment, rising inflation and inability to buy food. Paradigm shift, necessary for social change, is yet to happen in the Indian society.

Indeed, the pandemic has deeply disrupted the lives of millions globally; however, it was the incapability of the leadership to deal with the pandemic efficiently which has exacerbated this crisis. Organised governmental chaos in India has led the humanitarian crisis of an epic proportion, has reproduced existing inequalities and exclusion of the marginalised population.

These are the times when the capability of the States to secure basic needs for their vulnerable population is being tested to the core. In such crisis, an effective leadership could navigate society away from impending disaster, like leadership in Portugal and New Zealand did.

However, unlike India, in Portugal, a humane approach was adopted in dealing with the pandemic; people were given ample time to settle before national emergency was enforced, no one was brutalised by the police, and public transportation was totally free for all. However, I was sad to see that in Lisbon (where I stayed during the lockdown) how some Asian communities' members, primarily Bengali Indians (Martin Muniz area), Pakistanis and Chinese businessmen exploited their Asian employees. Less payment, long hours of work, firing employees without any pay, coercion, disregarding work contract, are some of the human rights abuses. During the lockdown, Asian immigrant workers have suffered at the hands of their Asian employers. But, in normal times, they suffer the same fate on a daily basis. Normality, probably, is an illusion for them, but crisis is not. Pain, agony and frustration arising out of the crisis is very real for them.

Finally, it can be said that COVID-19 pandemic, maybe by nature is exceptional and temporary to the ruling elites and middle classes, however, for the millions of the poor Indian migrant workers, crisis is permanent. Pandemic has exposed the fault lines of fragile Indian society. It certainly has shown the Indian migrant workers that they are unwanted in their own country. How much such societies are able to sustain the forces of volatile disruption, only time will tell. COVID-19 pandemic may have redefined the 'idea of normality' to the privileged one, but for the excluded, marginalised and discriminated, comfortability of normality is just an illusion.

REFERENCES:

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Power of horror: An essay on abjection*. Translated by Roudiez, L. Columbia University Press: New York. Retrieved from https://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/touchyfeelingsmaliciousobjects/Kristevapowersofhorrorabjection.pdf

Santos S, B. (2020). *Black Issues in Philosophy: Virus that is solid melts into air*. Blog of the American Philosophical Association (APA). Retrieved from https://estudogeral.uc.pt/bitstream/10316/89211/1/Virus_all%20that%20is%20solid%20melts%20into%20air.pdf

Amit Singh is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at the Centre of Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal.
Email id: amitsingh@ces.uc.pt

Book Review: *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (2018) by Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, Ather Zia and Cynthia Mahmood (Eds)

Author(s): Yogesh Mishra

Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 4 (2), October 2020, pp. 176-180

Published by: Indian Sociological Society

BOOK REVIEW

Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, Ather Zia and Cynthia Mahmood (Eds), *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 312 pp., ₹ 5,775 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780812249781.

--- Yogesh Mishra

Kashmir conflict is one of the prolonged conflicts in the South Asia region. The history of Kashmir has always been seen with a distinctive cultural and historical consciousness. Though the sociological studies and literature on history and politics of the region abounds, ethnographic research on Kashmir is very limited. As Lorraine Dowler writes, 'We need first-hand research, not filtered, received material. We must conduct work in places where conflicts are occurring' (Dowler, 2001, p. 421). In this direction, *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (2018) offers a range of perspectives to fill the gap by contributing essays from a wide range of fields grounded in ethnographic tradition.

The Introduction chapter opens up with a poem, a poem of resistance, setting the tone of the book and charts out the trajectory of the conflict. The editors (Bhan, Duschinski, and Zia) nicely weave the historical facts with contemporary images of protests and culture of resistance. They have worked towards detailing the complex nature of the conflict, informing the readers about a 'new generation that has pursued the freedom movement through hybrid forms of

opposition, combining local poetry, art, fiction, and literature with global models of cultural production and resistance' (2018, p. 3). As the authors seek to 'point towards alternative ways of conceptualizing the past, present, and future of Kashmir' (ibid., p. 5), each chapter in the book examines different aspects of the Kashmir conflict. The novelty of this book lies in theorising the experiences embedded in the quotidian that provides an important entry point into the everyday lives of Kashmiri people.

Duschinski and Hoffman, in the first chapter, open the discussion with reference to judicial-legal system. The essay analyses the emergence of legal spaces like *Majlis-e-Musawarat* and its role in contemporary Kashmiri society. The authors write about the changing landscape of Kashmiri struggle in terms of newly emerging forms of legal agency and the rise of legal consciousness (ibid., p. 68).

Extending the analysis of militarised spaces and a presence of ubiquitous violence, Saiba Varma, a medical anthropologist, critically examines the paradigm of psycho-social trauma, suffering, and PTSD, analysing

political claims. She shows how politics of language in the construction of trauma plays a crucial role in blurring boundaries between victims and perpetrators.

Mona Bhan's analysis of Orientalist colonial discourse weaves its linkage with the nationalist project of Hindu India. She writes about racialised politics, obsession with pure race and its connection with Ladakh, a part of Jammu and Kashmir State. This article connects imagination of a Hindu nation through hegemonic discourses of RSS campaign, a strong proponent of a Hindu India. Perhaps, the author could have added another layer by referring to politics of marriage in Leh (Smith, 1990) to further complicate the notion of body politics in this region.

The chapter by Ershad Mahmud offers a general view on Azad Kashmir, reminding us that Kashmir extends beyond the 'Line of Control'. Some narratives echo Partition memory and pain associated with it, as some scholars note how the 'unfinished business of Partition' (Ali et al., 2011) continues to haunt both the nations, India and Pakistan. The author rightly points out that the stories of family reunion and separation generate a new kind of discourse about the relationship between people on both sides of the line of control (2018, p. 212). The chapter asserts a need to comprehend this issue in its entirety and not in parts.

The notion of body politics emerges in the thoughtfully crafted chapter written by

Ather Zia. She draws attention towards normalisation of violence and deconstructs the role of martyred bodies of Indian civilians and soldiers by drawing parallel with killable Kashmiri bodies constructed as traitors. She argues that the martyr's body becomes a literal and metaphoric vehicle invoking different emotions (ibid., p. 106).

Similarly, evoking the image of martyr graveyard in Kashmir, Mohamad Junaid takes forward the idea of collective memory and commemoration. He discusses the role of martyr's graveyard as markers of violence and also repositories of collective memory. According to the author, martyr's graveyards mark violent social disruption in Kashmiri society producing powerful political effects and 'establish new forms of sociality and community among Kashmiri subjects' (ibid., p. 249).

The chapter by Seema Kazi situates the importance of body politics and militarisation process in Kashmir. Her analysis shows how militarisation has come to be embedded in the social fabric of Kashmir, and the body of a woman becomes a 'site for political intimidation' and is used to humiliate the community. Her analysis, from a gender perspective, reveals gender implication of militarisation and rape as a weapon of counter-insurgency.

Wherever the authors in the volume discuss violence perpetrated by various actors, in chapter six Gowhar Fazili takes a different turn and describes the life of a policeman in

Srinagar city. The chapter talks about the subjective shift and what it is like to be an army personnel or police personnel in a contested space. The author rightly points out that dialectic between professional and ideological police training, and personal and communal experiences shapes police subjectivity in Kashmir (ibid., p. 185). Further, at the same time, the author highlights the role of reflexive practices in research which has been recognised as an important aspect of ethnography.

This volume significantly speaks about 'experiential realities of Kashmiri people' and attempts to theorise the everyday experiences. The chapter titled *Interrogating the Ordinary* argues that *azadi* mobilisation in Kashmir in the early 1990s was shaped by everyday experiences of politics in Kashmir. In the subsequent chapter, Farrukh Faheem highlights the ways in which individual narratives, collective memory, and popular consciousness are linked. The author substantiates his argument by using rich material from field interviews and archival material like films and underground literature. This chapter, including others written by Kashmiri authors in this book, signal a need to include more voices like theirs addressing the multiplicity of local narratives, and adding more stories to counter the hegemonic views. For example, as examined in this book, the role of popular vernacular slogans, lines of a novel, profound impact of a movie on youngsters or access to underground literature help to understand multi-layered narratives

grounded in local contexts and spatial settings.

Towards the end, Cynthia Mahmood's concluding remarks binds all the parts in one whole and reiterates the value of grounded lived realities and urges to put human experiences at the centre of research. She reasserts the importance of ethnography, its emancipatory potential to challenge hegemonic narratives. *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* is an important addition to the existing literature on the Kashmir issue, and its engagement is promising. Each chapter contributes significantly, dwelling upon various aspects like morals, subjectivity, collective memory, body politics, and how individuals navigate their ways through multiple, contradictory and conflicting identities. This is the strength of this volume. However, at some places, a linear account of Kashmir's history seems repetitive and overlooking the nuances of historical complexity of this region. At a few places, the notion of ordinary or everydayness has been evoked; however, the authors could have problematised the understanding of ordinary by questioning what constitutes every day in a contested land.

A re-reading of the Kashmir conflict, through a mix of theoretical and empirical cases makes this edited volume a significant contribution to the discussion on Kashmir conflict. It is an important addition for anyone interested in ethnography of contested spaces and especially for those

interested in 'ground realities' of the Kashmir conflict.

_____

REFERENCES:

Ali, T., Bhatt, H., Chatterji, A.P., Khatun, H., Mishra, P., & Roy, A. (2011). *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*. New York: Verso.

Dowler, L. (2001). The four square laundry: Participant observation in a war zone. *Geographical Review*, *91*(1-2), 414-422.

Smith, S.H. (2009). The domestication of geopolitics: Buddhist-Muslim conflict and the policing of marriage and the body in Ladakh, India. *Geopolitics*, *14*(2), 197-218.

Yogesh Mishra is a Post-doc Fellow at the Department of Geography, University of Neuchatel, Switzerland.
Email id: anhalak@gmail.com

Book Review: *Writing Social Science: A Personal Narrative* (2019) by Paramjit S. Judge

Author(s): Shefali Bedi

Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 4 (2), October 2020, pp. 181-186

Published by: Indian Sociological Society

BOOK REVIEW

Paramjit S. Judge, *Writing Social Science: A Personal Narrative*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2019, 220 pp., ₹ 795 (hardcover). ISBN: 9788131610985.

--- Shefali Bedi

C. Wright Mills, in his well-known book *The Sociological Imagination*, while pondering over the question that how a young researcher may feel 'impatient and weary' by elaborate discussions of method and theory, would yearn for an account by a working student rather than dozens of codification of procedure by specialists. He writes that it is '(only) by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student' (Mills, 1973, p. 215). This book could aptly be considered as belonging to this line of thought within the Indian sociological research tradition.

This is an insider's account that provides a roadmap to navigate the path of academics following the inductive logic, i.e., from particular to universal, in the sense that the author resorts to his personal experiences to give the reader a sense of the larger world of social science research. As the title itself suggests that it is a 'personal narrative', the text is full of personal anecdotes that are very much relatable to the problems that one comes across while taking up a research endeavour.

The text begins with the first step of any act, i.e., 'Making a beginning: By way of Introduction', which suggests the aim of the book which is to provide guidelines so 'that it may prove beneficial to young people writing research papers, theses, monographs, books, and reviews' (Judge, 2019, p. 1). So if one has chosen social science as one's area of research then one needs to learn the art of writing and this book deals with that aspect. The chapter titled 'What should you have before venturing to write' (chapter 2) tells the reader that one requires two things to write: the first is 'a reasonable linguistic skill' (ibid., p. 7), so either it has to be English or one's mother tongue; but given the conditions we live in, one needs to know the English language for varied reasons which are enlisted, and the author prophetically clarifies that to practice social science in India 'the knowledge of English seems indispensible' (ibid., p. 9) (emphasis added). And the second is reading, but then the next question is what one should read and for this his answer is simple, read whatever and anything ranging from literature to popular culture to 'pulp fiction', provided one is able to make sense of it. The Durkheimian dictum that he swears by is interesting that 'there is unity of knowledge,

and specialisation of knowledge without unity is a state of anomie' (ibid., p. 11). But our academy is guided by specialisation and compartmentalisation of disciplines, and one question that a student of social science would often comes across in any introductory book of sociology is: what is the difference between science and social science? The author makes it clear that since the task of the social scientist is different from a natural scientist, who can conduct experiments which can be further replicated leading to universalisation, which is not the case in social science; as such the acquisition of knowledge in the latter has to be different. Hence, according to the author, reading gives one a pool of knowledge or 'critical mass of knowledge' (ibid., p. 18). Developing reading habits provides one 'familiarity with concepts and theories (which) is a necessary condition for writing social science research' (ibid.). Some of the best guidelines in the book are prefixed with a phrase 'please remember' like 'please remember that reading has many consequences, most of them positive, for your mental development, social life and professional life' (ibid., p. 21) or '(p)lease remember perfection is elusive but perfectibility is a process and all researchers should aim at achieving perfection' (ibid., p. 104).

Some underlying qualities of a social science researcher are also enlisted, the foremost being the need to plan and maintain regularity, consistency and proper schedule for professional writing and so

does exploding the myths about dietary and dress patterns and their relationship with writing.

One of the pre-requisite of a social science researcher is to write or convey one's findings in an organised yet logical manner, and locating or contextualising it in the larger theoretical paradigm of the research area. The author emphasizes on the need that a researcher should understand social phenomenon from multiple perspectives while mentioning the three important perspectives commonly held in sociology i.e. positivism and functionalism, Marx and Marxism, and 'action, consciousness and objectivity' adds the category of 'non-perspectives', which is quite evocative.

The academy itself is a very competitive domain like any other profession and is guided by certain compulsions and idiosyncrasies of individuals. The author never minces words while talking about academic working in India, like when he writes about the undercurrents of who frames and generates rules, and the eccentricities and irrationalities of the people running the affairs. As he says, '(m)ost of them have done nothing in life excepting building contacts and networks so as to be included in the national-level decision-making bodies' (ibid., p. 53), or when he writes about the jargon of impact factor which is still incomprehensible to a social science researcher and why it is irrelevant to social sciences.

Another common problem faced by a researcher is while choosing one's area of research when one is always confronted with situations like either to follow one's inclination or to do what is the demand of one's times. '(W)hat one should write' (chapter 4) reminds one to develop orientation towards an area of specialisation and stick to it and to work further into its related areas and 'to go slow in the beginning of one's career' (ibid., p. 64). '(W)here to publish one's work' (chapter 5) tells a researcher to have some sort of strategy in place in terms of what one thinks of the possible journals available for publication. This is important given the fact that publication is a long-term and gruesome process with many possible rejections coming one's way. But one should take one's chances, and indeed – 'somebody who is smart and makes contacts and develops networks is likely to have his/her work published at the right places' (ibid., p. 69).

Social science as an academic discipline clearly follows certain canons of research which requires training; and some of the most complex things about research methodology are made easy by the author when he writes some clear guidelines. For example, in the case of research design, the most emphatic statement is that it can be broadly of two types, 'descriptive or experimental', or about objectives that the ideal number of objectives is five for a thesis or monograph, or about references that having too many references may be seen as making unnecessary attempt to impress the reviewer (ibid., p. 81), or about research questions that research questions are nothing but the statements of objectives turned into interrogative sentences (ibid., p. 97). What strikes the most is the explanation about hypotheses and the question raised is: Do we need hypotheses in social science research? and the answer given by author seems quite plausible (ibid., p. 100).

Chapter 8 titled 'Discussion of data', talks about the primacy of fieldwork in social science research and also cautions the researcher against preparing schedule and working out methodology without even visiting the field (ibid., p. 107), to just believe in some of the errors of scholars as fact simply because they are big names, and to keep eyes/ear open while doing fieldwork (ibid., p. 109).

What is new is the category of imaginary facts; they are facts which are not true but have the highest probability to be true, and in social sciences imaginary facts are often accepted as true without further investigation (ibid., p. 116). This is often related to the larger question of fact and its interpretation which is guided by subjectivity and at times may lead to wrong conclusions.

Most recent and contemporary issue is taken up in chapter 14, i.e., 'Ethics and plagiarism'. Although research ethics has always been an important aspect of research, there has been of-late an increased awareness or attention that is being paid to

this in the Indian academia, given the situation that now all the research work submitted has to go through the plagiarism test, which was not the case earlier. As Indian universities and researchers are becoming more engaged with the global network of universities, there has been an increased pressure on institutions to come up with stringent norms with respect to research ethics, and especially if one's language of expression in social science (which in most cases) is English, then plagiarism is a real concern for a researcher. This chapter lists out the reason why students in India resort to unfair practices, such as, too much emphasis on memorising and reproducing content of the syllabus, the way the examinations in India are oriented, etc. which discourage creativity among students with its emphasis on scoring marks. Lack of command over English language also forces one to adopt such unethical practices and with the access of information through internet things have become much easier. Plagiarism is not just limited at the level of researchers but is profoundly found among the faculty members too, although here the 'typology' (list of the typologies of plagiarism given are quite emphatic and clear) may vary. Detecting plagiarism and punishing the erring person may not go a long way in curbing such practices, but identifying the real reason may help and one such method is the norms of UGC that force teachers in regular faculty positions to do research compulsorily in order to fulfill the new criteria set up for promotions, which is

popularly known as the API (Academic Performance Indicator) score card. But that is only for people who are into regular faculty positions; what about the nascent research scholars, and as pertinently noted by the author, that at this level the ethical conduct of the supervisor/advisor can go a long way in curbing unethical practices.

The two articles in the form of appendix pays head to the quintessential question, i.e., the idea of subjectivity or how to be objective, not only while doing one's research but also while evaluating work of one's peers. The personal anecdote explores the multiple realms of consciousness that are involved in establishing oneself as an 'authority' in an area of specialisation and to what extent an individual can go to cover the same, putting all sorts of ethics at stake.

Although all of us know that every discipline or academic activity is located in the larger network of ties and political affiliations or ideological apparatuses of individuals and institutional heads who tend to acquire and fill faculty positions accordingly, but to say the obvious needs courage and an up righteous moral standing which is earned through lifelong practice. Reading this personal narrative also evokes the potential that pedagogical processes hold in creation of young researchers who value ethics. This also comes as vindication of the fact that there is no shortcut to success and a social scientist has to work one's way with perseverance and hard work.

REFERENCE:

Mills, C. W. (1973). *The Sociological Imagination*. Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd.

Shefali Bedi *is a ICSSR Post-doc Fellow at the Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology, Punjabi University, Patiala.*
Email id: shefalibedi@pbi.ac.in

BOOK REVIEW

Parul Bhandari, *Matchmaking in Middle-Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage*. Springer Nature Singapore Private Ltd., 2020, 188 pp., ₹ 9,245 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-981-15-1598-9.

--- Sristi Mondal

Marriage is one of the most fundamental concerns that have always intrigued scholars in India. Exhaustive accounts have concentrated much on the structures and patterns of marriage. Recent studies have focused on the aspirational life of both marrying individuals and their families; and how it symbolises a 'new' middle-class identity. However, Parul Bhandari's work goes further into analysing the often-ignored affective dimension of marrying individuals.

Set in the backdrop of the post-liberalisation period, Bhandari aims at explicating how contemporary marriage practices are utilised by upper-caste Hindu professionals in North India for the construction of a 'modern' and global identity; and how these practices affirm, and are in turn affirmed by middle-class moralities in India. In Chapter 1, Bhandari debunks the dichotomous categorisations of arranged and love marriage, and dwells upon the formal and informal processes of selecting spouses. She rejects any teleological understanding of spouse selection; and conceives the 'modern' as engagement with the genealogical past. She explores how the contemporary method of matchmaking strikes a 'balance' between individual preferences and familial expectations. Bhandari attempts to analyse the conundrum of meanings associated with the 'new' middle-class identity. Moreover, contextually embedded subjective experiences of middle-class identity serve not only to influence spouse selection, but also caters to the process of self-fashioning of both marrying individuals and their families as being 'modern'. Bhandari goes on to analyse the web of 'actors' involved in matchmaking, and the invocation of specific middle-class moralities, that espouse a particular vision of Indian modernity.

Chapter 2 foregrounds the phase of 'elongated singlehood', during which pre-marital experiences, and feelings of rejection and hurt influences one's preferences during spouse selection. Moreover, specific middle-class moralities associated with diverse romantic encounters either reinforces or redefines the 'modern' self and 'new' middle-class identity. Invoking the temporal dimension to matchmaking, Bhandari underscores the significance of changing consumer culture, leisure habits, exposure to diverse media platforms, and reconfigured

urban spaces in shaping the lives and experiences of high-income unmarried population. The idea of delayed but 'right' marriage seemed paramount. However, what constitutes 'right' marriage/spouse is contingent on both informal pre-marital experiences of marrying individuals, and on the formal processes of matchmaking, as we shall discuss in the subsequent sections.

In Chapter 3, Bhandari analyses forms of 'decentralized mode of control' (Bhandari, 2020, p. 48) or the latent involvement of the family in pre-marital relationships as well as in the formal spaces of matchmaking. The 'modern' family does not dominate; instead, it guides spouse selection, communicating its desires through dialogical engagement with the marrying individual's desires. In a bid to be 'modern', class homogamy has been curated to define 'new' middle-class morality. Furthermore, Bhandari explores forms of 'muted references' to dowry, and how this practice is couched in a language of desire and 'practicality'. The dynamic imageries of dowry, in an age of consumerism, is inextricably connected to the professional middle-class identities of both individuals as well as their respective families.

Chapter 4 traces how matrimonial agencies and matrimonial websites become 'bridges', where their *modus operandi* not only aims at promoting individual-oriented forms of companionate marriage, but also situates the relevance of the family in matchmaking. Thus, contradictory preferences become a

crucial element in contemporary matchmaking in India. These new matchmakers further new forms of moralising discourse, to construct an image of 'modern' marriage. Bhandari goes on to analyse the pros and cons of matrimonial agencies, matrimonial brokers, and matrimonial websites, to gauge their relevance in diverse contexts. The author rejects a dichotomous conceptualisation of 'traditional' and 'modern'; and instead, concentrates on how 'good middle-class upbringing' (ibid., p. 81) requires straddling between the two.

In Chapter 5, Bhandari unravels how the sense of 'modern', global, middle-class self is contingent on the social construction of a 'good match'. The features of 'good match' are flexible enough to find novel ways to articulate itself. The efforts to instill middle-class identity renders the process of spouse selection as a complex negotiation between historically relevant criteria (for instance, caste) and contemporary features of middle-class(ness), that are embedded in a framework of modernity and mobility. The 'new' ideals of exposure, cosmopolitan lifestyle, good professional status, social networks, and 'taste' fosters class homogamy in most cases, since it eases 'relatability' among marrying individuals. Furthermore, the author provides a nuanced analysis of moments of 'compromise' and fractured modernity, for instance, the idea of 'presentability' and socially constructed standards of physical beauty dominate the construction of a 'good match'.

Chapter 6 critically interrogates the practices and expectations that define 'modern' coupledom. Despite ongoing negotiations to establish oneself as a 'modern' couple based on egalitarian principles, gender asymmetries are abound in inter-personal dynamics. This is often invisibilised behind the trope of companionate marriage and the web of middle-class moralities that goes into the construction of a 'good' husband or 'good' wife. Bhandari lists a series of new vocabularies in the new imaginings of modern romance or coupledom that is often embedded in new regimes of control. Such analysis could be hinged against the backdrop of the contemporary debates on public versus private sphere, where 'new', modern and gendered middle-class moralities provide an illusion of freedom. However, women are not entirely passive recipients of gendered expectations, but also assert subtle forms of agency through acquiescence, instead of radical transformation. Interestingly, Bhandari notes how certain historically relevant practices, like hypergamy for women, is not elusive to Indian modernity; rather, it is couched in a language of 'respect'.

In Chapter 7, the author explores the dynamics in inter-personal relationship among marrying individuals. She suggests the complementary significance of both middle-class moralities of family honour and parental consent on one hand, and individual preferences of love and companionship in the choice of spouse selection on the other hand. Contrary to the idea of passionate attraction, the author unpacks the centrality of practicality, rationality, and similar socio-economic backgrounds in situating the idea of love. It is interesting to note that the self-defined love marriages are not often transgressive of, but embedded in an array of familial expectations. The author is quick to assert that narratives of love and compatibility exemplifying a caste-free selection is often paradoxical, since caste-free consideration is not so free as it seems to be, that is, it is contingent upon factors like elongated singlehood or specific moments of 'compromise'.

Chapter 8 discusses the dark side of matchmaking, namely how emotional experiences of rejection, heartbreaks and humiliation during pre-marital romantic encounters or during the formal process of spouse-selection, affects marital preferences as well as notions of compatibility. Such romantic misery has wide ramifications, ranging from abysmal self-confidence among marrying individuals to lack of interest in marriage altogether. Interestingly, these dark experiences often re-embed one in familial preferences during spouse selection. Bhandari notes how such re-embedding breaks the dichotomy between arrange/love marriage, traditional/modern; and situates arranged marriage in a framework of the 'modern'. Counter-intuitively, when formal spaces fail at matchmaking, both parents and marrying individuals resort to informal methods; and consequently, situates this deemed 'love'

marriage in a range of middle-class moralities of duty and family honour. Bhandari notes subtle problematic forms of 'compromise' in inter-personal relationship, wherein latent and manifest forms of violence gets normalised in the name of love and adjustment.

Thus, Parul Bhandari's work situates the importance of education, professional status, exposure, lifestyle, hard work, parental approval, and family honour as crucial parameters to gauge 'modern' middle-class moralities. However, it is worth noting that middle-class is not a homogeneous category. The moralities associated with being a 'modern' middle-class might significantly differ if one undertakes the affective dimensions of matchmaking among other professions or socio-cultural backgrounds that constitute the middle-class, for instance, the ones in government bureaucratic positions. Thus, one must refrain from universalising contemporary middle-class moralities. Moreover, I feel that the ethnographic study on the construction of 'modern' middle-class identity would have been more nuanced if the author had incorporated the experiences of non-upper caste professionals. Additionally, the author's exclusive attention on caste and class marginalises other fundamental considerations like religion.

To conclude, what seemed pertinent in most of the discussions is the importance of 'commonalities' of some form or the other to establish 'connection' among marrying individuals. This wonderfully refutes contemporary representations on films, web-series and the like, that 'opposites attract'. Even the methodological focus of the author was to create 'spaces of commonality' (ibid., p. 17) with her interviewees, to ease the process of eliciting data from them, especially while confronting them in an environment of pre-conceived ideas of the author's background. Finally, this is indeed a relevant sociological as well as an anthropological read since it contributes significantly on the construction and flexibility of 'modern' middle-class identity of both individuals and their families via the formal and informal processes of spouse selection, and its consequent bearing on individuals' lived experiences.

Sristi Mondal *is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi.*
Email id: sristimondal39@gmail.com