

## **Indigenous Women of Northeast India at the Forefront of a Strong Non-Violent Peace Movement**

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*“I believe that peace is not merely an absence of war, but the nurture of human life.... Only in freedom is permanent peace possible. To unite women in all countries who are opposed to any kind of war, exploitation and oppression and who work for universal disarmament...and by the establishment of social, political, and economic justice for all without distinction of sex, race, class, or creeds.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Introduction**

According to the United Nations “Study on the problem of discrimination against Indigenous populations,” conducted from the 1970s to the early 1980s, “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.”<sup>3</sup> Some of the international instruments for the protection of tribal people are the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), ILO Convention No. 107 Concerning the Protection

1. The author is thankful for the research support given by team members at the Control Arms Foundation of India and the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network for this article, especially that of Kalyani Mathur and Yuri Luikham.
2. This quote is by Jane Addams, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1931.
3. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/7, Addenda 1–4.

and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries (1957), and ILO Convention No. 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989). Of course, the seminal Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is a very important human rights instrument for Indigenous Peoples as well.

Indigenous Peoples have been estimated to be more than 370 million people living in more than 90 countries distributed across all regions of the world. There are at least 5000 different Indigenous groups in the world, representing different cultures of the existing diversity of our planet. While they constitute approximately 5% of the world's population, Indigenous Peoples make up 15% of the world's poor. They also make up about one-third of the world's 900 million extremely poor rural people. Most of the world's Indigenous languages are considered to be endangered, meaning they are at a high risk of being replaced by dominant languages by the end of the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

Indigenous Peoples around the world strive to be in synergy with nature. They depend immensely on the available natural resources, yet at the same time comprehend the value of these resources for the survival of their future generations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indigenous Peoples have succumbed to the pressures of dwindling natural resources of the planet and the greed of mankind. States where these peoples live all too often do not recognize the diversity of their cultures and traditions and consider them secondary citizens. In the pursuit of fulfilling the requirements of capital intensive markets, these populations are forced to leave their natural habitats and face extreme violence and abuse often sponsored by the state. This violence can take several forms. As John Galtung suggests, there are three types of violence: one is physical, the second is cultural and the third is structural.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Peoples around the world are primarily subjected to the third kind of violence. Structural violence is inflicted by the social structure and social institutions that may deprive people of their basic human rights.

4. "International Day of the World's Indigenous People: Info Kit," UN Web Services Section, Department of Public Information, United Nations (August 9, 2007).

5. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.

These people face immense discrimination in the forms of racism, inadequate participation in public life, the illegal use of their lands and cultural violence. “The existence of rich natural resources in parts of countries, especially in large countries and with weak provincial administrative structures in some instances, could contribute to or even be a major cause for calls for separation or breakaway in some countries.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of Northeast India, it can be argued that a natural resource-rich land is at the center of a prolonged armed conflict which is intensified due to the influx of small arms, drugs and weapons in the region.

### I. Debate around Indigenous Peoples in India

Within the Indian context, there is a raging debate among academics and policy makers around the “applicability” of indigeneity. First, the critics of the issue are anthropologists like André Béteille and B.K. Roy Burman.<sup>7</sup> Their argument is that the ideology is a borrowed concept popularised by western institutions and scholars, theorists and naive human rights activists. This, according to these authors, seldom encourages the rights movement of the affected population. Second, the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination should not be an excuse to exclude other communities. Such an attempt dilutes the entire fight for rights of Indigenous Peoples. Third, tribal and non-tribal populations have lived in close proximity to one other for a long time. This has led to their assimilation in the larger Hindu society. Fourth, some tribal populations settled in the country long after the non-tribal population. Lastly, national sovereignty is challenged by issues of self-determination and land ownership.

The 67.7 million people belonging to a “Scheduled Tribe” in India are generally considered to be “Adivasi” which literally

6. *Conflict over natural resources in South-East Asia and the Pacific*, L.T. Ghee and M.J. Valencia eds. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Non-Traditional Security Issues*, A.T. Tan and J.D.K. Boutin eds. (Singapore: Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 2001).
7. Bengt G. Karlsson, “Anthropology and the ‘Indigenous Slot’: Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples’ Status in India,” *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 4 (2003): 402–423.

means “Indigenous People” or original inhabitants, though the term “Scheduled Tribe” (ST) is not coterminous with the term “Adivasi.” Scheduled Tribe (ST) is an administrative term used for the purpose of “administering” certain specific constitutional privileges, protections and benefits for specific peoples historically considered disadvantaged and “backward.” However, this administrative term does not exactly match all the peoples called “Adivasi.” Out of the 5653 distinct communities in India, 635 are considered to be ‘tribes’ or “Adivasis.” In comparison, one finds that the estimated number of STs varies from 250 to 593.<sup>8</sup> The state provides concessions to these Scheduled Tribes under Schedule V and VI of the constitution.<sup>9</sup>

It must, however, be stated that the Indian Constitution does not use the term “Adivasi” and instead refers to the STs as “Anusuchit Jana Jati.” Traditionally, “Jana” was the more popular term to refer to the tribes in the Hindi heartland.<sup>10</sup>

8. C.R. Bijoy, 2003, “The Adivasis of India: A History of Discrimination, Conflict and Resistance,” PUCL Bulletin (February 2003), <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/adivasi.htm>
9. Schedule V includes administration (Tribal Advisory Councils) and control of Scheduled Areas and Tribes (part C 6(3)): The criteria followed for declaring an area as a Scheduled Area are preponderance of tribal population; compactness and significant size of the area; under-developed nature of the area; and marked disparity in the economic standard of the people. These criteria are not spelled out in the Constitution of India but have become well established. In this understanding, India does not include the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. It includes areas of Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Orissa and Rajasthan.

Schedule VI - Provisions for Administration of Tribal Area in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram & Arunachal Pradesh. This schedule provides for two kinds of governing units in the Tribal Areas: the Autonomous District Councils and the Autonomous Regions. A: The Governor has the Power to include, exclude or diminish any of these areas or define their boundaries [S 1]. B: There shall be a District Council for Each Autonomous District comprising no more than 30 members and a Regional Council for the Autonomous Regions. C: The powers of administration shall be vested in these Districts and Autonomous Council [S 2(4)]. The Governor shall be entitled to make rules for the constitution of the Councils, their composition, and terms of office, appointment of officers and staff and procedure and conduct of business.

[http://lawmin.nic.in/olwing/coi/coi-english/Const.Pock%20Pg.Rom8Fsss\(2\).pdf](http://lawmin.nic.in/olwing/coi/coi-english/Const.Pock%20Pg.Rom8Fsss(2).pdf)

10. N. Ray, “Introductory Address,” *Tribal Situation in India*, K.S. Singh ed. (Shimla, India: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1972).

## II. Scheduled Tribes Population in India

According to the 2011 Indian census, 8.6% of the total population of the country is tribal. This constitutes 104 million people. India has the largest population of tribal people in the world. In the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, up to 90% of the population is tribal. However, in the remaining northeast states of Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura, tribal peoples make up between 20% and 30% of the population. The largest tribes are found in central India, although the tribal population accounts for only around 10% of the region's total population. Major concentrations of tribal people live in Maharashtra, Orissa, and West Bengal. In the south of the country, about 1% of the populations of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are tribal, whereas about 6% of the people living in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are members of tribes. A total of 6,793 crimes committed against tribals were reported in the country during 2013, as compared to 5,922 cases in 2012, an increase of 14.7%.<sup>11</sup>

## III. Violence in Northeast India

Northeast India is connected to the rest of the country by a 22 kilometer-long corridor. As mentioned above, 90% of the population in some parts of the country is comprised of tribal/Indigenous People. Northeast India shares international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The region has been facing the onslaught of multiple armed conflicts for many decades. The issues were aggravated after the introduction of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in 1958. More than 50,000 lives have been lost in the violence. The total population of the Northeastern Region of India is 45 million, of which 19.1% are living below the poverty line. Northeast India deals with complex social and political issues, such as the struggle over natural resources, ethnic conflicts, illegal migration, displacement and social exclusion. These issues are, however, rarely

11. "India: Minorities Castes and Regions in India," [www.factsanddetails.com](http://www.factsanddetails.com), [http://factsanddetails.com/india/Minorities\\_Castes\\_and\\_Regions\\_in\\_India/sub7\\_4h/entry-4216.html](http://factsanddetails.com/india/Minorities_Castes_and_Regions_in_India/sub7_4h/entry-4216.html)

reported in the mainstream media, which continues to neglect the region's growth and progress. The tribal/Indigenous Peoples are hugely influenced by the AFSPA as they are forced to leave their natural habitat, face extreme violence and, worst of all, have no relief from their plight and worsening living conditions.

The Armed Forces Special Powers Act is an act that provides special powers to the Indian Army. Under this Act, all security forces are given unrestricted and unaccounted power to carry out their operations once an area is declared to be "disturbed." Even a non-commissioned officer is granted the right to shoot to kill based on mere suspicion that it is necessary to do so in order to "maintain public order." Wherever AFSPA has been in operation, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial executions, torture, rape and arbitrary detention are regularly reported. The law allows security forces to get away with any brutality. While the government occasionally mulls repealing the Act, without following up on it, one issue has been receiving a lot of attention in recent times: the way soldiers who commit violence against women also manage to hide behind AFSPA's protective clauses.

AFSPA was first applied to the Northeastern states of Assam and Manipur and was amended in 1972 to extend to all the seven states in the northeastern region of India. These are Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland, also known as the "seven sisters." Later, a variation of the Act was applied to Jammu and Kashmir in 1990 and even appeared in Punjab during the 1980s and the 1990s.

#### **IV. Northeast Indian Women at the Forefront of a Non-Violent Peace Movement**

Indigenous women all over the world face multiple discriminations on the basis of sex, race/ethnicity, language, culture, religion and class. For instance, Indigenous women in Taiwan are called "third class citizens" because of their inferior status in relation to men and in relation to non-Indigenous people. Concerns regarding racial discrimination faced by Indigenous women were raised by Indigenous women at the 1995 World Conference on Women. In 2004, the United

Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) took note of the fact that the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) does not make specific reference to Indigenous women and recommended that “special attention should be paid to the issues related to maintaining the integrity of Indigenous women and the gender dimension of racial discrimination against Indigenous Peoples.” Indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to such violence both within their own communities and in the broader society. Indigenous women experience many kinds of violence in times of peace and war, including female genital mutilation, forced marriages, early marriages, polygamy, beatings and forced labour. Indigenous women are trafficked for prostitution and forced labour. In some cases, they are treated as exotic, decorative, sexual objects and study-objects by media and various communications systems.<sup>12</sup>

Indigenous women around the world have been at the forefront of a strong non-violent peace, security and disarmament movement. Over the last 200 years or so, women of Northeast India have been leaders in non-violent peace movements. Women play an indispensable role in preserving peace and order. They hold community together by stepping out of socially ascribed roles, transforming gender stereotypes, and by opening up opportunities for empowerment. Women’s groups in Northeast India have developed many a powerful programme of direct, non-violent action designed to confront the fire of insurgency that has engulfed this strategic region since the late 1940s. In India’s Northeast, women have always played a major role in many peace and social movements. Some of these important movements are:

### **a) Manipur Indigenous Women Against Colonialism**

Manipuri women waged two non-violent peace protests in 1904 and 1939 against mass exploitation and artificial famine in the region.

12. “Gender and Indigenous Peoples,” United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (February 2010), <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Briefing%20Notes%20Gender%20and%20Indigenous%20Women.pdf>

It was the women who protested against the then-Political Agent Maxwell, against the forced labor (“*lalupkaba*” in Manipuri) imposed on Manipuri men. Under their aggressive pressure, the British had to withdraw the use of forced labour in 1904. In 1939, women stood up against what they called “*chaktangba*” (inflation of food prices such as those for rice). Nupi Lan was an agitation started by Manipuri women against the oppressive policies of the maharaja, which were more export-oriented. These policies had a deep impact on the staple diet of Manipuri people, namely rice. Women who were directly involved in market activities took charge of the situation. Over the years, this movement has evolved to encapsulate other movements around constitutional, political and economic reforms of Manipur.

### **b) Meira Paibis, Women Torchbearers, Movement Against Counter-Insurgency**

In the 1970s, the women of Manipur came out from their homes and started a mass movement for the maintenance of social order and peace in Manipur. They started an anti-liquor movement in urban as well as in rural areas when the peaceful social order in the localities was disturbed by persons involved in selling and drinking liquor. Women in the concerned localities gathered their strength and asserted their capabilities in checking and controlling the persons who were involved in the selling and drinking of liquor as well as those persons involved in the transactions of liquor business. From being an informal group to punish drunkards and anti-social elements, the movement has evolved into a political force. Women have since learned the power of group effort and have taken up many cases, one of them being the Manorama case when a dozen Manipuri women stripped naked to protest against military excesses in the state.

The Meira Paibis are also involved in resolving crimes against women happening in communities; in checking and controlling trafficking; in arresting and handing over persons who are involved in drug trafficking; in dealing with family disputes; and in solving land disputes between neighbours; and in providing shelter to many destitute women.



Current events in Manipur reflect how important women's groups are in civil society movements in Northeast India. The Meira Paibis have become an institution in their own right today.

### **c) Naga Indigenous Women and Peacebuilding**

The Naga Mothers Association (NMA) of Nagaland has been very active in Northeast India. The NMA has rendered valuable service for the cause of peace. Their theme was "Shed No More Blood." An achievement of the NMA is the formation of the Peace Team in October 1994 to confront the deteriorating political situation in Nagaland. The NMA spoke against killings not only by the army but also by militants.

The NMA celebrates the 12<sup>th</sup> of May each year as Mother's Day and renews their appeal for peace. Apart from peace initiatives, the NMA has worked for social regeneration. The Association provides facilities for recovery from addiction and has also started anonymous HIV testing. They are likely the first women's organisation in the Northeast to test pregnant women for HIV. The NMA is providing pioneering services for the care of patients afflicted with AIDS. The NMA's greatest achievement is that most Naga women's organisations are their collaborators. The NMA has assumed enormous influence in Naga politics, which is borne out by the fact that they are the only women's group in South Asia who has participated in a ceasefire negotiation. In 1997, they mediated between the Government of India (GOI) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) factions and facilitated a ceasefire between the two groups.

### **d) Indigenous Women's Movement in Assam**

The women's movement in Assam is almost as old as the freedom movement in this region. Asom Mahila Samiti was established in 1926 under the leadership of Chandra Prabha Saikiani, and was later renamed as Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti. The Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, a major constituent of the Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, was established in 1929, and it was under these two organisations that

the movement for empowerment of women made significant steps in empowering the womenfolk in Assam.

The long history of Assam is replete with instances of women's bold and strong roles in spite of their traditional roles in a patriarchal family set-up. Women of Assam also played a significant role in the Indian freedom struggle. Assam has innumerable examples of women who have shown excellence in different fields and who are at par with their male counterparts. Women have also played a significant role in politics in this region.

In Assam, there are a number of interventions for peace by women's groups and they are largely issue-based. During and after the army atrocities in Nalbari and North Lakhimpur in 1989 and 1991 respectively, a number of women's groups for peace sprung up. The most outstanding of these was the Matri Manch based in Guwahati. This group became the rallying point for mothers whose sons have disappeared. They rallied around the issue of abuse of women. They ran protest marches against sexual abuse and violence against women. Initially, they were tolerated when they protested against state acts of violence but when their protests became more general in nature, different insurgent groups threatened them.<sup>13</sup> There are other similar groups such as the Bodo Women's Justice Forum, which organizes issue-based peace marches and protests. The Bodo and the Assamese women's peace movements demonstrate that in situations of chronic hatred and violence, women often organize on the basis of specific issues. They protest for specific violations. They remain organized for a short period of time, after which they disperse. This gives them a certain amount of anonymity and protection.<sup>14</sup>

### **e) Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network**

The Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network was formed in an attempt to help women whose lives have been changed dramatically

13. Rajesh Verma, "Women's Movements in Northeast," *the Otherside* 21, no. 7 (August 2008): 32–34, <http://rviindia.blogspot.in/2008/09/womens-movements-in-northeast.html>
14. Paula Banerjee, "Women's interventions for Peace in the North-East," (Calcutta, India: University of Calcutta, 2014), 7.

because of the gun killings of their husbands, fathers or sons, be it by state or non-state actors or unidentified gunmen. The Network attempts to lift women above the trauma and agony faced in armed conflict by helping them to find ways to heal the scars that decades of violence have caused to the community.

The Network's direct intervention involves a gender-sensitive approach to the gun crisis; supports women economically; and brings them forward to play a crucial role in small arms policy. The network has extensively contributed in the field of disarmament. It has helped around 20,000 women whose lives have been devastated by gun violence in Manipur. It is the first initiative of its kind in India to develop a National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security following the fundamental components of Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council. The formal launch of the Network took place on December 24, 2004, in Manipur's capital, Imphal.

## **V. Work on UNSCR 1325 by Indigenous Women of Northeast India**

Loss of land, livelihood, culture, language and natural resources are part and parcel of Indigenous Peoples' realities in Northeast India. The daily lives of Indigenous Peoples are disrupted due to armed conflict and increasing militarization in the region at the hands of the state and insurgent groups alike. Indigenous cultures have diverse knowledge which can act as a resource for this world. However, traditional knowledge has been endangered under the pressures of globalization and modernization. This, among other reasons, has forced people of this region to live in abject poverty. Even these harsh conditions have not deterred the women of this region from amalgamating their knowledge of nature and channeling their inner strength and determination to be the forerunners of non-violent movements for peace. Indigenous People are the original inhabitants of mother earth, and over millennia they have gathered immense knowledge. It is high time that these people should be the forerunners in decision-making processes about their own communities so that their knowledge and cultures are treasured and practiced for sustainable living.

Landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, is the first resolution to address the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women. It stresses the importance of women's equal and full participation as active agents in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace building and peacekeeping. It calls on member states to ensure women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all areas of peace building.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2014, the Government of India finally declared that wherever possible, women were to be consulted in peace negotiations. It should be recalled, however, that in 2007, India had stated that UNSCR 1325 would not be applicable in India because there existed no situation of "armed conflict." The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) insisted that a greater number of women should be part of peace negotiations, as women constitute half the population of conflict-affected people and they would help bring a better gender perspective when peace is being negotiated.

The Control Arms Foundation of India, the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, and the Northeast India Women Initiative for Peace have been working for the last ten years on women, peace and security. Women's network meetings were organized to address and respond to gender-based violence in conflict across the eight states in Northeast India with meetings and consultations in Manipur (4<sup>th</sup> June, 2014), Sikkim (28<sup>th</sup> June, 2014), Arunachal Pradesh (11<sup>th</sup> August, 2014), Meghalaya (7<sup>th</sup> October, 2014), Tripura (6<sup>th</sup> December, 2014), Nagaland (19<sup>th</sup> January, 2015), Assam (16<sup>th</sup> February, 2015), Mizoram (25<sup>th</sup> May, 2015) and Assam (28<sup>th</sup> April, 2016). Over 1,000 women participated in these gatherings. As a follow up to these meetings and in order to formulate a common agenda to address women, peace and security issues in the region, in alignment with UNSCR 1325, on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2015, the first Northeast Women Peace Congregation was successfully held in Manipur, bringing together women from all across the region to draft a National Action Plan and to call upon the

Government of India to facilitate the development and adoption of a National Action Plan On Women, Peace and Security. Chief guest, Shri Okram Ibobi Singh, Chief Minister of Manipur, made a commitment to look into issues of women, peace and security in the region and the issue of repealing AFSPA. As a remarkable and historic step, on the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognizes that the inclusion of women and gender perspectives in decision-making can strengthen the prospects for sustainable peace, women leaders of Northeast India, Myanmar and Bangladesh came together at an international conference. The event was entitled the South Asian Women's Peace and Security Conference: Formulating National Action Plans and the Way Forward and it was held on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2015, at the India International Centre in New Delhi.

Women leaders across the eight states of Northeast India and youth survivors of violence congregated on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016, at the second Northeast India Women Peace Congregation in Guwahati, Assam, for consultative meetings aimed at ensuring participation of women in peace processes, peace talks and decision-making forums; ensuring prevention of violations of women's rights in conflict; and bringing much-needed peace and development to the region.

Yet, given the enormity of the task, this is only the beginning of what the women of Northeast India can contribute toward a peaceful region. To galvanize change in a big way, there is a need for similar non-violent movements by Indigenous women to continue in full vigour and for voices from all corners to be heard for an organic change in society.