CHAPTER 1

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1.1 The Problem

Each conflict has its own unique and complicated history. The genesis of most of the conflicts that has engulfed the Northeastern states of India is either to preserve the unique indigenous identity or due to the lack of economic development and opportunities for the large majority of the people or both.\(^1\) Contemporary armed conflicts of the North Eastern region of India are primarily internal conflicts, occurring between different identity groups or between the state versus the armed activists, within a State. Assam, which was at one point of time was synonymous with almost all of Northeastern states of India is now just one of the eight of them. The genesis of conflict in Assam is rooted since the days of the treaty of Yandaboo\(^2\) and the days of endorsement of 'Cabinet Mission Plan', which placed Assam along with the rest of the North East in Group C\(^3\). Partition caused enormous economic and physical disadvantages to Assam. Coupled with these, Assam’s identity was in crisis due to the large-scale immigration from neighboring Bangladesh and Nepal that has changed the demography of the state. Besides, pressure on land with already lowered landman ratio in the valleys, vitiated democratic environment, perceived injustices, inter group economic competition, lower economic benefits for the indigenous

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\(^2\) Assam came under British rule in 1826 by the Yandaboo Treaty that ended Anglo Burmese war.

\(^3\) Group C consists of the part of the Muslim League ruled area.
groups in spite of the presence of 'enclave' industries and so on has created a fertile ground for growth of secessionist movement in Assam.

The State of Assam, which is of multi-ethnic nature, has been known in the recent days for all wrong reasons, specially the ongoing violence or armed conflict, fratricidal killings, ethnic clashes/inter group conflict as well as ethnic cleansing with mushrooming growth of terrorist outfits. Assam which was comparatively a peaceful state is now become so dreadful that even the local residents feel insecure to move around or travel for the fear of bomb blast or any mishap of similar kinds. It is a sad reality that a state which was comparatively a peaceful state prior to 1979 has transformed to a violent one marked by conflicts and militarization and an overall rise in violence in society at all levels.

Armed conflict across and between communities result in massive levels of destruction to the people - physically, psychologically, culturally and economically. Although entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, women and girls are particularly affected because of their peculiar status

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5 According to 1991 census of Government of India, Assam’s population can be divided into speakers of sixty eight languages and dialects.
10 'Two Proscribed; Nine Active & Twenty Six Inactive Terrorist Groups are operational in the state of Assam.' 'Terrorist/Insurgent Groups of Assam' http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/index.html
12 Ibid.
in society and their sex. It tends to exacerbate gender inequality and encourage gender-specific disadvantages which are not always recognised and adequately addressed. Parties in conflict situations sometimes use systematic rape as a tactic of war. Other forms of violence against women committed in armed conflict includes, murder, torture, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization. Far-reaching psychological impact on the women victim is pointed out by Coomaraswamy: “when rape is perceived as a crime against honour or morality, shame commonly ensues for the victim who is often viewed by the community as “dirty” or “spoiled”. She further elaborated, “To rape women with impunity and to mark their bodies with the symbols of the other side is to assert domination and to symbolically assault ethnic identity in its most protected space”. Consequently, many women will neither report nor discuss the violence that has been perpetrated against them.

Further, the effects of armed conflict on women have indeed different dimensions. The effect of such conflict on women requires consideration of a wide variety of factors, relevance and impact which differ considerably between cultures and individual women in those cultures. Research studies shows that the psychological traumas associated with sexual violation and with the loss or disappearance of family members last long even after peace returns. Normal

17 Field study findings. Interview with Phunu Bora of Nalbari Mahila Samiti, 9 May, 2007.
social and economic life gets seriously disrupted and the impact of the violence and the stress associated with the constant threats and anxieties of living in an atmosphere of unremitting aggression and fear has been substantial. In situations where the conflict is linked with the question of identity and ethnicity, it results in increasingly societal control over women's mobility, control over their bodies, and how they express themselves. In fact, the long-lasting effects of disruption of societal and community life processes that influence health and well-being has been all pervasive and serious in such situations. The psychological well-being of individuals is strongly bound to the psychological health of the immediate and larger supporting environment of the family. In many areas, this has broken down, leading to disastrous consequences like drug addiction, prostitution, starvation and psychosomatic disorders.

Parties to the conflict frequently locate military targets in and around civilian objects, in an attempt to shield them from the attack from the opposing party. Civilians are used as human shield in this case. Such methods do not prevent ongoing attacks but instead results in increased civilian causalities. Instances are there where women and children are used as 'cannon fodder' by militant groups. Furthermore, the continued violence in rural areas has affected livelihoods. Properties have been lost; there is lack of food and personal security even within one's own home. Continued tension and stress are the other effects. With many of the men killed or 'missing,' there is an increase in female-headed households. The women assume the key role of ensuring family livelihood in the midst of chaos and destruction.

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1.2 Background and Context of the Study

The study has been undertaken in the background of conflict that persist in Assam. The present work is an effort to understand the dynamics of conflict in Assam in general and Nalbari district in particular, particularly the effect of conflict on women. Gender as a category of analysis is itself an important tool to examine the position of women in conflict situations. Gender, ethnicity and citizen identities are important to understand how the tension between equal rights and respect for different identities are played out in the lives of both men and women differently in the time of conflict. The most pertinent issues are how women's space and freedom are being impeded by conflict situations and where women are positioned. In this study, the concept of patriarchy is taken in its broader sense to express power relations between man and women and between the state, man and women in conflict situations. The Nalbari district of Assam which has been chosen for this study is one of the most vulnerable district of Assam in terms of armed conflict. A detailed introduction of Nalbari district is being made in the following chapter. The objectives of the study are to:

- Highlight the different trajectory of women in armed conflict situations and how their lives have been impacted and they are locked into bad choices even when better alternatives are in principle available by the years of ongoing conflict in the above mentioned district of Assam.

- Analyse whether in the long run, the socio economic spaces of women are influenced by joining rebel groups with ultra nationalist ideologies like
ULFA\textsuperscript{20} or any other militant organizations? Whether it has a liberating implication for women in Nalbari?

- Highlight the lacuna in the existing judicial system/regulatory mechanisms in ensuring justice to women who are victims in such situations.

- Highlighting the role of successful women's agency in the context of conflict resolution and peace building in the district of Nalbari which finally strengthen the networking of women's groups in the region on issues of violence

- Work out strategies to involve women in conflict resolution, post-conflict reconstruction and in the peace process in general and Assam in particular.

1.3 Methodology

This research is based on part theoretical and part empirical study. For the latter part, the study depended solely on field work. A pilot study was conducted in the very beginning to clearly identify the targeted population. As the entire population could not be studied due practical limitations, the data which was gathered through purposive sampling was applied for the rest of the population. Simple random sampling was then conducted and sample size was fixed at 2000. As the nature of study is related to women in armed conflict in this particular district, stratified random sampling on the basis of gender was administered. Cluster sampling was also used on the basis of common geographical

\textsuperscript{20} United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is the main militant group of Assam.
proximity\textsuperscript{21} and a shared history\textsuperscript{22} along with the co-relation with the main variable of study. Snowballing method as to locate a credible sample was then followed. The major benefit of this method was that this method relied on interviewing key individuals who then introduce the researcher to others in the community/locality who are knowledgeable and willing to be interviewed. Although this method is a non random way of selecting people to interview, it is often the most effective method for identifying a wide variety of people. Informal networking was also given importance to go to the interiors of the Nalbari district where the sample for this study was located. Through snowballing method, surrendered women cadres of the dreaded militant group like ULFA or NDFB and the direct women victims of the ethnic conflict representing Assamese or Bodo ethnic groups were introduced to the researcher.

Questionnaire and schedules were designed on the basis of pilot survey. Three types of questionnaires were being employed, one for Government officials, Army personnel(s) posted in and around Nalbari, second was designed for women respondents (victim of militancy directly or indirectly) of Nalbari district. And the third was designed for surrendered women cadres of various militant groups who were interviewed in an Indian army camp named Red Horn Division, at the chosen district. Most of the questions were open-ended or semi structured. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a fairly open framework which allow for focused, conversational, two-way communication. They were used both to give and receive information on the chosen topic.

\textsuperscript{21} Baksa and Tamulpur for instance, are blocks of Nalbari which is bordering Bhutan and now becomes a part of BTAD.

\textsuperscript{22} Both Baksa and Tamulpur block, which is mostly dominated by Bodos have witnessed recent political engineering on the basis of ethnic lines.
The study used two types of schedule, one for male and other for female in the particular locality where background characteristics were almost identical in both. The rationale for choosing both male and female was due to the nature of study. For instance, a comparative study of sources of insecurity amongst the population of Nalbari with respect to security forces reveal that women are more fearful than their male counterparts. Again, the schedule consists of types of insecurity amongst women of Nalbari reveal a different picture than their male counterparts. For instance, death of a male member of a house, who was the sole bread earner in the family, matters a lot for a dependant women, which may not be the case for a man. The rationale for employing schedule was due to the presence of a large number of illiterate populations, especially in northern part of Nalbari district which is tribal dominated, mostly Bodos. They could not handle the questionnaires. It was easy for them to answer instantly to the interviewer which were asked and noted down immediately. The schedule, however, contains attitudinal questions probing the respondents' sources of insecurity and types of insecurity as mentioned earlier.

Simultaneously a simple level of rating scale was also being used. Rating is a useful way to measure attitudes toward opinions, and perceptions of a particular happening. Rating works best with literate people, and those more accustomed to structured answers. However, as the rating which was used in the field was of simple nature, even the illiterate population was able to employ them. Schedules were more helpful than the questionnaires in the field as the target population in Bodoland Territorial Administrative Division (BTAD) area were largely illiterate and they were comfortable with informal interaction rather than filling up the questionnaires. They all were employed in vernacular Assamese language and also translated to Bodo as these two are the main languages spoken in the area.
Ethical issues involved in social science research were followed strictly. The responses of women to preset questionnaires and schedules were helpful to know about the limits and nature of the social space of women of Nalbari. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) was also of great help as the views of the rural women on concerned theme was clear via this technique. To gain insight on a community's values, dynamics, internal relationships and conflict, this method was used. The rationale for choosing PRA and not participatory observation method was due to the nature of study. Participant observation is basically used in anthropological study where the researcher participates in the activities of the group and makes observations as participant. While in PRA, participation in an activity is done by the people themselves and not the researcher. Available existing literature was also used to supplement the primary data. An electronic tape recorder for recording the interviews and a field work notebook was being maintained. A digital camera was also kept to preserve some of the relevant photographs as part of field work.

1.4 Organization of the Study

This study has several components such as nature of the conflict persistent in Assam, issues related to identity and ethnicity, the gendered nature of ethnic identity in the said district of Assam, effects of armed conflict on women, question of women's space vis a vis their gendered rights in the time of conflict, relevance and applicability of international, national and local mechanism to address the vulnerability faced by women in such situations and women's
initiatives for building peace. These issues which will be discussed section wise in different chapters.

Chapter Two examine the nature of contemporary armed conflict. It presents an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework to analyse and understand conflict situations followed by the situation prevail in the State of Assam in the light of Galtung's structural inequality and cultural violence. The question of identity and socio political history of Assam has also been analysed to find out the genesis of conflict. The questions of ethnic identities which are intrinsically gendered in the State of Assam are also being addressed. A general discussion on effect of armed conflict in society and its effect on women in particular is also discussed followed by an introduction of Nalbari District.

Chapter Three describes the changing trajectories of women in conflict situations. Here, woman has been categorized according to their roles to study the effect of conflict situations on them which is supplemented by field work in Nalbari. The question of ‘space’ is also given emphasis. Narratives of some of the surrendered women cadres of different extremists group(s) has also been analysed from a gendered lens. A general study of the women in Assam is followed by comparative accounts of Nalbari and its relative exclusivity in the social fabric of Assam.

Chapter Four, talks of the existing support of legal means and regulatory mechanisms for women in the vulnerable pockets of Nalbari. It tries to explore various preventive measures operating in the conflict prone areas of Nalbari from two different angles: Individual and societal. Existing international initiatives for the women in conflict, initiative of central government along with
those of government of Assam on various welfare measures related to women and members of the banned militant groups such as United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) along with many other minor organizations of Nalbari region. Initiative of Assam police for vulnerable pockets of Nabari such as Baraliapur and Lakhipar, have also been critically discussed. The role of legal means as redresser mechanism for wives of extremists and women cadres caught in Nabari after ‘Operation All Clear’ 2003 has also been analysed along with their petitions. The legitimating of various repressive laws and their judicial sanction based on similar lines are also being questioned. Whether by introducing these mechanisms, there has been a shift in the ground reality or the lives of women in Nabari are one of the pertinent questions that have been discussed throughout this chapter. The lacunae in the existing justice system and importance of transitional justice along with gender justice system are being stressed upon.

Chapter Five is about the role of women in conflict transformation and towards building peace in the line of transitional justice system. In the background of the debates around women and conflict as well as peace it was found that the women of Nabari are the agent for redefining the concept of peace. Armed conflict is by no means always negative in its impact on women. Indeed, for some women it can be a time for empowerment as they take over roles traditionally performed by man. The role of successful women’s agency named Tamulpur Mahila Shanti Sena in the context of conflict transformation in the district of Nabari has been highlighted. This chapter talks of maximizing participation of people in peace building process as they are the affected masses of conflict. It has also developed a concept of ‘peace harbinger’ that may work in
near future in the conflict prone areas of Nalbari and bring respite for the distressed masses.

Chapter Six is a conclusion which offers concluding remarks of the study. In addition, a few suggestions are also been made which may have policy relevance in future.