CHAPTER 2

CONFLICT IN ASSAM: CONCEPTUAL CONCERNS AND THE BACKGROUND
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The nature of conflicts has undergone a transformation in the last couple of decades. Contemporary conflicts, especially of armed nature are fast adopting alternative methods of warfare, penetrating into towns, villages and even homes of the homes of civilian. In India's North East, armed conflict denotes the entire gamut of resistance movement along with struggles for ‘identity’. In Assam, the use of systematic force through insurgency, reduction of democratic space, violations of human rights are have resulted in perpetuating fear and insecurity and thereby fragmenting the emotional fabric of the community.

2.1 Theoretical framework

In this chapter a theoretical framework of conflict in a larger context of ethnicity will be discussed. Many a times, ethnicity determines the nature of conflict which in turn also determines the lives of women. Before going into the details of the kind of conflict that engulfs the State of Assam, the concept of conflict shall be discussed.

The definition of conflict is indeed very broad. Generally; the term conflict has been interpreted as the opposite of peace. Conflict can occur between individuals, within families, among community members and between different ethnic groups. In its broader perspective, almost any social processes can be labeled as conflict, since all that

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1 Triveni Goswami, 'Role of Women as Peace Builders with Special Reference to Nagaland' in Peace Studies Paper Series-No 6, Guwahati,2006.,p.9.
must have revealed is a hint of antagonism, psychological hostility, frustration, dissent or any types of severe differences subsumed under this concept. It can also be ascribed as a result of relative deprivation, dissatisfaction of basic needs, and failure of organizational functions, asymmetric power relations and dominant social structure. Simply to put, conflict is a situation where cooperation does not exist or partially exists. Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. In fact, conflict consists of three components: action, incompatibility and actors. Combining them we arrive at a complete definition of conflict as a social situation in which minimum of two actors strive to acquire at the same moment in time an available set of scarce resources.

In general, conflict can be categorized into two broad divisions, latent and active or overt. In latent conflict, a relatively permanent condition exists between conflicting parties with divergent and competing interests occurs whereas in active conflict, disputes occur over a specific problem. However, both latent and overt conflict has the potential of transforming a society to a large extent.

Adam Curle has described the progress of conflicts in terms of the balance of power between the parties, and the degree to which the parties are aware of their conflicting needs and interests. Conflicts progress from situations of unbalanced power and low awareness, or latent conflict, to situations of unbalanced power and increasing

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4 Myra Warren Isenhart, Michael Sprangle, Collaborative Approaches To Resolving Conflict, New Delhi, 2000, p.4.
6 Meenakshi Gopinath and Manjira Sewak, Transcending Conflict: A Resource Book on Conflict Transformation, New Delhi, 2003, p.27.
awareness, or overt conflict. A variety of theoretical perspectives attempt to explain the dynamics of conflict. Based on manifestations, conflict can further divided into, peaceful, violent, silent and open. Violent conflict includes armed rebellion, terrorists attack and similar types of conflict. Wallensteen and Axell identified armed conflict as situation with over 1,000 causalities. However, total number of armed conflicts seems to be on the increase when we follow this particular definition of Wallensteen and Axell which consider armed conflict with less than 1,000 casualties.

Two main schools of thought exist in the discourse of conflict. One school of thought views conflict as ‘pathological and dysfunctional’. In this perspective, conflict generally bears a negative connotation and is often interpreted as something irrational that needs to be suppressed because it is opposing co-operation and peace. The other school on the other hand, considers conflict as a functional means of social change. This school talks of constructive social processes to establish group boundaries, strengthen group consensus, develop a sense of self-identity, and contribute towards social integration.

In the theory of functionalism, Durkheim argues that society is held together by the values that people in that society share. Therefore, society is in a state of equilibrium based on moral consensus. Functionalism rules out disequilibrium or conflict. Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism theory also considers conflict as dysfunctional and abnormal condition of society. An alternative perspective was put forwarded by Karl Marx saying that conflict occurs between two basic economic classes of people. He emphasizes that there is constant conflict between the bourgeoisie who own the means

1Kumar Rupensinghe, ‘Strategies for Conflict Resolution: the Case Study of South Asia’ in Rupsinghe, Kumar and Mumtaz, Khawar, eds., Internal Conflicts in South Asia, New Delhi, 1996, p.166.
4Ibid., p.58.
of production and the proletariats who sell their labour. Dahrendorf further elaborates that society typically contain two antagonistic groups (ruler and the ruled) with opposing interests. Conflict is, therefore, not only limited to class struggle over economic resources but also can be a power struggle between interest groups. Neo-Marxists interpretations of conflict point to the relationship between the mode of production and emerging social structures containing conflicts of interests which ultimately become manifest in behaviour. Max Weber in his Social Action theory suggests that societies vary between conditions of equilibrium and conflict. It says conflict tends to operate in favour of powerful people of the society.

Macro theory focuses on the interaction of groups, specifically on the conscious level. Early political theorists, from Thucydides to Machiavelli and Von Clausewitz, have chosen one particular element to concentrate on power. The use and exercise of power is a central concept of macro theory of conflict. Macro theorists would agree that power comes in many forms: economic, political, military, even cultural. The common assumptions of macro or classical theories are that the roots of conflict stem from group competition and the pursuit of power and resources. According to Realist theory, conflicts caused by scarcity of resources and attempts by states to win control over those resources. Realism derives from social contractualists like Hobbes who argues that in a state of nature, life of man is ‘solitary, nasty, brutish and short’ and it would be characterized by a continual war of all against all. Realist pattern of inevitable conflict caused either by inherent aggression or by inherent structure of the system, where power is the main arbitrar. 

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\text{Ibid., p.60.}
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\text{Ibid., p.60.}
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\text{A.B.Fetharstone, From Conflict Resolution to Transformative Peace building -Reflection from Croatia, Peace Studies working Paper 4,University of Bradford, April 2000,p.3.}
\]
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\text{C.L.Wayper, Political Thought, New Delhi,1995,p.52. Also in Fetharstone,Op.Cit.,p.3.}
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\text{Fethatstone,Op. Cit., p.3.}
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Theory of ‘Shame and death of the self’ is an extension of the theory which says that childhood abuse creates violent personalities. According to James Gilligan, a violation of self esteem through insult, humiliation or coercion is an important source of anger and aggressive behaviour. Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger also argues on similar lines. Scheff and Retzinger argued that a particular sequence of emotions underlies all destructive aggression: shame is first evoked through violation of human being’s self esteem which leads to rage and then violence. This theory underscores the need for individuals to live with a certain degree of self esteem and respect without which the people might see violence as the only way to assert their selfhood. Self esteem in this context refers to self image of groups, communities and nations.

Equity theorists like Homans, Blau and Walster view conflict from the perspective of distributive justice. People become angry, distressed and frustrated when they perceive that they are not receiving a fair share or proportion of something they value. Roloff defines an equitable relationship as one in which some person perceives that the relative gains of two people in an exchange are equal. Roloff points out that perception of equity change as we learn more about people or situations, as events alter roles or responsibilities; we value the benefits of a relationship with new criteria. So, perceptions of inequity or imbalance change as people and situations change.

Violent conflict is in general protracted conflicts. Protracted social conflict is a type of conflict that is not based on material interests, but is one based on needs, particularly identity related needs of ethno-national or communal groups. Edward Azar argues that “These identity groups, whether formed around shared religious, ethnic, racial, cultural, or other characteristics, will act to achieve and insure their distinctive identity

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18 Ibid., p.41.
19 Rolof cited in Gopinath, Ibid., p.5.
within a society. When they are denied physical and economic security, political participation, and recognition from other groups, their distinctive identity is lost, and they will do whatever is in their power to regain it. In short, this is the origin of protracted social conflict."20 In this sense, ethnic conflicts are indeed protracted. The focus of protracted conflicts, according to Azar, "is religious, cultural or ethnic communal identity, which in turn is dependent upon the satisfaction of basic needs such as those for security, communal recognition and distributive justice."21 Such conflicts tend to involve an enduring antagonistic set of perceptions and interactions between community groups and the state. Those perceptions and interactions are conditioned by the experiences, fears and belief systems of the contending ethnic groups. Each attributes the worst motivations to the other side. Hostility begets hostility, creating conditions of violent conflict that feed upon themselves.22 In a similar way, Stephen Ryan defined protracted conflicts as "usually conflicts between ethnic groups which have been going on for some time, and which may appear to be irresolvable to the parties caught up in them".23

Protracted social conflicts have typical preconditions that play important roles in shaping their genesis and account for their prolonged nature. The tendency has been for these conflicts to arise in societies characterised by multi communal/ethnic compositions. They flourish in environments of high politico-economic underdevelopment and manifest themselves over various identity based needs. "The roots of protracted social conflict are to be found at the interlocking nexus of

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21 Ibid.,p.2.
22 Ibid.,p.16.
underdevelopment, structural deprivation (political, economic, and psychological) and
communal or identity cleavages."24

Moreover, it is assumed by Azar that 'structural victimisation' (i.e., social, political, and
economic inequalities as well as psychological oppression) usually takes the form of
ethnic discrimination in these kinds of societies. In fact, 'structural victimisation' is
perceived to affect some groups disproportionately or to benefit others. Azar argues
that, "It is at this juncture of actual physical and psychological deprivation that
structural victimisation bursts into hostile and violent actions.25 Protracted conflict
weakens civil society, delegitimizes governmental institutions, destroys the economy
and frustrates developmental goals.

Unequal and iniquitous social structures and institutions also play a significant role in
creating and perpetuating social conflicts. Social structures and institutions often favour
some groups and communities, and by doing this, disfavor others. This emerges as a
source of violent conflict. The writings of Marx, who claimed that social institutions and
structures reflect the material reality of the society, are pertinent here. As long as
capitalists control the means of production, they would also wield power over social
structures, making them inherently unjust towards the working class. Structural
violence is almost invisible initially as embedded in ubiquitous social structures,
normalized by stable institutions and regular experience. Structural types of conflict
occur whenever people are disadvantaged by political, legal, economic or cultural
traditions. It produces suffering and its damage is slower, more subtle and more
difficult to repair. Johan Galtung originally framed the term structural violence to refer
to any constraint on human potential due to economic and political structures. Unequal
access to resources, to political power, to education, to health care, or to legal standing.

24 Ibid., p.27.
are forms of structural violence.\textsuperscript{26} Anomalies in governance institutions, repressive trade agreements are some other causes. Such types of conflict are more of a process than an event, and is therefore complex and protracted.\textsuperscript{27} Cultural violence, which are small daily inputs, which gradually become part of an unconscious perception of what individuals and communities see and comprehend, justifies structural violence. When structural violence is supported by direct violence, direct violence is in turn needed to uphold the structure.\textsuperscript{28}

Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence continues to rank as one of the most important contributions to conflict studies.\textsuperscript{29} According to Galtung, "an action system is said to be in conflict if the system has two or more incompatible goal status."\textsuperscript{30} In other words, conflict arises whenever the potential development of an individual or group is held back by the condition of a relationship and in particular by an uneven distribution power and resources.

Further refining Galtung's model, Ted Robert Gurr has conceptualized one variation of perceived structural types of conflict, the relative deprivation (RD), as a perceived discrepancy between 'value expectations'\textsuperscript{31} and 'value capabilities'.\textsuperscript{32} "The greater the average degree of perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities, the greater the relative deprivation. The greater the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of various groups the greater the potential for political violence or conflict."\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{26} Upreti, Op.Cit., p.57.
\textsuperscript{27} Gopinath, Op. Cit., p.45.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p.46.
\textsuperscript{29} Dannis J. D. Sandole, Hugo Vander Merwe eds., Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice-Integration and Application, New York, 1993, p.11.
\textsuperscript{30} Handbook of Conflict resolution Strategies and skills for South Asia, Chandigarh, 2001, p.6.
\textsuperscript{31} Resources to which one feels entitled.
\textsuperscript{32} Resources which one feels capable of acquiring and keeping.
Galtung's 'rank disequilibrium' and 'status inconsistency' are two related terms that refers to discordant locations of actors along various indicators of socio economic measurement. They describe a situation where people are high on one indicator of social worth. For example, income but low on another, such as, political power. Such discrepancies are said to provoke particularly virulent discontent. When perceived structural violence conceptualized as Gurr's 'relative deprivation' or Galtung's 'rank disequilibrium' leads to the manifestations of violence as a means to change one's situation, Dollard's Frustration Aggression model come into the scene. The basic assumption of the Frustration-Aggression theory is that all aggression, whether interpersonal or international, has its root causes in the frustration of one or more actors' goal achievement. That is to say that conflict can be traced to the unfulfilment of personal or group objectives and the frustration that this breeds. Since the demand for basic human needs has always exceeded the supply, all human conflict can be traced to an actor's failure to obtain what it needs. The Frustration-Aggression theory rests on the basic stimulus-response hypothesis. However, the difficulty with Dollard's Frustration Aggression model is that they are non-structural in nature and do not sufficiently account for social context.

James Chowning Davies makes an explicit theoretical connection between the Dollard's group's formation of frustration aggression and his own modification of the 'hierarchy of needs' developed by Abraham Maslow. For Davies, it is the frustration of substantive (Physical, social- affectional, self esteem and self actualization) or implemental needs (security, knowledge and power) that can facilitate the transition from manifest conflict process to aggressive manifest conflict processes. Manifest conflict process refers to a situation in which at least two actors, or their representatives, try to pursue their perceptions of mutually incompatible goals by undermining, directly or indirectly, the

\[ \text{TH-16104} \]

\[ ^{34}\text{Ibid., pp.12-13.} \]

goal seeking capability of one another. On the other hand, in aggressive manifest conflict processes, at least two actors, or their representatives, try to pursue their perceptions of mutually incompatible goals by physically damaging or destroying the property and high value symbols of one another: and psychologically or physically injuring, destroying or forcibly eliminating one another. Davied argues, "Violence ... is produced when certain innate needs or demands are deeply frustrated."  

Another variation of social structural theories of conflict are to be found in the writings of Feieraband and Nesvolt. They define 'systematic frustration' in terms of 'social want formation', and maintain that the higher the social want formation in any given society and the lower the social want satisfaction, the greater the systematic frustration and the greater the impulse to political instability. Huntington also has made a similar approach to study the causes of violent conflict and instability especially in transitional societies. For him, conflict is the result of a lag in the development of a variable political institution, on the one hand and the socio economic changes on the other. Huntington argues that politicisation of the masses, urbanization, literacy, mass media; all expose the traditional man to new forms of life. The gap between the increasing aspirations, expectations and capabilities lead to conflict followed by frustration.

2.1.1 Impact of Conflict on Society:

Conflict has always both positive and negative impacts on society. Conflicts generate energy which can be channelised for constructive as well as deconstructive purposes.  

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36 Dennis J.D. Sandole, 'Paradigm, Theories and Metaphors in Conflict and Conflict Resolution: Coherence or Confusion?' in Sandole, Conflict Resolution...Op.Cit., p.6.
39 Ibid., p.30.
Conflict creates opportunities for interaction between unequal parties and forces them to be rational. Simmel devoted considerable effort to analyse the positive consequences of conflict for the maintenance of social whole and their sub units. Simmel saw conflict as "way of achieving some kind of unity." He took an optimistic view of conflict. However, despite this optimism, what is not been discussed is his perception that this unity may be obtained even if it be through the annihilation of one of the conflicting parties. The American sociologist Lewis Coser followed Simmel in identifying positive aspects of conflict as expressed in the Functions of Social Conflict. Coser felt the need to correct the balance of analysis, which tended to focus on the "dysfunction" of conflict rather than the potential positive aspects of conflict. Coser provisionally defined conflict as "a struggle over claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralise or eliminate their rivals". Later he defined conflict as a 'clash of values and interests.' Coser argues that conflict often constitutes the basis for community and unity among combatants and that conflict with an outside group is a solidifying force. There are others which could be added in the list of the positive side of conflict such as, conflict can increase commitment and enhances group loyalty, can identify key issues of concern which may lead to innovative breakthroughs and new approaches to the said problem, sharpens people's capacity to bargain, influence, compete or negotiate. It can be beneficial for the system and it may reinforce tolerance level between the warring factions.

Similarly, conflict could have severe negative outcomes. It can lead to violence, loss of life, denial of human rights, frustration, aggression, disrupts establish working patterns,

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47 Cited in Handbook of Conflict Resolution, Strategies and Skills for South Asia, IDC, 2003, p.5.
reduces productivity of the people engaged in various sectors, reduces social harmony and so on.

In an ethnically divided society, the repercussions of conflict could be manifold. Generally ethnicity focuses on group identity. It implies the organisation of plural persons into distinctive groups and solidarity and loyalties of individual members to such groups. Brass has defined ethnic groups in terms of objective attributes, with reference to subjective feelings and in relation to behaviour. An objective definition assumes that though no specific attribute is invariably associated with all ethnic categories, there must be some distinguishing cultural feature that clearly separates one group of people from another.

It can be language, territory, region, diet, dress or anything of this sort. The subjective definition stresses the existence of self consciousness. However, the difficulty to apply this concept in the present study is that they make it impossible to find out how a particular group of people arrives at self consciousness. The third dimension, namely, behavioural definition points to the existence of concrete, specific ways in which ethnic groups do or do not behave in relation to other groups. Behavioural definitions are also a form of objective definitions as they assume that there are specific ways in which ethnic groups behave or do not behave in relation to other groups. In other words, behavioural definitions merely suggest that there are cultural differences between ethnic groups. The most appropriate definition which will serve as analytical tool for this study thereby will be the objective cultural markers which also recognises that they are susceptible to change.

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50 Ibid., p.86.
Ethnic identities tend to crystallise in Gordon Allport's words, "condense around symbolic cues." Allport has suggested that the cues are always visible.

Visual cues have considerable reliability and relative immutability, especially if they are bodily cues. Furthermore, the symbols employed to differentiate group from group may be of widely divergent characters at different levels of identity. If the difference is especially significant, there is increased efficiency in the detection of identifying cues. An overarching identity may be indicated by language, while lesser one may be evidenced by a behavioural trait and a still lesser one by a visual one.51

Ethnic groups can become more or less exclusive, larger or smaller. After all, membership in an ethnic group is a matter of social definition. Ethnic identity is generally acquired by birth. However, there is a possibility for changing individual identity.52 There are various related processes of ethnic change. In the context of Assam, along with the concept of cultural identity and the related ethnic markers, the concept of group identity will be stressed upon. In case of the changes in group boundaries, change does not occur in individual but is applicable to collective identity. Group boundaries can become either wider or narrower. Some group identities may be lost by assimilation: i.e., the process of erasing the boundary between one group and another. There are two main types of assimilation: amalgamation and incorporation. In amalgamation, two or more groups unite to form a new group, larger and different from any of the component parts. Alternatively, one group may lose its identity by merging into another group which is called incorporation. Differentiation on the other hand, is narrowing of boundaries by creation of additional groups. In division, a group may separate into its component parts. There is on the other hand, the possibility of

proliferation, when a new group comes into existence without its parent group losing its identity. In the context of Assam, differentiation process is of great relevance which will be discussed in the section on the idea of construction of Assamese identity later.

Living in a region of conflict has its own fallouts. In a multi ethnic society, an armed conflict situation intuitively makes aware of one’s ethnic identity. The fear and anxiety aroused by the political consciousness in the environment outside, gets enmeshed within the self. Group consciousness impacts upon individual consciousness and the divide between the personal and political gets blurred. As women are the bearer of cultural markers in a given society, they are the first ones to be targeted by the opposing group(s) at the time of conflict.

Symbolism is very important in ethnic conflict, because it clothes ethnic claims in ideas and associations that have acknowledged moral force beyond the particular conflict. The question of ‘space’ along with ethnicity under a broader framework of conflict will be analysed in a greater length in chapter three. Gender as a category of analysis in a conflict situation of ethnic nature offered as an interesting tool to understand the whole conflict dynamics vis-à-vis women. This tool is used to draw attention to the way in which gender differences are constructed and translate in the social groups, institutions etc. In other words, it means that various questions are analysed and elucidated from the perspective of both the genders, and not just one of them. Since gender roles are embodied in space, there is a link between spatial organization of both at home and at

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**Principle of Differentiation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Proliferation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A→B+C implies one group divides into two or more component parts.</td>
<td>A→A+B implies one or more groups produce an additional group from within ranks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case only a part of the main table has been quoted. The main table talks of the processes of Ethnic Fusion and Fission.
the neighborhood and gender appropriate behaviour based on the premise that space contains a clue to behaviour and is instrumental in communicating social norms. Nira Yuval-Davis also reiterated that the spatial mobility of women are very much dictated in the patriarchal social set up. In other words, cultural and ethnic norms create 'spaces of modesty and immodesty'. In such a paradigm, a line is drawn between 'permitted and forbidden' spaces and between the spaces of 'purity and impurity'. Fenster emphasis on the point that the cultural guards of society, which is synonymous for men, demarcates such boundaries. Women's spaces are also defined in terms of autonomy, empowerment and capabilities. Autonomy in this context means the ability to largely decide independently on matters concerning one's own destiny and life. The concept is relational, referring to a possibility of change within unequal social structure or relationships. The concept of power on the other hand is understood as a concept not as domination but as capacity. In the line of Nussbaum's thinking, the question of capability is addressed in fifth chapter of this work. Capability as an agency is being highlighted in that chapter.

2.1.2 Ethnic Identity, Gender and Spatial Expressions:

In any society, women are the repository of cultural symbols and markers of generations. In armed conflict, the relations between men and women change and these shifts are reflecting back in conflict. Massey felt the need to conceptualise space as constructed out of inter relations as the simultaneous coexistence of social inter relations and interactions at all special scales. The ways spaces are culturally and symbolically constructed reflect the hegemony and power which exclude women from

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55 Ibid., p.469.
56 Ibid.
access to resources. Such aspects of symbolism of space are usually formulated by the patriarchy. The most prominent are the public-private devices, which for many women in different cultural contexts mean permitted and forbidden spaces. Symbolic spaces are most relevant to women as they play a major role in the construction and defense of cultural and ethnic collectivities as mentioned above. For instance, in Assamese Hindu societies, women are forbidden to enter the Manikut of the Xatras, a widow is not suppose to wear colorful clothes or forbidden to attend any function or pujas till a certain period of time after her husband’s death, Assamese Hindu women has to maintain complete seclusion when she has menstrual periods. A social function is organized to honor her ‘womanhood’ which is accepted by the society and she is taught how to behave in society from that time onwards. In other words, ethnic constructions and understanding of spaces are differentiated in gendered terms. And that is the key reason for which inflicting physical injury to women is considered as injury to the whole ethnic group.

Whereas ethnicity emphasizes differences between groups, the concept of citizenship draws attention to the principle of sameness, such as equal rights, justice and equal treatment for all. In a powerful critique, Pateman demonstrates that the original social contract, as described in the writings of political theorists such as Locke and Rousseau, excluded women as ‘citizens’. Women were viewed as creatures of passion rather than rationality, lacking the capacities required to participate as citizens and indeed, as capable of bringing considerable disorder into the public sphere. The rights of men over women were seen to be natural rather than political. Pateman concludes that citizenship is fundamentally gendered. The exclusion of women from civil and political citizenship and the reproduction of patriarchal institutions via social

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58 Sanctum Santorium
59 Vaishnavite institutions of Assam originated by Saint Shankardeva.
61 Ibid., p.180.
citizenship have been resisted by the feminists. The question of rights in the political sphere is seen as crucial to the full development of women's citizenship as Rian Voet calls 'An active and sex equal citizenship'62. At the time of ethnic conflict the gap related to rights and justice widens further which will be addressed in chapters three and four.

It was argued by the Difference feminists63, that women's experiences are fundamentally different from men especially in the time of conflict and peace. Here, the problem is not that men and women are different but the 'sexist' cultures devalue 'feminine' qualities instead of valuing, celebrating and promoting them.

Regarding conflict which is especially of armed nature, difference feminists argue that women because of their greater experience with nurturing and human relations,64 are generally more effective than men in conflict transformation and peace building which will be discussed in chapter five.

From the above discussion it is understood that space is not a neutral entity. It is a concept which is culturally constructed. Symbolic meaning is attached to it with regards to gender relations, roles and values in different ethnic societies. Gender relations and their expressions in space are linked to notions of power relations and citizen identity both between communities and the state and between two different gender in specific community.

2.1.3 Conflict in Assam

Conflict in the context of Assam will be analysed from structural and cultural dimension of conflict propounded Galtung in the larger framework of ethnicity. As

63 Joshua S Goldstein, 'Feminist Theories of War and Peace' in Goldstein, Joshua S., War and Gender: How Gender Shape War System and Vice Versa, Cambridge, 2001, p.41.
64 Ibid., p.42.
mentioned earlier, structural dimension highlights the underlying causes of conflict and the patterns and changes it brings about in social, political and economic structures. In other words, structural conflict typically built into the very structure of social, cultural and economic institutions. Structural violence usually has the effect of denying people's important rights, socio-political and sexual equality, and sense of personal fulfillment of self worth and so on. It includes huge political repression, psychological alienation often unnoticed which works slowly and erode humanistic values and impoverish human lives.

This aspect focuses attention on how social structures and organizations are built and changed by conflict. It speaks of the ways how people build and organize social, economic, political and institutional relationships to meet basic human needs, provide access to resources and make decisions that affect the groups. The cultural dimension on the other hand refers to changes produced by conflict in the broadest patterns of group life, including identity and the ways culture affects patterns of conflict. Structural causes of conflict in society are given in a table below:

**Table No:1 Structural Causes of Conflict in Assam.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of conflict</th>
<th>Key characteristics</th>
<th>Case of Assam</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Unequal, unjust and unrepresentative social structures, social exclusion, vertical social stratification.</td>
<td>Difference in education, wealth awareness, vulnerability and deprivation between various ethnic groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>Legal systems with bias towards certain group.</td>
<td>No proper legal or regulatory measures available for the victims of conflict. Legal arrangements providing privilege to powerful, Faulty land acts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Economic arrangements and power biased towards certain</td>
<td>Economic exploitation of the indigenous people,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Government policies ignoring local interests.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party and ideological biases and discrimination</td>
<td>Political hegemony of ruling Assamese elite versus other ethnic groups.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Strong ethnic affiliation, Assamese as state language has ruptured the century long greater Assamese fabric. Now a Bodo is not an Assamese but prefer to call a Bodo, rupture of social capital amongst various ethnic group.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ethnic minority groups hold deep seated values and define their identity, cultural discrimination of state government |

Source: Upreti, Bishnu Raj *Armed Conflict and Peace Process in Nepal: The Maoist Insurgency, Past Negotiations and Opportunities for Conflict Transformation*, New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2006, p. 62. *(case of Assam has been supplemented and is not in the original text.)*

In severely divided societies, as in Assam, ethnicity finds its way into a myriad of issues such as development plans, educational controversies, land policy, business policy, and power struggle and so on. Characteristically, issues that would elsewhere be relegated to the category of routine administration assume a central place on the political agenda of ethnically divided societies. Horowitz distinguishes between ranked and unranked systems in this regard. Ranked systems are societies in which one ethnic group is in complete domination of another. Unranked systems are composed of two or more ethnic groups with their own internal stratification of elites and masses. Walker Conoor also underlines the causes of ethnic strife which are predicated upon language, religion, customs, economic inequality and so forth. In such cases, the most important manifestation is "us –them" syndrome. Connor further underlines the importance of the depth of emotions in ethnic conflict. In most of the cases, the violent conflicts are between the state and particular social groups, frequently between ethnic groups and the state. Although these are frequently characterized as conflicts between

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two parties; i.e., the state and ethnic groups, there are a range of multiple conflicts involving violence, with many parties and many issues being involved.

2.2 Genealogy of Conflict in the State of Assam: Historical and SocioPolitical Background:
While talking of conflict in the context of North East of India, especially of Assam, conflict is generally understood in the form of armed struggle. The expression ‘armed conflict’ appears in Article3 of Geneva Conventions which deals with non international armed conflict as a confrontation not between two states but between the government and a rebel movement. An armed conflict is a contested incompatibility which concerns government or the territory where the use of Armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle related deaths. The conflict in Assam is mostly two faced-States versus the armed activists and conflicts between two or more groups of armed militants. In other words, conflict in Assam is both horizontal as well as vertical. On the vertical plane, various ethnic group versus the central ruling elite, horizontal on the other hand include the inter tribal or inter ethnic conflicts which often take the form of either ethnic cleansing or forced assimilation leading to serious violation of human rights.

Conflict in the North East is rooted in her peculiar political historical past and the process of her integration to the Indian mainland. The colonial power structures, problem of immigration, language and identity issues along with ethnic polarization with a sense of deprivation are some of the prominent causes for conflict in the region.

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Assam was an independent state till the advent of the British Power in 1826. The tradition of freedom and independence which the people of Assam had been enjoying for years, became a source of inspiration and motivated them to fight against British Imperialism. Under the banner of Assam Association, the politically conscious Assamese middle-class had emerged in laying foundation of mobilization for anti British rule.

The intellectual articulation of their sentiment was reflected in the writings of the litterateurs of that period like Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury, Jnananath Bora and so in. In his article entitled "Kamrup and Bharatvarsha" Jnananath recalls the glory of the Kamrupa Kingdom which has successfully remained a Hindu Kingdom even without being a part of Bharatvarsha (India). Emphasising Assam's separateness from the rest of the country Bora writes, "Today's Kamrup, which had always been a separate country, has become a province of India. The history of our country is not the same as that of the other provinces of India...... Had the British incorporated the former territories of Kamrup like Jalpaiguri and Rangpur and made Assam into a separate country, then we would have drawn inspiration from other countries of the world and our views would have been different..."

In another article, "Asom Desh Bharatvarshar Bhitarat Thakibo Kiyo?" (Why Assam should stay within India?) Jnananath Bora insists that Assam's regeneration would be possible only if it is separated from India. Emphasizing that although the British forcibly incorporated Assam into Indian Territory, the 'Assamese' have always considered themselves to be an independent nation, though it was an uphill task to

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69 Treaty of Yandaboo was signed on February 24, 1826. By article 2 of this treaty, the Burmese King relinquished all claim over Assam. British control of Assam was formalized henceforth.
70 Girin Phukon, Assam: Attitude to Federalism, New Delhi, 1984, p.2.
72 Present day Assam was known as Kamrup.
74 Ibid., p. 89.
define who is an Assamese. He questioned, "Would Thailand or Burma become a part of India just because they are brought under a single administrative unit?" 75
The political arrangements were also no less faulty which created a massive resentment amongst the Assamese masses.

The Cabinet Mission Plan (1946) grouped the country in three segments within a loose federation prior to independence. Assam was placed with Bengal in group C with 36 Muslim and 34 general seats in the Constituent Assembly76. "Although the provinces within each group were granted the right to opt out after the first election, Assam was bitterly opposed to being placed for any purpose and for howsoever short a period with avowedly and potentially 'Pakistan' group".77 The cabinet Mission's proposal ultimately fell through and under the Indian Independence Act, Muslim majority Sylhet voted in a referendum to sever its ties with Assam and joined East Pakistan and Brahmaputra valley was relieved.78

In 1950's, the North East essentially meant Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The colonial power introduces a number of administrative concepts like excluded areas, partially excluded areas etc.79

The excluded areas80 were areas where the vast majority of population was of tribal origin. They were not placed under the authority of the autonomous provincial

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75 Ibid., p.88.
76 Group A-Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa (Hindu majority provinces); Group B- Punjab, North West Frontier Province and Sindh (Muslim majority provinces); Group C- Bengal and Assam (Muslim majority provinces).
77 B.G. Verghese, India's North East Resurgent Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development, New Delhi, 1996, p.28.
78 Ibid., p.28.
80 The Simon Commission preferred the term 'excluded area' to 'backward area', the reference being to areas excluded from application of provincial legislation. The 1935 GOI Act recognized the backward tracts of Assam into the excluded areas. However, the term "excluded areas" has mistakenly been interpreted to suggest that these areas were excluded from British India.
government but continued to remain under the direct and exclusive authority of the British governor. Partially excluded areas were areas with a mixed population of Indians and people with tribal origin. Unlike excluded Areas, these territories were transferred to the authority of the autonomous government, but with the restriction that the British governor was empowered to adapt all promulgated provincial laws to local needs of the concerned areas. Later on partly to rationalize these concepts, Government of India had created four new states. The absence of line system in Assam has resulted in immigration and later on influx from Bangladesh and Nepal.

"The immigration problem has overshadowed all other problems since 1979. There was no realistic estimate of immigrants but estimates vary between 30-40 lakh. During 1971-91, the Muslim population grew nearly twice as much as the Hindu. The rate of growth of voters in the immigrant areas has been higher than the rate of population growth of the state." One observer reflected the sentiments of the Assamese: "...Within fifty years they (immigrants from Bangladesh) will form the majority in Assam. The next step will be a referendum on merger with Bangladesh. With Assam gone, India will have no land link with the North East India..." (For details of immigrant Muslim population in various constituencies of Assam, see table 1 in the appendix).

The Census data on language were not of help to identify the illegal immigrants. Since the Indian Census relies on a person's self-description of

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82 Way back in 19205, Government of Assam adopted the policy of 'line system' which imposed restrictions on settlement in certain areas so as to protect the future interests of the indigenous population. According to this system, certain specific areas of the province were divided into three classes-1. immigrant's line, mixed line and Assamese line. However, the execution of the provisions of the line system did not work mainly due to the pro Muslim League Policy of the Government of Assam from 1926-1944. Phukon, op.cit., p.38.
84 Assam Tribune, Guwahati, dated 17 August 1985.
what his mother tongue is, the political leaders of immigrant communities appear to have succeeded in engineering responses that would draw attention away from Assam's changing map. Large number of immigrants – notably Muslims of Bengali decent along with other immigrants identify themselves as Assamese speakers, irrespective of whether they speak the language.85

The second dimension of immigration into Assam from Bengal was the tension between the Assamese and the Bengalis. After British territorial adjustment, there had been continuous flow of Bengalis, besides tea garden laborers, Marwaris and Biharis. Since more Bengalis were English-educated compared to the population of Assam, they were positioned as clerks, officers and other offices in the company administration in Assam. It is important to note that in North East, language often provides the criterion for the articulation of identity politics.86 Among many markers of ethnicity as discussed earlier, language has assumed an important place in the history of past and present political situation. Language provides a bond of unity among its speakers and defines a line of separation marking off one speech community from another.87 Gellner has also reiterated the fact stating, "Language is the fulcrum on which even nations are built".88

It is a historical fact that taking advantage of non-co-operative attitude of the Assamese people towards their British conquerors during early years of annexation of Assam in 1826, the Bengali people, who gave support to and held various important administrative positions under the Britishers, persuaded them to believe that Assamese was an "uncouth dialect" of the Bengali and to make


Bengali the medium of primary and secondary education in Assam... (emphasis added)

Dr. B.K Baruah, a noted Assamese intellectual has also stated in this regard:

Culturally, racially and linguistically, every non-Assamese is a foreigner in Assam. In this connection, we must bear in mind that Assam from the very ancient times never formed a part of India. Mythology and legendary allusions apart, viewed in this perspective every foreigner who came to and resided in Assam for trade and other purposes after the occupation of the province by the British in 1826 A.D. might be treated as alien, if she wanted to save her from the grip of foreigners. An alien cannot be expected to take a dispassionate view of public affairs of our future free state. 90

With the growth of Assamese sub-nationalism, the Assamese intelligentsias became increasingly conscious of establishing their language on sound footing. It took the Assamese people decades to persuade British rulers to redress their wrong and reinstate Assamese to its rightful place. In more directly competitive terms, official status aids group performance. And it has been commented that the Assamese language movement grew out of a deep feeling of mortification among Assamese-speaking people at the relative excellence of Bengali-speaking people, who surpassed them in all the possible fields. It was thought that, once Assamese emerged as the official language, the Bengalis, for want of their efficiency in it, would automatically be put at bay91 (emphasis added). Prior to this scenario, Assamese was a lingua franca which was spoken by more than 60 percent of the total population and which was

understood by a large section of the hill and other non-Assamese people. The bond of unity marked by language may be one of chance and choice, depending on whether the linkage is attained through mother tongue or a second language. In this sense, ethnic bond based on language can be viewed as either an evolved bond based on mother tongue or a deliberately created unity founded on a language other than mother tongue. Communities may alter both the name of their language and the extension of their speech community for a variety of reasons in different historical situations.

The imposition of Assamese language backed by movements, made the tribes suspicious about the hidden motive of the dominant section of the Assamese. The hills of Assam were the home of the tribal population, speaking various languages and dialects different from those of plains. They possessed their own language and culture with different socio-political institutions. In this context, Amit Prakash has mentioned, "when an individual (or group of individuals) consciously perceives a certain descriptive identity as indispensable to the definition of his/her (or their) personal identity and accepts that descriptive identity as predominant and paramount over other identities and seek to acquire political resources on the basis of that identity, that conscious identity becomes politically significant." Issues of identity are fundamental in protecting a sense of self and group survival and become particularly important during conflict. Inspired by the identity consciousness of the Assamese, the tribal population of Assam has also become conscious of their distinct identity, started reviving their language and projecting it as their symbol of identity and asserts their rights through political mobilization. In Assam, the issue of identity too shaped and moved the issue of conflict, often in terms of deeply felt demands.

92 Ibid., p.2.
95 Girin Phukon, Politics of Regionalism in North East India, New Delhi, 1996, p.138.
At the deepest level, identity is lodged in the narratives of how people see themselves, who they are and what they fear they will become or lose.

Along with the issue of identity, ‘underdevelopment’ was another factor that gave birth to conflict. It is a sad fact that despite being potentially one of the richest state in terms of natural resources, Assam has found herself economically weak. Historically, Assam used to contribute a large share of revenue to the central exchequer through her raw materials like crude oil, jute, tea, timber etc but she remained one of the most underdeveloped province of India. Sir Otto Niemeyer in his financial report too recognized the financial deficit of Assam. Phukon reiterated, “The perpetual backwardness due to lack of infrastructure, particularly communication, transport and power were other critical issues. The partition snapped Assam’s direct link with the rest of the country necessitating greater transportation charges for her export and imports.” Jayanta Madhab has also emphasised, “Planning priorities of the Governments, both central and the state were faulty. The implementation of projects and programmes was even worse. Whatever public sector enterprise was established almost all died or got sick due to poor management.” The desire for ethnic sovereignty coupled with the need to dethrone outsiders from their control over local resources has been the main motivating force behind the conflict in Assam.

97 Provincial autonomy (1935) and partition of the country created manifold problems for Assam which required large financial resources. In this connection, financial award of sir Otto Niemeyer is noteworthy where he recommended a grant of Rs. 47 lakhs and an annual subvention of Rs. 30 lakhs to Assam. But it seems that these recommendations could not fulfill even the minimum requirement of the government of Assam. Two main reasons were attributed for this-First, Assam produced petrol, kerosene, tea etc., and contributed more than 90 crores to the central exchequer in the shape of excise duty but on the other hand, Assam was left to run the new constitutional scheme under the GOI Act 1935. Second, the Central Government had not taken into account the fact that a large part of company income earned in Assam had been assessed for income tax purpose outside Assam, thus leading to a reduced share of Assam from income tax pool, Phukon Assam, Op.Cit., p.111.
2.2.1 Idea of Construction of Assamese Identity and the making of Ethnic Rifts:

It is important to discuss as to who constitute the Assamese population? Assamese population does not necessarily mean caste Hindu alone. In fact, the Assamese culture is the result of continuous process of socio cultural fusion among diverse linguistic and ethnic traits for centuries. Assam is a melting pot of various ethnic stocks having different and diverse socio cultural background. The representatives of these stocks came to Assam from different directions at different periods of history. In the course of time all of them contributed their respective cultures towards the growth of composite Assamese culture. As Phil Cohen puts it, "Ethnicity refers to a real process of historical individuation-namely the linguistic and cultural practices through which a sense of collective identity or root is produced and transmitted from generation to generation." 

According to Udayon Misra, "an influential section of the Assamese intellingentia who stressed the polytechnic nature of Assamese society, at the same time feel that it was Hindu and particularly by Vaishnavite faith are Assamese which served as the main cementing force of Assamese Society." The term 'Asamiya' however very specifically mean those people who have accepted 'Asamiya' as their mother tongue. Therefore, the term 'Asamiya' encompass the autochthon tribals, migrated Muslims or non caste Assamese Hindus, tribals and Marwari families who have accepted the 'Asamiya' language.

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100 Bodo , Chutia , Deori, Dimasa, Rabha, Mishing, Tiwa and many other tribes are bracketed under the inclusive term 'Assamese' and regarded as part of the greater Assamese society once upon a time.
103 Official language of Assam.
It is important to note here that identity politics has assumed centre stage in the discourse of groups involved in contemporary conflict and self consciousness is a crucial factor for emergence of an ethnic identity, besides others.

Identity is also treated as a result of symbolic interactionism which is socially transformed. The linkages between identity processes and the wider social structures within these processes can be gauged by Giddens 'reflexive project of self' meaning individuals reflect on their identity and continuously rework it. Identities like symbols therefore are constantly negotiated and revised as societies undergo change.

In fact identities are under constant definition and redefinition especially during the time of conflict. As per the formulae given by Horowitz on varieties of ethnic change, a case of Assam particularly Nalbari can be showcased in the line of differentiation. A larger Assamese group now divided into its component parts. Once an ethnic 'Assamese' have now become an ethnic 'Bodo' as a result of cultural and structural reasons of conflict in the society. Today the consolidated meaning of the term 'Assamese' is facing erosion and as a result the state is facing ethnic conflict. The rupture of composite culture has began though in the past, despite their distinct

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105 Prakash, op.cit., p.3.
106 According to Anthony D Smith, an ethnic community is a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories and cultural elements, a link with a historic territory or homeland and a measure of solidarity, Guibernau J.Rex, The Ethnicity Reader-Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration, New Delhi, 1997, p.81.
107 George Herbert Mead believed that symbols were the basis of individual identity and social life. In his opinion, individuals can acquire identity only through interacting with others. By doing this, we learn the language of our social lives. Since Mead regarded symbols as the foundation of both personal and social life, the theory he developed is called Symbolic Interactionism, (http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~ko371597/symbolic.htm).
109 Glazer, op.cit., p.115.
separate cultural identity various tribes contributed largely for the composite ‘Assamese’ culture following the lines of reformer saint of Assam Shankardeva.\footnote{Vaishnavite saint of Assam who propounded the concepts like ‘Namghar’ (public prayer hall) and \textit{Ek sarania Dharma} (religion of refuge on one God), Maheswar Neog, \textit{Shankardeva}, New Delhi, 1967, p.34.}

\subsection*{2.2.2 Birth of Secessionist Movement:}

The 1980s witnessed a mass movement in Assam led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) for the detection and eviction of foreign nationals from the state and the granting of greater autonomy. This movement was supported by a majority Bodo\footnote{One of the oldest plain tribes of Assam.} youth, who worked along with AASU. \footnote{Sudhir Jacob George, ‘The Bodo Movement in Assam’ in \textit{Asian Survey}, vol.34 no.10, October 1994, p.880.} The movement came to an end after signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, and subsequent elections enabled the erstwhile AASU leaders to form the new AGP government in Assam. AGP government raised the hopes of the tribes specially the Bodos for fulfillment of their long standing demands\footnote{Ibid., 880.}. The Bodos were already in distress with a sense of discrimination and neglect when in 1986, when Secondary Education Board of Assam notified Assamese as a compulsory language in all schools. The alleged policy of assimilation by imposing Assamese language upon the tribals has been termed by plain tribes, especially the Bodos, as a conspiracy to swallow them\footnote{Amarjeet Singh, ‘Movement For Bodoland State : Struggle For Autonomy’ in \textit{Journal of Peace Studies}, vol. 14 no.1, January-March, 2007, p.48.}. All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) later on spearheaded a movement for separate Bodoland as a result of identity consciousness and a sense of relative deprivation.

By asserting national and ethnic identities, the Assam agitation has also prepared the ground for the rise of militancy in Assam. The dreaded United Liberation Front of
Assam (ULFA), which dared to challenge India’s sovereignty over Assam, was only an offshoot of Assam’s agitation. The birth of ULFA showed the way for other ethnic groups to float their own militant outfits realize their demands. Today in addition to ULFA, many other militant organizations like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Dimasa Halim Deogah (DHD), etc are active in Assam and has resulted in an armed struggle or conflict against the state. Initially, many of these organizations maintained close relations with the communities they represent. But over the course of time, they moved away from their own people, their activities having nothing to do with the interests of the people they claim to serve. For instance, in one of its press release in 1992, ULFA has stated and tries to justify the role of migrants in the state as "...When we refer to the Assamese instead of Assamese speaking people we actually mean the different inter mixture of tribal nationalities-those who are committed to working for good of Assam. The mixture of nationalities that is the Assamese is, in reality, the result of immigration. We consider the immigrants from East Bengal to be the major part of national life of the people of Assam..." (emphasis added). Now these groups resort to all kinds of methods including abduction, killing, and extortion to collect money for conducting their activities. There are many incidents where militant groups of Assam, merely to prove their existence and get public attention, are involved in destruction of public property and killing of innocent civilians. State’s role in such situation is taken as an intervening process, which has and may open up further space for mobilization and result in a spiral of conflict. If the state denies concession to demanding groups and instead pursues policies that are partisan, centralized and repressive, conflict occurs.

115 ULFA was born formally on April 7, 1979 by a group of six radical Assamese youth who vowed to fight the Indian State till they achieve a ‘Sovereign Socialist Assam’. In other words the extremists of the Assam movement was born as ULFA and began to assert itself.
116 Almost all the outfits claim to be working for protecting the interests of the ‘natives’ from foreign immigrants to formation of autonomous districts/state or the creation of separate state within the Indian Union.
2.3 Armed Conflict and its Effect on Society:

Armed conflict has important direct and indirect consequences on society. The direct effect of conflict is death and destruction, whereas indirect effects continue years after conflict ends. Effect on infrastructure, health, deterioration of existing social order, unemployed youths attracted towards violence etc is some of the negative effects of armed conflict. Armed conflict also adversely affects quality of life, on civilian economy, communication, social harmony and social fabric. Most importantly, many of these destructions results in turn contribute to the persistence of armed conflict. In worst cases, this cycle creates an underdevelopment trap, whereby armed conflict cause economic and social disruptions that lead to further conflict or violence. Armed conflict can degrade governance, deform institutions and destroys development. Hence, a protracted cycle of conflict can lead to complete state failure.

2.4 Peculiar effect of armed conflict on women:

Women and men experience conflict in their capacities as both victims and perpetrators. Women as a heterogeneous group of social actors are arguably more affected than their male counterparts in conflict situations. In fact, gendered form of physical violence exists in all types of conflict. Armed conflict exacerbates inequalities in gender relations that already exist in society. In an ethnically divided society, women bodies are generally used as 'ethnic markers' thereby have more specific manifestations. The inequality that women experience in armed conflict derives from dominant

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understanding of gender roles. This dimension has also been stressed by Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration of 1995 which says,

"While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex. Parties to conflict often rape women with impunity, sometimes using systematic rape as a tactic of war and terrorism. The impact of violence against women and violation of the human rights of women in such situations is experienced by women of all ages, who suffer displacement, loss of home and property, loss or involuntary disappearance of close relatives, poverty and family separation and disintegration, and who are victims of acts of murder, terrorism, torture, involuntary disappearance, sexual slavery, rape, sexual abuse and forced pregnancy in situations of armed conflict, especially as a result of policies of ethnic cleansing and other new and emerging forms of violence. This is compounded by the life long social, economic and psychologically traumatic consequences of armed conflict ...".

122 Gender refers to the perceptions of appropriate behaviour, appearance and attitude for women and men that arise from social and cultural expectations. The concept of gender emerged as a reaction to the marginality of women in prevailing analytical frameworks. The social system is considered to be male centred where experiences of men are perceived to be the norm and women's experiences are organised and evaluated in accordance with the general (male) experiences. Gender attempts to understand the relations between femininity and masculinity, which place women and men in a relation of power. A range of practices, ideas, representations, including division of labour, roles, resources expose this relation of power. These relations ascribe to them different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavioural patterns etc. However, these relations are largely socially constructed and vary with time and space, handouts circulated by Jagori, distributed in a workshop on Gender in Centre For Education and Communication (CEC), January 23-24, 2006, New Delhi.

123 A Report on Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 4-5 September 1995, New York, p.84.
In this connection Coomaraswamy also says,

"To rape women with impunity and to make their bodies with the symbols of the other side is to assert domination and to symbolically assault ethnic identities in its most protected space" \(^{124}\)

Nussbaum talks of three kinds of capabilities that are cardinal for women's development: Basic, internal and combined. Nussbaum tackles the issue of individual capability and social arrangements with her concept of 'combined capabilities' \(^{125}\). These comprise 'internal capabilities' which Nussbaum explains as the "developed states of the individual herself that are, so far as the person herself is concerned, sufficient conditions for the exercise of the requisite functions". \(^{126}\) According to her, suitable external conditions will enable the exercise of the function. \(^{127}\) However in conflict situations, external conditions are not suitable to develop such 'capabilities'.

Feminist scholarships have established a rich tradition in analyzing the gendered dimensions of nation state rule and revealed the multiple ways in which policies shape employment opportunities, family practices and state society relations for both men and a woman who has been discussed in greater details in chapter three and four. It is also important to mention here that the existing ethnic identities in Assam, which may be recognized in distinctive components such as food, culture, customs, and festivals, are also intrinsically gendered and highly differentiated between man and women, which further deteriorates in conflict situation.

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\(^{126}\) Ibid., p.10.

The effects of armed conflict on women have indeed different dimensions. As mentioned earlier, the pitiable condition of women in general starts multiplying during and after conflicts. It shows that the psychological traumas associated with sexual violation and with the loss or disappearance of family members last long after peace returns. The conflict in Assam, which has manifested itself as a low-intensity silent war and which in some areas have gone on for decades, has no frontiers, entering every home, neighborhood and community. Normal social and economic life has been seriously compromised 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. Over and above the overt impact of violence, 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 many cases, psychological bonds in the family comes to an end as a result of conflict, which leads to disastrous consequences like drug addiction, prostitution, starvation and psychosomatic disorders. Furthermore, 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 related effects. With many of the men killed or “missing,” there is an increase in female-headed households. It has also resulted in large-scale migrations to the urban centers by women which have been witnessed in the state of Assam.

The situation is even worse in rural areas where insurgents are more active resulting in these areas being witness more intensive counter insurgency (fake encounters also at times, when innocents get killed on false pretexts) operations. The women in rural areas are today sandwitched between the militants and security personnel involved in counter insurgency operations. On several

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occasions, women are subjected to sexual harassment by both insurgents and security personnel. In the inter community clashes too, the women and children are the first victims and worst sufferers. The women by the time manage to flee after collecting their minors and belongings, are butchered and killed.

The very presence of army in rural areas in such situations causes a lot of insecurity to women. When search operation is going on from house to house, body searchers are also being carried out. When armed forces are in ‘operation’, women are routinely questioned on the thinnest pretexts and are thus exposed to sexual violence, including the threat of assault. This further aggravated when security forces search their home at any time day and night.

Losing husbands and sons may not only mean only emotional loss but also mean loss of economic support and social legitimacy for a women victim. Women’s lack of economic power and opportunity may force them to rely on their male family members and in their absence a women lose all rights for their own protection, employment, benefits or guarantees to security.

A large number of civilians have lost their lives between 1999-2000 and from 2000-07 in Assam due to ongoing conflict. The victims are found mostly to be the sole bread earners of the family. In such situation, the burden of looking after families, running their homes and becoming protectors of their children falls entirely in the shoulder of women, while traditionally they are the ones who have

132 H.Srikanth, ‘Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.35 no.47. November 18-20,2000,p.4112
133 Dainik Assam, 12 September,2006.
been protected. In this study an analysis of how women’s space is impeded by prevailing conflict situations has been studied.

2.5 Introduction of Nalbari District and the Two Selected Villages: Baraliapar and Lakhipar:

In the light of the above scenario, a study has been conducted in Nalbari district of Assam. Nalbari has been chosen for its interesting demographic composition, geographical location and peculiar socio economic background and a history of conflict. Nalbari district is situated in between Kamrup and Barpeta district(please see map) bordering Bhutan. As a part of greater Kamrup kingdom, the history of the district consists of invaders like Subedars of Bengal, Koch Kings and Ahom. Ahom came in 1682 and ruled till 1826. Following an agreement between Ahom king and East India Company, Assam province came into existence with Kamrup as one of the constituent districts. For better administration, old Kamrup district was divided into three sub-division in 1983. This sub-division was upgraded as a district from 14-8-1985 vide notification no GAG (B) 46.84.33 dated 10-8-1985 with headquarters at Nalbari. This district is a home to indigenous populations like Bodos, Rabhas, Nepalis, tea garden people besides the plain Assamese people, all adding to the rich tapestry. The district comprises nine revenue circles. It has a good numbers of SC and ST populations, adding up to 8.78 and 17.67 percent, respectively.

The rural population of the district is 9992,915 out of which 512,225 are males and 480,690 are females settled in 803 inhabited villages out of total 824 villages.

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134 Wasbir Hussain, Homemakers Without the Men, New Delhi, 2006, p. 115.
indicating that 21 villages are uninhabited. It is also interesting to note that out of 803 inhabited villages in the district 401 villages or 49.94% do not have schedule caste population. However amongst 803, 359 villages do not have scheduled tribe population. Rural male literacy is 66.44% while the rate for female is 43%.

Due to its strategic location, that is bordering Samdrup Jhonkhar, a southern district of Bhutan, which is a safe heaven for most of the militant group, Nalbari has become the hotbed for the militants. In 1990, immediately after the first ever pro-human rights and democratic rallies in all southern districts of Bhutan, the Government of Bhutan, invited the ULFA leaders from Assam to Bhutan. Under the Royal command, the Chief District Officer of Samdrup Jhonkhar district in eastern Bhutan coordinated a meeting between the ULFA leaders, representatives of the Ministry of Home and a few prominent citizens of eastern Bhutan. The meeting decided to allow the ULFA leaders to make their bases in Bhutan in return for their support in terrorizing and eventually evicting Lhotshampas (Bhutanese people of Nepali origin) from Bhutan. Since then ULFA leaders have been living in Bhutan. They have established 33 camps inside Bhutan.

In fact, Nalbari has a long and devastating history of conflict and has always been a traditional strongholds of the dreaded militants like ULFA and NDFB and erstwhile Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). Several top leaders of ULFA including its Deputy commander in chief, Raju Baruah, ULFA’s one time publicity chief

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137 Uninhabited villages are found in Baska and Barkhetri area of Nalbari (present BTAD area), District Census Handbook, 1991, Guwahati, p.17.
138 Ibid., p.23.
139 Samdrup Jhonkhar is hardly 30 kms from Tamulpur area of Nalbari.
140 District of Nalbari is amongst the top three vulnerable districts of Assam facing the conflict, Bibhu Prasad Routray, ‘Assam:ULFA’s Routes To Terror’ in South Asia Intelligence Review, vol.1 no8, September 9, 2002,(www.sapt.org).
Mithinga Daimari, Ms Pranati Deka, cultural secretary, Lohit Deuri, a former ULFA commandant and several others hail from this district support this very fact. Recent killing of FCI Director PC Ram has also occurred in Nalbari after his long stay in the shelter villages located in this district. The categorization of the polling stations on the basis of sensitivity with respect to militant attacks also prove Nalbari as a conflict prone zone of Assam. Out of total 885 polling stations, 283 are very sensitive, 237 are sensitive and 365 are safe. 142

Instead of ‘three cornered armed conflict’, as put forth by Anindita Dasgupta,143 to depict the conflict situations of Nalbari, I would argue that the four cornered armed conflict exists in the particular district. It is a conflict between the militants and security forces, militants and ex militants i.e. mostly ULFA versus surrendered ULFA (SULFA), who generally work as Government’s spy or agent and between the militant groups of different ethnic origin, i.e. between members of ULFA and NDFB or erstwhile Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) where civilians have often been targeted victims or incidental casualties. In this case too women’s bodies are taken as a cultural or ethnic marker and thereby, she has to bear the brunt of physical assault or injury in many cases. This is one of the major sources of the insecurity for the people of Nalbari which has been elaborated further in chapter three.

Recent political engineering of Nalbari is also a product of conflict which is of interethnic nature. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, insecure and declining groups lay claim to a favourable distribution of prestige through the official invocation of symbols. Political boundaries tend to set the dimensions in the field

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within which group contact occurs. And such contacts in turn, renders for groups to sort out affinities and disparities. In case of Nalbari, disparities are now sorted out between Assamese and the Bodos by creating the territorial Division called BTAD. In other words, new politics of representation therefore sets in motion an ideological contestation around 'Bodo ethnicity'.

Northern part of Nalbari is mostly populated by the Bodos. They were reduced to less than 1/3rd of the total population due to the influx of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in their own homeland. The Bodos had grown increasingly impatient of promises of autonomy by AASU. However, in pursuance of Bodo Accord the demographic figure of Nalbari is changed after the creation of BTAD in the year 2003. The Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) Act was passed by the Legislative Assembly of Assam which came into force on 13 May 1993. The Act provided for the establishment of an administrative authority known as Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). It was against this backdrop that GOI initiated a fresh process of dialogue with the Bodos in September 1997. In response to the initiative of the Central Government, The Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) unilaterally suspended its operation with effect from 14 July 1999. This was followed by a series of tripartite talks between GOI, Government of Assam and BLT. After twenty one rounds of talks, a Memorandum of settlement was signed on 10 February 2003. The provisions of MOS are as follows:

1. Creation of an autonomous District to be known as Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the state of Assam and provision of constitutional protection under the sixth schedule to the constitution of India.

2. Adequate safeguards to the non tribal of BTC area.

144 Largest plain tribe of Assam.
145 A militant group that demanded autonomy within the India.It has been disbanded now.
3. The area under BTC jurisdiction is called the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD).

4. The BTC could not have more than 12 executive members each of whom looks after a specific area of control called *somosthi*.

5. The council enjoys autonomy and control over departments specified in the MOS, but it does not control the district administration.

6. The BTAD consists of four contiguous districts-Kokrajhar, *Baksa*¹⁴⁶, Udalguri and Chirang representing 35% of total area of Assam.

7. The Council seem to have largely addressed the issue of Bodo self determination now.

This was the first instance that guarantee for the hill tribes under the Sixth Schedule¹⁴⁷ of the Constitution of India has been extended to plain tribes.

As a result of the formation of BTAD, Nalbari is divided into two halves-Nalbari and Baksa. However, this particular case study will include both Baksa and Nalbari as Nalbari district. The following figures show the location of Nalbari and how she look after curbing out Baksa out of her. Baksha is having total 692 villages ¹⁴⁸ mostly populated by Bodos.

The creation of BTAD area has been the result of ethnic aspiration of the Bodos. In other words, territorial recognition of the Bodos by creating BTAD area has given them an identity status and they have regained their shattered ethnic aspirations.

To quote Amit Prakash, "When the individuals concerned translate their descriptive identity into a self conscious political identity (by whatever process) premised on any attribute of the group) they emerge as ethnic identity."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Curved out form Nalbari.
¹⁴⁷ Sixth Schedule deals with the administration of the tribal areas of Assam,Meghalaya,Tripura and Mizoram.
¹⁴⁸ Data from SDO sadar,Baksa.
The following map shows the BTAD area of Baksa curved out of Nalbari.
However, two particular villages namely, Baraliapar(1)\textsuperscript{150} and Lakhipar located in Baksa region of Nalbari has been selected as focused study area to understand the impact of armed conflict on women. The rationale for such selection is enlisted as follows,

- Both the villages have witnessed unprecedented violence\textsuperscript{151}.
- They faced tremendous violence when comes to the case of women\textsuperscript{152}.
- Both of them were shelter village for the major outfits\textsuperscript{153}
- Both the villages come under the ‘most sensitive ‘zone in the district\textsuperscript{154}.
- They are backward in all respects\textsuperscript{155}.

\textsuperscript{150} There are two villages having the same name. The village Baraliapar where the study has been conducted will be cites as Baraliapar(1), village code 1133.
\textsuperscript{151} Field work data.
in Baraliapar, Seventeen Assamese women were gunned down by unidentified gunman in the year 1998.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} As told by Gaonburhas of both the villages. The Assam police Prahari scheme has also mentioned this fact.
\textsuperscript{155} Both the villages are inundated by floods, malaria prone, no PHC nearby, all link roads are broken, civil amenities are far from satisfactory, socio economic position of women are in a deplorable
• Though women are hard working and having an edge in weaving and knitting, they are not getting any assistance from the state.  
• Lakhipar has been selected under project PRAHARI of Assam Police to transform it into a 'model village'.  
• Though multi ethnic in composition, both the villages maintained social harmony, cohesion amongst themselves in the time of conflict.

Baraliapar and Lakhipar village is located in Tamulpur subdivision under Pub Baska mauza of present Baksa District, Bhutan. The demographic composition of Baraliapar village is very interesting which consists of 95 household of plain Assamese people, 65 household of Bodos with no Schedule caste population. In Lakhipar which is infested by severe malaria, is one of the shelter villages of Nalbari for most of the major outfits especially ULFA and NDFB. It consists almost 200 household of Bodos and Hajong (90%) and Non Bodos (10%). Non Bodos consists of mostly Bengali Hindus. It is interesting to note that none of the village has schedule caste population. However, total number of female population in Baraliapar is 486 while Lakhipar has total 529 female population. It was found that in both the villages which was rampant by armed conflict, women are proving themselves as the testimony (of the conflict) which has been discussed in greater details in the next chapter.

To conclude, the existing cultural markers of a society define women’s space in the time of armed conflict. The very nature of women’s vulnerability often lies more in the fact that armed conflicts have evolved to the extent that the civilian population is totally

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156 Initially, with the assistance from government side under the project prahari, women weavers of Lakhipar were encouraged. But gradually the process has slowed down.
157 Elaborated in chapter four.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
caught up in the fighting and women are frequently the ones trying to maintain and provide for the everyday survival of themselves and their families. The notion of vulnerability also comprises the problem of being at risk, the ability to cope with the situation and the stress, shock and trauma of conflict. Vulnerability generally does not fit into an easily determined category or definition where women are concerned. It is, therefore, in accordance with the specific nature of each situation and the different factors involved those groups of women who could be identified as being particularly vulnerable. In other words the degree or the women's vulnerability solely depends upon the circumstances.