CHAPTER-VI

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Women have been associated with peace activism for long but the belief that women are by nature peaceful, has been critiqued. This essentialist view is flawed as there are numerous instances from across the globe that reflect the engagement of women in both instigating as well as actively participating in acts of violence. According to Weaver (2011), “The core issue with the association of women with peace activism is that it raises, and reinforces, gendered norms, through the assumptions of what it means to be a woman.” ¹

Despite criticism, many women have organized themselves into collectives and have adopted gendered frames through which they have articulated their resistance and efforts for peace. These spaces not only allow them to challenge their limitations but also explore their sense of agency.

According to Jenkins and Perrow (1977), “The strategic use of gender identities and attributions may help either to establish or to challenge the credibility of a movement’s stance with regard to particular issues and therefore may encourage the donation of resources by elites and others to movements or counter movements…”² Gendered tactics such as particular behaviours, strategies of protest, adoption of gendered names for their organizations etc., can ground a social movement in a way that shapes the construction of the image of the concerned participants, “frame an issue in a particular way, or claim legitimacy as actors in a given arena.”³

Interesting insights have emerged from information collated over the past three years from people, associated with both the organizations as well as the civil society in Guwahati and Nagaland, during the present study. Several interlinking themes have emerged across the study.

I. COLLECTIVES AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN NORTH EAST INDIA

The North Eastern region of India has seen the birth and growth of several women’s collectives since the pre-Independence era. The first women’s cooperative or Mahila Samiti in the region was formed in Dibrugarh, Assam in 1915 and was subsequently followed by the establishment of the Mahila Samitis in Nagaon in 1917 and Tezpur in 1919. Chandraprabha Saikiani, a progressive activist championing for the rights of the women and co-founder of the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, led a protest with a fiery speech, against women’s segregation on the occasion of an Assam Sahitya Sabha meeting in 1925, thus laying the foundation for the establishment of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti in 1926. According to Bhuyan (2007), “Saikiani’s vision was that these samitis would extend to the entire state of Assam, addressing women’s rights issues with a focus on handloom as an economic engine.” The Mahila Samitis were set up with a welfarist outlook and its programmes thus included schemes on nutrition, health, weaving etc., with a focus on rural women.

Apart from the Mahila Samitis, several communities in rural Assam had traditional informal collectives that contributed towards the development of the community. Elaborating on this phenomenon, Monisha Behal states, “An interesting instance of collective work was noticed among the plains tribal communities of Assam who run paddy banks. Under the system, young women from several households pool their share of grain and offer it on loan.”

4 Bhuyan, D A World of Changing Views: Tezpur District Mahila Samiti and its work with Women and Communities in Northeast India, Unpublished Dissertation submitted to graduate faculty of James Madison University, for the degree of Doctor of Psychology, 2007, p.53
5 Ibid p.56
6 Ibid p.58
7 Behal, Monisha Women's Collectives in Assam: A Short History of their Status and Present Day Realities, Paper presented in the Conference on Changing Women's Status with Focus on the North East, organized by the North East Social Research Centre, Guwahati, Assam. October 11 – 13, 2001, p.1
Of the innumerable Mahila Samitis that were set up in Assam through the years, the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti (TDMS) has been able to carve a niche for itself. Amongst its many objectives, some of the pertinent ones are to address and change gender biases, to sensitize social agencies that impact and affect women, and to foster awareness in women about their rights, including legal aid, right of access to knowledge about reproductive health and choices, to resist and educate against domestic and sexual violence against women and to enhance the skill and capacity of women to empower themselves.\(^8\)

The TDMS also carried out extensive humanitarian relief work for the Burmese refugees who came to Assam in 1942 (following the Japanese occupation of Myanmar) and during the Chinese Aggression in 1962. A sum of Re.1 was collected by the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti from each household which added up to a princely sum of Rs.24,000/- which was subsequently handed over to the National Defence fund\(^9\).

The TDMS had also initiated steps to implement the Sarda Act (abolishing child marriage) by sending a notice to a groom who was found to be marrying an under-aged girl in 1934. In 1948, it worked on a proposal for ‘fixed meal times’ to facilitate women’s leisure time.\(^10\) Thus the minutes of the Twentieth Annual Conference of Tezpur District Mahila Samiti held on 11 and 12 July 1948 state,

> Nowadays in urban areas women without domestic help hardly have time to come out as she is preoccupied with the kitchen. However to participate in cultural activities one needs some leisure time. Considering these situations, this sabha (meeting) proposes that the following time table should be accepted in all the towns of Assam as fixed meal times – Lunch 12 noon and dinner 10 pm. No meal should be served after one hour of the proposed time. . . We shall need a strong movement to implement these provisions. The sabha calls upon the women of Assam to take the initiative by discussing these

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\(^8\) Ibid p.61
\(^9\) Personal Interview with Monisha Behal at NEN Office, Guwahati, May 2012
\(^10\) Medhi, Hemjyoti The Making of an Archive: ‘Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India’, Global South Sephis e magazine, Vol.8 No.1 January 2012, p.51
proposals with men and facilitate their implementation in different towns of Assam. 11

These are just a few examples to show how far reaching the goals of these Mahila Samitis are. As collectives, they have the power to initiate changes in their immediate environment and usher in social as well as economic transformation, at varying levels within the community.

But over the years, the significance of the Mahila Samitis has declined and they have been relegated virtually to the vestiges of public memory. Several reasons have been cited for the gradual decay of the Mahila Samiti from the popular imagination. Hemjyoti Medhi who has carried out an archiving project on the Mahila Samitis states, “The ‘steady decline’ is due to several factors. One is the change in the political economy that the Mahila Samitis stemmed from and represented at a given moment in late colonial Assam. Secondly, voluntary work within the Samitis has also declined.”12 Monisha Behal who has been closely associated with the functioning of the TDMS, stated that, “…almost all mahila samitis maintain a middle position in being apolitical to situations that need public opinion and serious questioning. At the same time the degree of their involvement in local movements, less controversial issues, literary and social initiatives are very high…” But the members of the Mahila Samitis beg to differ. Joylakshmi Bora of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti states that

> With changing times, we have new emerging problems like trafficking of women, climate refugees, etc. Here, the government departments should try to rope in the expertise of the Mahila Samitis. We still command an appeal in the remote villages and the Government should cash in on this. However, we need the support of the authorities to carry on our activities.13

Thus we see that despite a rich legacy, Mahila Samitis have been pushed to the margins and their recall value as an institution of social transformation has waned over the years.

It is in such a context, that this present study on the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT), as collectives initiating

11 Ibid p.53
12 Interview with Hemjyoti Medhi (over email) on October 29, 2012
social change, assumes significance. The NMA as well as KGNMT have both played an active role in undertaking activities for societal change and development in their respective contexts.

(i) Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and Social Change: The NMA was established in 1984. In the initial years, NMA focused its activities on Drug Addiction that was ravaging the Naga society and HIV/AIDS care (with large numbers of Injected Drug Users amongst the youth). In 1989, the enormity of the situation motivated the NMA to set up the Mt.Gilead Home, one of the first rehabilitation centres for the addicted youth. According to Neidonuo Angami, “The NMA HIV/AIDS Care Hospice was officially opened in the year 2001 with the support of Nagaland State AIDS Control Society. Since September 2004, the Catholic Relief Service (CRS) has been providing nutritional support to the people infected and affected by HIV at the hospice.”14 In the 1990s when violence began to take its toll on the people and the communities were affected by large numbers of death and destruction, the NMA decided to take up the call for peace. During the NMA General Assembly held at Zunheboto in 1994, a resolution on ‘Shed No Blood’ was adopted. A peace team comprising members of the NMA was formed and it visited the various factions of the rebel groups, held consultations with them and facilitated dialogues on reconciliation and peace. According to Angami, “When killings became rampant, we appealed to churches and women organizations to contribute shawls to NMA. These shawls were used to cover and honour those unidentified bodies. NMA initiated burial arrangements with the local authorities and ensured that every dead body is honourably buried in dignity.” 15

NMA has proactively engaged with the Government of India during the peace talks that were held with the NSCN-IM. It also partnered with the Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights (NPHMR), Naga Students Federation (NSF) and the Naga Hoho (the apex body of the Naga tribes) on a ‘Journey of Conscience’ –initiating people-to-people dialogue to strengthen the peace process. It has also vociferously campaigned for the

14 Angami, N Role of Mothers in Peace Building, Paper presented at the Peace Education Consultation for North East India, jointly organized by CFPEM and RAISE, sponsored by North East Council, Shillong, April 21-23, 2007
15 Ibid
repeal of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) and for 33% reservation for women in municipal bodies in Nagaland.

The Critique:

NMA has been at the forefront of socially empowering initiatives and has emerged as visible force to contend with. But despite its widespread appeal, NMA has also faced criticism from various quarters on the grounds of being partial towards a particular rebel faction, of becoming politicized and of losing sight of its goals in the long run.

As Niketu Iralu states,

I believe NMA should develop its role as the conscience keeper and voice of compassion of Naga society and jealously guard its impartiality. It will then help our society in all fields including holding the political groups and factions within the sane bounds of human behavior. NMA as such, because it is regarded as the body to which all Naga women belong, becomes a divisive force in our society if it starts to get involved in politics. This does not mean women and mothers should not take part in political actions or for political objectives.\footnote{Personal Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012}

Thus with its multi-faceted functions, the NMA also has to deal with immense expectations from the people of Nagaland regarding its roles and responsibilities. While this expectation reflects the overriding concern of the people for an impartial entity in the conflict ridden socio-political scenario of Nagaland, it also raises the issue of the feasibility of the survival and sustenance of a civil society actor, mired as it is in the complex entanglements of partisan politics.

(ii) The KGNMT and Social Transformation: The KGNMT situated at the Sarania Ashram, Guwahati was established in 1946 by Mohandas K. Gandhi. The KGNMT was set up with a welfarist approach and its programmes were directed towards improving the health of women and children, education and women’s upliftment through economic activities. The website of the KGNMT states the following as the thrust areas
of work—Natural resource management, Pollution, Biodiversity conservation, Protected areas, Technology and Industries, Gender, Agriculture and related issues, Education, Environmental legislation etc. Besides conducting awareness camps on these issues, the KGNMT has also initiated dialogues and consultations with members of various rebel groups, conducted meetings and interactions with people in the communities and devised strategies to work with children (programme on child journalism). The Assam Matri Samaj, an organization within KGNMT, has spearheaded the efforts at brokering peace with ULFA and sevikas of the KGNMT have not only been successful in bridging the gap with the communities at the grassroots but also facilitated their active engagement in the processes for change and development within their own communities. Anima Dutta, a sevika in Baksa district, is one such example. Elaborating on her work with the Bodo youth, Dutta stated,

"I was working in the Simlabari Centre under Baksa district. The situation was very tense in that area then. It was the year 2000 and I was working with women, helping them to set up Self Help Groups (SHGs). One day, 20-25 young boys came up to me and asked me if I could help them too. They requested me to set up a SHG for them. I helped them understand that economic upliftment was the only way in which we could achieve peace. I asked them if their mothers would approve of the path they had chosen and they said it was the circumstances that had driven them to take up arms. I approached the Director of State Institute for Rural Development (SIRD) in Guwahati and asked him if SIRD would help me. At that time the situation was very volatile there...there were regular arsons, abductions and killings...people were scared to venture into this area. After much persuasion and an assurance of protection from the leaders of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT, a rebel organization), a team from SIRD visited Simlabari and conducted a two day camp that was attended by around three hundred (300) youths. The youths entrusted a lot of faith in me and I felt that it was my duty to never let them down. Over time, as they set up SHGs of their own and reaped rich dividends, their attraction towards arms gradually declined. Through the SHGs, women usually engage in weaving as well as preservation of fruits in the form of jams, jellies and pickles; fisheries, rearing of cattle and pigs and bee keeping. The former male cadres, on the other hand, have been
found to engage in pisciculture and the plantation of *kadam* and *gamari* trees in the periphery of the fisheries.  

Anima Dutta’s work goes a long way in revealing how small initiatives can bring about positive peace within the communities and help reconstruct, repair and rejuvenate the broken spirit of the society.

**The Critique:**

Despite the huge repertoire of work carried out by KGNMT and *Assam Matri Samaj*, very little is known about them. This lack of awareness amongst the civil society is appalling and it reflects the obvious gaps that exist in publicizing the initiatives undertaken by KGNMT. A former *Pratinidhi* of KGNMT, Kusum Bora Mokashi citing Amalprava Das (the founder of KGNMT) stated that, “Amalprava Das believed that we should not direct focus on ourselves and our work. That is the reason why publicity has never been sought for the work we have undertaken.”  

Except for very brief coverage during the *Matri Diwas* (22nd February every year) in the print media and isolated coverage in the electronic media, very little information is made available to the public on its activities, thereby losing out on the possibilities of engagement with the civil society at large. Another criticism of KGNMT has been its failure to incorporate the youth in its fold, and very few young girls wanting to be a *Gram Sevika*. Kusum Bora Mokashi offered several reasons for this. She stated, “We have strict rules...we have to wake up at 4 am, wear only *Khaddar Mekhela Chadar* and we also get very low salaries as primarily this work is voluntary in nature. Therefore, not too many young girls want to join as gram *sevikas* here.” The rigidity in its rules has proven to be its undoing and KGNMT has found it difficult to keep pace with the changing times. This has, thus resulted in its stagnation as an evolving civil society actor.

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17 Personal Interview with Anima Dutta at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012  
18 Personal Interview with Kusum Bora Mokashi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012  
19 Ibid
II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD: INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES

The NMA and KGNMT have articulated their efforts for the reconstruction of the community from within the framework of Motherhood. The definition of a Mother for both these organizations is not confined to the biological mother, but is any woman who can identify with the normative qualities associated with motherhood (love, self-sacrifice, care, nurturance etc) and can thus relate to the experiences, thereof. The Constitution of the NMA thus mentions the following regarding the individual membership, “The term ‘mother’ herein shall connote the state of adult womanhood where one technically attains “the status of motherhood” by virtue of the Naga tradition, whereby one eventually bears the possibility of adulthood or motherhood, irrespective of marriage or childrearing.”

An annual membership fee of Rs.2 is collected from each individual member, by the respective tribal units. For the Assam Matri Samaj, all sevikas of the KGNMT can become its members.

(i) Motherhood, Nation and the Nationalist Discourse

According to Ivekovic and Mostov, “Gender and nation are social and historic constructions…and the topography of the nation is mapped in gendered terms (feminized soil, landscapes, and boundaries…)…National mythologies draw on traditional gender roles and the nationalist narrative is filled with images of the nation as mother, wife and maiden.”

Several bodies of knowledge have been created on the representation of the nation as the mother in colonial India, especially in Bengal and North India (Gupta, 2001; Chowdhury-Sengupta, 1992; Bagchi, 1990; Chowdhury, 1998). They reveal how motherhood has been represented in the nationalist discourse, with the construction of Bharat Mata/Mother India, as the ideal mother of valiant sons, the all sacrificing mother in the family and the upholder of moral values. As Charu Gupta (2001) states in her article The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: ‘Bharat Mata’, ‘Matri Bhasha’ and ‘Gau Mata’, motherland, mother tongue and motherhood are potent

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20 Article 5, Constitution of the Naga Mothers’ Association, Nagaland 2009
21 Ivekovic, R and Mostov, J ‘Introduction’ in Ivekovic, R and Mostov, J (Eds) From Gender to Nation, Zubaan, India, 2004, pg.1
symbols of a glorified mother. The maternal metaphor was often intricately linked with linguistics—*Matri Bhasha*—to strengthen regional and national identities. 22 Hindi was also personified as a Hindu mother and numerous poems were dedicated to it, extolling its greatness and depicting it as a larger than life figure that needed to be worshipped. 23 Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, in his address to the 13th Hindu Sammelan on March 1923, alluded to the different facets of being a mother (as mother/motherland and mother tongue). He said, “…One mother gives birth, the second gives a space for playing, wandering and for worldly existence, and the third makes human life happy by giving the power to express one’s mental thoughts and impulses.” 24 Jashodhara Bagchi (1990) in her article *Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal* states how the image of the mother was used to capture and reinforce nationalist sentiments. She says that “By representing the country as a Hindu mother/goddess, the nationalist culture helped to inject a significant order into the struggle...” 25 According to Bagchi, the nationalist ideology appropriated symbols of motherhood but also strove to reinforce patriarchal values confining mothers within the roles of domesticity especially, being mothers of valiant sons and upholding the virtues of procreation. 26

Elaborating on the dichotomous formulation of Mother India vis a vis the mother at home, Indira Chowdhury (1998), in her article *Rethinking Motherhood, Reclaiming a Politics: A Reading of Ashapurna Debi’s "Pratham Pratisruti"*, states how the construction of motherhood,

… held out, on the one hand, the promise of the most desirable way of being a woman within the imagined nation - Bharat and yet, on the other, consistently circumvented a woman-centred definition for motherhood because like all other issues of female sexuality vis-a-vis Indian women, motherhood was often the site on which the contest between coloniser and colonised was played

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23 Ibid p. 4293
24 Ibid
26 Ibid p. WS-70
The ideology of motherhood conceptualised women as beings especially equipped for reproduction and invested with an essential maternal instinct. Thus we see that an active engagement with the process of engendering the nation took place in colonial India. The glorification of motherhood was channelled through the construction of the nation and language as the mother (Bharat Mata/Mother India and Matri Bhasha/Mother Tongue) and the articulation of nationalist sentiments was grounded within that space.

During the freedom struggle, Gandhi encouraged women to participate in his non-violent movement. Hence, large numbers of women were seen taking part in them. But Gandhi has been criticized for not transforming the potential of women into tangible positions of strength and leadership. As Lina Fruzzetti says, “Gandhi saw women as selfless and motherly, stemming from the demands of child bearing and child raising and therefore better qualified than men to preach the art of peace to the warring world.” Priyam Goswami, in her paper, *Marginal Visibility: Participation of Women of Assam in the Freedom Struggle and their Representation in Historical Narratives* elaborates on this phenomenon. She states,

Gandhi was aware of the women’s potential for passive resistance. He projected them as symbols of courage, intelligence, perseverance, robust independence and power and not as stereotypes of submission, subservience, self effacement, helplessness and patience. But Gandhi did not want to involve women in direct action. In fact, he inducted women because they were considered self sacrificing, able to endure pain and were essentially non violent in nature. He did not visualize any fundamental division of labour or departure from normal social relations of a woman as wife and mother. And herein lies an inherent dichotomy in Gandhi’s views on women.

Thus the Gandhian thought places immense weight on the woman’s role as a Mother—as an instrument of unfailing support, unconditional love and self-sacrifice for her

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29 Goswami, P *Marginal Visibility: Participation of Women of Assam in the Freedom Struggle and their Representation in the Historical Narratives*, International Conference organized by Peace Studies, OKDISCD, Assam, June, 2009, p.4
children. This very framework has guided the vision of the mother for KGNMT and Assam Matri Samaj.

(ii) Construction of The Mother and KGNMT

For the members of the KGNMT, the notion of motherhood as they envision is, heavily borrowed from the Bhagvad Gita. As Kusum Bora Mokashi, states, “a mother’s heart is sapta sakti rupe nihoto. The seven values inherent in a mother are Khyoma, Dhriti, Satya, Doya, Medha, Smriti and Sri (Forgiveness, Patience, Truth, Sympathy, Intelligence, Memory and Power). Matri egorakir sakti samajor proti prabhat pelabo pora (A mother through her inherent strength can shed light on the darkness prevailing within the society).” 30 This statement reflects the glorification of the mother as an enlightened being, who can, through her own resources (inner strength) put an end to the misery plaguing the society. As Mokashi elaborates, “puruh prodhan samajot swadhin hoboloi, matri shakti bhal kori upalobdho koribo lagibo. Gun bilag bikah koribo lagibo. (Only when a mother, ‘realizes’ her inner qualities, can she become independent in a male dominated society). Thus, for the woman, the onus of carving a niche for herself in a patriarchal set up, lies with her.

This particular construction of motherhood is amply reflected in the celebration of Matri Diwas by the Assam Matri Samaj on the 22nd of February each year, to commemorate the death anniversary of Kasturba Gandhi, who is regarded as the “Mother of the Nation”/ “Rashtramata”. The objectives of Matri Diwas are three fold:

- Emancipation of women
- Self Awareness for their development.
- Awareness of their Rights and Education31

Other than a host of events lined up for the entire week leading up to the 22nd of February, a pamphlet outlining issues of significance is also printed and distributed amongst the people. The essence of Motherhood is described as a natural extension of being a mother, with special emphasis being laid upon the notions of unconditional love, self sacrifice, service above self etc. The Mother is constructed as an individual who is selfless (who does not insist upon her children to express their duties towards her). A verbatim translation of a quotation about the Mother from the pamphlet states,

30 Personal Interview with Kusum Bora Mokashi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012
31 Personal Interview with Hema Bharali, at her residence, Sarania, Guwahati, June 18, 2010
“Her entire life is spent in working for others, but never does she insist upon garnering the service of others.”

An important statement that undermines the woman as an individual who can exercise rights—“Ei pobitro din tot mahila hokole adhikar dabi’r kotha pahori jauk”—(On this auspicious day, may the women disregard issues concerning their rights). This statement demeans women as individual entities, who are conscious of their rights and projects them as a being without an identity of one’s own.

According to the pamphlet, the aim of the Matri Diwas is to not only spread the message of unconditional love and self-less service towards others (and this is achieved by presenting mothers as an epitome of such qualities) but also to bring about a semblance of peace in the conflict-ridden environs of the State, through widespread discussions, debates and service towards others.

The Programmes on Matri Diwas include the following:

- Children begin their day by offering obeisance to their mothers as well as all mothers in their neighbourhood.
- Mothers gather the children in their neighbourhood and conduct story-telling sessions—narrating the biographies of ‘great people’ and philosophers.
- An attempt is also made to spread cheer amongst disadvantaged children, by distributing fruits, sweets etc.
- A programme is held on the occasion at the premises of the KGNMT in Sarania, Guwahati and all women’s organizations are cordially invited for it.
- All the functionaries of the Panchayat and Gram Sabhas are also requested to spread the word about the Matri Diwas and make an effort to consolidate the information regarding the events on Matri Diwas in their respective areas.

Critique of the pamphlet:

The emphasis laid on the notions of cleanliness, service above self, selflessness, unconditional love etc., reflect the underlying thought processes that are essential to the construction of a woman as an entity who is virtuous, ‘untainted’, always obliging and without an identity of one’s own. By exalting the status of mothers as larger than life entities, an attempt has been made to create an image of an individual who is devoid of

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32 Matri Diwas, Pamphlet released to commemorate the death anniversary of Kasturba Gandhi.
33 Ibid
ambition, not conscious of her individual rights and not striving towards the development of personal growth. The pamphlet presents a rather skewed representation of a Mother (mostly an Essentialist view of motherhood) and to a large extent it successfully communicates that image to the mothers in particular and the youth, participating in such programs, in general. This can pose to be quite a challenge especially in the creation of an alternate discourse on women as individuals who can exercise their rights, and be loving mothers at the same time, but not at the cost of their self-esteem and self-respect.

(iii) Construction of the Mother and NMA

The construction of the Mother for NMA has been shaped by the prevalent religious discourse in the State, that is, Christianity as well as by the teachings of the traditional Naga society. As Meneno Vamuzo and Sano Vamuzo state,

The vision of the Mother for the NMA is shaped by the understanding first of all, that a mother is the one who brings life into the earth. And that with this comes the responsibility of protecting and taking good care of her children who are closest to her heart, particularly the wayward child—that’s what concerns the mother the most. The aim is that no one should be left out. She wants the best for her family and the Naga society at large. Traditionally, particularly during the headhunting days, Naga women, when the men had gone away, were responsible for the management of their homes, taking care of their children, hosting and entertaining guests, taking care of animals, and going to their fields to work for food for the household. For the NMA in the present context, the Mother strives to guard against the ills that are constantly bombarding the society from various angles. They want to protect their families from these harmful elements. This is why we see the solidarity when mothers are called upon to respond to various needs in their communities. The image of Mother in the Naga context includes more than that of a biological mother. For instance, the term “Azu” (my Mother in Chokri Naga dialect) is used not only to address my biological mother, but other women as well, who are of my mother’s age, or older. Moreover, my sister’s/cousin sister’s children call me “Azu” as well, because I am their mother’s sister, regardless of whether I’m older or younger to their biological mother; and regardless of my marital status. Hence, there is a unique place of respect and honour that shapes the vision of the “Mother.” There is also the Christian concept—as you know,
most Nagas are now Christians. And so the essence of Christianity, which is love and forgiveness, is also a crucial factor that drives/shapes NMA’s vision of the Mother.\(^{34}\)

The preceding explanation clearly illustrates how the notion of motherhood has been constructed and has borrowed elements from the traditional belief systems about the role and status of woman/mother in the society and the family, as well as the religious beliefs that pervade their day to day lives. It is also pertinent to note that the mother has been portrayed as someone who constantly looks out and cares for the ‘wayward’ and is responsible for the protection of the family and society at large. The construction of the notion of motherhood fits within the framework of the essentialist view, with emphasis on the qualities of the ‘care ethic’, nurturance, unconditional love, sacrifice and protection for the weak and the fallen.

According to Niketu Iralu, the Mother is the creator, protector and nurturer of the hearth and home. He elaborates on his version of what shapes the vision of the Mother for the NMA and states,

> Respect for every mother as the protector and nurturer of her children to enable them to become adults and grown up members of society is very great in the thinking of the Nagas also. It is interesting that God the Creator, the Great Spirit, is called “Ukepenuopfü” in Tenyidia (of which the Angami dialect is a part). The word means “The Woman from whom we are born / from who we came”. This attitude of respect for mothers probably explains why it was possible for Naga mothers to go to all the factions during the worst days of the factional conflicts and speak to them with utter fearlessness and they were heard.\(^{35}\)

Sarah Nuh, the Vice President of NMA, states that the vision of the Mother for the NMA has been shaped by the fact that mothers/women have been peacemakers in he

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\(^{34}\) Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) and Sano Vamuzo (Chairperson, Nagaland State Commission for Women) through email May 9, 2012

\(^{35}\) Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012
early Naga society (since the days of head hunting) and even today, where men cannot enter/go, women have been found to play a very important role in peace building.\textsuperscript{36}

Thus we find that both Christianity and the traditional belief systems play a significant role in shaping the vision of who a Mother is and what her roles and responsibilities are, for the NMA. This also implies that Christianity and the oral histories (that have been passed down the generations) are intimately linked with each other and continue to play an influential role in the thoughts, expressions and lives of the people in Nagaland.

### III. POLITICAL MOTHERHOOD AND RESISTANCE

The NMA and KGNMT have articulated their resistance to the atrocities meted out by the State and non-state actors, through the framework of motherhood. According to Pratt, “all socio-political acts can be seen as ‘inherently geographic’ practices that are situated, legitimated, and imparted meanings in relation to specific social spaces (Pratt, 1999)”.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, the development of a sense of political consciousness for the members of both NMA and KGNMT is rooted in and shaped by the existing socio-political contexts within which they function. The particular spatial politics not only moulds the language of debate and dissent but also creates a fabric of inter-woven tension and equilibrium, allowing voices that have long been silenced, to be heard.

Richa Nagar citing Pratt, states, “Mapping the socio-spatial circuits through which women share and politicize their experiences enables us to chart the ‘discursive geographies’ (Pratt, 1999) of women’s resistance, and grasp the specific processes by which resisters learn to critique, redefine or transform the hegemonic views of empowerment and violence..\textsuperscript{38} The manner in which women interact with their environment and the multiple dichotomies that exist therein mould and give direction to their strategies. Each of these organizations share values integral to their vision and are driven by a motto that collectively mobilizes them to usher in change. For KGNMT, the

\textsuperscript{36} Interview with Sarah Nuh, Vice President of NMA through email, May 16, 2012  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid p.360
The overriding theme is “Matri Shakti: The Strength of Creation.” Gandhi wished that the Trust be imbued with the quality of maternal strength, and that, like Kasturba, members of the Trust bring their rural sisters forward to actively participate in the development of their villages and of the Nation. For NMA, the motto is ‘Human Integrity’. Both these themes are reflective of the underlying value system in the respective organization and they play an influential role in giving shape to the overall strategies that are adopted and the kind of activities that are carried out, by them.

Jennifer Schirmer defines ‘political motherhood’ as a form of political consciousness that creates conditions whereby women can move into the public sphere and engage with it more actively. Schirmer has extensively worked on the motherist movements in Latin America, especially in the countries of Argentina, Guatemala and Chile, which have had a history of being under repressive regimes. She states that “using the language of sacrifice and the traditional values associated with motherhood as both political protection and political tools”, women have been able to create new forms of resistance. Elaborating on the phenomenon of political motherhood, Schirmer states,

As in past resistance movements, these women use the image of the weak and powerless female to their advantage as a protective means for mobilization, resistance and survival…Not mobilized by ideology, but by the sheer weight of social and political circumstances that accompany the loss of a relative and the destruction of the family, these women, as disobedient female subjects of the state, dramatize powerlessness and help to demystify the powerful.

Women who adopt the motherist framework often bring diverse experiences of their own, to the organization. These experiences, combined with their notions of motherhood, women’s rights and human rights, together create rich identities of mother-activists. Women often join these organizations for multiple reasons—to seek justice for wrongs inflicted on them, to champion the cause of women and still many, who wish to work for the larger cause of human rights and redefine women’s rights as human rights.

39 Accessed on September 26, 2008 from the website http://kvkindore.in/kgnmt/statebr.htm
40 Accessed on September 26, 2008 from the website http://kvkindore.in/kgnmt/baa.htm
41 Souvenir released on the 25th Anniversary of the NMA, February 14, 2009
43 Ibid

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Describing how the mothers of NMA work, Meneno Vamuzo states,

The NMA appeals to their “brothers,” who are the men/leaders in the various factions, and pleads for protection and cessation of bloodshed as many of the mothers’ ‘sons’ lives are being taken away. Taking their stand as mothers, they are able to take on a non-threatening position, which allows them to be heard, as most people can relate to their own mothers, unless there are some exceptions. So when their appeal is made through the stance of motherhood, then it is received well by the leaders of the various factional camps.44

Here Vamuzo, clearly illustrates how the women of NMA utilize their roles as ‘mothers’ to the ‘sons’ (rebels) who have gone astray, and make every effort, by pleading and appealing to the leaders of the factions, to bring an end to the violence. Her assertion that “taking the stand as mothers, they are able to take on a non-threatening position, which allows them to be heard, as most people can relate to their own mothers…” clearly reflects a conscious effort made by these women, to adopt motherhood as a political identity while negotiating with the State and non-state actors, such that they can achieve their goals and make their voices heard, without being confrontational with those in power. This undoubtedly fits into the definition of political motherhood as defined by Schirmer.

With its motto, “Matri Shakti: The Strength of Creation”, the members of KGNMT tend to adopt strategies for peace building and reconstruction of the fissures in a community, through the larger approach of motherhood. As a young scholar who has engaged with the grams sevikas at the Sarania Ashram has stated, “Gandhian feminists are inclined to think that women are better attuned to peace building activities given their natural propensity to provide, care and nurture and give. I believe these mothering qualities inherently equip women to be more accommodative and self-sacrificing facilitating enough common ground for reconciliation of conflict of interests.”45

Anima Dutta, while elaborating on her experience as Gram Sevika of KGNMT, working with the Bodo youth in Baksa district, had the following to say,

44 Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) and Sano Vamuzo (Chairperson, Nagaland State Commission for Women) through email May 9, 2012
45 Interview with AB in Guwahati, October 18, 2012
After much persuasion and an assurance of protection from the BLT leaders, a team from State Institute for Rural Development (SIRD) visited Simlabari and conducted a 2 day camp that was attended by around 300 youths. The youths entrusted a lot of faith in me and I felt that it was my duty to never let them down. The Army would often conduct a raid, but I never identified any of the boys. I even spoke to the Deputy Commissioner at that time and told him that the boys were working towards coming to the mainstream and that he should ensure that the Army should not disturb them so as to facilitate their transition.

The statement, “The youths entrusted a lot of faith in me and I felt that it was my duty to never let them down” and the efforts made by Dutta to ensure that the boys were not harassed by the Army, reveal a sense of protectiveness and compassion that she felt towards these young boys who had gone ‘astray’ and were making an attempt to rejoin the mainstream. Her endeavours reflect not only the values of unconditional love, service above self, unstinting support for the weak that underlie the vision of KGNMT but also the internalization of these values in her persona that enabled her to adopt the role of a mother to these young boys and act in the manner she did.

IV. ABSENCE OF LEADERS, FRAGMENTATION AND SCEPTICISM: THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN ASSAM

Although Assam has had a long history of violent conflicts and has seen civil society actors initiating movements for social change, none of these movements or organizations has been able to sustain themselves in the long run. The Mahila Samitis that were one of the earliest known collectives of women established in several parts of Assam in the pre-Independence era, working with a welfarist approach amongst the rural as well as urban communities, have seen a steady decline, today. The widespread appeal amongst the rural populace was enough evidence of the strength of its network. One can only imagine the contribution towards peace efforts that could have been made by an institution such as the Mahila Samitis, had they been active today as they were earlier. An organization such as the Matri Manch that was formed during the peak of insurgent activities in Assam also died a quiet death. Ironically, KGNMT and the Assam Matri Samaj that are

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46 Personal Interview with Anima Dutta at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012
carrying out exemplary work amongst the communities at the grassroots are almost invisible. This begs the question—what plagues the civil society in Assam? Unlike, the Naga Mothers Association in Nagaland, why does Assam not have an apex body comprising of women? Why is there such widespread scepticism amongst the civil society towards mothers’ organizations in Assam? The answers to these questions are multi layered and are as much a consequence of the kind of society and polity that exists in Assam, as the nature of perceptions amongst the people.

The cross section of the members of civil society that were interviewed for the present study came up with a number of interesting insights into what they perceived were the reasons for the vacuum in the State. Five questions relating to this issue were placed before them: First, why do you think Mothers organizations in Assam such as the Matri Manch have not been able to sustain themselves in the long run, in contrast to the NMA, in Nagaland? Secondly, in the backdrop of the ongoing peace processes in Assam, what is your opinion on the absence of the role of the Mothers organizations? Thirdly, why do you think the potential of the Mahila Samiti (as a grassroots organization) has not been harnessed in the dialogue for peace within the State? Fourthly, are you aware of the existence of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT) and the Assam Matri Samaj, which was set up by it in 1997? And fifthly, are you aware of the peace building activities carried out by the Assam Matri Samaj and the strategies employed by them for peace efforts? An attempt will be made to capture the basic perceptions regarding each of these questions.

(i) Non-sustenance of Matri Manch in Assam vis a vis NMA in Nagaland

Leadership crisis, heterogeneity in Assam and lack of awareness were the main themes that emerged as reasons for the non-sustenance of Matri Manch in Assam.

a) Leadership Crisis: As a retired professor states, “In Assam, there has been a leadership crisis in mothers’ associations and organizations, big or small. An absence of dedicated persons to render selfless service is the root cause for the failure of such organizations to sustain themselves for a long time.”

Another respondent stated that, “Mothers in Assam rarely stand the test of time as a politically active group. Individual

47 Interview with Prof. A.A., Guwahati, October 18, 2012
actions by mothers carry no long term results and are not effective." 48 While another respondent, a young professor in a college in the city cited the independent nature of Naga women and their greater clarity regarding issues of peace, as a cause for the sustenance of women’s peace groups in Nagaland. 49

b) Heterogeneity in Assam: According to a professor of a University, “Assamese society is much larger, population-wise and geographically, and therefore lacks the cohesion/integrity of the Naga society which is comparatively, close-knit. Assamese men and women are more laid-back, and generally lack the tenacity to continue a particular programme, than Naga women who are generally more industrious, energetic with a strong concern for social change.” 50 Wasbir Hussain, a security analyst of the region, provided a succinct account. He stated,

Nagaland is a homogeneous entity with 90% of its populations being Christians. There is an overriding concern amongst the Nagas for Naga Nationalism. A bond exists amongst the people across all strata, not only on the basis of their religious affiliation but also the sense of being a victim of State betrayal. Assam, on the other is a rather heterogeneous entity, being multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious. Unlike the Naga Hoho in Nagaland, Assam does not have any unifying, apex body to guide its peace process. The Assam Xatra Mahasabha had, at one point in time, initiated a state wide movement in Assam but could not sustain itself for long. It was not that the people did not lend support to it but the Mahasabha did not have state wide appeal and could not establish a hold over the heterogeneous populace of Assam. 51

Another young scholar provided an interesting insight. He stated that “Assam has a more heterogeneous society. Also, due to the strong progressive women’s participation during the struggle of independence, the ethnocentrism is much lesser among the Assamese women than the other northeastern states, thus leading to the non-sustenance of such organizations.” 52

48 Interview with B.B., Guwahati, November 1, 2012
49 Interview with N.B., Guwahati, October 29, 2012
50 Interview with Prof. M. D., Guwahati, July 31, 2012
51 Interview with Wasbir Hussain, Guwahati, June 10, 2010
52 Interview with U.D. Guwahati, October 21, 2012
c) Lack of awareness: The lack of awareness coupled with the relative invisibility and inability to engage with the common people, were cited as reasons that led to the non-sustenance of *Matri Manch.*

(ii) Absence of Mothers organizations in the ongoing peace processes in Assam

For the civil society in Guwahati, it has been seen that there is a lot of skepticism with regards to the role of motherist organizations in the peace process or as active political actors. The reasons could be many...one, Assam has not seen the growth and sustenance of mothers organizations unlike Nagaland; secondly, even if they have existed at a given point in time, they have not been able to carve a niche for themselves in the larger peace process. Thus, their utility as a significant pressure group has not been realized by the civil society at large. Subsequently, their need has not been felt in the peace building arena.

Many people have cited that instead of a *mothers* organization, the need of the hour is a common platform, uniting diverse voices and allowing them the space to air their grievances, put forth their demands and contribute to the peace process. Also they feel that organizations using motherhood as a metaphor may not really be able to contribute much because in reality, they reinforce stereotypes of who a mother is and what she should be like, without actually challenging the framework within which she performs these roles.

A young scholar who has engaged with Gandhian issues of non-violence, stated,

> As it is, in the history of the political life of the State in the post-independent period, on no occasion has Mothers organizations been sought to be made a significant participant in the official dialogue processes (with the exception of All Bodo Women Welfare Federation may be). The present peace processes are also indicative of the same tendency. Personally speaking, I believe that instead of having a separate Mothers organization, efforts should be made to have a common platform including different civil society groups and stakeholders where all voices could be heard and accommodated, including that of the womenfolk.

Another interesting observation came from a young scholar who stated,

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53 Interviews with U.S., T.B.K., B.S. Guwahati, October 18-21, 2012
54 Interview with AB in Guwahati, October 18, 2012
As I locate the mother’s associations with ethnocentrism and patriarchy, I believe the economic issues would get precedence over the ethnic issues if no such organizations are involved. However, lack of mother’s associations should not be equated with the lack of women in the peace process. I firmly believe that there should have been more women participating in peace process putting women’s issues in the dialogue. But I strongly disapprove women’s participation in the form of ethnocentric concepts like Mother’s Associations.\(^{55}\)

(iii) Absence of the Mahila Samitis from the peace processes in Assam

The popular perception is that Mahila Samitis lost their legitimacy/credibility as an unbiased political actor when they chose to remain silent during the atrocities committed by a section of the rebel forces during the Assam movement and thereafter. Another major criticism of the Mahila Samitis is their successive lack of leadership, vision and failure to include the newer, younger generation into its fold, thereby descending into a state of complacency and remaining nostalgic in their past glory.

Although the Mahila Samiti started essentially as a social collective for women, they were quite active during the freedom struggle and later during the Chinese Aggression. This involvement meant that they straddled between their roles as a social as well as a political actor with ease.

According to a retired professor and social activist, “Members of the Mahila Samitis supported the Assam Movement (as mothers) but the subsequent leadership has proven to be ineffectual thus interrupting the further support for the other movements.”\(^{56}\) According to Wasbir Hussain, “Mahila Samiti per se has no state-wide appeal. There are several different Mahila Samitis and the Identity question regarding ‘who is an Assamese?’ has not been resolved as yet. The ‘us vs. them’ debate is still raging on. Unless Mahila Samiti has an apex body that is representative of all the other linguistic communities, not much will come off it.”\(^{57}\) A young scholar who carried out a study on the Mahila Samitis, had this to say.

\(^{55}\) Interview with U.D. Guwahati, October 21, 2012  
\(^{56}\) Interview with Prof. A.D. Guwahati, June 20, 2010  
\(^{57}\) Interview with Wasbir Hussain, Guwahati, June 10, 2010
The potential of the Mahila Samitis has not been harnessed in the dialogue for peace within the state due to the following major reasons—disintegration of the State of Assam had a negative impact on the organizational base of the Mahila Samitis; absence of able leaders and the lack of vision of the leaders who could not attract the new generation into the fold. All these factors led to the eventual decline of the mass support that the Mahila Samitis once enjoyed.\textsuperscript{58}

Other reasons given for the absence of the Mahila Samitis in the peace process include, “the inability of the Mahila Samiti to suit the needs of the women in the context of changing times”,\textsuperscript{59} “the Samiti has not been able to incorporate the strategies of peace building in its agenda. They are probably viewed in our patriarchal society as unfit to handle with the affairs concerning the future of the State,”\textsuperscript{60} “Assam needs a dynamic leader to give a boost to the organization. They have been busy carrying out certain governmental schemes rather than addressing the real issues concerning women,”\textsuperscript{61} “The answer lies in the nature of the peace dialogues. If they are at all taking place, they are taking place between the government and the rebel groups. No civil society has been involved in any form. And Mahila Samitis are not part of the rebel outfits,”\textsuperscript{62} Hemjyoti Medhi who has carried out a study on archiving the Mahila Samitis, stated the following.

Some Mahila Samitis are being harnessed these days to work as NGOs and Mother NGOs for the National Rural Health Mission, in Dibrugarh and Tezpur for instance. But, they have not evolved as stakeholders in the peace process like the Naga Mothers Association and some others in the hills. It is perhaps to do with the extent of armed militarization in the hills and the plains, presence of arms at home, in the neighbourhood and the village that forces women to react in a particular way.\textsuperscript{63}

(iv) Awareness regarding the existence of KGNMT and Assam Matri Samaj

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with U.D. Guwahati, October 21, 2012
\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Prof. G.S., Guwahati, October 20, 2012
\textsuperscript{60} Interview with Prof. P.D., Guwahati, June 23, 2012
\textsuperscript{61} Interview with P.B., Guwahati, November 4, 2012
\textsuperscript{62} Interview with U.D, Research Associate, Guwahati, October 21, 2012
\textsuperscript{63} Interview with Hemjyoti Medhi (over email) on October 29, 2012
A little more than half the respondents (19 out of 30) were aware of the existence of KGNMT, but the majority (21 out of 30) had never even heard of the Assam Matri Samaj. This is particularly shocking in the context of the comparative visibility of NMA in Nagaland. NMA’s overwhelming visibility in the Naga consciousness drives home the fact that very little attention has been paid to highlight the work carried out by Assam Matri Samaj that has been established under the aegis of the KGNMT.

(v) Awareness regarding the peace efforts initiated by the Assam Matri Samaj

Only six respondents were aware of the peace building activities carried out by the Assam Matri Samaj in comparison to the overwhelming twenty four who were not. Of those who were aware, some interesting observations regarding the nature of work, was made, “I am aware of some transitional and half-hearted initiatives taken up by the organization. I am of the opinion that these are casual and therefore have not been able to make a mark in the peace process.” 64 Another respondent stated, “I am aware but I feel, they must play their roles more prominently by involving every section of our society.” 65

Thus, it is seen that an absence of a critical engagement with the civil society is proving to be a bane for KGNMT and Assam Matri Samaj. Subsequently, the gap between these organizations and the common people have widened considerably, eroding the potential for peace making within the community.

64 Interview with Prof. A.A., Guwahati, October 18, 2012
65 Interview with Prof. T.B.K, October 18, 2012
V. INFLUENCE OF THE CHURCH ON THE NMA AND PEACE BUILDING IN NAGALAND

The history of Christianity in North East India goes back to over two hundred years. Pioneering Jesuit priests first entered the Brahmaputra valley in 1626 on their way to Tibet. But these visits were occasional and did not succeed in establishing any Christian influence in the region. Meanwhile, the Charter Act of 1813 allowed Christian missionaries to propagate their faith in India. In North East India, the English Baptists were the first to take advantage of this clause and soon established missions at Guwahati and Cherrapunji. The American Baptist Missionaries came next and by mid nineteenth
century, both the American Baptist Mission and the Welsh Methodist Foreign Mission had set up base in Cherrapunji.66

Along with the many benefits that Christianity brought about, there were also legitimate fears amongst the people of a loss of their traditional moorings. John Hutton in his preface to the second edition of *The Sema Nagas* (1968) lamented in the 1930s that the past was being quickly lost to the tribe and that their pagan past was likely to be forgotten in the breach of continuity which conversion to Christianity was bringing about.67 In the monographs on *The Angami Nagas* (1921), Hutton wrote, “Old beliefs and customs are dying, the old traditions are being forgotten, the number of Christians or quasi-Christians is steadily increasing and the spirit of change is invading and pervading every aspect of village life.”68

Today, Nagaland has a predominant Christian population. The Church has emerged as an all-pervading socio-religious institution within the Naga society. Daily life and spirituality go hand in hand for the people there. For most, the Church plays an integral role in their lives and its fundamentals are firmly ingrained in their psyche. The Church is looked upon as the reservoir of trust and faith, and is therefore a powerful instrument for bonding the community together.

The indoctrination of the people into the Christian fold begins early when young children are sent to Sunday School to be taught the teachings of Jesus, of love, trust, salvation etc. The Church is the bedrock of the Naga community and each Naga derives strength and solace from it, in times of crises.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) has also adopted the Christian faith in its political agenda and wishes to form a Christian State. In fact its motto is “Nagaland for Christ”.

To a question on whether NMA has a close relationship with the Church in Nagaland, especially with regards to its peace building activities, a senior journalist with a leading daily in Nagaland, Al Ngullie, stated the following,

Yes the NMA and the Church in general maintain close relations. As a social organization, NMA plays the role of social assessors and social adjudicators—a correlative role to that of the ecclesiastical motivations of the church and its teachings. The relation between the two almost intermingles, in fact. The relation between the Naga Baptist Church Council (NBCC) and its constituents is certainly close. Yet, concerning the “church” in its broader denotation, the NMA has yet to prove itself when it comes to traditional institutions such as, for instance, the Catholics and of course, non-Christian, non-Naga sections of the Naga spectrum.  

Meneno Vamuzo and Sano Vamuzo who are closely linked to the NMA, elaborated on the close relationship shared between NMA and the Church. They said,

Most, if not all those in NMA belong to one church or another, and some are church workers. We believe they get their inspiration from the church. A common advice given by the elders in the NMA is that the various units that go on different ventures should pray first in order to receive guidance from God, before they begin. The Church and the NMA work together very often, and recently, the church and the NMA worked together in coordinating a fast and prayer program for women in order to seek direction in bringing about a stop to the violence and bloodshed in the land. This is an example of the way the two entities work hand in hand for the society.

Speaking on the same lines, Sarah Nuh, the current vice president of NMA stated that, “As Nagaland is a Christian state and most of the NMA members are Christians, the Church becomes the best platform for any kind of programmes. The Church is always the base for any kind of peace efforts that the NMA takes up.”

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69 Interview with Al Ngullie, Senior Journalist, through email, December 10, 2011
70 Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) and Sano Vamuzo (Chairperson, Nagaland State Commission for Women) through email May 9, 2012
71 Interview with Sarah Nuh, Vice President of NMA, through email, May 16, 2012
Elizabeth Imti, a young lecturer in a college in Nagaland, spoke about the overwhelming influence of the Church. She stated, “The Church and the NMA are both separate institutions…they both work together but as such they cannot be seen as clubbed together. The NMA uses the platform of the Church and yes, it is an effective one—as people do not question the Church in Nagaland.” Her statement that NMA utilizes the Church as an effective mechanism for its activities is significant because it clearly illustrates the kind of strategies adopted by the former to maximize the dissemination of information but also speaks volumes regarding the mass appeal of the Church amongst the people.

Niketu Iralu, an eminent social activist who has been an active proponent of the peace process in Nagaland, provided a more critical observation on the relationship between the Church and NMA. He stated,

It would be fair to say almost all Naga mothers are now Christians. The influence of the Church on NMA therefore, and vice versa, is immediate. If NMA loses its neutrality by getting too close to a particular political faction its support from the Church suffers immediately. But if it sticks to its struggles for justice and its crusades against social evils, it need not worry about the support it will get from the Church.

Iralu’s concern with the politicization of the NMA is significant and it raises pertinent issues regarding the unbiased role of civil society actors in peace building.

The majority of the respondents (28 out of 35) interviewed in the study across Dimapur and Kohima, believed that NMA and the Church shared a close relationship. Some of the responses were as follows—“NMA together with the Church has been strongly advocating reconciliation, sustaining the ceasefire”73, “They have worked together in the prohibition of liquor and also in bringing the Government and the Underground forces to negotiate peace”,74 and “Yes, especially with regards to peace building activities because the Church is described as a feminine character that acts as mother

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72 Interview with Elizabeth Imti, September 21, 2012
73 Interview with D.C., Lawyer, Kohima, September 28, 2012
74 Interview with V.S., Self employed, Kohima, September 26, 2012
and a teacher.” Of those who stated that the NMA and the Church did not share a close relationship, they made the following observations, “Outwardly, it seems to but the picture is different inside. The NMA and the Church are different entities, so are their aims and objectives. NMA’s concern is to stand up for the rights of the women while that of the Church is towards the spiritual wellbeing of the people” “When it comes to peace building activities in Nagaland, NMA does not have close relations with the Church.” There were a couple of others who believed that the nature of relationship between NMA and the Church as well as their effectiveness as partners, was ambiguous.

During the interactions with the respondents in this study, the researcher increasingly got the feeling that the contemporary Naga society, being deeply embedded in the teachings and fundamentals of the Christian faith, was gradually losing touch with its rich age–old traditions. The outward manifestation of the cultural heritage in terms of the costume or jewellery was still intact, but the huge repertoire of oral histories in the form of folklore, folksongs etc. seemed to be dying a slow death especially amongst the present generation.

VI. ARE MOTHERS ORGANIZATIONS A PAWN IN THE HANDS OF THE STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS?

Mother activists across the globe have been found to play significant roles in initiating efforts for peace and have raised their voices against the atrocities meted out to their communities. Many a times, organizations with a motherist agenda or even mother activists have been subtly influenced by the State as well as the non-State actors to fulfil their respective agendas.

Malathi de Alwis has written about the origin and growth of the Mothers’ Front in Sri Lanka. Shedding more light on the matter, the author states that during the late 1980s to counter an uprising of nationalist Sinhala youth, widespread State repression had resulted in large scale murders and disappearances. It was in this context that the

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75 Interview with A.S., Lecturer, Kohima, October 10, 2012
76 Interview with K.I., Journalist, Dimapur, September 23, 2012
77 Interview with M.C, Self employed, Dimapur, September 28, 2012
Mothers’ Front was born. The actions of the Mothers’ Front were met with strong counter resistance efforts from the State. The State machinery employed tactics that were in the form of counter-rallies, counter-rituals and counter-rhetoric. Although the Mothers’ Front was successful in evoking emotions and captivating the hearts of the people, it was not without its share of criticism though. From time to time, various Ministers as well as the government-owned media accused the Mothers’ Front of being a pawn in the hands of the opposition party, the SLFP.

Notions such as ‘Mothers of Martyrs’, that exalt and glorify the procreative aspect of ‘mothering’ are generously used by the State and non-state actors to emotionally blackmail mother-activists to lend support to their cause. Julie Peteet elaborates this phenomenon in the context of Palestine, “In protracted military conflict, with its attendant losses of life, women, in particular the mother of the martyr, symbolize life giving, or national generativity, loss, and sacrifice. Celebrating women’s reproductive potential often is the ideological gloss on subordination;”

Bayard de Volo talks about how maternal imagery was utilized by the State as well as the opposition to mobilize women, in the context of Nicaragua. She describes how the maternal rhetoric was used by both the State and the opposition to not only, further their political ends but also, to quell fears regarding resistance by mothers, as a collective political actor. In the article, Bayard de Volo proposes that maternal framing benefits the militaries in at least three ways:

1. channeling maternal grievances,
2. disseminating propaganda through supposedly apolitical mothers,
3. evoking emotions and sympathy nationally and internationally.

First, By mobilizing mothers into maternal organizations, the state or nonstate military attempts to redirect and control mothers’ anger at the drafting or death of a son or daughter (Bayard de Volo 2001; Elshtain 1987; Zeiger 1996).... A second benefit is mobilized mothers

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can themselves promote propaganda from a supposedly apolitical perspective. … Women can be framed as mothers speaking from the heart out of love for their children rather than from a political standpoint. … The third benefit to maternal mobilizing is its emotional resonance both nationally and internationally.\footnote{Ibid}

A recurring wartime frame, as documented by Elshtain, 1987 is that of the Spartan Mother—a woman who raises her son as a warrior ready to die for the nation and this was also evident during the Contra War. The propaganda carried out by the State incorporated images of the Spartan Mother and the ‘Patriotic Womb Frame’ i.e., women who gave birth to future combatants, were glorified (Bayard de Volo 2001).\footnote{Ibid. 721-722} Bayard de Volo’s paper thus reveals not only how maternal framing strategies emerge as significant instruments in the hands of both the State as well as the Opposition, particularly in times of conflict but also, how they can mould public discourse on the essence of the conflict.

To capture the views of the respondents on this issue, the following questions were asked—Do you think Motherhood as a notion (“our boy’s syndrome”) is manipulated by the State and the rebel forces? Do you think organizations like NMA or the Meira Paibis are being used by the rebel groups (for their own purposes)? Several interesting insights emerged during the study. While many respondents agreed that mothers organizations were being used to a certain degree by the State and rebel forces, there were many others who vehemently denied that it could ever take place.

Speaking about the NMA, Meneno Vamuzo stated,

I don’t know about Meira Paibis, but for NMA, I don’t think that is the case. My mother says, “No, how can we allow our children to use us?” My mother was part of an NMA team that recently attended a function at a factional camp upon invitation. She was asked to speak on behalf of the mothers, and she said that she did so with conviction. She told them that mothers will no longer allow their sons to be killed in factional clashes, and that bloodshed has to stop in our land. As mentioned earlier, there is that place of respect and honour for

\footnote{Ibid}
\footnote{Ibid. 721-722}
mothers in our context, and so I do not think that manipulation of mothers can take place.\(^{83}\)

Noted social activist Niketu Iralu stated the following,

Nagas do not use the word ‘rebels’ to call the genuinely dedicated people who fight for the aspirations of their people. They call the men who exploit the crisis of their people’s struggle to collect money for themselves as ‘goondas’, not rebels. I believe there is some truth in the suggestion that Motherhood as an emotive notion is manipulated by the State as well as the hard-pressed fighters for their people’s aspirations.\(^{84}\)

A young man from Dimapur (who chose not to be named, fearing he would be targeted by the rebel groups) stated the following,

Yes, I think that sometimes the rebel groups use the NMA as a front for expanding their influence over the public (I hope I don’t get shot for this). If liquor is seized somewhere—NMA and some rebel groups tend to be present at the spot. Little do the public know that this is just a ploy to trick the public into believing that the rebel groups are being of some assistance at curbing social evils when they are in fact the very cause of all those.\(^{85}\)

His observation is particularly important as it raises significant doubts regarding the role of the NMA as a non-partisan organization working for the welfare of the community.

Another respondent stated, “Motherhood had been exploited by the state and rebel forces in many situations, where they have tried to use motherhood for their selfish interests, especially in the early phase of the Naga freedom struggle.”\(^{86}\) While another respondent had this to say, “Yes all organizations are being used by the rebel groups. The public are too blind to see that.”\(^{87}\)

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\(^{83}\) Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) and Sano Vamuzo (Chairperson, Nagaland State Commission for Women) through email May 9, 2012

\(^{84}\) Personal Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012

\(^{85}\) Interview with W.K, Dimapur, September 21, 2012

\(^{86}\) Interview with M.I., Asst.Prof, Dimapur, September 21, 2012

\(^{87}\) Interview with M.C., Self employed, Dimapur, September 28, 2012
There were some who came up with ambiguous responses and some others who placed
the onus on the organization (NMA) to respond in a manner they deemed fit to
questions on manipulation—

NMA is a respected organized body and has always been under able
leadership. They continuously work on equipping their leaders and upcoming
leaders with requisite exposure. They have set priorities and sometimes gets
involved when need arises. Therefore safeguarding the lives and interest of the
society cannot be perceived as favouring towards any political party or rebel
group nor are they being manipulated. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out
that some people have suspicions or even convinced that NMA sometimes are
being manipulated.  

A young journalist working with a leading daily in Nagaland stated the following, “It
depends on how an organization responds to such advances. Every organization has the
choice to be used or not to be.”

For the respondents in Guwahati, in addition to the questions—Do you think
Motherhood as a notion (“our boy’s syndrome”) is manipulated by the State and the
rebel forces? Do you think organizations like NMA or the Meira Paibis are being used
by the rebel groups (for their own purposes)?, another question specific to the context
of Assam was also asked—Do you think Dr. Mamoni Roisom Goswami was
successful in highlighting the grievances of the ULFA by advancing the notion of
Motherhood (“our boys” while referring to the cadres of the ULFA) while negotiating
with the State?

An overwhelming majority of the respondents believe that the organizations with a
motherist agenda and those who adopt the notion of “our boys” tend to be manipulated
by the State/rebel forces in some way. Agreeing with this contention, Wasbir Hussain
stated the following,

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88 Interview with D.D., Self Employed, Dimapur, September 24, 2012
89 Interview with K.I., Journalist, Dimapur, September 29, 2012
Yes, to an extent… because such organizations are closer to the sub-nationalist agenda, it is easier for sections of the organization to get manipulated by the rebel forces. Also, because the rebels are basically youth, from the same society, an emotional appeal from them tends to be paid more attention to, than that made by the State.\textsuperscript{90}

A retired Professor stated, “Yes. In the context of North East India, it has been established that the motherhood notion has been used by the state and the non-state actors. Naga Mothers’ Association and Meira Paibi are no exception. It is a fact that these organizations are vulnerable to “our boys syndrome”, which is a trap. Even Mamoni Baideu fell into this trap.”\textsuperscript{91}

According to a young scholar, “Yes. The state and the rebel forces only capitalize on sentiments that already prevail at the societal levels.”\textsuperscript{92} Seconding this view another respondent had this to say,

Yes. “Our boys” syndrome” is naturally there and the state, rebel groups, political parties and other civil society bodies try to control and influence such groups for their own purposes. This is true not only for NMA or Meira Paibis but around the world. In the fight for power and influence, everyone will try to use anything to achieve its purpose. But to what extent it will let others control or influence, is the main question. Mothers are a part of the community… their emotional attachment with the community cannot be separated. The community has a lot of impact on any movement especially among ethnic communities marred by conflict and violence. To maintain a balance between their cause and the pressures surrounding them is the main dilemma facing these organizations at present as it is an emotion laden decision.\textsuperscript{93}

There were some others who came up with some interesting insights on the “our boys” phenomenon. A Professor who did not want to be named stated the following,

\textsuperscript{90} Interview with Wasbir Hussain,. Guwahati, June 10, 2010
\textsuperscript{91} Interview with Prof. A.A. , Guwahati, October 18, 2012
\textsuperscript{92} Interview with A.B. in Guwahati, October 18, 2012
\textsuperscript{93} Interview with E.D. in Guwahati, September 25, 2012
I actually do not personally believe in this “our boys syndrome” and cannot really fathom why others (besides the mothers whose sons are actually involved) do so. For me “our boys/youth” mean those who have chosen to remain and fight it out the hard way, not taken up a gun but continued with college, worked in the fields/kheti tried to make an actual difference although employment avenues were not always rosy. It is these young people who need a break in life, not some spoilt so called rebel/baghi.  

A retired bank officer had this to say, “The – our boys syndrome – has its own historical cycle. It crests in the earlier stages of an insurgent movement, and declines when the sheen of the syndrome wears out. It would be difficult to unambiguously assert who controls whom among the strangers in the mist.”  

To the question on whether Mamoni Roisom Goswami as an interlocutor during the ULFA peace talks with the Government of India, was successful in highlighting the grievances of the ULFA by advancing the notion of motherhood, the majority of the respondents believed that she had been successful, although they differed in the extent to which she was. 

According to a young scholar, 

Yes...individually she tried at her own level though many, especially her critics did question her. But what is important is that a woman chose to give voice to the rebels in Assam which was paid attention to by different levels of stakeholders. How and why and under what circumstances she voiced those grievances is talked about amongst the Assamese intelligentsia-both positively and negatively. And this is natural. But what makes the difference is that she made an effort ...using her own space and name.  

According to another respondent, 

Her negotiation was rather more complex and can not be just summed up as advancing the notion of Motherhood. First, she was compassionate to the genuine grievances of the ULFA and that made her a very successful
interlocutor. Moreover, her well-acknowledged humanism emanating in her writings as well as in her persona was instrumental in making her an acceptable negotiator. She also used her connections in Delhi (due to her long association with Delhi University) to influence different pillars of the Government to come forward for a negotiation.  

A young lecturer, had this to say, “Yes, to a certain extent. However, as the state is known to play out the ‘fatigue-syndrome’, things were not addressed as urgently as they actually should have until after the situation threatened to spiral out of control.”

There were others who believed that Mamoni Roisom Goswami was not successful in her efforts...“As already stated, Mamoni Raisom Gowami fell into the trap of “our boys syndrome” and connived the crimes committed by the ULFA militants. Further her approach was apolitical. Militancy is a political problem which cannot be handled if one took an apolitical position.”

Mitra Phukan, a noted writer and musician had to the following to say,

No. She was well meaning, but ineffectual. Motherhood as a notion is no match for men and women with guns. And we all know, don’t we, how easily we, as mothers, are influenced by our children’s voices? And how we turn a blind eye to their faults because of our "maternal” emotions?

Another respondent stated the following, “No, I admire her as a great writer but was highly irritated by her statement on ‘our boys’ (who are now middle-aged men)... she was romanticizing their 'struggle' maybe?”

Thus we see that an overwhelming number of respondents in both Nagaland and Assam have reported that mothers organizations or even individuals who have advanced the notion of motherhood while mediating with the State, are to some extent being controlled or influenced by both the State as well as the Non-state actors, with more

97 Interview with U.D., Research Associate, Guwahati, October 21, 2012
98 Interview with A.B., Guwahati, October 18, 2012
99 Interview with Prof. A.A., Guwahati, October 18, 2012
100 Interview with Mitra Phukan, over email, October 18, 2012
101 Interview with Prof. P.D. Guwahati, June 23, 2012
people inclined towards the greater influence exerted by the non-State actors/rebel groups. The reason cited for this is the emotional attachment that the ‘mothers’ may have for the ‘sons’ who have gone astray and the fact that the mothers belong to the very community, to which the ‘sons’ belong.

GRAPH 9: ARE MOTHERS/MOTHERS ORGANIZATIONS A PAWN IN THE HANDS OF THE STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS?

VII. HAS THE STATE OR THE CIVIL SOCIETY CAPITALIZED ON THE POTENTIAL OF MOTHERHOOD AS PEACEMAKERS?

Although women have initiated social movements for change and have formed collectives to raise issues that have been pushed to the margins of public memory—cloaked in a veil of silence, they have seldom been included in decision making bodies.

The difficulty in making women’s peace activism visible is that women themselves see their activity as non-political and an extension of their domestic concerns as ‘stretched
roles’. Their activism is dubbed ‘accidental activism’ so to speak. Women often seek out informal spaces within the societal framework in times of conflict, to give vent to the anger and frustration festering within. In doing so, they surpass the private-public divide, that is, they transcend the private space and participate in the struggle, as social actors.

Much of the activism is at the local, grassroots level. Women’s activism is most visible when politics is less hierarchically structured. Rita Manchanda has rightly stated that, “because women’s peace activism is grounded in the informal space of politics, it gets undervalued and as post conflict politics moves into formal space, it gets marginalized.” This raises the issue of their access to power; how politically empowered they really are and how seriously are their opinions taken. Are women relegated to being mere props in any movement of change or are their voices also heard?

In the North Eastern region of India, women have been used as an instrument for asserting authority by the opposing forces and are acknowledged as a strong pressure group in the society. Their role is confined to carrying out processions; sit-in demonstrations and other similar modes of protest. Yet, when it comes to formal, decision-making settings, women are excluded and marginalized.

To understand whether the State and the civil society have capitalized on the potential of mothers organizations as peace builders, questions related to the specific political context were asked in Nagaland and Assam. For Nagaland, therefore, the visible presence of the NMA in the socio-political scenario prompted a more detailed questioning regarding its role as well as potential as mediators in the peace process. In contrast, since KGNMT does not have a noticeable space in the political context of Assam, the questions asked to the members of the KGNMT were more to do with its role in the present political scenario and whether they have been accorded due recognition by the State and civil society.

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103 Ibid. p 10
(i) Whether the Potential of the NMA as a Peacemaker has been capitalized upon

Varying opinions were put forth by a few key informants regarding whether the potential of NMA as a mediator in the peace process had been taken full advantage of. Elizabeth Imti, a young lecturer felt that NMA has not received their due, yet. She stated: “No. In the Naga Reconciliation Talks, the representation of women in the Peace team was very miniscule and just that was an indication that women’s voices are not taken seriously. Women as mothers can feel the pain, the cancer of the society.”

According to Meneno and Sano Vamuzo,

> Mothers are genuinely concerned about the socio-political environment around them, and NMA recognizes the society’s need for their greater involvement, but the society at large unfortunately has not yet come to that understanding. In the social set up, women are often excluded in the broad leadership circles at the various levels. Hence the women’s reservation is being fought for by the women at present, as they believe that this will extend to other areas as well.

Adopting a more critical stance to this issue, Niketu Iralu said, “NMA must first work out what its role should be if they are to be mediators in the present crisis of our people.”

(ii) Role of NMA in the present political context of Nagaland

According to Elizabeth Imti, “They are seen as an intermediary between the non-state actors and the government. Nagas have much respect for the Mothers and will ultimately respect their opinion. In conversations earlier with ex-Presidents of the NMA, they felt that sometime they were caught in men’s wars and no one was interested in listening to the other group.”

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104 Interview with Elizabeth Imti, September 21, 2012
105 Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) and Sano Vamuzo (Chairperson, Nagaland State Commission for Women) through email May 9, 2012
106 Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012
107 Interview with Elizabeth Imti, September 21, 2012
Tracing the socio-historical role played by Naga women in the community, Meneno and Sano Vamuzo, state the following,

The Naga mother has traditionally been a peacemaker not only within their individual families, but they also functioned as mediators between villages that were at war. This is continuing in the present context as the Mother in today’s context strives to bring peace within the broader context of the Naga family—every Naga army cadre is considered a “son” to the mothers, which is why initiatives are taken at various levels of the NMA to visit the headquarters of the Naga factions to plead for peace and reconciliation, and to end bloodshed. Under their slogan “Shed No More Blood,” the NMA has been appealing to all for an end to bloodshed all across Nagaland. When a person dies, there is a Naga tradition of covering the dead body with a traditional Naga shawl. The NMA has over the years collected shawls from their various tribal units, and covered the bodies of numerous Naga soldiers who have been killed, as a sign of their love and caring for the fallen. However, they also appeal to the leaders of the various factions because every time killings take place, it reminds mothers of the number of lives that are being lost pointlessly, and unfortunately, most of them are over trivial matters that could have been solved amicably without any loss of lives.108

According to Niketu Iralu, “I believe the NMA should develop its role as the conscience keeper and voice of compassion of Naga society and jealously guard its impartiality. It will then help our society in all fields including holding the political groups and factions within the sane bounds of human behavior.”109 Sarah Nuh, the VP of NMA feels that the proactive stance adopted by the organization in facilitating the movement for 33% reservation of women, can play a significant role in present Nagaland.110

(iii) Has the State or the Civil Society accorded due recognition to NMA?
Niketu Iralu steered clear away from mentioning whether the Government of India had accorded due recognition to the NMA for its peace efforts although he chose to speak about the civil society. He stated that the civil society,

108 Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) and Sano Vamuzo (Chairperson, Nagaland State Commission for Women) through email May 9, 2012
109 Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012
110 Interview with Sarah Nuh, Vice President of NMA through email, May 16, 2012
…has always appreciated NMA’s efforts to stop violence and bloodshed caused by inter-faction conflicts or conflicts between Naga fighters and the Indian security forces. I believe most of the Naga public expect the NMA to concentrate on healing the divisions that are fragmenting our society causing bloodshed in all parts of the Naga homeland rather than side with any of the factions involved in the search for settlement of the Indo-Naga problem. 111

Sarah Nuh, the vice president of NMA believes that the organization has not received its due recognition in all areas.112 Elizabeth Imti too was of the opinion that NMA has not been accorded due recognition. She stated, “Not really. They have never really been at the forefront as such but now perhaps with the media’s help, one reads of their social work and visits to the peace camps etc.” 113

Amongst the respondents from the civil society in Nagaland, a majority of them believed that the NMA had been given due recognition. The reasons cited were—“Through the media and Church,”114 “NMA is a respected, organized body and thus they have been given their due.”115 An interesting comment made by a young journalist, was that the recognition need not be given to NMA by others. “If their peace efforts are fulfilled, that achievement in itself is recognition.” 116 While there were a couple of others who believed that NMA had not received its due and to substantiate their claims, they stated that “The recognition is not very vivid. I have witnessed the Liquor Prohibition Act. The NMA has a lot more to do.” 117 The recognition is “not in proportion to the functions.” 118

Assam:

(i) Role of KGNMT and the approach of Gandhian non-violence in the Present Political context of Assam

Kusum Bora Mokashi, a former pratinidhi of KGNMT had the following to say,

111 Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012
112 Interview with Sarah Nuh, Vice President of NMA through email, May 16, 2012
113 Interview with Elizabeth Imti, September 21, 2012
114 Interview with K, a student, Dimapur, September 25, 2012
115 Interview with D. Dzuvichu, Self Employed, Dimapur, September 24, 2012
116 Interview with K.I., Journalist, Dimapur, September 29, 2012
117 Interview with S, Lecturer, Kohima, September 23, 2012
118 Interview with D.C, Lawyer, September 28, 2012
Gandhiji believed that a non-violent society could be established and one way in which the KGNMT works on it is, by instilling the Gandhian thought and approach amongst children. During the struggle for Independence, India was fighting against one foreign company, the East India Company. Now, with the advent of liberalization, there are more than 20,000 MNCs all over the country.

Once with a donation of around Rs.30,000 that was given to KGNMT, a scheme was introduced whereby a sum of Rs.500 was disbursed to a group of tribal women without a rate of interest, to pursue economic activities. The women could buy thread worth Rs.500 and weave clothes worth Rs.2000. At the end of the cycle, they could return the sum of Rs.500 they had borrowed and still make profits. There have been around 32 women working under such a scheme. Besides weaving, women also reared animals, such as goats, pigs etc.\footnote{119}

Mokashi believed that adopting the Gandhian approach could bring about self-reliance amongst women, thereby paving the way for positive changes within the community.

According to Damayanti Devi, the present \textit{pratinidhi} of KGNMT,

For Gandhiji, women and children were of immense significance in his larger scheme of activities. But over time, there has been an expansion of activities to keep in touch with the changing times...and in such a scenario, the Shanti Sena was formed. In 2009, we had also begun printing a newsletter called \textit{Shanti Doot} (Messenger of Peace). In addition to this, we submitted reports to the Chief Secretary after our visits to the communities affected during the ethnic hostilities in Udalguri and Mongoldoi.\footnote{120}

While reiterating Gandhi’s emphasis on working with women and children, Devi elaborated on how KGNMT has made an attempt to keep pace with the changing times and evolve a more proactive role for the organization in the efforts to maintain peace for the greater development of the community. Thus it is seen that both Mokashi and Devi’s statements reflect the evolving vision of KGNMT—of creating change within the community by empowering women and by awakening their ‘\textit{Matri Shakti}’.

\footnote{119 Personal Interview with Kusum Bora Mokashi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012}
\footnote{120 Personal Interview with Damayanti Devi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012}
(ii) Has the State or Civil Society accorded due recognition to KGNMT?

Kusum Bora Mokashi stated that since no proactive efforts were made to publicize the work undertaken by KGNMT and Assam Matri Samaj by the members, the levels of awareness amongst both the civil society as well as those in positions of power were dismal. This subsequently had a negative impact on the ability to get its work, the degree of recognition, it deserved.

(iii) Potential of Motherhood as a space of protest and KGNMT

Hema Bharali, an octogenarian, who has been associated with KGNMT since its inception, when asked about her thoughts on motherhood as a potential space of protest, stated the following, “we do not have people who are constantly engaged with these issues. There is a lot of scepticism involved and there exists some sort of a conditional thinking.” This profound statement captures the essence of the dilemma KGNMT finds itself in. On the one hand, it is rooted in the ideals of Gandhian non-violence, on the other hand it finds itself outpaced and consigned to the oblivion, by the accelerated transformations dotting the socio-political culture of Assam, today.

In conclusion we can say that, women view conflict differently and can contribute new perspectives from their day to day experiences. Thus, including women in formal discussions can lead to a more integrated and gendered perspective of what constitutes peace, conflict and human security.

VIII. ROLE OF MOTHERS OR MOTHERS ORGANIZATIONS AS PEACEMAKERS

In many conflict ridden contexts, across the globe, women have chosen to adopt the identity of motherhood to advance the notion of peace building. In doing so, they have successfully been able to portray themselves as a non-threatening entity but strong enough to challenge, resist and withstand repressive measures.

121 Personal Interview with Kusum Bora Mokashi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012
122 Personal Interview with Hema Bharali, at her residence, June 18, 2010
In order to obtain a succinct understanding of how the respondents in the present study have been able to perceive the role of the Mothers organizations or the Mothers as peacemakers in Nagaland and Assam, a couple of questions were asked on their responsibilities, whether they are a neutral entity and whether they have the space to highlight their grievances and make their voices heard.

(i) Motherhood as an instrument for peace building: Assam and Nagaland

Damayanti Devi, the present pratinidhi of KGNMT, extolling the greatness of a mother stated that the mother can work towards peace not only from her hearth and home, but can also initiate her children into a peaceful environment from the womb itself.  

For the respondents of the civil society, the majority believed that women can use motherhood as an instrument for peace building. Some of the significant responses were as follows—

A young scholar who has been closely engaged with Gandhian peace building stated that,

Gandhian feminists are inclined to think that women are better attuned to peace building activities given their natural propensity to provide, care and nurture and give. I believe these mothering qualities inherently equip women to be more accommodative and self-sacrificing facilitating enough common ground for reconciliation of conflict of interests. Seen in this light, motherhood per se could indeed be used as an instrument of peace-building activities with a universal appeal cutting across faultlines.  

Elaborating on the qualities that are intrinsic to a mother, a Professor teaching in a University had this to say,

As mothers have to a certain extent retained their primeval instinct to protect their young, they may generally be more committed to making the future a more secure space for their offspring and others of the next generation. Mothers can also be ruthless when the safety of their children are concerned,

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123 Personal Interview with Damayanti Devi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012
124 Interview with A.B. Guwahati, October 18, 2012
and may be willing to take risks, fight tooth and nail to ensure their goals, and be more willing to ignore political expediency.\textsuperscript{125}

A retired Professor described how since early civilization it has been proved and established in a formidable manner that a mother can exert a tremendous amount of influence on her children and as well as on other people around. Thus a mother could use her influence in initiating activities towards peace building.\textsuperscript{126}

Another respondent had this to say,

Yes. Women play an important role in peace building though it goes unrecognised because they think more for their families; but it is always men who take the leadership. Mothers all around the world mourn for the loss of their loved ones and hence they strongly loathe any kind of violence and warfare. Mothers can bring about a change within the family by withholding their loved ones from joining militaristic activities and diverting their attention to constructive activities which will lead to peace and security. Women and mothers can form associations in their respective areas to spread the message of harmony and peace.\textsuperscript{127}

A common thread weaving through these testimonials is the belief that peace building extends naturally to a mother. Thus, there is an implicit understanding amongst these respondents that seem to suggest that qualities such as nurturance, self-sacrifice, an accommodative nature, protectiveness and the willingness to take risks for their children allow the mothers to work towards the development and the maintenance of peace within their communities. There is also an emphasis on the ‘responsibility’ aspect of being a mother that suggests the role mothers can play in ‘preventing’ their children from engaging in militaristic activities. This reflects the underlying belief systems prevalent in the society that shapes who or what a Mother is or should be, and what her responsibilities are towards her children and the community at large.

There were a couple of others who believed that Motherhood could/should not be used as an instrument for peace building as adopting that particular identity would make their stance biased. Elaborating on it further the young scholar stated, “Motherhood is intrinsically attached to the question, ‘whose mother?’ so it is just another marker of

\textsuperscript{125} Interview with Prof. P.D., Guwahati, June 23, 2012
\textsuperscript{126} Interview with Prof. A.A., Guwahati, October 18, 2012
\textsuperscript{127} Interview with S.B., Lecturer, Guwahati, November 3, 2011
one’s identity, like ethnicity, nationality etc. The Motherhood metaphor is used often in the context of identity mobilizations. So, once women use motherhood as a tool of building peace, it would inherently become partisan. Another respondent stated that a woman can be a part of a peace building initiative but need not use her status as a mother for it.

There were some others who provided a conditional response to motherhood as an instrument of peace building. A respondent suggested that, “Mothers definitely could help in the peace process but to me using motherhood as an instrument for peace-building is in actual, reinforcing the stereotypes. The notion of a ‘motherhood organization’ is patriarchal in nature. Moreover, the concept is not inclusive of women who are not “mothers” and hence it is limited.” Mitra Phukan, a noted writer and singer believes that for peace building, “Motherhood has to be reinforced by other instruments. ‘Motherhood’ by itself is not enough.”

Thus we see that amongst those who have either negated the idea that women can use the notion of motherhood for peace building or have agreed to it, only conditionally, there is an overwhelming strand of scepticism regarding the limits of the potential of motherhood for peace.

Describing how the women from NMA initiate steps to mediate with the various factions of the rebel groups, Meneno Vamuzo had to say this,

The women come from different backgrounds, but they take a stand that shows their solidarity as one because they have the same sentiment. An example is when mothers see a dead body, they wonder whose son/brother could that be? What would his mother feel? What if they were in her shoes? And so women consider themselves to be above differences and political or other divides. They have a sense of joint responsibility, a sense of belongingness, which strengthens their responses to society’s needs. ..., I know of some groups of women, some of which my mother has been part of - sometimes from a specific tribe, and in other cases, various tribes collectively visit the factional camps and appeal to the leaders. These are courageous initiatives given the risks such undertakings involve. As you might imagine, the killings have inculcated fear.
in the minds of the public. But in doing so, the mothers have engaged in meaningful discussions with the leaders. In other instances, the police or civic bodies have called on women groups and organizations to approach the warring factions as a last resort when other efforts have failed, or when situations have gotten out of control. This is so because in tense moments like these, the men are not disposed to listening to each other - hence, the women become the last resort. I remember a local news item some years ago about a woman whose photo was featured in one or more of the local papers. She had gone to a place where different factions were firing at each other, playing her traditional drum and pleading for an end to the killing.132

Her description clearly illustrates how women coming from diverse backgrounds bond over the identity of the mother—to the sons who may have been caught in the violent aftermath of the decades old conflict within the State. She states that the women share a sense of solidarity, that they have a ‘sense of joint responsibility’ and a ‘sense of belongingness’ that in turn strengthens their responses to the society’s needs. This reflects how women have successfully been able to engage with the discourse on motherhood and utilize strategies shaped by it, to intervene, mediate and attempt to bring an end to hostilities between warring factions.

The majority of the respondents of the civil society in Nagaland believed that the NMA and Mothers in general can play a role in the peace efforts. Many of them suggested multiple ways in which the Mothers can work towards peace. Some of them are as follows—“Demanding that traditional and customary laws that are discriminatory towards women should be done away with; review/repeal of AFSPA; inclusion of more women in law enforcement; opening up of more schemes by the government for women; inclusion of women in Village Development Boards, legislative assemblies etc.; providing the platform/opportunity to women from all walks of life to listen to one another and determine ways to promote peace in the region.”133 Another respondent stated,

It is high time for women to come out of their homes and do something for the peace of our land. Peace begins from home so each mother can educate their children in a proper way, do away with all sort of ‘isms’ that we have in our

132 Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) over email May 17, 2012
133 Interview with V.S., Self employed, Kohima, September 26, 2012
society. Mothers have a common trait (underlined by interviewee to emphasize) and through this all, mothers can come together and unite themselves and in doing so, can influence the others. It is a drastic step and the process may be slow, but I believe the outcome will bring change and peace in our land.\textsuperscript{134}

According to a teacher in a school, “The NMA has contributed to building a broad-based peace that amongst others has allowed the ceasefire to survive; intervened at the national and local level to stop violence; bridged the divide among various factions; maintained open communication channels between communities and promoted indigenous models of reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{135}

There were some others who felt that the NMA and Mothers could not contribute to the peace efforts. A young journalist stated, “No, I don’t think NMA and Mothers can play a role in the peace efforts because if that was possible, the Naga society would be having a peaceful and lasting atmosphere, since decades ago.” \textsuperscript{136} According to a lawyer, “No, Nagaland already has a lot of problems going between the common people—demand for a separate state by our Eastern brothers, the failed Naga reconciliation etc. The NMA cannot be blamed entirely but organizations like the NMA could have done so much when there was time. There have been politics involved all through the time. So, I feel NMA cannot play a role in peace efforts since I have not seen any results.”\textsuperscript{137}

(ii) Mothers Organizations, Neutrality and Space

To understand whether Mothers organizations can really play the role of a peace builder within the community, it is important to know whether they can afford to be a neutral entity and whether they have an adequate space to air their grievances. Niketu Iralu believes that NMA should strive to be an impartial entity amidst the prevalent political imbroglio, as only that would allow them to serve the people of Nagaland more effectively. Elaborating on it, he stated,

\textsuperscript{134} Interview with N.K., Student, Dimapur, September 24, 2012  
\textsuperscript{135} Interview with M.K., Teacher, September 27, 2012  
\textsuperscript{136} Interview with K. I., Journalist, Dimapur, September 23, 2012,  
\textsuperscript{137} Interview with D.C., Lawyer, September 28, 2012
NMA should maintain its position as the common platform for all Naga mothers and women of all tribes. Just as Naga Hoho too, should do as the common platform for all Naga tribes. Their special responsibilities are promotion and preservation of the unity of the Naga family and their common welfare. I believe if they go beyond this given field and stray into taking political roles they render themselves vulnerable to perceptions and suspicions of siding with factions or parties for diverse reasons which will undermine their positions in the minds of the public. By remaining impartial politically which enables them to speak and act with authority on the larger moral issues they serve the people more effectively. (Right now no Naga woman has become a leader of Naga Hoho or of any of the tribes. One day this should and will happen. It has not become an issue yet.).

The majority of the respondents from the civil society stated that they believed NMA was neutral. According to a respondent from the civil society, “NMA is definitely an impartial entity. As a women’s organization, they have given great importance to the women folk and the society. They have set their priorities straight and they protest against human rights violations. They also spearhead in fighting evils against women and the society in general.” There were also some others who believed that Mothers organizations were visible only when they raised concerns surrounding questions on gender (social, such as VAW or political, such as demand for 33% quota) and hence their ability to be an impartial entity was compromised.

In contrast, a sizeable number in Assam, suggested that Mothers organizations cannot be neutral. According to a Professor in a University, ‘They appear to be ‘neutral’, the bulwark between state and rebel group, but first, ‘mothers’ generally are and have always been known to be biased. Secondly, they take their stance as “protectors” of the group and hence ‘mothers’ and thirdly, the moment they represent a particular organization, they are actually politicized. So their stance can never be neutral.’ Wasbir Hussain states, “It is difficult and tough for the organizations to be neutral in a politically charged atmosphere. It is easier to be manipulated by non-state actors. Therefore, we hardly see them protesting against militant excesses.”

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138 Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012
139 Interview with D. D., Self Employed, Dimapur, September 24, 2012
140 Interview with K.I., Journalist, Dimapur, September 23, 2012,
141 Interview with Prof. M.D., Guwahati, July 31, 2012
142 Interview with Wasbir Hussain, Guwahati, June 10, 2010
the politically entrenched situations within which the Mothers organizations function, a young scholar had to say this, “The leadership of any such organisation should be firm enough to resist direct or indirect patronage from any quarters. Very often, political machinations are so discreet that, if not cautious, such organisations may find themselves falling easy prey to the designs of vested interests. Accordingly, both the leadership and rank and file of such organisations should always be resilient and stay away from partisan politics of any kind, no matter what.”

With regards to the question on the space to highlight their demands and voice their grievances, Niketu Iralu suggested that for NMA (just as it is the case for the Naga Ho Ho), “the space that it can command is shaped by the size of the aims and thinking of its leaders.” An overwhelming majority barring one respondent among the civil society in Nagaland, believed that NMA has an adequate space to air their concerns on issues plaguing the community. In Assam too a sizeable number of respondents believed that organizations shaped by a Motherist agenda have an adequate space. According to a young scholar,

Organizations with a motherist agenda have space to voice their grievances or highlight their demands. Example is there from Argentina and other African countries. In Northeast India, the Meira Paibis have social space and in fact, during the two women's wars it even acquired a political space in the sense, it successfully overturned political decisions of the government who held political power. Naga Mothers Association also has social space…

Amongst those who stated that they do not have an adequate space, a young lecturer put forth the following view,

As I said earlier I am not very comfortable with the word ‘motherhood’ I have a doubt as to how far these organizations have got their due in highlighting their grievances. Our society is very patriarchal in nature be it Manipur, Nagaland or Assam. We have to analyze how far these organizations have

143 Interview with A.B. Guwahati, October 18, 2012
144 Interview with Niketu Iralu, social activist through email, February 10, 2012
145 Interview with E.D, Guwahati, September 25, 2012
been able to make a place in these societies. Women have always been looked upon as emotional beings and both the state and rebel groups have exploited that notion and kept the women away from addressing the real issues.\textsuperscript{146}

Thus we find that organizations with a Motherist agenda or even Mothers are perceived to play a significant role in ushering in peace within their respective communities. But there is also an underlying scepticism shared by a section of the people regarding their influence, ability as well as their intentions in bringing about changes within a conflict ridden context.

**GRAPH 10: CAN MOTHERS/MOTHERS ORGANIZATIONS PLAY A ROLE IN PEACE BUILDING?**

\textsuperscript{146} Interview with P.B, Lecturer, Guwahati, November 4, 2012
IX. WEAVING: THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SYMBOLISM WITHIN A CONTEXT OF CONFLICT

In situations of conflict, women have been found to exercise their sense of agency by working out strategies to alleviate the hardship befalling the family. Many of these strategies are born out of necessity and are shaped by the desire to create a space for themselves in the larger milieu. More often than not, these strategies cater to economic activities—both at an individual level as well as through cooperatives—engaged in weaving, rearing animals etc.

In Assam, KGNMT, guided by the ideals of Gandhi, has introduced weaving for women towards self reliance, amongst its many programs for social upliftment. According to Gandhi, “universal production and use of khadi through universal hand-spinning” was one of the four constructive programs that he had envisioned for every citizen of India that could facilitate the path to self-confidence, dignity and the power to continuously better one’s position within the society.\textsuperscript{147} Gandhi had in fact once stated that, “Assamese women are born weavers; they weave fairy-tales in their cloth.”\textsuperscript{148}

The state of Assam has had a rich legacy of weaving, with mostly the women operating the looms. It is one of the most important cottage industries and is intimately connected with the lives of the people. The former pratinidhi of KGNMT, Kusum Bora Mokashi had this to say about women and weaving in Assam, “The loom is a significant element of Assamese culture and is a signifier of self-independence.”\textsuperscript{149} KGNMT through its gram sevikas encourage women to weave khadi clothes, to be self-reliant. According to Mokashi, women weaving khadi do earn an income from its sales, but it is mainly carried out as an activity for self-sustenance.\textsuperscript{150} Anima Dutta who has worked extensively with women and the former cadres of the Bodo Liberation Tigers, in the

\textsuperscript{147} The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, VOL.71, pg.244
\textsuperscript{149} Personal Interview with Kusum Bora Mokashi, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid
Baksa district stated that women engage in weaving through the many SHGs that operate there with the help of KGNMT. 151

In Nagaland too, weaving is an essential part of the lives of the women. Naga shawls are unique in that each tribe has its own patterns. Elaborating on the significance of the colour palette, design element and beliefs associated with them, Antony Kuriakose states the following in his article, *Style and Status of Naga Shawls*,

Naga women are excellent weavers and the colourful shawls, woven by them are extremely popular. A number of traditions and beliefs are also associated with the weaving and wearing of the traditional dress. A chang cloth requires all the zig-zag lines to fall uniformly, or else the young warrior wearing it may die a premature death. When a Konyak woman gets married she wears a shatni shawl which is preserved and later used only to wrap her dead body. Convention demands that a rongtu shawl be worn only if the mithun sacrifice has been carried out over three generations. Textile dyeing is a significant art among the hill tribes of the region with each tribe possessing one or two special types of dyes. Superstition and belief also dictates the selection of colour. The weavers believe that if a young woman dyes her cloth red, she is sure to die a violent death and hence only old women dye yarn red. 152

The interviews with the key informants during the present study revealed how Naga shawls have come to acquire a symbolic meaning during the conflict in the State. According to Meneno Vamuzo, “When a person dies, there is a Naga tradition of covering the dead body with a traditional Naga shawl. The NMA has over the years collected shawls from their various tribal units, and covered the bodies of numerous Naga soldiers who have been killed, as a sign of their love and caring for the fallen.” 153

An earlier study carried out by the researcher on Naga women in three locations in Nagaland in 2005 revealed how the women engaged in economic activities to generate income and contribute to the upkeep of the family. Although the primary occupation of the villagers was agriculture, the women were found to have initiated measures to diversify their activities incorporating other facets of agro-based industries, weaving

151 Personal Interview with Anima Dutta, at KGNMT, Sarania Ashram, May 12, 2012
153 Interview with Meneno Vamuzo (social worker) over email May 17, 2012
and handicrafts. They adopted context specific strategies and took steps to involve all sections of the community in their reconstructive activities. They thus provided a viable alternative to the existing social structures.

Thus we find that weaving emerges not just as a productive economic activity for the women within a context of conflict, but it also allows them to express their sense of agency and gives them the impetus to be an instrument of social transformation within their respective communities.

DOCUMENTATION OF A LIST OF MOTHERS ORGANIZATIONS IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Other than the NMA and KGNMT, an attempt was also made to compile a list of organizations which advanced the notion of motherhood while initiating efforts for development and peace in North East India. At the outset, it must be stated that very little information, if any at all, exists about these organizations, thus limiting our knowledge on their authenticity. In addition to this, information could be gathered on only a couple of organizations from the states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. They are as follows:

I. Assam

i) Saatsori Matri Samaj\textsuperscript{155}
   Address: Azara, District Kamrup, Assam 781 017
   Telephone: 0361-2890836
   Person in charge: Chompa Bora (President) Binita Debi Barua Das (Secretary)

ii) Boko Anchalik Matri Samaj\textsuperscript{156}
   Address: Village and P.O. Boko, Kamrup

\textsuperscript{154} Goswami, T Role of Women as Peace Builders with special reference to Nagaland , Peace Studies Paper 06, Peace Studies, OKDISCD, Assam, 2006

\textsuperscript{155} Accessed on April 15, 2013 from the website http://www.standupagainstviolence.org/States/assam.html

\textsuperscript{156} Accessed on April 15, 2013 from the website http://wcd.nic.in/projsanc/CrechelistUpload19_07_2010/Assam09-10.htm
Telephone: 9435306706

*Creche Location under the Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme’09-*10

iii) Matri Samaj\textsuperscript{157}
Address: Hindu Gaon Tiniali, North Lakhimpur, 787001, Assam
Telephone: (03752) 23212
Person in charge: Ms. Punyaprabha Hazarika.

II. Manipur

i) The Ideal Mother’s Association\textsuperscript{158}

Naoriya Pakhanglakpa
Keisham Leikai
Imphal - 795001
Manipur

Phone Nos: 0385-2454869, 09856087720

Contact Person: Kerani Singh Akoijam

IMA aims to promote better socio-economic and cultural life of the poor mothers and disadvantaged groups of the society. It has taken up several activities aiming at helping these women and children.

III. Arunachal Pradesh

i) Miao Mothers Association\textsuperscript{159}

It was established on May 31, 2011 and it works in the area of peace and conflict resolution within the community.

\textsuperscript{157} Accessed on May 8, 2013 from the website http://www.standupagainstviolence.org/States/assam.html
\textsuperscript{159} Accessed on May 1, 2013 from the website https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-miao-times/miao-mothers-association-in-action-again/173438559395195
Therefore to conclude, some of the significant themes that emerged during the study were—the history of women’s collectives and social transformation in the north-eastern region (with special reference to NMA and KGNMT); construction of the notion of Motherhood, the nationalist discourse and the vision of the mother for NMA and KGNMT; the notion of Political Motherhood in the context of Assam and Nagaland (looked at from within the framework as advanced by Schirmer); the absence of leaders, fragmentation and scepticism—the case of the civil society in Assam; the influence of the Church on the NMA; Mothers organizations being a pawn in the hands of the State and Non-state actors; The state or civil society not capitalizing on the potential of motherhood as peacemakers; The role of Mothers or Mothers organizations as peacemakers and, the significance and symbolism of weaving within the context of a conflict.