CHAPTER 3

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Visibility to gender dimensions in conflict has been spurred by the devastating impact of conflict on women as victims. Gendered conflicts have been typically studied from a perception of victimology where attention has been focused on women's experience and perception of violence faced. Women's space, patriarchy, gender and development are some of the related themes to understand women's space in ethnic conflict.

3.1 Women's Spaces, Gender and Development:

Space is constructed out of continuous co-existence of social inter relations

"Theoretically women's space has been defined in terms of women's access to (and control over) material resources (including food, income, land) and other forms of wealth and to social resources (knowledge, power, prestige) within the family, in the community and in society at large. It has also been defined as 'the ranking, in terms of prestige, power or esteem, according to the position of women in comparison with, relative to, the ranking given to the position of men'".


The patterning of socio-physical spaces of women depends upon the social construction of that particular society. In other words, symbolism of space is usually formulated by patriarchy. Patriarchy clearly highlights male domination and power in the home as well as in society at large. It combines the force of male authority with the subtleties of parental care, so highlighting the way women's subordination rests on ideological and emotional power, on personal relationships as well as on physical force. Hartmann defined patriarchy as men's domination over women, especially on her labour. Walby defines patriarchy as a system of interrelated social structures and practices through which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Patriarchy is taken in its wider meaning to express power relations not between men and women but also between state, men and women which will be taken up in the next chapter. The instances from Nalbari, Assam show that spaces are never neutral and they are affected by social and power relations. Symbolic spaces are mostly relevant to women as they play a major role in the construction of cultural and ethnic collectivities. Sara Evans presents five essential preconditions for an insurgent collective identity of women. That includes: "Social spaces within which members of an oppressed group can develop an independent sense of worth in contrast to their received definitions as second class or inferior citizens; Role models of people breaking out of patterns of passivity; An ideology that can explain the sources of oppression, justify revolt and provide a vision of a qualitatively different future;"

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9 Ibid., p.45.
A threat to the new found sense of self that forces a confrontation with the inherited cultural definitions (meaning it becomes impossible for the individual 'to make it her own' and escape the boundaries of the oppressed group; and finally, A friendship network through which a new interpretation can spread, activating the insurgent consciousness.in to a social movement."

The construction of space in terms of gender has been drawn by various thinkers like Foucaut (space vis-à-vis exercise of power), Lefebvre's Marxist analysis in urban studies, Giddens time space formulation in his construction theory and so on. However, underlying theme of all these studies reveal that space is a physical form which is linked up with social structure. Ardener in 'Women and Space' describes how spatial terms are indispensable to understand the gendered patterning of society.

Societies generate their own culturally determined rules for drawing boundaries in the real world, division that structure given modes of perception and social interaction which gives birth to markers in our lives and resulted creation of the spaces. Gender is often mistakenly used to signify women only. It is argued that gender is not only about women or men as separate and independent categories, but is a relational concept. It focuses on how the terms of man and women are mutually constituted and interdependent.

As mentioned earlier, ethnic identities are ethnically gendered, ethnically specified constructions and understanding of spaces are differentiated in gendered terms. One example of this could be women’s mobility which is circumscribed by cultural

10 Ibid., p.45.
12 Ibid., p.37..
13 Ibid., p.37.
construction of space. Consequently they are sometimes imprisoned by the symbolism that defines their ethnicity.\textsuperscript{15}

Sen has defined ‘space’ in terms of capability which is to indicate comparisons of quality of life, how much resources a female is able to command. Through this approach question of space, questions about social equality and inequality has raised.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite decades of development the fact remains that women in Assam, though little better than their sisters in the rest of the country, are still categorized as deprived sections of society. Not only the benefits of development have eluded women as a category but in some ways development process have enhanced male domination over women and added to their deprivation. One of the most contested terrains today is to see women as a part of the broader issue of development. Adopting such an approach ensures economic independence of women both within and outside family, which add to their comprehensive welfare.\textsuperscript{17}

Feminists have also developed an analysis of citizenship arguing that it is structured by gender and ethnicity and provides the basis for certain forms of political representation. The concept of citizenship draws attention to principle of sameness, such as equal rights and equal treatment for all. The gendering of citizenship rights was recognized by T.H. Marshall too. His social rights of citizenship could be extended to men without difficulty but difficult for women who are ‘dependants’ of men and whose legitimate work is held to be located in the private sphere.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p470.
\textsuperscript{17} Abha Avasthi, Srivastava AK, eds., Modernity, Feminism and Women Empowerment, Jaipur, 2001, p.179.
Ursula Vogil has also reiterated that women were not simply latecomers to citizenship rights as in Marshall's evolutionary model of citizenship rights. Their exclusion was part and parcel of the construction of the entitlement of men to democratic participation which conferred citizen status not upon individuals as such but upon men in their capacity as members and representatives of a family.\(^{19}\)

In fact, Pateman has argued that citizenship is structured on the gendered distinction between public and private and the citizenship rights are associated with the former. It implies that women's care work within family does not carry with it citizenship entitlements in the way that paid employment in the public domain does. Feminists therefore argue that women's care work within family/house should be a basis of entitlement to rather than exclusion from various social rights and for measures to facilitate their full inclusion in paid employment or entitlements.\(^{20}\)

The patriarchal understanding of citizenship implies the two demands that are incompatible because it allows two alternatives only. Either women become men and thereby become full citizens or they continue at women's work, which is of no value for citizenship.\(^{21}\)

In the late 1970's and 80's a new 'Gender and Development' (GAD) analysis emerged which tackled not just the nature of women's various roles but the interactions of those roles with those of men.\(^{22}\) GAD is an approach concerned not simply with women's roles but with the dynamics and structures of gender relations. Gender relations are seen as central to social processes and social organization and therefore to development, which

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p.22.
is defined as a complex process involving socio, economic, politico and cultural betterment of the individuals and society itself.²³

3.2 Ethnicity, Space for Women and Human rights:

Spaces for women in ethnically divided society are highly gendered. In the context of Nalbari, ethnic identities talks about the distinguished values and norms that are different amongst communities/groups. Cultural symbolism creates gendered forbidden and permitted spaces, which affect women’s freedom to move in space. Women are considered to be the custodians of cultural particularisms by virtue of being less assimilated, both culturally and linguistically, into the wider society.²⁴ As mentioned in the preceding chapter, women may be controlled in different ways in the interests of demarcating and preserving the identities of ethnic collectivities. According to Yuval- Davis, regulations concerning maintaining symbolic identity of their group,²⁵ such as not allowing to marry or have sex with men of other group are embedded in such construction. In Baraliapar, it was found that parents of Assamese ethnic identity prefer to marry off their daughters to an Assamese family rather than a Bodo family.²⁶ Power relations both between identities and between communities and state and between men and women dictate the conceptualization of gendered ethnic and citizens identities and rights, which is of course culturally constructed.²⁷

²³ Ibid., p.15.
²⁵ Ibid., p.315.
²⁶ Field observation, 7 October, 2007.
The connection between gender and space in terms of human rights is also of relevance in the context of gender identity and space. Amnesty International Report of 1995 says human rights are tragically gendered as women represent a large majority of poor in every country.\(^{28}\) In other words, the report has acknowledged the poor economic space of women. This follow the exclusion of women from being involved in public sphere of power or in decision making in terms of shaping laws and institutions. Practice of restrictions on mobility or forbidding women from moving freely in their environment either because of political reasons or because of internal cultural norms is one of the cardinal issues in present human rights discourse. As mentioned earlier, women’s right to work and political participation are also abused because of her lack of freedom to move freely. Martha Chen has also taken up the issue of employment space in terms of justice and survival\(^ {29}\).

Harvard framework for women entails five level\(^ {30}\) of gender equality which will be analysed in the context of Nalbari with the help of the tool provided by Roshmi Goswami\(^ {31}\). It discerns the following role of women’s role in internal conflict situations and describes the changing trajectories of women in such scenario. Women’s situations may in practice combine characteristics of these seven different roles or overlap. Field study analysis indicates which combination of roles prevails at what time and how they are subjected to change.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 471.


\(^{30}\) Based on Sara Longwe’s formulations. Five levels of Gender Equality are material welfare, access to resources and benefits, conscientisation, participation in decision making process, control over one’s life and levels of power.

\(^{31}\) Roshmi Goswami ‘Women and Armed Conflict-Ground Realities From North East’ presented in WISCOMP symposium on Human Security, August 2000, p. 4.
3.3 Analysis of Changing Role of Women in Conflict Situations in the Light of Seven Role Framework:

Women of all communities who are caught up in a conflict of armed nature face the choice of either actually becoming involved or try to avoid such conflict or be a silent spectator. Categorising women according to their roles, it is seen that a common underlying thread runs through all the categories.\(^{32}\) The existing inherent gender biases of the communities get reinforced in such situations. The following roles of women in Nalbari district in the context of conflict situations are portraying various roles that women perform.

3.3.1. Women Relatives, Friends of Armed Activists

This category covers mothers, wives, sisters, partners or any female relative/friends of armed activists. Majority of women in the district of Nalbari fall under this category. The mothers, wives, sisters daughters and partners of armed activists who are in struggle with or without choice who bear the atrocities both by the state as well by the other warring factions such as unidentified gunman. These are the group of women facing human rights violations both by the state as well by the militant groups.\(^{33}\) These sets of women are almost ignorant about the motive behind their near ones who bear so much of hardship in the name of 'sovereignty'\(^{34}\) of Assam. Initially some amount of attention has been paid to this category but gradually they have to silently cope with the trauma and rebuild their lives without any support\(^{35}\). Irrespective of their different ethnic alignment or affinity, the women under this category shares almost a similar story.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., p.4

\(^{33}\) Field data.

\(^{34}\) As told by Bharati Kalita of Nalbari, who lost her husband because of the fact that her brother in law is the deputy commander in chief of ULFA.

\(^{35}\) Goswami, Op.Cit., p.3.
Mother of Anil Kalita, an NDFB extremist is 70 years old now. She is psychologically traumatized, needs psychological counseling indeed. Army used to come to their place in a routine check up. Once, when Anil came to meet her, army raided her house. Anil fled away to the nearby paddy field but her younger son Jogen, who is a farmer was captured by army who took him to the nearby kumarikata police station. He was beaten there in the army station and handed over later on. Since then, their mother had become mentally ill, fearing that both of her sons will be taken away from her. Due to the existence of the draconian laws prevalent in the state of Assam, the civil rights of the people were terribly violated and along with Jogen, his mother was suffering indirectly.

Savitri killing\textsuperscript{36}. She was a 60 years old lady, a mother of an ULFA leader from Nalbari, Bhaskar Rajbonshi. On September 10, 2007 she was killed by two SULFA\textsuperscript{37} activists in an operation conducted with the help of Nalbari Police. The present state government seems to be vocal in condemning secret killing and reiterates that recurrence of similar incident is an indictment on the political leadership for its failure to prevent the state police force. However, the irony is that the state government has covered up the whole issue by protecting the accused SULFA men and unable to protect the civilians resulting in tragic death of Savitri for no fault of hers. The cases of human rights violation by the security personnel in the name of flushing out militants is really alarming.

Belshri Narzary, a Bodo women recollected how on the eve of Bihu festival army people came and asked for her husband on 13-1-1993. As it was festival time, her husband has asked Belshri to provide them tea and pitha (regional delicacy). Her husband Phuren was beaten mercilessly by the army personnel in front of her eyes without any rhyme and reason. Next day, her husband died and whole burden of her family fell on her. Entire incident has changed her life. They were marginal farmers and had to fight for daily meals. Shy natured Belshri was forced to become a homemaker without her men.

\textsuperscript{36} Assam Tribune, 12 September, 2007, p.1.
\textsuperscript{37} Surrendered ULFA.
A lady who was entirely depended upon her husband was bewildered. She has not even got assistance from government. Rather ABSU has issued a certificate declaring Phuren to be a martyr. The following pictures are the testimonials of her sad tail.

**Photo -1**

Widow of Phuren Narzary (white clothed women in photo) and 'Martyr' Certificate Awarded to Phuren by All Bodo Students Union, who was Killed in Fake Encounter 38

Jhumur 39 Basumatari is a friendly lady having two kids. Her husband is now a surrendered NDFB 40 cadre now. She recollected how she had to fight and struggle to meet her husband in the jungles of Bhutan. Her husband, who was a graduate, working as an auditor in NDFB. Jhumur with her eight months old child, had to adopt tricks to meet her husband as she continued to stay with her parents at the time when her husband was away. Either she had to wear the attire of a Bhutanese women or go in disguise to Samdrup Jhongkhar, (a safe heaven for militants before 2003 in eastern

38 Fake encounters were possible due to obnoxious laws like the armed forces (special powers) Act and Disturbed areas Act, which not only permit the security forces to kill suspects, but also exempt from prosecution. Phuren Narzary's case was an example of horrifying examples of such abuses with no extremist connections. On a palpably false grounds he was caught and killed. On the top of it, when the news came to light, ABSU has declared him as a martyr, just to politicize the matter as Narzary was a Bodo by birth.

39 Name changed for security reasons of the interviewee.

40 National Democratic Front of Bodoland
Bhutan). She had to bring up her child as a single parent. Her husband Shiva was caught by the Indian army when he came down to plains for treatment (as was sick severely in the jungles of Bhutan), and later surrendered. He was transferred from one jail to another. Jhumur had to move accordingly requesting the officials to give her permission to meet her husband. It was really painful for Jhumur when officials rejected her plea to meet her husband. She was keeping a constant check of the movement of her husband from one jail to another in spite of practical limitations.

The tail of Bharati Kalita, whose husband was killed by 'secret killers' or 'gupta hatyakari' in her language, because her brother-in-law, is Raju Baruah, a deputy commander in chief of ULFA is also followed on similar lines. She was married to Dijen Saloi, a small businessman who was leading his life in a humble way. They had nothing to do with the rebels or their organizations. Like many other women in Assam, who have been indirectly drawn into the vortex of the prevailing conflicts in state, family ties have cost immense lost to Bharati. On January 3, 2001, seven masked men all armed and clad in black trousers and jackets barged inside their house and killed her husband. They killed her husband's nephew too. On the surface, Bharati should have had no cause for worry as they were close relatives of ULFA. Security forces, too, would not target them as they had no direct links with the militant group. But strangely enough; the dynamics of conflict in present day is far from simple. Immediately after her husband's death, she received the usual ex-gratia payment of Rs 1 lakhs. But had to face the real struggle with two children by herself. Her condition is irreparable. The responsibility of bringing up children and managing the household falls entirely on her shoulder.

Dulu Chetia is another woman whose husband got killed by the extremists. This traumatized women had to bear the burden of entire family along with the old parents.

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41 Wasbir Hussain, Homemakers Without the Men, New Delhi, 1996, p.10.
of her husband. She has received only a sum of Rs 1 lakh but could not get the amount fixed by Relief and Rehabilitation Department. However, she has got a fourth grade job in government office on compassionate ground. She is now capable of bearing the economic hardships and better off than many who has not received any assistance from any quarters.

Rima was studying together with ULFA’s cultural secretary Pranati Deka in Nalbari college. They were very good friends. Rima was not aware of the fact that Pranati was attracted towards ULFA. Rima came to know about this when one day she saw one of Pranati’s stitching (handwork) where she has designed beautifully the ‘Rising Sun’ (Udita Surya), the logo of ULFA in a yellow banner. Within a couple of days, Pranati dissaspeared from the town and joined ULFA, before Rima could interact with her regarding the handwork by Pranati. The real battle has now began for Rima when army personnel frequently visit Rima for questioning about Pranati and her whereabouts. Rima was looked upon by her classmates in the college to be an ULFA inmate. She was forced to discontinue her study by her relatives as she was harassed continuously in the college. Gradually, people started avoiding her. As a result, Rima has developed a psychological isolation and do not prefer to go out of the house. Most of the time she is confine to her house working in her tatsal (weaving machine).

**Inference**

The implication of these narratives of women reveal the fact that being relatives of armed combatant they are playing one of the ‘tough role’ in the time of conflict. They are obliged to support the activities of a militant son, husband, or a brother and finally have to grapple with trauma, widowhood and tragedy. State and society treat the relatives of victims in different ways, depending on their status. Psycho social need of these sets of women are never addressed and these women are never seen as individual member or citizen of the State.
Motherhood is often a symbol of peace and a signifier of suffering in conflict. In a patriarchal set up, widows hardly have space for her own self. But there are instances when they were made into political symbols depending upon the situation or need. It was a right moment for the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) to issue a 'testament of martyr' for Phuren when the political situation was hot due to inter ethnic clash. In Belshri’s case, she was ‘honoured’ as she and her deceased husband are symbols of Bodo identity. The underlying attitude of targeting this category is what Radhika Coomaraswamy has highlighted, “It is not merely the honour of the victims that in question, but the perceived honour of the enemy that is the target in sexually violating their women...”.

3.3.2 Wives of Missing Militants

The second category consists the women whose husbands are in militant outfits and are missing. Wives of missing ULFA group consists of Malini Ingtipi, Anima, Gyanmona Moran, Menoka Chetia and several others. For almost three years, since Bhutan military operations in 15 December, 2003, to flush out militant groups from its territory, these women have been knocking on every door for information about the whereabouts of their missing husbands. The Gauhati Court, however, asked the centre and State authorities to make detailed submissions as soon as possible, when the cases pertaining to missing ULFA leaders is scheduled to come up for hearing. An analysis of the repercussion of the conflict situations in the above mentioned role in the Nalbari district of Assam has led to a vicious cycle as mentioned below. (Figure 1)

A widow and her child/children after losing their sole bread earner suffer a primary depression because of bereavement, economic hardships and social factors. Widow mother who find herself under heavy stress, pass on the stress to her children so that

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42 The clash was largely between Assamese and Bodos.
her children understands the responsibility after the fall of his/her father. In Nalbari, it was observed that due to the economic hardships faced by the widow, the pressure passed on to her children inculcates more of a deviant behaviour in the child. This behaviour gets consolidated into the mindsets of a child at the cost of development of compliance and sensitiveness because of low employment opportunities, family, societal and government support to the widow women and for host of other reasons. This in turn leads to secondary depression in widow mother and her children. Further, it creates irritation and lack of frustration tolerance in the family leading to weakening of the mother-child bond. It spurs the stress levels in the family, leading to enhanced responsibilities on the shoulder of a widow mother. The deviant child if not counseled properly may become juvenile delinquent or criminal propelling him/her towards joining militant factions.

Enhanced Responsibilities on Widow Mother and her Child under Primary Depression

Increased Stress Level in a Family

Excessive Pressure passed by Widow Mother on her Child

Irritation and low Frustration Tolerance in both Mother and Child

Development of a Deviant Behaviour in the Child

Secondary Depression In Widow Mother and her Child

Figure 1: Link between women headed household and a conflict situation

Source- Developed on the basis of field work data.

44 Field work finding, 26 October, 2006.
Urmila Brahma from Barama has lost her husband five years ago in a fake encounter. Since then she is having excessive pressure on her to bring up her three children. Two of her children were caught up by police recently while smuggling kerosene illegally to nearby Bhutan. This incident has affected Urmila psychologically and financially. After returning from jail, both of her child have developed a deviant behaviour as Urmila says and they are trying to motivate their young brother into their illegal business. All these have caused depression to Urmila. The amount of frustration and irritation level increases which further brings stress in the family.

There are other cases of similar kinds which leads to disastrous consequences like drug addiction, prostitution, starvation and psychosomatic disorders.

**Inference:***

In both the roles mentioned above, a sense of insecurity prevails, which is of course common to all the categories. Participatory research in Nalbari depicts that high rate of unemployment and economic impoverishment lured a considerable youth towards militancy or towards criminalized lifestyle. At times, the family tradition also motivates the child to follow the same role as his/her parents did follow. As told by Niharika, wife of the kin of ULFA men Barin says, "Though I never wanted my son to join ULFA, ultimately he followed the path of my husband. My son was good at studies. He passed his Higher Secondary (10+2) exam with second division. But we do not have financial power to pursue his career/studies and thereby the consequence of joining ULFA. One day he left home like most of his friends."  

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45 Field work data, 29 October, 2006.
The state is unable to extend its welfare rights of social citizenship to these category of women. Merton’s analysis of conflict between social and cultural goals and the institutionalized means through which they could be achieved has provided a framework through which ‘deviant’ response must be understood. When the goal is economic success is dominant but the individual lacks the means through which to achieve it, ‘innovation’ (illegal activity in case of Urmila’s sons) is a possible response.

3.3.3. Women Relatives of State Armed Forces and State Officials
This category includes mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and partners of the police, armed personnel who have been dragged into conflict unwillingly. These are the women who remain forgotten and invisible to the human rights activist as well as by the state.

Nilima falls into this category of roles. She is suffering from multiple disability (75% and above) certified by Medical Board of Assam. She was absolutely depended upon her brother Prafulla Kalita, who was a constable in Assam Police Task Force Battalion (APTFB) and was killed by extremists on election duty. A case was registered but that has not cured the grief of Nilima, who does not have anyone to look after her. Her health is fast collapsing and she is facing severe financial crunch. Conflict in Assam has taken away her only hope, i.e., her brother.

Inference
As mentioned in the inferences drawn from the first category, state and society treat relatives of victims in different ways, depending upon their status. In this case, as

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48 As told by TH Hazarika, the lawyer who is looking after the case B/PS No 148/99.VS 147/148/149/302/307 and Arms Act 27/R/W 10/13/
Prafulla was in police, he was branded as a symbol of Nationalism who became ‘Swahid’ for his country. On the other hand, his sister is treated as ‘forgotten and invisible others’, as mentioned by Roshni Goswami. Little effort has been done to change the life of the Nilima or to rehabilitate them so that she can build up her life without her brother. Like the first category, women under this group also have to grapple with trauma and tragedy. There are instances across Nalbari where young widows help in mobilization of young men to join into armed forces due to the attached symbols of ‘love towards the Nation’.

3.3.4. Women as Victims of Sexual Abuse or Physical Abuse or Bullets

They are the women who are mostly uninvolved, innocent civilians. They are targeted both by state and non-state abusers. It is not possible to give the estimates of such victims as the majority of victims and have never reported the violation against them. “When rape is perceived as a crime against honour or morality, shame commonly ensues for the victim, who is often viewed by the community as dirty or spoiled.”

Women as symbolic bearers of caste or ethnic identity are systematically tortured. From a cultural perspective, the entire community is polluted as a consequence of the acts of sexual violence. The effects of women themselves can range from psychological traumas to social ostracism of the respective women and children born out of the sexual violence. Women are targeted because of their gender, and the forms of abuses inflicted upon them tend to be gender specific.

The glaring example of innocent women who fall prey in the attacks of bullets as a result of inter ethnic clash was clearly noticed in Baraliapar village. On 13 January, 1998,

51 Ibid., p. 5.
Assamese ladies were busy cooking *Pitha*, a local delicacy as it was the day of *Uruka* (a night prior to *Magh Bihu*, an Assamese harvest time festival). Seventeen people were shot dead in one go specially the ladies by unidentified gunman along with their children who were playing nearby in this festive season. As Baraliapar village is situated in present Baksa district, which is dominated mostly by Bodos, the rest of the population suspect it to be the work of BLT to terrorise the Assamese population so that they vacate the village. It is interesting to note that in Baraliapar majority of the population is plain Assamese caste Hindus. By this barbaric act of the militants, five families are completely ruined. The lone survivor of one family i.e., two minor children were send to SOS village in Guwahati later on. The picture below shows the name (in Assamese) of the victims whose name has inscribed in a tomb made by the initiative of village people and Assam Police later on as a tribute to all who laid their lives.

Photo – 2 Tomb stating the names of the victims

*Source-* photo taken during field work, 14 January, 2007, Baraliapar, Nalbari.

The victims were, Ms Jaimati Kalita, Mr Hemchandra Kalita, Mr Dwipen Kalita, Ms Pratima Kalita, Ms Hiran Bhuyan, Mr Navajit Kalita, Ms Kunjaprabha Kalita, Ms Gitanjali Kalita, Mr Pramod Kalita, Ms babita Kalita, Ms Pheleni Bhuyan, Mr Gajen Bhuyan, Ms Bina Bhuyan, Ms Lipika Kalita, Ms Gitanjali Kalita, Mr Dhaneswar Kalita and Mr Mahesh Haloi. They were all Assamese plain people.
Inference
In a ethnically divided State, the concept of citizenship, the right to equality along with respect for ethnic difference including gender equality should be maintained, as referred by Fenster.\textsuperscript{55} However, all these has been grossly denied in a multi ethnic states of the North East India in general and Nalbari district in particular. The women victims in this category are not seen as 'women' but as 'Assamese women'. In this particular case of Baraliapar, symbolic ethnicity has taken a political form. In other words, the victims are portrayed as symbols of Assamese identity – a symbol that was very much hated politically by Bodo rebel group(s) during that time. Their bodies became the markers of ethnicity as they carried the responsibility for their historical traditions and customs. Women are ascribed the social role of inter generational transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisines along with their mother tongue.\textsuperscript{56} In case of the incident of Baraliapar, Assamese women were singing 'Bihu' songs, preparing 'pithas' (delicacy made of rice and til, coconut etc.) making arrangement for night feast or 'Mejis', which became their identity markers which finally took their lives.

In case of sexual assault which is very common in the rural Nalbari, in the time of conflict, victim has to bear the attached 'shame' the rest of her lives. The survivors of such kinds of violations have the burden of silently coping with post trauma stress almost without any kind if support. This is because any kind of sexual violation is looked upon by society as an act of 'dishonour' rather than as a violation of the fundamental human right for every woman. In situations of ethnic conflict, when the question of identity and ethnicity are linked, this leads to increasing societal control

\textsuperscript{55} Tovi Fenster, 'Spaces and Cultural Meanings' in Essed et all, eds., A companion ..., Op.Cit., p.471.
\textsuperscript{56} Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Gender and Nation' in Wilford, Rick and Miller, Robert L., eds., Women, Ethnicity and Nation: The Politics of Transition London, 1998, p.27.
over women’s mobility control over their bodies and their way of expression.  

57 Rita Manchanda has mentioned, "The politics of rape in conflict is imbricated in women’s bodies being both a metaphor and the material reality of markers of the identity of the community or nationality."  

58 In Nalbari too during the time of assertion of ethnicity, patriarchal values are reinforced. In the words of James Giligan, "Violence can be for men a very powerful way to ward off shame and to achieve pride and honour whereas it does not serve that purpose for women."  

59 In armed conflict, body politics around these women acquires prominence. Women as an identity marker invite control over and become the victim of the ‘sexuality’ without their ‘male protectors’.

3.3.5. Women as shelter providers

They are the women who sometimes voluntarily or at times are forced to give shelter to banned militant and became the cause of wrath of Army. Their lives are neither safe in the hands of state deployed army nor in the militants. If she refuses to keep the members of the outfit, she will fall prey into their hands. As a part of this study, three women of Lakhipar was found who gave shelter to many of such groups but were reluctant speak openly about it. It is common in those villages that outfit members knock at the doors at wee hours and force the householders to give shelter. “A group of four asked me to cook rice for them as they were hungry”.  

60 The militants had food, gave her some money and then left.  

61 Anima, another respondent says, “our poultries were killed by the terrorists and my sister’s homes was made into hideouts as it was near a jungle and was located in a hilly

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59 Gopinath, Trancending ....op.Cit., p.22.  
60 A village women at Lakhipar says during field study.  
61 Ibid.
terrain.” 62 There is a constant fear of being hounded by the state armed forces for being sympathizers and on the other hand they dare not to refuse the armed combatants63. Even if there is no overt threat by the militants, there is increased economic burden and the constant concern for the safety of the family.64 Due to the presence of army jawans and militants, the ladies staying in the border areas of Nalbari wants their daughter to get married as soon as possible for security reasons.

Inferences
It was evident that people, especially women staying in a bordering villages of Nalbari are in constant threat as are plagued by militant groups whims. When army comes to know about such hideouts later on, the condition of women deteriorates further as their bodies became a bargaining chip65. If the shelter seekers are from different ethnic groups, threat is than even more. In other words, the army directly target women and the terrorists do so indirectly. In this case too, women as an identity marker invite control over and targeting of their sexuality and reproduction, along with bolstering of associated norms, values and practices. While in patriarchy, chastity is valued for determining descent and inheritance, but during conflict situations, female ‘purity’ becomes the boundary for determining membership of the group identity and a mode of segregation from other identities66. Rupjyoti, a marginal farmer from Baraliapar says in this connection, “We want to guard the ‘purity’ of our women. Therefore all of us (male members of the villages) used to keep constant vigil at night shift wise and was patrolling all over the village especially during the conflict or inter ethnic cleansing.. This local mechanism was devised to protect our women from the BLT men who often

63 Respondant Nirmala’s version in the field.
64 Field Observation.
eye on the 'honour' of our women.\textsuperscript{67} It is important to mention here that in movements where group identity is linked to 'purity' either of race or behaviour or of ideology at a more symbolic level, female sexuality and reproduction becomes central not only to define female personhood but also the groups as an exclusive entity. Accordingly, values such as chastity, honour, female seclusion are reinforced.

3.3.6. Women Militants or Combatants

These are the women who are actively involved in the struggle either by choice or by coercion or due to circumstances. It is important to analyse the motives for becoming combatants in case of women like their male counterparts, including enforced recruitment, agreement with the ideology of the rebel group, economic necessity and so on. Most of the women, especially those who have surrendered, during interaction said that they had no other work and therefore joined ULFA or NDFB. As rural poverty and rural unemployment are high in Assam amongst the states of India\textsuperscript{68}, the frustrated and unemployed youth becomes victim of the militant outfits by joining them. Only a very few have joined for an ideological cause.\textsuperscript{69} Most have perceived themselves as being empowered and privileged as they had broken away from convention and joined the rebellion. Their sense of freedom initially is enhanced when they enjoy greater mobility, wear man's attire and carry arms. Runumi, one ex ULFA cadre in Baska says, "I had a romantic vision of myself with arms defending my motherland which soon got over"\textsuperscript{70} However, this act of rebellion or mobility has not necessarily improved their so called 'liberated' status\textsuperscript{71}. In Tamulpur area almost 33 militants have surrendered in the month

\textsuperscript{67} Field Work data dated 17 October,2006.
\textsuperscript{68}Jayanta Madhab, 'Social Conflicts in the North East: An Economic Interpretations' in Contemporary India,vol.1no.4 October-December,2000,p.181.
\textsuperscript{69}Nani Gopal Mahanta, Assam:Portents of violence and Hope for Peace, Guwahati,2005,p.13.
\textsuperscript{70} Field data,26 October,2006.
\textsuperscript{71}Roshmi Goswami 'Women and Armed Conflict-Ground Realities From NE,' paper presented in WISCOMP summer symposium on Human Security in New Millennium in August 2000.
of October 2007 and most of the women militants revealed that in the camps they were misguided. They were of the opinion that when ULFA was formed they were emphatic towards the cause for which it was built in the year 1979. The then Robinhood nature of ULFA motivated them to join. But now it is working at cross purposes and has deviated from its original goal.

Coming to the public/private demarcation, in the camps of the jungles too, stereotypical gender roles are being played and the women are the lowest rungs in the hierarchy of these rebel groups. While joining in such groups, an attempt is to masculinise them and at the same time, to relegate them to subordinate position. The message during military training for women is to 'kill the women in you' that endorses the inferiority of women according to the feminist thinkers. They are aware of the fact that they may be victim of bullets anytime and mentally prepared for that eventuality. These women are equally endangered as some of them are abducted for sex or to cook and clean the camp. During the period of their abduction and often after these women can be in considerable danger from attack by the opposing forces as well as by the abductors. They fear the fate as happened to Roshmi Borah who faced the wrath of the militants. Their spaces and position will be discussed later in the section on women in the extremists group and their changing role.

3.3.7. Women as Peace Negotiators

These are the women leaders or women activists or individual women who have taken initiatives for bringing peace in the state. However, that they are not always supported

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73 In this case, rebels were given shelter at Borah's house and this young lady offered her qualified support to the organization. One of the boys of ULFA offered his love to this lady which she firmly rejected. Later she was abducted, raped and killed. The reason ascribed by the militants was that she was an army informant. The culprits responsible for the crime later on surrendered and came back to the so called mainstream and was allowed to move scot free.
by the community and are extremely vulnerable to suspicion and attacks by all factions of the society, both actors and non actors. Prof Goswami was working as a catalyst for the much awaited negotiation between ULFA and the GOI which ultimately ended as a futile exercise. Women who are always active in the area of non formal politics in Assam are denied space in formal politics. In most of the cases, peace negotiations tend to remain male centered where women are typically underrepresented in the involved negotiation process. As women and men have equal rights and chances of participation, women's increased participation is desired. From utility point of view, the quantitative argument says that human resources in times of conflict are scare and thus both male and female politicians are urgently required.

**Inference**

Peace is a concept embedded in justice. In the line of argument of procedural justice which seeks to maximize participation of people in decisions which affect their lives, it is highly desirable to include the women who are the most affected sections of the society during the time of conflict, in the decision making process or in the process of conflict transformation. Women's role as an agency for peace and conflict transformation will be taken up separately in fifth chapter.

Susan Moller Okin has argued that any theory of justice which is silent about the prevailing inequalities within the family is an incomplete one. The family is considered to be 'private' and justice as an idea bearing on the 'public sphere'. According to Okin, the assumption overlooks the fact that the family and its working in

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75 Indira Goswami is one of the leading writers of India today. A Janpith awardee for the year 2000, she has stated peace talks between the rebel groups and GOI.
77 John Paul Lederach, Conflict Transformation, Virginia, 2003, p.27.
itself to a very great extent constituted by the 'public' ideas of 'justice' that constitute it.\textsuperscript{79} People's lives in the public shapes and are shaped by their ways of participating in family life. Unequal division of labour as Okin opines, within the family creates obstacle for women in their lives outside the family and these inequalities are often supported by social traditions.\textsuperscript{80} Walby\textsuperscript{81} argues that women's access to political rights enable them to fight for an extension of their civil and social rights, thereby challenging private patriarchy and transforming it into public patriarchy. Feminist social movement have undermined state support for private patriarchy and forced the adoption of a new patriarchal strategy of inclusion and control. The case is very true for Assam even where women are not represented in the decision making process including the negotiations for peace. When the state initiates to involve the women, it merely assigns women to act as a 'healer' or a 'pacifier' rather than a 'negotiator'. There has been no effort on the side of the state or non state agencies to involve women in actual negotiations. This has reemphasized the lack of understanding of peace in terms of mutually and equality. Non participation of women in these processes has resulted in defocusing the fall of armed conflict on women and marginalizing women's needs and aspirations.\textsuperscript{82}

"We need peace. But who will bring peace. In their diverse capacities, women try to minimize conflict or effects of violence. So they are the best negotiators of peace..." Malati, a member of Tamulpur shanti Sena reiterated.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.,p.82.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.,p.82.
\textsuperscript{81} Bhargava,Op.Cit.,p.102..
\textsuperscript{82} Roehmi Goswami, Reinforcing Subordination..., Op.Cit., p.4.
\textsuperscript{83} Field data,26 October,2006.
3.4. An Overall Analysis of Women’s Space in Nalbari in Conflict Situations

In Nalbari, however, due to the prevailing situation the women have to give up the traditional stereotypical role and come out for work as the responsibility to look after the family now rests on her soldier. “Before conflict occurs women were not taken into consideration. They were only working at home. But during an after conflict women came out of their houses to demonstrate their capability.” 84 In curfew prone area of Nalbari what have been noticed that the Bodo women, make home made liquor known as Hari, which they sell in markets. Home made liquor is very popular in Baksa area of Nalbari. Some women even opened up phone booth or PCO, local Paan Shop for daily earnings. Women of Lakhipar even help their male members in planting rice saplings in the paddy field coming back they collect dry leaves, wood etc for cooking purpose. Then they prepare food for the entire family, give fodder to their domestic animals, poultry and start weaving for selling their hand made stuffs. Whatever their occupation may be, when conflict prevails, it becomes a difficulty for the women to work and go out of the four walls of their house. As mentioned earlier, restrictions on women’s mobility is more when the question of ethnicity arises. The following pictures show how circumstances has made women to leave their ‘stereotypical private role’.

Photos show women selling vegetables in market place, group of weavers, selling ‘paan’ and Tamul (beatle nut) and bamboo products for economic reasons.

Source – field observation
Photos states the different occupational patterns adopted by women for economic reasons.
1: selling vegetables in the market place in Baska, Nalbari
2: women weavers weaving clothes
3: women selling Paan Tamul (beetle nut and beatle leaf) on roadside
4. women selling handmade bamboo products.

It is interesting to note that if viewed from public – private dichotomy, Bodo women, due to their inherent liberal tribal society, are seen in large number in public domain. In the above photographs, except for the last photograph, where an Assamese Muslim lady is selling bamboo products in suburbs of Nalbari, the rest represent Bodo women wearing ‘Dokhona’ and ‘Jumgra’ (chadar), which is their distinct cultural identity. The constraints of Assamese speaking non tribal women regarding their restricted mobility and visibility with respect to a Bodo women in public sphere can be attributed their social tradition, customs and male dominated social milieu. However, such examples do not necessarily mean that the Bodo women have achieved ‘freedom’ or a wider ‘space’ for themselves. The freedom which they have attained is relative in nature and environment specific as well as for sustenance of the family. In tribal societies, it is a common practice that the amount of work a women performs is much more than that of their male counterpart.
However the women of Nalbari, irrespective of their ethnic loyalties have continuing marginalization in public realm buttressed by their influential patriarchal system.

Due to the conflict situations, high drop out rate is being witnessed in case of women of Nalbari area. Often in the time of conflict; schools are converted to army camps. The boys studying in that school can now go to another school which is a kilometer away but for women it may not be possible. At times, parents are scared to send their daughters due to fear of army or militants. Education is assumed to be empowering and transformative in the capability approach which has been denied especially to women at the time of conflict. It so happened that some women were very much interested to continue with their studies but due to army’s presence who often pass dirty comments and the wrath of militants as in case of Rasmi Borah of Nagaon district, they were forced to discontinue their studies. Indeed all the ten central capabilities enlisted by Nussbaum are minimally available or almost absent for the women in Nalbari.

All the narratives mentioned above define the position of women in Nalbari. The victims of violence speaks the same language, irrespective of whether they are kin of any militant group, wives/sister of police officers, politicians or ordinary citizens. This is the language of deep anguish, pain, trauma and hardship as expressed by Wasbir Hussain. Caught amidst conflicting situations women have to take on roles that they have never thought of possible previously. Since women take on the role of a mother, a wife, a sister, a neighbour and most importantly a caretaker after they become a victim of conflict, the responsibility of finding an alternative source of income and rebuilding

86 Life, Bodily health, Bodily integrity, Senses, imagination, thought, Emotions, critical reflection about the planning of one’s own life, Affiliation, Being able to live with concern for and in relation the world of nature, enjoy recreational activities, Control over one’s environment politically and materially.
for the survival of the family falls on her. All of them today constantly talk of peace and hope for a lasting solution.

Categorising women according to their roles, it was found that a common underlying thread runs through all categories. The existing inherent gender biases of the communities get reinforced in the situations of conflict. In Nalbari, where much of the conflict is linked with the question of ethnic identities, the pressure on women is tremendous. Women are seen as keepers of culture and tradition and as such patriarchal controls on the way women express themselves have increased. But while women are expected to uphold without questioning, even the negative and retrogressive practices and traditions, men have the choice of remaining unbound and unregulated by the positive traditions of their cultures.

3.5. Women in the Extremists Group and their Changing Role

In Assam total 14 militant groups are operating underground activities. From the secondary sources as well as personal interaction with some of the surrendered women cadres of ULFA and NDFB, the following inferences have shaped in regarding the women combats.

Analysed from the socio economical background, most of the women cadres of rebel groups come from a poor financial or economic background. Most of them have a similar tale on life: a life of despair, broken dreams and betrayal. The thought of avenge and empowerment, has motivated them to join the outfits. Most of them are either matriculate or under-matric. (Except for some who are even passed higher secondary

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examination (10+2). For instance, Ms Pranati Deka, ULFA's cultural secretary, is in jail at present, was pursuing graduation in Nalbari College before joining ULFA. However there are cases when many join the rebel organisation due to ideological reasons, alignment (such as disappointment of 1983 elections in the state, influx of Bangladeshi's in Assam), or due to the influence of local ULFA leaders, fulfillment of material urge and satisfaction and so on. When they reach the organization, their hard life starts in training camps of Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh, facing grenades, mortar attacks with deathly precision. In ULFA, there exists a 'Nari vahini' for women cadres. As told by surrendered cadres there are two main units of ULFA's women's wing: General Headquarter and Military Headquarter. In the first group, women's role are only ornamental. Important posts are occupied by male counterparts.89

The second unit consists of women who are well skilled in handling all types of devices. In the time of military operations, their 'Volcano unit' comes out for the help of their male cadres to get rid of police and military searching. Besides, it is the responsibility of women cadres to secure the release of the arrested male cadres and motivate and gather support from the masses. They also do spying for their organization. The other activities that women performs their in the organization as Administrative, cultural, medical, transportation, Budgeting, cooking and so on.

(89 Told by Malini, a surrendered cadre at Tamulpur, 15 September, 2006.

(87 The following photo shows the 'equality' at the time of cooking which is otherwise being denied, where women cadres are cooking along with their male counterparts in an unidentified location in Nalbari).
However the spaces of women in the outfit organizations can be summarized as follows. It is very difficult to maintain parental and conjugal life in a jungle set up in the presence of insecurity for a women combatant. Apart from their health problems, there are other problems too, like army raid (as happened in Bhutan operations), fear of ferocious animals while going out to collect dried woods, leaves, branches etc for cooking, collecting food/water etc from the plains in disguise and so on. When a lady is to deliver in a camp in a jungle set up, her position is easily understandable. Reproductive role of women generally makes them particularly vulnerable. Absence of medical services and basic supplies have vastly different implications on women then for men. In the groups like NDFB, men cannot marry till he completes five years in the organization. If a person is engaged and suddenly he moves to an organization of such kinds, the plight of women is beyond repair. She faces societal isolation apart from humiliation of all kinds coupled with economic problems and psychological trauma. In organizations like ULFA, there are cases when handfuls of women cadres are used for satisfying the desire of male cadres. Only a few male cadres are forced to get married to these women with whom they established physical contacts. But rest and majority of

90 As told by a respondent, who is an ex-NDFB from Nalbari.
91 some of the information like names etc could not be mentioned due to security reasons
them are dumped and increasingly used by male cadres.\textsuperscript{92} Nirupama, one of the respondents who was in ULFA once, says “Earlier we were thinking of reporting such cases of assault to the higher authority but later on we came to know that punishment of the culprit depended how much he is close to the leader.”\textsuperscript{93} In other words, the victim in such situations had virtually no options left for them.

Another respondent, Kamala, who has recently surrendered in Tamulpur said that she has developed sexually transmitted disease (STD) in their camp in the jungles of Bhutan. She calls STD as “diseases of women”. She reported to the higher authority for her treatment which was not attended. Her physical health was deteriorating. One day she had to flee with co operation of other women cadres from Bhutan in the pretext of filling water from the pond. It took several days with her pitiable health to reach the valley where she surrendered.

Even after the extensive training in jungles, the women cadres are virtually kept away from direct military action. Rather they play a supportive role by sending messages, helping their male counterparts in transporting arms, bearer of loads and rations etc. As mentioned earlier, some of the high profiled women who are in charge of general head quarters of ULFA are, Kaberi Rajkonwar (wife of commander-in-Chief), Meghali Saikia, Kalpana Neog, Moni Baruah, Sadhana Batcha, Rangdongjiya Rabha,(highest position holder amongst women) and Pranati Deka (Cultural Secretary). But most of their roles are ornamental in nature. This clearly shows that even the militant roles have not given women full equal rights, agency or leadership in any of the rebel organizations. The supposed liberation that women may achieve in situations of armed

\textsuperscript{92} Chenoy, Militarism..., Op.Cit., p.18.
\textsuperscript{93} Field work data taken in a Welcome Ceremony organised for Surrendered Militants by Indian Army in Nalbari, 24 February 2004.
combat is often a temporary one, in which they are required to take roles traditionally reserved for men. Women joining these groups see themselves as empowered and performing untraditional roles certainly in the initial stage of recruitment. This changes later, however, when they find themselves in a minority and unable to take on decision making roles. They often find themselves trapped into doing the same chores and household jobs that they would ordinarily take on in their homes. They find themselves confined and marginalized in the same inferior positions. Most of the surrendered women cadres reveal that they have just exchanged their traditional dress (i.e., wearing jeans and Camouflage wear instead of traditional Mekhela Chadar in case of Assamese women or Dokhona Jumgra in case of a Bodo woman) for uniforms while the job definition remains the same and exploitative one.

Most of the women in camps remain in constant threat. They are aware of the fact that they may be victim of bullets anytime and are prepared for that eventuality. No doubt they fear torture, worse still they fear the fate similar to Rashmi Borah\textsuperscript{94}, because she was suspected of spying for the army. There are instances \textsuperscript{95} when the women combatants are being used only as "comfort women." \textsuperscript{96}

In present scenario in Assam, a man can become a SULFA\textsuperscript{97} and create a space for himself in society. But for a women, it is much more difficult. In such situations, the families often eulogies them but do not want them to return and live with them, as they fear, by staying with the former members of the organization, they may be the victim of either the active members of the organizations or the unidentified gunman or the

\textsuperscript{95} Field interview with SULFA women.
\textsuperscript{96} A term to denote the horrific nature of the ordeal to which women were subjected during their detention by the Japanese military during WWII.
\textsuperscript{97} Surrendered ULFA
military men. The feminists view in this regard is that even when women join in militancy, the attempt is to masculinise them and at the same time, to relegate them to subordinate position.

Feminist thinkers like Friedan says that there has been a role crisis for women. When girls are forced to adjust to their stereotypical role, there arises a crisis in their natural role. The core problem is not sexual but of identity. i.e., an identity of being a woman. Analysing health implications of armed conflict on women, it was found that there is an acute rise in incidences of infectious diseases amongst the women armed combats as said by a respondent.98 Besides, women’s reproductive health support services are especially affected in Nalbari. Even if services do not break down completely, health personnel are reluctant to enter and work in conflict areas for security reasons. The women have to either travel long distances for such services or do without any medical help or support. At times unwillingness coupled with financial and physical constraints to travel further accentuate their health problems. Runima, a widow from Tamulpur, having severe respiratory problem says, “I cannot afford to go to Guwahati Medical for my treatment as I do not have money. I do not have a regular job. My husband got killed in an encounter five years back. If I spend money in my treatment I will not be able to pay school fee for my three children ...”99

98 Field work observation.
99 Field work data, dated 9 October, Tamulpur, 2006
3.6. An Analysis of Women of Nalbari in Armed Conflict Situations

A general overview of visible effects of conflict situation in Nalbari in a tabular form is as follows:

The table states that Women are severely affected in conflict situations under various heads. The existing deteriorating conditions and lack of space of women in public sphere further widens and deteriorates in the prevailing conflict situations. It also denies the list of aspects of life that are related to the idea of 'capability' which has been propounded by Nussbaum. In other words, the central to the list of human capabilities i.e., life and bodily health are missing in case of women in Nalbari. School dropouts, migration for socio economic reasons, employment break, loss of control over material resources, physical assault, poor health facility and break in family ties are some of the repercussion of conflict. The seven role of women has described the visible effects of conflict on women.

**Figure - 2 Visible Effects of Conflict on Women**

Source: developed based on Field work data.
Assamese family as a social institution is well known for the emotional and physical support that it provides to its extended members but in case of Nalbari it seems to fails to respond to the needs of women in case of a break in kin system as a result of conflict. In case of women trafficking which has been found by research, the main reasons are attributed to economic instability of the family, breakdown of joint family system, social bias against the marginalized women and the attitude and value attached to women especially born out of rape or forced sexual assault. The trafficking networks in insurgency affected Assam is getting well established over the years. At present, women and girls from Assam, especially from Nalbari are trafficked to the brothels of all over India for commercial sexual exploitations. There were many cases where women victims of sexual abuse and crimes, including those trafficked and rescued from brothels made the headlines of newspapers. Girls from Nalbari are also trafficked into coerced marriage in Haryana and Punjab. They are brought mainly through the northern route by trains as well as trucks. Some percent are also brought first through the eastern route to Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand and then to Delhi.

As a repository of culture and ethnicity, how these women have suffered has been mentioned in greater details in the type of sexual violence with examples from Baraliapar. With respect to demographic change, a shift has been noticed before 2003, when BTAD was formed. Most of the people of ethnic Assamese origin (specially from adjacent Barpeta district) who were settled in Tamulpur for business purpose have shifted to some other place due to the fear of ethnic cleansing. Ratan Bora, a businessman from Tamulpur said, “All my brothers have shifted to Barpeta. But as my

100 http://www.shaktivahini.org/traffickingreport.pdf
102 Ibid.
wife is an Bodo, I have continued to stay back in Tamulpur with my family..."\(^{103}\) Niharika, a widow of a businessman who was shot dead by ULFA men because he denied to pay the sum demanded by ULFA, says, "Assam, especially Nalbari is no more a safe place for us. After my husband’s death, we have sold off our property and shops in Nalbari town and now shifting to Guwahati with my children."\(^{104}\) Important reason for such out migration was found to be threat of extortion by militants, or due to the threat of getting killed because they represent the minority ethnic group in that particular region, although in the State of Assam, they constitute the majority.\(^{105}\)

Women of Nalbari believed that development activities are curtailed as the state has been pre occupied with counter insurgency operations. This is the result why even the basic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, health care services etc educational facilities remained under developed. It was found that where development funds and resources have been made available, much of it has been siphoned away due to lack of accountability\(^{106}\) or have gone into the pockets of the militant as well as the middlemen\(^{107}\).

However, there are certain invisible effects on women resulted from armed conflict which can be represented in various headings as follows in the diagram.

In case of sexual assault as a medium to inflict injury to the members of other ethnic origin or rape by state actor or non state actors, question of women’s ‘honor’ gain prominence. Psychological isolation, trauma due to physical assault, changes in

\(^{103}\) Field data, 3 February, 2007.

\(^{104}\) Field data, 3 February, 2007.

\(^{105}\) In Baksa, Assamese constitute the minority population while Bodos are the most dominant majority.


\(^{107}\) As told by a retired octogenarian Gaonburha (village headmen) of Lakhipar.
relational paradigm due to loss of husband followed by social ostracism is some important invisible effects of conflict on women.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure: 3:** Invisible Effects of Conflict on women observed in the field work.

Women victims of Nalbari silently cope with the trauma of sexual violence without any formal/ informal counseling. Psychologist Jayanta Das says, “In most of the cases, women are not encouraged to speak about their past trauma, thereby, they suffer internally which later on affect their health system.” In case of women combatant during the time of rehabilitation, gender needs of females remain unaddressed. Transgression from traditional roles to violent fighting situations does not find ready

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108 Field data, Guwahati, 8 August, 2006.
acceptance in society. It was really surprising to that not a single counseling centre was located in Nalbari where large number of women cadres surrender along with the presence of women victims especially of sexual nature, cutting across the district of Nalbari

In most of the cases, women draw their social status and placement through her husband. Kinship ties and family norms part of a relational paradigms and women self is organized around maintaining theses affiliations and support structures. Without the presence of such kinship, women suffer from identity crisis. Dhoroni, one of the respondents from Kekerikuchi of Nalbari says, “Without my husband, no one is ready to accept me in society. I have become a burden of my own. My husband, who was a member of ULFA died in an ambush with Indian army. We had completed only three months of our marriage and the sky fell on me...My in laws avoid me thinking that I carry bad luck along with me. I feel lonely as I do not have any children...”

As women are the carrier of the culture and the value of chastity and fidelity is attached to her, in armed conflict, women are restricted to the walls of their home. Nirmola, a respondent from Batiamari says, “Though I am a literate and passed tenth standard with all odds, I cannot work outside due to prevailing situation. I am confined in my house. The only exception when I go out is with my husband to the paddy field where I help him planting the rice saplings.” There was no choice for them with regard to employment or access to resources.

110 Field data, 14 August, 2006.
111 Field data, 14 August, 2006
Lack of infrastructure due to the prevailing conflict has also affected the lives of women in Nalbari. In Lakhipar, which is located in the foothills of Bhutan, women face difficulty communicating to nearby places. As mentioned earlier, Bodo women has better mobility in relation to her Assamese counterparts. In Lakhipar, women who sell vegetables in local haats face lots of hardship due to proper connecting roads. Most of the roads are water clogged, infested with insects like leech, snakes etc. The only connecting bridge in that locality has also fallen down and now people are using boat (Nau) and raft made of banana trunks (Bhur).

Garlosa, one of the respondent who sell vegetable and eggs in Barama haat says, “We come early in the morning here and go back before dusk for safety reasons. There is no roadways from our place to this market. We often come by shortcuts crossing the forest area. In the absence of electric bulbs, we cannot locate the local paths via forest area that we have designed for communication. Moreover, moving after darkness is liable to arouse immediate suspicion of security personnel.”

A study was conducted in Baraliapar and Lakhipar village of Nalbari through Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method. The following findings have been found regarding the sources of insecurity and types of insecurity of total 270 people from both the villages. The sources of insecurity are divided into unidentified gunman, militants, security forces, ethnic clash, natural calamities (Nalbari being one of the flood prone areas of Assam) and religious riots.

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112 Field work data, 4 October, 2006.
113 This method was adopted to know the spontaneous views of the participants on various themes pertaining to militancy.
114 The first three indicators of sources of insecurity has been borrowed from Anindita Dasgupta’s article, Dasgupta, Civilians..., Op.Cit., p. 4465.
Table 2: Sources of Insecurity among People of Nalbari

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Insecurity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified Gunmen</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militants</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Forces</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Clash</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Calamities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Riots</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PRA Fieldwork in Nalbari

Sources of insecurity of people of Nalbari

Figure: 4

Source: Field work Findings.
As evident from the above graph insecurity due to “Unidentified Gunmen” is maximum both in males as well as females and it can be mainly attributed to higher such incidences with low predictability, it is widely viewed that these enemy in disguise generally resort to straight and indiscriminate killings. These killers strike at the dead of night and ruthlessly gun down entire families including women and children.

Arms have become so easily ‘available’ and killings so acceptable that any one with a gun could come with his face covered in the middle of the night and shoot you dead, if he felt he had enough reasons to do so. The arms are available due to the illegal border trading (Bhutan border) as told by one of the respondent, 

“It is a easy thing to bye a weapon here. For purchasing a locally made gun, you just have to give a few hundred rupees in the hands of a ‘dalal’ (middleman) and he will arrange a gun for you...”

There has been a strong perception in Nalbari that both the ULFA and the security forces commit acts of violence against civilians under various pretexts. But in this case, many such victims were relatives of leaders of the banned outfit. The killing of Savitri, a seventy years old lady from Nalbari is a glaring example of such killings whose case has been discussed in the above mentioned categories of women. Government procedures restrain regular security forces to be directly involved in such heinous crimes. Unidentified gunmen are widely believed to be SULFA who have surrendered in front of state and working for state now evoke considerable fear in Nalbari area. They have invariably killed unarmed civilians, many of them innocent relatives of top

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115 Due to strategic location and transborder links.
116 Told by Ranjit, a three wheeler driver who ply his vehicle daily between Tamulpur and Samdrup Jhongkhar, 29 October,2006.
ULFA leaders. Some others were killed on mere suspicion of helping or sympathizing with the banned outfit, or even for voicing their opposition to the criminal activities of the surrendered militants. Easy accessibility of weapons has, however, made it possible that the unidentified gunmen could even be 'just about anyone' who would kill to settle political scores, personal vendetta, business rivalry, or may simply be carrying out a contractual obligation. There are also numerous instances of civilians being abducted by unidentified gunmen who are believed to have subsequently met with tragic deaths at the hands of their abductors as their whereabouts have not been traced even today. Their anonymity, and the willingness to use their guns indiscriminately, makes unidentified gunmen the most feared source of insecurity. The levels of insecurity among females are higher than males in this category can largely be attributed to additional high dependency syndrome and socio cultural factors underlying womanhood.

In Nalbari, “Militants” are second most important sources of insecurity and are identified as people belonging to ULFA or NDFB. The fear of them arises from the fact that the militant groups has been responsible for killing a number of civilians over the years, for being opposed to their ideology or politics, or for refusing to accede to their demands, or on suspicion of being state informants. In this regard the case of Roshmi Bora, a fifteen year old girl is of worth mention. Today most of those who still provide

119 Ibid., p.4465.
120 On June 10, fifteen-year-old Roshmi Bora from Pachali (Raidihingia village, Nagaon district, Assam) was abducted from her house, by a group of unknown men. The men were dressed in military clothes and spoke in Hindi, which misled Roshmi’s family into thinking the abduction was by the armed forces. An FIR was lodged at the Nagaon police station. A sequence of events followed this. According to newspaper reports, the parents were called to an isolated area by members of a militant group and they were promised that their girl would be released. Later, the ULFA issued a statement that they had killed Roshmi Bora because she was an army-informer.
shelter to militants do so under duress. There was a time when the ULFA enjoyed considerable goodwill and they could move about openly with arms. Their indiscriminate threats of extortion and killings

Unarmed civilians have lost the earlier goodwill for the militant groups like ULFA (due to their Robinhood character), which has now been replaced with fear due to the shift in the strategy of killing the innocent civilians. They cannot move about openly with arms anymore due to the overwhelming presence of the security forces and naturally carry the weapons concealed. Now, the presence of draconian laws like Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958 under which a person can be arrested without a warrant on a basis of reasonable suspicion or an army person can enter and search without warrant any premises to make such arrests creates considerable fear as found in the field work. Heavy presence of informers of security forces, people are more threatened and horrified because of militants as well as from getting labeled as associates of them by the security forces. Female feels less threatened from militants then males is due to the fact of past history, shared cultural norms and wide perception that militants in general do not harm women and children. However, it is important to mention here that the nature of the notion of ‘past history’ and ‘shared cultural norms’ has changed in the wake of the creation of Bodoland Territorial Administrative Division (BTAD). The people who was considered under a common generic term ‘Assamese’ are now divided into various ethnic lines as ‘division’ in the words of Horowitz. The women who are generally considered as markers of identity of the community often pay the price for it. Now conflicts due to ethnic polarization along with sectarian lines (for example Bodos versus Assamese) do not spare the women of the ‘other’ side or community.

122 Field work observation.
Rupshikha of Baraliapar village of Nalbari reiterated,

"After the incident of 1999, I do not like the Bodos, as they have taken away all my family members without any fault of theirs. There was a time when Assamese and Bodos were taking part in Bathau Puja and Bihu simultaneously but now everything has changed."\textsuperscript{124}

In Nalbari consistent presence of the "Security Forces" too evokes fear of armed violence, torture and insecurity amongst the people. The security forces are looked upon as an extension of a repressive state largely controlled by a 'manipulative'\textsuperscript{125} political elite whom the discussants held responsible for the emergence of insurgency and armed violence in the first place, by creating an environment which provided no effective measures of dissent than violent armed struggles which, they insisted, led to the proliferation and diffusion of small arms and in turn perpetuated violence and insecurity\textsuperscript{126}. Brutal killings of militants by security forces often within thickly populated villages created considerable apprehension within the inhabitants. Those particularly affected are the families, friends, neighbours and acquaintances of the militants who are killed. People of Nalbari cited incidents of custodial killings not only of militants, but also of civilians on mere suspicion of being 'informers' evoked acute fear and resentment. The extra judicial killings after militants are caught from a particular locality evoke acute fear and insecurity amongst the people.

People are also fearful of being caught in the crossfire during encounter operation. Frequent cordon and search operations, often in the middle of the night, abusive behaviour during search operations, physical acts of humiliation, indiscriminate arrests,

\textsuperscript{124} Field work data.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p.4466
illegal confinement, torture in custody and particularly brutal reprisals on civilians where militants had ambushed security forces, molestations and rapes, have all contributed to compound the fear of violence and violations by security forces within these communities. Most of the people who expressed their apprehension of the security forces, however, never accused the entire force of violence and violations indiscriminately but recounted specific instances when the forces had certainly overstepped all norms and committed excesses. Sewali, one of the village women from Lakhipar who sells vegetable in the local haat in Barama, which is quite far from her house remembered how an army personnel helped her in wee hours when suddenly curfew was imposed in the entire locality and she was on her way to home from Barama, after selling her vegetables. As there was no vehicle and boats available on that day due to the imposition of curfew, she had to walk all these kilometers and had no other option. Suddenly a jeep of Indian Army stopped by her and dropped her in a nearby place from which she could walk down to her home. Sewali shared that it was her first and last time when she actually sat on a jeep.127 “Though there are instances of bad incidents, the good side of the security personals can not be nullified”, she said.128 People of Nalbari also recounted instances when the conducts of the security forces were such, that it was won a lot of trust and admiration. Rubul chetia from Nalbari town says,

“After coming of Lt. General Rajesh Tyagi, as an officer of Red Horn Division, the situation has changed in Nalbari. He is a friendly officer and any body can approach him.” 129

127 Field work data, 3 September, 2005.
128 Ibid.
129 Field work data, 4 September, 2005.
Field study indicated that security personnel invoked more fear in women than their male counterparts because of their body. The very presence of army in rural areas of Nalbari district in the time of conflict causes lot of insecurity to women. After indiscriminate firing and during routine house searches; women body searches are also being carried out by the male security personnel and that too at times in the absence of their male family members. When the army forces are in “operation” women are routinely questioned and severely cross examined, on the thinnest of pretexts and are thus exposed to sexual harassment including the threat of assault. This is further aggravated when security forces search their home at any time day and night even during in the absence of male members. It appears that women are constantly paralysed by fear and unable to perform their normal activities. The very sight of men in uniform is traumatizing for them. Manomati from Lakhipar says, “Ten years ago, in counter insurgency operation, two army jawans forced themselves upon me.” and as she was considered ‘impure’ in her society, she has shifted in a new place to start a new life eight years ago.  

In case of Nalbari in the areas where Bodos are the predominant tribe (west of Nalbari district) and where there currently is massive armed agitation calling for a separate state, non-Bodo are apprehensive of the militants belonging to both the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force and NDFB. Both Bodo groups have been responsible for a number of gruesome ethnic cleansing campaigns. However in case of Nalbari which is one of the strongholds of ULFA, there seems a tacit understanding between the banned outfits. Significantly, both Bodos and non-Bodos consider the security forces one of the primary sources of insecurity and paradoxically, feel that their removal from the camps would worsen the situation. The sense of insecurity due to ethnic violence is less among the

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130 Field work data. 9 September 2006.
people of Nalbari because of prevailing common enemy syndrome that is the state, balance of power between several outfits, as well as the shared history of coexistence in Nalbari. Moreover the data can be flawed because the participants were hesitant to reveal their sources of insecurity, especially in a group discussion in which persons from different ethnic groups often participated. Current ceasefire by the BLTF and ongoing peace talks has slightly lowered the apprehensions in case of ethnic violence.

Insecurity due to ethnic clash was a minor factor earlier but with recent outbreak of ethnic cleansing incidences in adjacent and far flung district of Nalbari, after formation of BTAD area and rise in ethnic consciousness and ethnic polarization, it will gain increased prominence and may pose law and order challenge in the days to come. Of late considerable fear has been generated by women of Nalbari due to ethnic polarization, especially after the ghastly incident of Baraliapar.

Two important rivers, the Pagladiya and the Puthimari, traverse the Nalbari district from north to south. Both the rivers originate from the Bhutan hills. The Puthimari River is also known as Jia Bamodi, Lakhitara in various parts of Nalbari. Though incidence of flood caused by this river is an annual feature, it is not as ravaging as the Pagladiya. More then 60 % of Nalbari district is flood prone that includes Nalbari town. Annual “Natural Calamities” causes human and livestock causalities and heavy destruction of properties. Thus, it is a major source of insecurity. It accentuates the hardship for all. Women are more vulnerable on whom all burden falls and especially in Female Headed Household in a conflict situation.

Thus as evident from the graph, insecurity due to armed conflicts in Nalbari causes higher insecurity level then the natural calamities that people of Nalbari faces every year, as the latter is far more predictable.
Insecurities and tension due to "Religious Riots" are significantly very less as compared to other sources of insecurities. It is because past history of accommodation, cohesion and peace. Juxtaposition of a Hari mandir with a Mosque in Nalbari town is an unique example of cohesion. Level of insecurities among females is less then males in Nalbari may be because of lower prejudices level.

**Table: 3 - Type of Insecurity among People of Nalbari**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Insecurity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torture</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing of Family Members</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork in Nalbari

It was found that male members have more fear of getting tortured and being killed as compare to loss of family members and material loss. This is evident from the fact that many males have been absconding and have deserted their family\(^{131}\), leaving them at their fate, just to save themselves.

Pushpita, one of the respondent, who is a weaver in Nalbari town says, "I do not know where my husband has gone. I still remember that fateful night when Dinesh left home early in the morning due to fear of army atrocities as faced by our neighbour and never returned. I do not know whether he is dead or alive."\(^{132}\)

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\(^{131}\) Field work data, dated 8 October, 2006.

\(^{132}\) Field Work Data, dated 24 October, 2006.
Females of Nalbari are more worried for the well being of their family members. This may be due to the fact that socio cultural aspects and child rearing practices promotes and makes women an epitome of sacrifices.

Types of insecurity of people of Nalbari

![Figure 5 showing the types of insecurity among people of Nalbari through field work findings.](image)
Psychological aspects is the second most important factor it may be largely due to higher concern and attachment levels of women towards their family members, socio-cultural aspects and high dependency syndrome. There exists a large gap between the levels of anxiety caused by torture and being killed is due to the visible and invisible impacts of violence as mentioned earlier in this chapter earlier.

In both males and females concern for material loss is in the lower side. But there exist a gap between male and a female may be due to the gender roles. Male priority and responsibility of taking care of the economic needs of the family, while female share a subordinate role in the existing patriarchal set up. The expression of power relations and identities both between communities and the state and between men and women, dictate the conceptualization of gendered ethnic and citizen identities as well as the connection between gender and space which could be seen in the context of Nalbari.

The types and sources of insecurity as portrayed in case of Nalbari are peculiar in nature as PRA data has revealed. Though fear to lose life comes as the topmost sources of insecurity universally, this study finds a synchrony while categorizing sources and types of fear in case of Nalbari. Moreover while deploying the same sets of schedule to the same sets of respondent after a considerable time revealed consistency in their answer. The PRA conducted in adjacent Rangia (in Kamrup district), which is only 25 kilometers away from Tamulpur, however, raked the presence of security forces as the sources of their prime insecurity followed by un identified gunman.

To conclude, women play multiple roles in armed conflicts but these roles remain unacknowledged. Due to their symbolic references along with identity and honor of the community, women have to face multiple injuries in the time of conflict. The ‘supposed liberation’ that women may achieve in situations of armed combat is often a temporary one, in which they are required to take roles traditionally reserved for men.
Often women have to revert to household and private roles once the situation becomes little normal. In the absence of men their role multiplies and it affects her overall wellbeing.

The multiple roles that women are subjected to and play in armed conflict show that woman cannot be categorized just as victims of conflict. Even when they are victims; they exercise their agency and survival techniques despite adverse conditions. Armed conflict has complex and multiple impacts on women, and therefore, their response to armed conflict are also increasingly complex. Cultural codes impact women’s role in conflict. There are instances in Nalbari when women are trying to challenge traditional roles and create space for herself. In fact, feminist thinkers\(^{133}\) have argued that woman have all the potential to regain their lost space or prove as an independent agency during conflicts. But the reality is that most of the women /women combatants have been one of subservience to men. Some women may achieve positions of leadership in situations of conflict but since the laws and social construction has not changed and structurally hierarchical, women as a group has not improved their position or receive equal rights.