

Gender and Conflict: The Theoretical Discourse and Women's Experiences of Conflict in Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is a universal human phenomenon. It is considered to be inherent in human nature, an idea which has been strongly upheld by Charles Darwin's famous notion 'survival of the fittest'. This implies that ever since humans have existed, they have been resorting to conflict for their survival. What has changed over time is the reasons humans resort to conflict, and with that, the form and intensity of conflict itself. In today's world, conflict has acquired new dimensions and is becoming increasingly violent. Until recently, however, one thing remained constant: conflict has primarily been associated with men. Women have been considered at best a passive witness to conflict. This notion has been challenged by feminist scholars who have tried relentlessly to bring forth women as active agents in the process of conflict. Feminist scholars have also highlighted the effects of violence and violent conflict situations on women. One major way to do this is to look at conflict from a gendered perspective. In what ways do women and conflict interact, and how and to what extent does gender affect this interaction? Furthermore, in what ways do women's experiences of conflict differ from men's, and what role does gender play in causing this difference? These are some of the issues that have been explored in this paper.

Keywords: Conflict, Violence, Gender, Theoretical Discourse, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict has always been an integral part of human existence. According to Heraklitos, the presocratic philosopher, "War (or strife) is the father of all things" (Barash & Webel, 2002). In the 19th and 20th centuries, social Darwinism in the same manner maintained that war was not only rewarding, virtuous and manly but also biologically appropriate (Barash & Webel, 2002). Louis Kriesberg, in a similar fashion, opines that 'all about us are social conflict'. Thus, many thinkers believe that conflict is inherent in human nature.

However, conflict is a phenomenon which is dynamic in its form and nature. Kriesberg argues that conflicts vary in their bases, their duration, their mode of settlement, their outcomes and their consequences (Kriesberg, 1973). Further, conflict is a very broad term that includes the entire spectrum of inter-state wars, internal conflicts, ethnically driven insurgencies and secessionist movements (Behera, 2006). The origin of conflict is also a fascinating subject. According to Tim Jacoby, for much of history, human strength or muscle power has determined the forms that conflict and violence have taken. The development of basic tools around 200,000 years ago and spears and arrows about 160,000 years ago generated the ability of Pleistocene people to injure each other. But it was in the Neolithic period, approximately 13,000 years ago clear evidence of weapons can be observed (Jacoby, 2008). Since then, with time, humans have developed more and more sophisticated tools for conflict, which have brought humans to an age of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Violence, for Amitai Etzioni, is not only common during wars but is part of everyday life (Etzioni, 1971). Conflict can be both peaceful and violent. However, with the evolution of human civilisation, violence has become an increasingly common feature of conflicts at both the national and international levels. Furthermore, with the coming of 'new wars' in the form of intra-state conflicts, which include guerrilla groups, ethnic groups fighting for autonomy, etc., the distinction between 'battle front' and 'home front' has become blurred. That means conflicts, and especially violent and armed conflict, are increasingly engulfing civilians and are affecting them in multiple ways. As Soudiya Qutab writes, "Conflict involving arms is a ubiquitous

phenomenon. Since the dawn of the 21st century, armed conflicts have become more internal, long-drawn, and complex, with civilians increasingly becoming the targets” (Qutab, 2012).

In such a situation, the question of women and the effect of such violent and armed conflict situations becomes important. Until recently study of conflict and violence considered only the experiences of men. The prime reason for this was that traditionally, women are not an active part of the process of conflict. They are not combatants or warriors. They are seen as just passive recipients of the effects of conflict. Hence, the earlier literature on armed conflicts and wars was mostly gender-blind, with women’s participation simply not identified (Behera, 2006). However, with the efforts of feminist scholars, this perception has started to change. Now, we know that women are not just passive witnesses of conflict but active agents in it. Armed conflicts affect both men and women. But the experiences of armed conflict of men and women differ significantly. During armed conflict situations, women’s suffering goes beyond death and destruction. They become targets for rape, molestation torture and other sexual abuse. The indirect sufferings of women in armed conflict are usually long-term and often unacknowledged. In this context, exploring the interaction between conflict and women from a gendered perspective becomes of utmost importance.

Unequal gender relations existing in society have been identified as the prime reason behind the differences in the experience of conflict between men and women. In a traditional society where women are restricted mostly to the private sphere without any economic power and decision-making ability, when under conflict, such women lose their men, they are suddenly pushed into a strange world where she has to bear the burden of economic responsibilities for the family, which she had never done before. It is just one example of the numerous ways in which unequal gender relations can cause more intense and harmful effects of armed conflict on women.

Keeping these issues in mind, this paper has dealt with three major themes. First, this paper has provided a theoretical understanding of the concept of conflict, primarily from a sociological perspective. Secondly, it explores the various complex ways in which women and conflict interact and has analysed how and to what extent gender affects this interaction between women and conflict in armed conflict situations. Here, a critical observation of the issue of considering women as active agents in conflict situations brought forward by feminist scholarship has also been made. Finally, this paper attempts to place this analysis in the specific context of Assam¹ and explore the nuances of the interaction between women and conflict and the role of gender in it. Thus, this paper provides a critical assessment of the complex and dynamic ways in which conflict, women, and gender interact in armed conflict situations from a sociological perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This paper intends to undertake a critical analysis of the interrelations between conflict, women and gender from a sociological perspective. To achieve this, the paper has relied on secondary sources and conducted a qualitative analysis of the same. The paper has undergone a careful and in-depth analysis of these sources to provide a critical understanding of the dynamic nature of the relationship between conflict, women, and gender in armed conflict situations. Finally, looking at secondary sources, the paper has attempted to apply this complex relationship in the specific context of Assam, India.

Conflict: A Theoretical Understanding

The word conflict derives from the Latin word *confligere*, which means “to strike together”. It is impossible for two physical objects, such as two billiard balls, to occupy the same space. They conflict, and if either is in motion, the conflict will be resolved by a new position for both of them (Barash & Webel, 2002). In popular usage, the term conflict is used both as a noun to mean a fight, struggle, collision and clashing, and as a verb to mean to come into disagreement, struggle, clash or incompatibility (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996). According to Michael Nicholson, a conflict exists when two people wish to carry out mutually inconsistent acts (Nicholson, 1970). Similarly, Louis Kriesberg has defined conflict as a relationship between two or more parties who (or whose spokesmen) believe they have incompatible goals (Kriesberg, 1973). Manorama Savur, in her essay, ‘Sociology of Conflict Theory’, begins by presenting Niccolo Machiavelli as the first conflict theoretician. Machiavelli saw conflict manifesting itself primarily between the common people and the ‘great

and powerful. He believed that lust for power and domination is the primary cause behind both internal strife and interstate wars (Savur, 1975).

Machiavelli and Hobbes initiated the basic stance of cynical realism about human society. An individual's behaviour is explained in terms of their self-interest in a material world of threat and violence. Social order was seen by them as being founded on organised coercion (Collins, 1975). Marx added more specific determinants to the lines of division among conflicts of interest and stressed the material conditions that can mobilise particular interests into action. Marxian principles with certain modifications provided the basis for a conflict theory of stratification (Collins, 1975). Marx's commitment to rapid social change led him to visualise the social system as rife with change-producing conflict. His commitment to rapid change made him look for violent forms of conflict (Turner, 1975). Like Marx, Simmel also thought conflict to be an all-pervasive feature of the social system. But he didn't agree that social systems could be perceived only in terms of conflicting interests inherent in relations of domination and subjugation. In terms of the consequences of conflict, Simmel's view was very complicated, as he saw the source of conflict in the human instinct of hate. On the other hand, Marx's commitment to dialectical assumptions about conflict and change made the analysis of the consequences of conflict very easy (Turner, 1975).

Another important view on conflict comes from Max Weber, who focused on human emotions and their role in producing conflict. For Weber, it was crucial to understand creation of emotional solidarity does not supplant conflict; yet emotion is one of the main weapons used in conflict (Collins, 1975). Ralf Dahrendorf attached vital importance to the conflict situation within the industrial setting, but deliberately confined it to the national borders. For him, structurally significant conflict arises in relations of dominance (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996). While another Sociologist, John Rex, widened the scope of conflict beyond the narrow metropolitan countries to encompass the colonies. Rex saw conflict as a central feature of a capitalist society and believed that conflict could be resolved by agreement on values (Savur, 1975). Lewis Coser, on the other hand, suggested that social conflict may be taken to mean 'a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the opponents aim to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals'. Defined this way, conflict can be seen as a comprehensive category, encompassing a variety of phenomena, from brawls in the bazaar to war between nations (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996). Louis Kriesberg has analysed social conflict in terms of various factors such as Intensity of conflict, Ways of regulating the conflict, Purity of conflict, role of power inequality, etc. By purity of conflict, Kriesberg meant to present various ways in which a conflict could end. For example, in the case of pure conflict, one side wins and the other side loses. However, he also asserts that in reality, the results of conflict don't remain straightforward (Kriesberg, 1973).

Social Mobility, a very important idea of social stratification, has significant implications for understanding conflict. Both a lack of mobility and a high level of mobility can act as a source of conflict. In other words, low levels of conflict may be associated with very low and very high levels of mobility. It is when the idea of unlimited mobility has taken hold, but the reality of social institutions and social experiences does not accord with that ideology, that a high density of conflict may come to mark a society (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996). Conflicts may vary in their causes and content, and in their intensity too. One measure of the intensity of a conflict is duration (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996). Lewis Coser brings a distinction between realistic and non-realistic conflicts. Realistic conflict is a means towards a specific end. On the other hand, non-realistic conflict is an end in itself (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996).

An important debate in sociology took place over the question whether or not social or international conflict could be regarded as beneficial or 'functional' for the social system, or it should just be avoided, considering its destructive nature. When the debate began, conventional sociologists tended to neglect the possibility that conflicts could be beneficial. Against this view, the argument stood that conflict may have beneficial effects. Supporting this view were the functional sociologists. One of them was Lewis Coser, who pointed out that even the most violent and widespread conflict may be functional for both parties involved in the conflict (Mitchell, 1980).

In sociological discourse on conflict, some broad perspectives also emerged, following which sociologists tried to figure out the basic causes of the emergence of conflict. One such perspective is the unconscious and biological basis of conflict. The ubiquity and inevitability of conflict made sociologists believe that there are

some innate and endemic qualities. Societies and human beings that predispose them, more or less unconsciously, to engage in conflict. It implies that human beings are biologically bound to engage in conflict. A major focus of this perspective was on the universal cultural phenomenon of in-group/out-group relations and the tendency to look upon out-groups with hostility, which W.G. Summers labelled as ethnocentrism. Another such perspective is the conscious, historical approach. This perspective implies that conflict behaviour is consciously learned through historical experience (Jayaram and Saberwal, 1996).

Among all these various concepts and theories, there is a call in sociological discourse for the development of a general theory of conflict. However, this call is contested by the interdisciplinary approach, which believes that no existing social science discipline has sufficient academic resources to achieve an adequate theory of international conflict. On the other hand, supporters of a general theory of conflict argue that specialised concentration on a given type of conflict will lead to the neglect of certain facts or principles which are essential to an adequate understanding of that kind of conflict (Fink, 1968). However, despite all these existing theories and debate over the creation of new ones, sociology has a long way to go before it can claim to have explained the concept of conflict in its entirety. Explaining various reasons sociology has yet failed to produce a satisfactory understanding of conflict and the reasons behind neglect of the issue by sociologists, Jessie Bernard in her article, 'Where is the modern sociology of Conflict' has stressed on the importance of most creative handling of conflict situations from the local to the international level (Bernard, 1950).

Conflict, Women and Gender: A Critical Analysis

As it has been mentioned earlier in this paper, literature on conflict is mostly gender blind which ignores the role of women in conflict completely, caused by the conventional notion, 'women work for peace and men wage war, cooperative women, conflictual men' (Caprioli & Boyer, 2001). Navnita Chandra Behera, in a similar way, mentions the stereotyped notion of 'men make wars and women make peace'. Such stereotypes characterise men as active and women as passive, men as agents and women as victims, men as rational and women as emotional. Thus, women are underrepresented and misinterpreted in terms of gendered causes, costs and consequences violence has on women's lives (Behera, 2006). Rita Manchanda also asserts that "...history provided no chronicle of women's experiences of conflict and organised political violence" (Manchanda, 2001). Feminist scholarship has been trying to challenge such conventional stereotypes and make women and the effects of conflict upon women more visible to establish that the impact of conflict upon women has gendered connotations.

The impact of armed conflict upon women is multidimensional. Feminist scholars have pointed out that existing gender inequalities affect the way conflict impacts women. Hence, it is very important that we employ a gendered perspective while analysing the effect of conflict upon women. It is undoubtedly true that in the modern forms of organised political violence, women are the worst sufferers. Armed conflict often exacerbates inequalities, based on gender, which exists in different forms and varying degrees in all societies and that makes women particularly vulnerable". The women refugee/IDP² represents the epitome of marginalisation when armed conflict breaks out (Gardam & Charlesworth, 2000). Women, generally speaking, are not directly involved in warfare. However, they are arguably the major victims of warfare (Gardam, 1997).

The growing literature on gender and conflict over the last 20 years has made women's and girls' experience of conflict visible and has highlighted the changing relationship of power between men and women (Thompson, 2006). A majority of this literature has focused on the very important issue of sexual violence against women during conflict situations. Sexual abuse of women during armed conflict is a very important issue which has strong gendered connotations. It is a form of cultural violence against women, which is committed by considering women as symbolic and physical markers of community identity (Manchanda, 2001). Thus, violating women's sexuality implies a sort of abuse of the enemy culture in armed conflicts. However, this availability of works does not persist when it comes to other distinctive ways in which women suffer in armed conflict. Thus, the unique sufferings of women remain hidden. (Gardam, 1997). Another important problem that conflict situations create for women is that they take away the men. This problem also has strong gendered implications. Men usually take care of the public sphere and perform the traditional role of breadwinners. However, under a conflict situation, women suddenly find themselves in a position where she has to bear the responsibilities of both the public and private spheres and carry out the economic

responsibilities for the family. Traditionally, being in a secondary position in relation to men in terms of unequal gender relations, lack of education or training and lack of decision-making power, this new set of previously unknown responsibilities increases women's vulnerability during conflict situations. Saudiya Qutab, while studying the widows and half-widows³ of Jammu and Kashmir, presents this varied picture. Qutab says that though problems faced by widows and half-widows are more or less the same. But the fact that there is no confirmation regarding the status of their husbands, their grief is prolonged, living a life of utter uncertainty. These half-widows had to face a plethora of problems like the economic burden of the family, the burden of lengthy, expensive and disappointing legal battles in search of justice for their husbands, etc. The unconfirmed status of the husbands has serious legal implications for these half-widows as they cannot claim the compensation from the government, which a widow of conflict usually receives. Furthermore, some of these half-widows' husbands are suspected state informers. Being the wife of an informer 'Mukhbir' doesn't receive the usual sympathy of the people, which is enjoyed by the half-widows whose husbands were picked up by security forces. These wives of informers have to face dire social stigma, which complicates things for them (Qutab, 2012).

Another important issue raised by conflict situations for women is conflict-induced migration. Conflict blurs the distinction between public and private spheres for women, and in the case of forced migration, women are pushed into a whole new world of suffering. Rita Manchanda rightly observes that, "The women refugee/IDP represents the epitome of marginalisation and the disenfranchisement of the dislocated. Her identity and her individuality are collapsed into the homogenous category of 'victim' and community, devoid of agency, unable and incapable of representing herself, powerless and superfluous" (Manchanda, 2004). Talking about the internally displaced women in ethnic violence which Manchanda terms as 'internally stuck' shows that how these women get stuck in a battle front unable to escape and how they become victims of rape and sexual assaults which are used as prime weapons of war in ethnic conflict situations. Furthermore, living in refugee camps creates further hardships for women and especially young girls, as they have to live in conditions where food is scarce and the environment is unhealthy and prone to violent sexual abuses. Sexual abuse, forced prostitution, trafficking, and abduction become common for women in refugee camps. Furthermore, it is said that women under forced migration become doubly victims as they lose their private sphere, and after a period of disintegration, patriarchy reemerges in manifested forms (Behera, 2006). Except that these psychological effects of violence and abuses, and traumatic experiences of conflict, constitute another major problem in the lives of women. Empirical evidence shows that many women suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the aftermath of a conflict situation.

Another factor that aggravates the sufferings of women in conflict situations is the inadequacy of the national and international laws that protect women against violence. Judith Gardam writes that most of the human rights law fails to take into consideration the ground realities of women in conflict situations. He points towards the apparent imbalance between the number of laws protecting combatants, who are mostly men, and those protecting the non-combatants, who are the civilians and mostly women (Gardam, 1997). In another essay by Judith Gardam and Hilary Charlesworth, it has been pointed out that International Humanitarian Law, like the 43 provisions of the Geneva Convention which specifically deal with women and armed conflict deals with women in their relationship with others and not as individuals in their own right (Gardam & Charlesworth, 2000). Judith Gardam also points out that the effects of conflict upon women vary according to different stages of conflict. In terms of the immediate effect, male and female civilians suffer equally. However, the aftermath of the conflicts, whether civil or international, has a very different impact on men and women. Although during the conflict women share the burdens equally, even though they had no part in the decision-making process that led to the conflict, they must return to their traditional role, devoid of all rights to participate in the decision-making process after the conflict (Gardam, 1997).

Caprioli applying Johan Galtung's model of Structural violence to women shows that all four components of the model, Exploitation, Penetration, Fragmentation and Marginalisation, are to be found. Structural violence is maintained through socialisation, gender stereotyping and a constant threat of violence, which is exactly the case to be seen in terms of women and conflict (Caprioli, 2005). Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma summarise the impact of armed conflict on women aptly. They argue that even though women face violence during both peace and war, even though their basic right to physical security is routinely violated during

conflict, even though they bear additional social and economic burdens during conflict as they often find themselves solely responsible for their families (including the very old, the very young and the sick); their political right to participate in decision-making and governance is generally ignored, with their views seldom taken into account when wars are waged or when peace is negotiated (Joseph & Sharma, 2003).

The discussion above presents a portrait of women as victims of the impact of conflict and unequal gender relations. However, women under conflict are not just passive victims but also active agents. Cynthia Cockburn argues that “If women have a distinctive angle in peace, it is not due to women being nurturing. It seems more to do with knowing oppression when we see it” (Manchanda, 2001). Thus, having experienced the effects of subordination in daily life, women stand strong in favour of peace. Paula Banerjee, reflecting this stance of women in terms of peace, describes the success of the Naga Mothers Association in working in collaboration with the state government for peace (Banerjee, 2001). Doing so, women in Nagaland in North-East India have become active agents of peace, instead of passive victims of conflict. While it is true that conflict affects women adversely. But at times, the adverse conditions create certain opportunities for women, too. Judy El-Bushra, in his study of the impact of armed conflict on women in five African countries, shows that the conflict situation in those countries (Uganda, Angola, Sudan, Mali and Somalia) brings clear changes to the existing gender relations, with women taking on greater and more extensive responsibilities in the households. However, institutional changes which can provide women with decision-making power are slow in coming (El-Bushra, 2003). Rita Manchanda, studying the displacement of women under conflict in South Asia, finds similar results. Conflict here leads to the emergence of women-headed households, which provide women with certain decision-making powers and independence in economic terms. However, Manchanda argues that, to benefit from these gains of conflict, such solidarity networks must be created at local, national and international levels (Manchanda, 2004). In another article addressing the issue of the emergence of women’s agency in the informal sphere through the process of peace building, Manchanda says that these skills must be consolidated to enable women to participate in the formal political sphere. (Manchanda, 2005). Furthermore, there are various studies that attempt to establish a relation between higher levels of gender equality and lower levels of international and interstate conflict (See Melander, 2005; Caprioli and Boyer, 2001; Caprioli, 2000). Furthermore, women indeed become specific targets of armed conflicts. But on many occasions, they have actively participated in conflict. Women actively took part in the ethnic cleansing during the genocide of the Tutsi people by the Hutu people (Jones, 2006). Thus, we can see that women do not just passively bear the effects of conflict. Instead, the relation between conflict and women is dynamic and mutual.

Conflict, Gender and Women in Assam, India

This section will explore the gendered roots of women’s experiences of conflict in Assam, India. Assam has witnessed a long-lasting and enduring situation of conflict. North-East India remains one of the most conflict-prone zones in South Asia. For the last 18 years, peace has eluded Assam, although there is a growing apathy among the conflict-torn Assamese⁴ against the Army and state as well as the extremist extortionists (Banerjee, 2001). During this period, Assam has witnessed insurgencies at various scales, among which ULFA, NDFB, BLT, etc. are prominent groups which created a constant state of insecurity in the state. In such a situation, it is bound that the women of Assam are living in a state of utter vulnerability. We have discussed before that the impact of conflict upon women carries gendered connotations. Hence, at this juncture, it will be useful to see what the status of women is in Assamese society.

Women’s status depends mainly upon their rights and privileges and the roles assigned to them, most often based on gender. In Assam, too, this follows. The education of women in Assam shows positive signs. According to 2001 Census Data, the female literacy rate in Assam stands at 56.03%. Work participation in Assam for women has increased considerably in the post-independence era. Traditionally, Assamese women are involved in de-husking of paddy, rearing of silkworm worm etc. (NCW Report)⁵. However, presently, due to globalisation and the increase in education has brought considerable changes have been brought. Women of Assam are now absorbed in different avenues brought out by globalisation (Phukon, 2009). However, household work is not regarded as valuable, and as most of the women are involved in household activities, the status of women is still below their salaried counterparts. Further, women still have limited access to resources because of which means women in Assam are still far behind in reaching an equitable position with men. Political participation of women in the state is also minimal (NCW Report). Women in Assam took an active

part in various social movements historically, including in the Indian National Movement. However, this participation failed to ensure increased political participation for women (Banerjee, 2001). Phukon writes, “In most cases, the social behaviour and attitude of the society towards women was somewhat liberal in comparison to other states of India” (Phukon, 2009). However, attitude towards widows and single women in the state reflects the trend in the rest of the country. Jeuti Barooah, in her study of ‘Single Women in Assamese Hindu Society’, writes, “Sporadic cases of widow remarriage continued, but society did not accept it as a usual phenomenon” (Barooah, 1993). Thus, we can see that the status of women in Assam is still far from being equitable. Conventional ideas of gender roles are still strong, and gender based social hierarchy is prominent.

Having evaluated the status of women in Assam, we can now explore the effects of conflict on women in the state. Women in conflict situations in Assam are adversely affected by both insurgency and ethnic violence, and state sponsored counter terrorism activities. Operation Rhino, Operation Bajrang and Operation Golden Bird are some of the major counter-insurgency operations initiated by the government in the state. These operations have left behind a long trail of sexual abuse and human rights violations by security forces on the part of women in Assam. A study by the North East Network on Women in Armed Conflict Situations highlights the traumatic stories of several women in various parts of Assam. The NEN study also suggests that women in conflict situations in Assam are not aware of the laws and rights that protect them. This makes their position even more vulnerable. (NEN Study, 2005). Another important feature of the conflict situation in Assam is the increase in the number of female-headed households. In conflict, husbands are killed, abducted, people go missing, for various reasons, women are being compelled to come out to the public sphere and perform men’s roles. As mentioned earlier, women in Assam have very limited access to resources. This limitation increases women’s vulnerability when they try to live and survive on their own in a conflict situation.

Another prominent result of Assam’s prolonged insurgency and ethnic violence is the increase in conflict-induced migration. Monirul Hussain, in his study, ‘Internally Displaced Persons in India’s North-East’, states that within the IDP communities, it is the children and women who suffer most (Hussain, 2006). Gender inequality and the gender gap that persist in society define women’s condition in the refugee camps. Unknown to their rights and the laws that can protect them, they are bound to suffer sexually, physically and psychologically. Moreover, on the one hand, gender inequality created through patriarchal society makes women vulnerable in conflict situations. On the other hand, in high conflict areas, the level of patriarchal control even increases (NCW Report).

However, women in Assam have attempted their initiatives for peace. Several women's groups such as Matri Manch, The Sajagota Mahila Samiti, Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS), Bodo Women’s Justice Forum, etc. Matri Manch has taken up issues of abuse of women and violence against women's bodies by the state as well as insurgents. The Sajagota Mohila Somiti takes up issues of rape or police riots. MSS takes out peace marches and keeps a close vigil in their surrounding neighbourhood. Finally, Bodo Women’s Justice Forum takes up issues of peace and human rights (Phukon, 2010). However, these organisations have yet to reach the level of success that has been attained by the Naga Mothers Association in Nagaland. This might be primarily attributed to the very limited political participation of women in Assam, because of which these organisations fail to succeed in the public sphere.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper considers three major themes. First, this paper has attempted to present a detailed theoretical understanding of the concept of conflict from a sociological perspective. An important distinction that is made here is between conflict and social conflict. Sociology primarily deals with the idea of social conflicts and the various forms in which it manifests itself in society. The theoretical understanding provided by sociology in terms of terrorism, ethnic violence and genocide, etc., is significant. It can undoubtedly be stated that the study of conflict has always been an integral part of sociological discourse. However, an all-encompassing, universal theory has yet to come.

The second theme of this paper is to explore the interrelations between conflict, women and gender. In this context, this paper has undergone a number of works which cover various aspects of the theme of the paper

under consideration. Careful and critical analysis of them shows that gender is an inseparable entity when it comes to the study of conflict and women. The analysis in this paper finds that gender or gender relations not only define how conflicts impact women, but they also determine how women react and interact with the effects of conflict. Gender and its role in presenting women as active agents in the process of conflict have been explored. This particular notion makes the critical rejection of conventional binary ideas of women and peace, and men and war, imperative.

The final theme of this paper was to place the analysis of conflict, women and gender in a specific context of Assam and explore the nuances of the interaction between women and conflict and the role of gender in it. In this particular area of study, a very small number of works have been produced till now. However, a careful analysis of those texts reveals that gender plays a crucial role in determining the effects of conflict in Assam too. Women's subordinated status in society and existing unequal gender relations work as a catalyst in worsening the effects of armed conflict on women. Considering the grave and ubiquitous nature of conflict and violence, more in-depth and qualitative studies in the state are required.

The gendered perspective of conflict and women can be called a major triumph of modern feminist discourse. However, a continuous and rigorous academic exercise will be required if we wish to find solutions for the serious problems regarding women in conflict situations. Assam presents a grave challenge to us in this context, which is intensified by the presence of a long-term and enduring conflict situation along with gaps in gender development in terms of education, health, economic independence, social status and political participation. These gender gaps that exist between men and women in Assam constitute a prime reason for the pitiable condition of women in conflict situations in Assam. Hence, along with a continuous exploration of the dynamic relation between conflict, women and gender, a serious rigour in terms of eliminating gender gaps in Assam is the need of the hour.

Notes

1. ¹Assam is a state of India situated in the North-Eastern part of the country.
2. ²The term half-widow has been used to refer to those women whose husbands went missing during conflict situations. As these women do not have any confirmation of the status of their men, they are bound to live like widows even if they are not.
3. ³IDP stands for Internally Displaced Persons.
4. ⁴Assamese Society denotes the local inhabitants of Assam. In that sense, the term 'Assamese society' cuts across ethnic identities, cultures, languages and religion, encompassing everyone in the state under one Assamese community. However, the term 'Assamese' refers to the Assamese language and also to the people speaking this language, which happens to be the majority group in the state.
5. ⁵NCW stands for North-Eastern Council for Women.

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