

PROFILE No.12 NORTH INDIA
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Insider/outsider: Feminists in India Addressing the State's Wars

This is the third and last Research Profile resulting from my visit to India. I'll focus mainly on women's interventions in two instances where the Indian state is forcibly suppressing insurgent movements for self-determination: Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East region. But I'll start with a brief note on Indian militarization and enmity with Pakistan, and a women's initiative in this context.

1 INDIAN MILITARIZATION AND ITS OPPONENTS

India is a highly militarized state. Its total national armed force, with around 1.1 million personnel, is the third largest in the world. Its air force is the world's fourth largest.¹ This massive military machine confronts supposed threats to security that are both external and internal. Externally, it's the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and China – most continuously the former - that are the main perceived enemies.²

The Independence of India in 1947 was immediately followed by widespread bloodshed as Partition split the entity in two.³ Ever since, the formally secular but predominantly Hindu state of India has had uneasy relations with the state of Pakistan, with its overwhelmingly Muslim population and politics. Bangladesh, which seceded from Pakistan in a bitter war in 1971, is smaller, less militarized and therefore less threatening to India than is Pakistan. But the Indian / Bangladesh frontier is crossed by many undocumented economic migrants. Increasingly the porosity of this 'soft border' is a source of disquiet to India.⁴

¹ www.indianchild.com/indian_armed_forces.htm accessed February 3 2005. The figures obtained from this website are rather old – those of 1994. While the relative ranking of India may have changed in the interval it is unlikely that the actual size of the force has decreased.

² Though political relations with neighbouring Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are also sometimes tense, they are less powerful states and not perceived as a military threat.

³ For feminist accounts of the effects of Partition on women, see Butalia 2000 and Menon and Bhasin 1998.

⁴ It has been pointed out to me that the 'real' issue behind India's problematizing of this border is whether the poor Bangladeshi migrants are Hindu or Muslim. If Hindu they are sympathetically viewed as 'refugees'; if Muslim they are seen as 'illegal immigrants' appropriating land and jobs in India and altering the demographic pattern. (Rajashri Dasgupta personal observation).

In the wider international scene, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru between 1947 and 1964, India was a leader among the non-aligned countries, seeking to build a strong bloc independent of the rival camps of capitalist 'west' and communist 'east'. During the 1970s and '80s however India developed a close military and strategic relationship with the USSR. It signed a ten-year 'friendship treaty' with the Soviet Union and obtained nearly all its advanced military hardware from this source. In turn, the USSR supported India's interests at the UN. But with the eclipse of the Soviet Union in the late '80s and the 1990s, Indian foreign and economic policy increasingly turned towards the USA. Although the Indian government is not a supporter of Bush's policies, the anti-Islamist discourse of the 'War on Terror' has resonance in this country, appealing particularly to the Hindutva extremists that have gained enough votes to win power in several states and, for a period, in the national government.

Internally the Army is deployed against insurgencies in two peripheral areas, Kashmir in the north and the cluster of small states that comprises 'the North-East' of India. Its military actions in these areas are carried out under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 and 1972 (AFSPA), Disturbed Areas legislation, and since 2002 the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA).

The Army has often been called on to supplement police action elsewhere in troubled areas. Organized violence in India arises in class relations (the so-called Naxalite, or Peoples' War Group, insurgencies in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh), in race relations (oppression of tribal people – *adivasis*), in caste relations (aggression against *dalits*) and in ethno-religious relations (particularly genocidal attacks by Hindu extremists on Sikhs (notably in 1984) and on Muslims (as in the Gujarat massacre of 2002 about which I have written in a separate Profile, No.10).

Anuradha Chenoy summarizes the situation as follows.

In India the increase in militarization can be indexed by many factors: unresolved regional and territorial conflicts with bordering countries; the recent use of a doctrine of deterrence based on acquiring nuclear weapons; the switch to a foreign policy that has rejected the established tenet of non-alignment and replaced it with a realist framework; and national-security doctrine that does not place enough emphasis on peace negotiations. Internal militarization can be judged by the promulgation of laws that give the army extraordinary powers over civilians in conflict situations; the increased use of the army to resolve civilian issues and suppress opposition movements; the centralisation of state structures and justification of a militarist ideology by the state; and the increasing use of military and paramilitary forces in domestic crises and conflicts (Chenoy 2002:122).

1a: The anti-war movement in India

Anti-war and anti-militarist activism in India tends to be focused around (1) opposition to nuclear weapons and (2) reducing tension between India and Pakistan. While there were demonstrations nationally and locally in 2002 and 2003 against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies, these were not as massive in India as in some countries, partly because civil society is relatively weak but partly because the government didn't seem to be on the point of joining Bush's "coalition of the willing". What has agitated the movement far more has been the war rhetoric exchanged between India and Pakistan and frequent border clashes between their armed forces, potentially very dangerous given their nuclear arms race.

A moment that fuelled macho triumphalism on the right was the testing of a nuclear device by India at Pokhran in the Rajasthan desert in 1998. This was followed a year later, in the summer of 1999, by a serious frontier incident at Kargil. The death of hundreds of Indian soldiers in a ten-day assault by Pakistan shocked Indian public opinion and gave rise to a wave of jingoistic nationalism throughout the country.

Conversely, these moments have also stimulated anti-war and anti-militarist activism. Among the national organizations involved are MIND, the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament and PIPFPD, the Pakistan-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy formed in 1994. Both have local chapters in various states. MIND calls for the de-nuclearization of Indian defence policy, and an end to production and deployment of nuclear weapons by both India and Pakistan.⁵

PIPFPD, as their title suggests, believe that people-to-people dialogue has an important role to play in peace building and that resistance to war has to be linked to 'the struggle for democratization' and the demilitarization of 'domestic governance' in the two countries. Thus the People's Forum link the reduction of tension between India and Pakistan to the restoration of peace and democracy in Kashmir and to the reduction of religious intolerance throughout both countries (PIPFPD brochure, undated).

This raises an important issue. I often heard it pointed out that 'India is a democracy after all'. It is true that, though heavily militarized, it is not a *military state*. It has a multi-party electoral system. But Indian democracy does not extend to Jammu and Kashmir nor to the North-East, whose peoples feel the full weight of the state's repressiveness. Stephen Cohen points out that the reality of so many Indians living under military rule, if not military law, makes India one of the world's largest military dominated states – while being simultaneously the world's largest democracy (Cohen 1990:100). The Indian state's handling of communal/religious intolerance and violence has been far

⁵ www.angelfire.com/mi/MIND123 accessed February 3 2005.

from 'democratic'. In some ways it is harder to see, in a formal democracy, where the sources of repression lie. It is all the more important therefore that the antiwar movement address both the external and internal military behaviours of the state, and question not only its militarism but also failures of democracy that have given rise to it.

1b: Women opposing Indian militarism and war

In visiting New Delhi and Kolkata I wanted to meet women who could help me understand better the organized responses of women to the posture of the Indian state toward those it perceives as its external and internal 'enemies'.

The national organizations opposing Indian militarism, mentioned above, have both men and women members, but their leaders and spokespeople tend to be men. In the anti-nuclear movement, Uma Chakravarty told me 'the thinking and writing is done almost entirely by men – it's thought to be 'specialized'. There's no gender analysis of the issues'. The People's Forum, although in its brochure it mentions the importance of 'the struggles of dalits, women, workers, adivasis and other marginalised sections' in countering the threat of globalisation, is said to lack a well-developed gender perspective on militarism and war.

On the other hand Uma Chakravarty pointed out some encouraging developments. Although Indian feminists made a late beginning on militarization and nuclearization, two recent interventions are notable. First, a pamphlet on the Iraq war and the global dimensions of militarism was widely circulated during the antiwar campaign and later published in a collection (Joseph and Sharma 2003). Second, an article written collectively by a group of feminists was published in an edited volume of essays on nuclearization in South Asia (Sangari et al 2001). Also, current research by Seema Kazi addresses Indian militarism and militarization from a civil society and gender perspective, in particular relation to Kashmir. Women experience similarities between the violence of war and the violence of peace - so a gender analysis usefully expands the meaning of militarization to include the relationship between state violence *and social relations*. It reveals the 'public-private' dichotomy running through dominant narratives on conflict as false.⁶

Conversely, if the anti-war movement and theorists of Indian militarism have in the past not been particularly gender conscious, the Indian women's movement nationally has, for its part, not laid very much stress on war and militarization. In my Research Profile No.11, I noted that Vimochana / Women in Black, in Bangalore, had made a strong conceptual connection between *violence against women* and the issue of *militarization and war*. But this connection has not been made so clearly in the national women's movement, even though violence against women has been the prime motivating issue since its origin in the eighties.

⁶ Seema Kazi is a Delhi-based women's studies scholar, who is writing a PhD thesis at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics, on the theme of gender and militarization in Kashmir.

But things may be changing in this respect too. Asha Hans told me that at the forthcoming national feminist conference in Goa one item on the agenda this time will be militarization. Such a focus, she said, is welcome and new. Uma Chakravarty added a further update. The recently concluded XIth national conference of the Indian Association of Women's Studies had two sub-themes on militarization, conflict and displacement. The main plenary (which Uma introduced by attacking cartographic nationalism) included a presentation by Nandita Haksar who spoke about the North-East and Kashmir, and was critical of state repression and militarized state structures in the regions. At the end of the conference two resolutions were passed: one against militarization generally, and one that specifically demanded the lifting of the AFSPA and the extension of solidarity to the women of Manipur, recognized as bearing the consequences of the Act for close to five decades.

Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA)

One unusual and high-profile national project of 'women against war' is the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA).⁷ It began in 1999, at the time of the Kargil war, when tension between India and Pakistan was at its peak. Forty-one women from all over India came together and decided to organize a visit to Pakistan to meet like-minded women. Among them they had many pre-existing friendships and connections over there on the 'enemy' side. But, Syeda Hameed, one of the organizers, told me, to reach out to them, 'was unthinkable at the time. It seemed like sheer madness'. They had no sanction from either government for the visit. All the same, contacts were mobilized, visas obtained and the journey organized.

It was on 25 March 2000 that women finally boarded a Pakistan Tourism Bus at the Ambedkar Stadium in New Delhi for the thirteen hour journey to Lahore and thence to Islamabad. In Pakistan they were received by various government ministers and human rights bodies, but most importantly they established warm connections with women's organizations. The final conference produced a statement that included a pledge 'to make Peace a reality in the subcontinent'.

Regrettably the prevailing tensions have not allowed the collective wisdom of women of the sub-continent to surface. Women activists will mobilize these women's voices, so that they are heard in every part of the region making it difficult for the decision makers to ignore them. They shall become the force in steering the destinies of these two great nations towards peace, progress and prosperity (WIPSA 2000:8).

A return visit to India by Pakistani women took place soon after. Three years later still, in May 2003, 34 women made a similar bus trip, from Kolkata to

⁷ This was not the only women's organization building bridges between India and Pakistan at this time. Meenakshi Gopinath for example told me that WISCOMP (see p.24) was organizing a series of conflict transformation workshops for young Indians and Pakistanis. WISCOMP's approach to CR is described in Gopinath et al.2003.

Dhakha in Bangladesh. This time co-organizers with WIPSA were SANGAT, the South Asian Network of Gender Activists and Trainers. The travelling group met ministers and officials, professional associations and trade union women, and visited a number of women's NGOs.

The issues this time were different. Bangladesh is not in a state of war with India. But the management of the international border involves many human rights abuses, in particular the maltreatment of gypsy communities and the trafficking of women and children. I notice that issues touched on in the report were far-reaching, including condemnation of the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq, and aggression in Palestine. The group also expressed more of WIPSA's feminist ethos. They wrote

The underlying philosophy at this journey was the feminist desire for bonding, the belief that hearts ridden with differences must first come closer and the differences understood and respected....As women we felt we were beginning a new way of relating, a new way of bringing the ordinary people of our two countries together...(WIPSA and SANGAT 2003:1).

We are against violence which is perpetuated as a means of resolving disputes in the family, the community and between countries... If women of the South Asian region are united, they can pressurise the governments to stop destructive political power games. The borders and boundaries are insignificant when hearts and minds meet (WIPSA and SANGAT 2003:30).

2 JAMMU AND KASHMIR

2a: History of the conflict

The war within and over 'Kashmir' is the one conflict in India that is widely reported internationally. This is because it's a flashpoint in the long-running hostility between Pakistan and India, and there's fear that it could spark all-out war between these two nuclear-armed states.

At Independence, the (Hindu) Raja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir signed a provisional instrument of accession to the Indian state. However, J&K was granted its own constitution, which endowed it with certain rights. For instance, one clause precluded Indians from other parts of India buying land in the state.

In the ensuing process of Partition, the Indian states with majority Muslim population became part of Pakistan. The two states with almost equal Hindu and Muslim populations, Punjab and Bengal, were divided between Pakistan and India. Jammu and Kashmir was an exception – the only Muslim-majority state that remained in India. As Rita Manchanda puts it,

India maintains that the territory of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of the country... Pakistan's claims on Kashmir are derived from the *raison d'être* of the founding of Pakistan as the homeland of the Muslims of the subcontinent... India has made it the test case of its secularism, linking its fate with the survival of a pluralist Indian state, home to 120 million Muslims (Manchanda 2001b: 47).

The first war between Pakistan and India over J&K occurred in 1948. The ceasefire line was adopted as a *de facto* border, the Line of Control (LOC), effective from 1 January 1949, supervised by the United Nations. Thereby India lost control of part of the state territory. The Kashmir valley (predominantly Muslim), Jammu (predominantly Hindu) and Ladakh (mainly Buddhist), a total of around 10 million people, remained in India (IJK). But a smaller area to the west, which became known as 'azad', or 'free' J&K (AJK) fell to Pakistan's control, along with the territories of Gilgit and Baltistan which became Pakistan's 'Northern Territories'. War broke out again in 1965 and 1971, but the cessation of these hostilities did not result in any change in the 1949 border. It is along the Line of Control, effectively an international border between India and Pakistan, that clashes between the two militaries have continued to occur. The partitioning of Kashmir along the LOC, a small-scale version of the Partition of the sub-continent after independence, has had a similar effect in dividing many families and generating much suffering.⁸

In 1990 a different kind of war began in Indian Jammu and Kashmir – an internal struggle against the Indian state. UN resolutions had called for a plebiscite to decide on J&K's status, with which India and Pakistan had failed to comply. The political system in IJK, largely controlled by Indian politicians, was (as it still remains) unrepresentative of local opinion. Rigged elections in 1983 and 1987 heightened anti-state feeling.

In the late 1980s young men in the Valley began to organize a movement they called the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). In 1990 they started a guerrilla insurgency aiming to reunite the split parts of J&K and declare the whole an independent state. As Sumantra Bose writes

They were stunned by the enthusiastic popular response their makeshift insurrection received from the people of the Kashmir Valley. The militants were aware of widespread, deep-rooted grievance against India, but they were still taken by surprise by the intensity of mass support for *azaadi* (freedom), expressed in huge pro-independence demonstrations in the Valley during 1990 (Bose 2003:3).

The heavy reaction of the Indian military, particularly a massacre by government troops in Gaokadal on 22 January 1990, drove street protest underground. It strengthened the authority of those militants who favoured not independence but unification with Pakistan.

⁸ Soon after I was in India I heard of a new development: to some media fanfare, a bus route had been opened between Srinagar, the principal city of J&K, and Muzaffarabad in 'azad' Kashmir.

The independentist, Muslim but secularist JKLF's dominance of the uprising yielded by 1992-1993 to the rise of a pro-Pakistan, moderate Islamist guerrilla group called *Hizb-ul Mujahideen*, strongly promoted by Pakistani military authorities (Bose 2003:3).

Increasingly Pakistani fighters would penetrate J&K so that the insurgency became less a movement for freedom (*tehreek-e-azadi*) and more an Islamicist *jihad* (holy war). The Indian state characterized the uprising as cross-border terrorism inspired and organized by Pakistan (Kaul Bhatia 2001).

In 1994 the JKLF renounced armed struggle and set up a political alliance termed the All Parties Hurriyat Conference. But (as Rita Manchanda puts it) the Hurriyat leaders were unable to disavow the extremist politics of armed struggle. Although the ordinary inhabitants of the Valley had begun to understand that the bloodshed was no longer likely to deliver independence, by now 'power had passed into the hands of those who wielded the gun and had no other politics' (Manchanda 2001b:79).

The Government of India deploys a force of troops and security personnel in J&K estimated variously at 300 - 500,000. They are equipped with the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) which permits massive human rights violations, including unlimited detention without trial and shooting of suspects on sight, a strategy called 'catch and kill'. They frequently ransack entire villages, killing men and raping women, in revenge for attacks on military personnel. The arbitrariness of the violence means nobody is safe. Journalist Sonia Jabbar movingly describes an incident in which Muslim militants disguised as Indian Army soldiers attacked a village of Sikhs, while the Army then punished an innocent neighbouring village of Muslims as the supposed culprits (Ramachandran and Jabbar, undated).

2b: The damage to Kashmiri society

Although in 2000 there were attempts at ceasefire on both sides, the conflict is nowhere near political resolution. A newly formed coalition government in late 2002 pledged to remedy human rights violations in J&K and to disband the much hated Special Operations Group of the police. A year later this had still not been implemented. I was told by a Kashmiri journalist from Srinagar, 'Parliamentary democracy is a farce. The Indian government coerces the voters and controls puppet candidates. Nobody turns out to vote in elections.' The Hurriyat Conference boycotted elections in the summer of 2004 and attacked the polls, to which security forces were driving reluctant voters. The turnout was no more than 16%.⁹

Meanwhile, the cost to Kashmiri society has been enormous. The death toll between 1989 and 2002 is believed to be between 40,000 (the official figure)

⁹ Bulletin of Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.org/library>, accessed 6 November 2004.

and 80,000 (the estimate of the Hurriyat Conference) (Bose 2003:4). There have been more than half a million people displaced; 2000 people have disappeared, unaccounted for; there are an estimated 30,000 orphans; 15,000 widows and thousands of 'half-widows' (wives of disappeared men) (Manchanda 2001b: 46).

Caught between the bullets of the militants and the security forces innocent people have been the inevitable victims of this mindless saga of violence. Crackdowns, cordon and search operations, area sanitation, road opening patrols, soft targets are the terms that have permeated the discourse in the valley along with the daily horrors of negotiating militant ambushes, grenade attacks, bomb blasts and landmines. The militarization of Kashmir that has taken place both at the level of society and at the level of politics has brought its wake a trail of disruption, death and destruction (Das Gupta, undated:1).

Added to the conflict between state and insurgents there has long been a bitter war between militants and moderates. Nor does it end there. In this gun culture the violence isn't limited to political struggle but extends to personal vendettas, extortion and other forms of criminality (Kaul Bhatia 2001). A Kashmiri journalist told me how the sense of threat affects morale.

There are so many incidents. Every day people are used to seeing in the news, two or three deaths, so many women molested, so many wounded in incidents. After sixteen years of armed struggle people keep quiet. There are informers – and assassinations of supposed informers. People are labelled and categorized. You are taken to be pro-Indian, or pro-Pakistani, or separatist. There is suspicion. It splits families.

This is an environment in which it's impossible for human rights organizations and other manifestations of a normal civil society to flourish - so much is controlled either by the state or by a variety of militant groups.

The conflict in Kashmir is often represented, in India and internationally, as an ethnic one, in which Muslims are attacking a Hindu minority associated with Indian rule. But several of the women I interviewed, some from India, some from Kashmir, stressed that there is rather little inter-ethnic aggression in this conflict. They believe any ethnic animosity is a by-product of the brutal repression by the state of an originally legitimate movement for self-determination and the infiltration into Kashmir of Pakistani jihadists. Those who believe this is not an inter-communal war often invoke the prevalence in Kashmir of the tolerant Sufi variant of Islam, and the popular notion of 'Kashmiriyat'.

Kashmiriyat is perceived as the distinct if composite and essentially secular culture of the people who inhabit the Valley of Kashmir – a culture and way of life that had evolved over centuries of coexistence and confluence of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and the Sufi cult (Das Gupta undated: 3).

A particularly destructive moment in recent Kashmiri history was the exodus of Hindus from the Valley. Known locally as Pandits, the Hindus had filled a different economic niche from their Muslim neighbours. They had traditionally been literate, the clerks and officials employed by the state, while the Muslims of the Valley were traditionally farmers and crafts-people. But there had been a shared sense of being Kashmiri. In 1990, an estimated 200,000 fled the Valley, some to live abroad, some to refugee camps in Jammu. The majority of Pandits left due to fear for their safety (particularly threats of rape). Some suggest the fears were manipulated by Hindu leaders. Either way, the departure of the Pandits is seen as marking the beginning of the end of the Kashmiriyat ideal, irretrievably communalizing Kashmiri society (Manchanda 2001b).

2c: The effect of conflict on Kashmiri women

Women tell me that gender relations in Kashmir, though patriarchal, have generally involved greater respect and freedom for women than has been the case in many other areas of India, whether predominantly Muslim or Hindu. Customarily, most women have not covered their faces when in public, but have worn just a headscarf tied behind. Women were on a promising trajectory in the seventies and eighties. Families were increasingly willing to spend money on the education of their daughters as well as their sons. In the growing middle-class, women were entering administrative, professional and academic work.

But the trajectory was interrupted and reversed by the outbreak of open warfare in IJK in 1990. Local men, as Rita Manchanda puts it, 'emasculated by a powerful armed enemy, hit back by reasserting control over women' (Manchanda 2001b: 45). And armed conflict itself has had a devastating effect.

Everyday violence transformed women's lives. Women became indirect victims of the arrest, torture, disappearance and loss of loved ones. Also, women became direct victims of the physical violence of rape, kidnapping and murder. No house in the valley was left untouched, directly or indirectly from the protracted curfews, crackdowns, arson and generalised violence (Manchanda 2001b: 70).

Essays from Kashmir edited by Urvashi Butalia (Butalia 2002) express with terrible clarity the suffering of Kashmiri women in this war. Widowhood has an especially damaging effect on women in India, because it means not only loss of material support but loss of respect in family and community. To survive at all, many widows must marry surviving male relatives. Those who have no such resource may starve. One particular village, Dard Pora, where most of the men were killed by the Army, is known as the 'village of widows'. In principle, the state gives compensation to widows, but this support does not extend to those whose husbands fought the state.

2d: The prevalence of rape

The Indian Army, from the start of the repression in 1990, has found rape an effective way of humiliating and shaming the men and communities they wish to subdue. Shortly before I was in New Delhi an article appeared in the newspaper *Greater Kashmir*, reporting the rape of a 10-year-old girl and her mother by a group of soldiers led by a major of the Rashtriya Rifles. It was reported as 'the third incident in ten days' and conveyed the usual rider: government orders probe, Army denies charges.¹⁰ The article evoked no surprise, for such news is barely news at all.

In the N.Kashmir village of Kunan Pospora, in 1991, in a cordon and search operation by the 5th Rajputana Rifles, 20 or 30 women and girls were raped. The village has been ostracised ever since, for rape is always blamed on the victim. Sonia Jabbar, who visited the village, told me that it's difficult for young women to find husbands, and young girls, not even born at the time of the incident, don't go to high school because it's out of the area and they had been teased and taunted for coming from that village.

The militants made the plight of the women worse, making capital of the incident, parading the village in front of the media. Rita Manchanda writes

...the political leadership of the separatist movement, in publicly projecting rape as a war crime, failed at the same time to politically challenge the patriarchal code of the 'dishonoured' women.' In other words they shifted it from being an issue of family honour to being an issue of community honour (Manchanda 2001b: 75).

This was of no help to women. Worse, the militants themselves practice rape. Ashima Kaul reports

The militants ... rape a woman for being the wife, mother, daughter or sister of an informer or deserter from their ranks. They also rape or threaten to rape a woman when they want to coerce the male member of the family to go to training camps... (Kaul Bhatia 2001: 11).

For these and other reasons, many women are almost as angry with the Hurriyat as they are with the Army. Yet silence surrounds these abuses. Women have learned that to speak out about rape is to compound the already disastrous effect on their lives.

2e: Limitations on women's organisation

Women demonstrated against the Indian government in spontaneous protests, especially in the early 1990s, but the resistance was not organised

¹⁰ *Greater Kashmir* (2004) Vol.17, No.310, November 8, p.1.

or sustained. During the 1990s women of the Muslim community are known to have helped the fighters in various ways, but there are believed to be few, if any, women in the various underground fighting forces in Kashmir, and there are none in the leadership. There's been a tendency for the leadership to be instrumental about women's suffering, 'categorising them as martyrs' mothers or raped women, dismissing their activism as accidental and denying them agency' (Manchanda 2001b: 34). Sahba Husain told me in interview

the conflict was a space for women to be active, but their issues were suppressed. Marriage and divorce rights, property rights, these things the militants believed could wait until victory had been achieved.

After Parveena Ahangar brought a *habeas corpus* plea against the government concerning the suspected abduction of her son by the military, she formed an Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons. The main activists in of the APDP are women and it uses a discourse of 'motherhood' - it is sometimes known as the 'Kashmir Mothers' Front'. It is concerned only with victims of the state, not those of of the Hurriyat

There is in fact a notable lack of autonomous feminist initiatives in Kashmir. The two women's organisations that are most widely known are Dukhtarane Millat (Daughters of the Faith, DM) and Merkaz-e-Khawatteen (Council of Muslim Women, MKM). Both are intimately involved with militant groups, and have little mass base. The former, under the energetic leadership of Asiya Andrabi, in 1992 launched a campaign for stricter observance of *sharia* law and for women to adopt full cover, the *burqa*. Women failing to comply were harassed and beaten.

In fact the *burqa* campaign proved unpopular, especially among middle-class and urban women, including students. As the underground groups have become more brutal, many women have become disillusioned with the armed struggle. Sonia Jabbar says, 'men's and women's discourse there is really different'. But it's a real challenge to know how to address violence and injustice, not just that of the Indian authorities but that within Kashmiri society. The Indian government actively discourages international humanitarian agencies working in Kashmir, and for their part the Hurriyat don't welcome interventions by Indian NGOs that might show India in a good light. As to women's organizing, they don't tolerate any such thing if it's not under their control. And the costs of stepping out of line are very high. 'You don't fool around,' I was told.

Secularism as a whole as failed in Kashmir. Rita Manchanda summarizes the way this affects women's organizing.

The lack of local secular women's groups in Kashmir is both a historical development and symptomatic of the struggle. With the MKM and the DM articulating women's role in the conflict, any possibility of reaching out and building alliances, either with mirror organisations like the Daughters of Vitasta [an organization of Pandit women] or with secular women's movements in the rest of the country, was undermined. At the

national level, women's groups, human rights organisations and civil liberties groups, with a few significant exceptions, have been reluctant to get involved in a pro-separatist struggle (Manchanda 2001b: 92).

3 NORTH-EAST INDIA

North-East India, like Kashmir, is a region in which the Indian state is at war with some of its own citizens. The region is politically sensitive, having international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. It contains seven small states: Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Together they have around 31 million inhabitants, twice as many as Jammu and Kashmir. The region is attached to the rest of India by only a narrow corridor running between Bhutan to the north and Bangladesh to the south.

There is a 'perspective' problem about the region. For those who live there, it's the centre of the world. For those who live in the rest of India it's 'the North-East', peripheral and problematic, a place where there's nothing but trouble. Attitudes towards the Nagas are a case in point. The Naga tribes were always fighters, and among their traditions was ritual headhunting. They are in the main Christians, predominantly Baptists, converted from animistic beliefs by missionaries. Unlike Hindus, they eat beef; unlike Muslims, pork. So the upper caste Hindu ruling elite of India tend to see them as 'backward tribal peoples'. Sometimes even well-meaning metropolitan Indian people 'exoticize' the people of the North-Eastern tribes. This treatment alienates many individual northeasterners and catches others uncomfortably in a cleft stick between Indian identity and a specific local identity.

The seven states all have armed conflicts, though they differ in scale, intensity and motivation. Assam for instance, despite having a largely Hindu population, has an armed movement, the United Liberation Front of Assam, seeking secession from India. But for purposes of this paper I shall focus on two anti-state insurgencies, that of the Nagas and that of the Meitei and other people of Manipur¹¹ - because it's in these two contexts that I found specially interesting activity among women.

3a: The Nagas

Naga struggle for independence

The Nagas comprise numerous separate tribes, living in mountainous areas between the Chindwin river and the Brahmaputra plains. The British found

¹¹ Binalakshmi Nepram has helpfully pointed out that, as the Naga people live not only in Nagaland but also in neighbouring states, so the Meitei live not only in Manipur but also across several state boundaries. Besides, in addition to the Meitei of Manipur, Manipuri people of ethnicities such as the Kukis, Hmars, Zomis and Pangals are also waging armed rebellion. When you read the term 'Meitei' or 'Manipuri' in the following account these complexities should be borne in mind.

these warrior hill people hard to administer and largely neglected the area. A movement for unification of the tribes began even before the end of British rule. As Independence approached, self-determination was foreseen, and the Nagas were assured by Indian leaders that Indian rule wouldn't be imposed on them against their will. The promise was broken. And although the Indian state of 'Nagaland' was conceded in 1963, this didn't satisfy the Nagas desire for unification and autonomy, because a lot of them live in neighbouring North-Eastern states, and 40 percent indeed live outside the borders of India altogether, in Myanmar. The Nagas refer to Indian Naga territory as Western Nagaland and to that in Myanmar as Eastern Nagaland. They've continued to see themselves as a homogeneous and distinct people who are discriminated against by Indian society and the state.

So, as Rita Manchanda writes

The growing security paranoia of the emerging Indian ruling elite, especially as regards the peripheries or border areas, undermined the early commitments made to the Nagas to safeguard their autonomy and drove a demand for self-rule into an armed struggle for 'nothing short of sovereignty' (Manchanda 2004: 3)

The Indian Armed Forces moved into Nagaland in the 1950s, and have remained ever since. As in Kashmir, they are furnished with the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which can be imposed for an indefinite period without review and gives unbridled powers to military personnel, guaranteeing them near total immunity (Khala 2003). Paula Banerjee, a researcher who visits Nagaland frequently, described it to me as 'an area under siege'.

The independence movement was led for many years by Angami Z. Phizo, president of the Naga National Council. As the struggle intensified and the militants went underground, Phizo left to live in exile in London. In 1980 there was a split in the movement, which now has four factions. The Naga National Council is divided into the 'Adino' and 'Pangar' factions, with only limited military operational capability. The armed struggle is pursued mainly by two other groups, named after their leaders. The stronger is the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, led jointly by Isak Swu and Th. Muivah. Known as NSCN (I-M), its headquarters are in Bangkok, Thailand. The NSCN (K) is the National Socialist Council of Nagaland led by S.S. (or 'Baba') Khaplang from his base in the mountains of Eastern Nagaland (Myanmar), where he runs a training camp for Nagas and militants of several other liberation movements of the North-East.

The state government of Nagaland is controlled by politicians and parties that for most purposes comply with the policies of those in power in New Delhi. But the Naga tribes have an alternative structure in their traditional local assemblies of elders, of which the apex bodies are the Naga Ho-Ho (in Nagaland) and the United Naga Council (across the border in Manipur). They also come together in the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights. On the other hand numerous attempts to bring the Swu/Muivah and Khaplang factions to an accord have foundered. Even the church fails to unite them because Naga Christianity has several variants. Another impediment to unity

is language. With a host of different tribal action tongues, the Nagas are obliged to communicate among themselves in English, or in a fabricated pidgin language called Nagamese.

There are currently two separate ceasefire agreements in operation between the Nagas and the Government of India. One, with the NSCN (IM) dates to 1997, the other, with the Khaplang faction, to 2001. But these have apparently not ended the bloodshed. Besides, rather than being a factor for stabilization in the North-East, the ceasefires between the Nagas and the Indian government are threatening to the several other states in the region in which Naga tribes reside. In negotiating the ceasefire, the leaders had spoken of 'Nagalim', not 'Nagaland'. This term suggests an irredentist dream of a future political entity encompassing all the four or five million Naga people, in whatever state they currently reside.

Meantime, heavy-handed repression by the Indian Armed Forces, endlessly provoking further desperation among the Nagas, has had a seriously damaging effect on everyday life. There has been serious loss of subsistence agriculture. The economy, education, health services and the civil administration all suffer from the insecurity. There is a growing problem of alcoholism. Narcotics and small arms abound. So do human rights abuses - on all sides.

Naga women's activism

Naga society is patriarchal and patrilineal. Women have significant status within the framework of those structures, in social and ritual life, but roles are strongly gendered. Although women have taken to education with fervour and female literacy rate is higher than the national average, equality does not extend to economic and political power. 'Electoral politics in the northeast is... completely dominated by men. They dominate the seats of power', writes Paula Banerjee (Banerjee 2004: 522). Women are excluded not only from modern but from traditional political structures – they are not permitted to be members of village tribal councils or the Naga Ho-Ho and the equivalent apex body in Manipur, the United Naga Council.

However, in Naga society there's an old tradition known as *pukrelia*, in which women would intervene to bring a halt to inter-tribal fighting. Men respected this function and would sometimes call on women 'as a last resort' in conflict situations. Naga women were not traditionally permitted to bear arms. This traditional association between women and 'peace' may explain why there are very few women among the armed militants of the Naga national movement, in contrast for instance with the insurgencies in Nepal and Sri Lanka.

<i>Naga Mothers Association</i>

Women have a separate structure, of which the apex body in Nagaland is the Naga Mothers Association, grouping the women's organisations of the various Naga tribes. Despite being called a 'mothers' association', members may be married or unmarried, have children or none. It was formed in 1984 with the

aim of raising the consciousness of citizens towards 'more responsible living and human development' (Banerjee 2001: 160). Its leader for many years was a charismatic woman called Nedionuo Angami. She has now been replaced as president by a younger woman, also well-respected, Khesheli Chishi.

In the 1990s repression by the state and inter-factional rivalry were resulting in many deaths and injuries. In October 1994 the NMA formed a 'peace team' to halt the deterioration. Their theme was 'Shed No More Blood'. They initiated dialogue with the so-called 'national workers' of the underground factions and with the state government, calling on both sides to arrest the violence. In a pamphlet of 25 May 1995 they wrote 'the way in which our society is being run whether by the overground government or the underground government, has become simply intolerable.' (Banerjee 2001: 161) They initiated an annual Day of Mourning, when deaths on all sides are commemorated. At the first such occasion in 1994 3000 women from different tribes turned out in a spirit of healing and reconciliation.

The scope of the Naga Mothers' Association does not extend to the fifteen Naga tribes living in Manipur, which are represented by a separate organization, the Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM). Formed in 1994 as a result of an increasing awareness among women prompted by preparations for the UN 4th Women's Conference in Beijing, it has (writes Rita Manchanda) 'a more secular modern associational style' than the NMA. 'While the NMA has subsumed a gender rights agenda in an overall mobilization for social reform, the NWUM has been much more determined to inscribe gender rights on the post-conflict democratic agenda' (Manchanda 2004: 71).

Like their sisters in Nagaland, the Naga women of Manipur are excluded from membership of the apex body, the United Naga Council, but unlike them they are prepared to stand up and make demands for political representation. 'NWUM women... have been particularly resentful of being used as 'human shields' and ignored when it comes to decision-making' (Manchanda 2004: 75).

Although there are difficulties of communication (the NWUM do not speak Nagalese), the two associations co-operate well. Since the signing of the ceasefires they have worked together to press for their extension and to mobilize support for the peace process among the tribes. In March 1999 a four-woman team trekked on foot across rough and dangerous terrain to S.S.Khaplang's headquarters in Myanmar. They've been together several times to visit Isak Swu and Th. Muivah in Bangkok (Manchanda 2004: 53). In September 2000 when the ceasefire was in danger of being broken, the two organisations together appealed to the Indian Prime Minister and the rebel groups to sustain the process (Manchanda 2004: 11).

The significance of Naga women's activism

What does the activity of Naga women add up to? In terms of *peace activism*, the women's organizations play an important part in pressing for a more

consensual politics in Naga society, and for including an agenda of justice and development in the notion of peace. They are unusual in having actually been party to peace negotiations. But their initiatives are ambiguous. The women continue to support the insurgents and believe in the justice of the armed movement for self-determination, while simultaneously urging a reduction in violence. They don't act against the ideals of their people and are sometimes used by the rebel groups for their own purposes. On the other hand they are liable to be marginalised by the state. Paula Banerjee writes

Women recognise that they can become important factors for peace because it is within the traditional, patriarchal definition of their roles. But the state has failed to support their leadership in peace processes at the local community or national level (Banerjee 2001: 169).

They are ambiguous too in terms of a *feminist agenda*. As Rita Manchanda points out, the political language of the NMA is articulated as an extension of everyday life: motherhood and food. They innovate within their traditional identities, but don't challenge them. They simply 'stretch' their roles as women. She points out 'the politics of motherhood are ambivalent, they are available for mobilisation for human rights in peace and for raising soldiers' (Manchanda 2004: 25).

The Naga Mothers Association's peace initiative turns to the moral authority of the mother and socially sanctioned space available within the Naga tradition of women's activism for peace in the informal space of politics. It is precisely as mothers that women have this space to appeal to the powerful and move them to compassion and shame. The NMA's initiative represents the use of motherhood for women's political mobilisation and also its limitations (Manchanda 2004: 12).

Finally, neither the Naga women activists nor those of Manipur (see below) transcend identification with their *ethnic or national 'names'*. While they successfully make common cause with other tribes on certain issues, e.g. on the issue of a Greater Nagaland, they can turn fiercely against each other when ethnic interests are at stake.

Nonetheless, and more positively, Paula Banerjee sees them making a useful space for women in the public sphere, and, once there, as being a democratizing influence. She said to me in interview 'They are using women's traditional concerns as an instrument for peace. It's an active strategy. War is a masculine business and to get in on the act they need lever. Motherhood for them is that lever.'

3b: Manipur and the Meteis

The state of Manipur is adjacent to Nagaland, and also on the border between India and Myanmar. It was an independent kingdom until incorporated into the British Empire in 1891 as one of the 'princely states'. Soon after

independence, under house arrest in Shillong, the king was obliged to sign a 'Merger Agreement', making Manipur a part of India (Takhellambum 2003).

The royalty and ruling class of princely Manipur were of the Metei people, who inhabit the plains and still dominate the political structures. Many of the Metei were opposed to the accession of Manipur to India. Metei's are 60% of the 2.2 million inhabitants of the state. Though many had become Hindu or Muslim, today some are returning to their native religion, a form of animism called Sanamahi, and others are converting to Christianity. In the mountainous areas around them live 29 scheduled tribes, the most significant of whom are the Naga and the Kuki.

Like the Naga, the Metei are traditionally a martial society (Takhellambum 2003). In 1949, under the leadership of Hyam Irabot Singh, they started underground activities with the support of the Burmese Communist Party. The AFSPA was imposed in 1980. Today 27 armed rebel groups operate in Manipur. The most significant is the United National Liberation Front, dating from the 1960s. Ten years later the Manipur People's Liberation Army was formed, Maoist in orientation, trained in China. Locked in 'identity struggles' with the Indian state, these and other insurgent groups confront the Indian Army and police, and boycott state and national electoral processes (Nepnam 2004).

Through these decades of conflict Manipur has become a state where might is right and where the gun culture is the law of the land. Manipuri society has become divided along narrow ideological lines, with competing allegiances dividing and subdividing the populace. The state's economy and infrastructure have collapsed...(Takhellambum 2003).

This author stresses particularly the effect on women. Many are searching for disappeared family members. Many have been raped. Many have taken to prostitution to eke out a living.

Traditionally, the Metei have not fought the Naga. In fact they mediated between the Naga and the Kuki during a bloody conflict between the two tribal groups in 1992. But they have recently been unsettled by the apparent aspiration of Naga nationalist leaders to subsume the Naga-populated areas of Manipur into their future 'Nagalim'. Although the Metei are more prosperous, the Naga are better lobbyists, with international connections and support. So they're afraid that the government of India may be persuaded to 'trade away' some of their territory to the Nagas. In 2001, 20,000 Metei demonstrated on the streets against any extension of the Naga ceasefires. Government buildings in Imphal, the capital, were ransacked and there were injuries and several deaths. The Nagas living in the plains took what they could carry and fled to the hills. It is unclear whether they moved because of fear or because (somewhat like the Pandits of Kashmir Valley in their exodus to Jammu) they had been induced to do so by their leaders (interview with Roshmi Goswami).

Meitei women's activism

Meitei society is patriarchal. Yet, despite Hindu and Muslim influence in the area, Meitei women have been rather less subordinated than women elsewhere in India. They managed much of the agriculture and internal trade, and earned money from handicrafts. Women have a reputation for bold activism, and people speak of two historic Nupi Lal, or women's uprisings against the British. The first was in 1904 when they resisted punishment of their men by the British for a crime (burning down a bungalow) of which they believed them innocent. Second, in 1939, they protested against the export of rice from the state, which was creating an artificial local scarcity. They marched together to stop and overturn the bullock carts transporting rice, and burned down the dealer's warehouse. Many women were injured by bayonets.

So it was well within tradition in Manipur when, in the mid-1970s, women initiated the Nisha Bandhi movement to combat increasing drug and alcohol abuse among their menfolk. In 1991 this achieved the result of legislation that declared Manipur an alcohol-free state. Sometime in the 1980s this women's movement, prompted by atrocities committed by the Indian police, morphed into the Meira Paibis, which means 'torchbearers'.

<i>The Meira Paibi movement</i>

The Meira Paibi movement is very informal, with no written rules or constitution. Women of any age may join, but the characteristic Meira Paibi is a middle-aged married woman. Their name refers to the fact that they patrol the streets at night with flaming torches. In each locality they base themselves in a shed, called the Meira Shang, the 'torch shed'. The principal aim is to guard their neighbourhoods against surprise incursions by the Indian armed force, when they will raise the alarm by banging on lampposts. But they also try to deter guerrillas from carrying out operations in localities where they may result in reprisals against villages. The Meira Paibis call for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. At times they have been in dialogue with the authorities, but at other times they have become the target of military violence (Takhellambum 2003).

A dramatic incident took place in July 2004, which brought the Meira Paibis to the attention of the media in India. On July 10, under cover of night, four men of the Assam Rifles came to the house of a woman, Thangjam Manorama, with an arrest warrant. They believed her to be among the commanders of the People's Liberation Army, though those who knew her said that she was no longer connected with the armed struggle. Her body, raped, mutilated and half naked, was found in the morning. She had been shot six times, including through the genitals.

There were massive protests all over Manipur. On July 15 twelve women of the Meira Paibi went to headquarters of the Assam Rifles, in the historic Kangla Fort. They stripped naked. They shook the gates. Some held placards saying 'We are all Manorama's mothers', 'Indian Army rape us!'. There were

photographers and reporters present and the images that circulated next day in newspapers and on television, first locally and then India-wide, caused shock and concern. The Prime Minister of India, a Sikh, who happens to come from nearby Assam, was obliged to come to Manipur and meet with representatives of the Meira Paibi. He promised that the soldiers responsible for the outrage would be court-martialled, and agreed to a review committee with civil society members.

I received the above account verbally in the course of interviews with Roshmi Goswami, Paula Banerjee and Binalakshmi Nepram (there is also an account in Nepram 2004). Paula's view is that the stripping action was astonishing and positive. It could be seen as a strong protest not only against the brutality of the Indian Army but the whole patriarchal mode of governance of Meitei society. It was women stepping way out of line, doing something for which there was no precedent. They were neatly using mockery to shame men, she feels, and to expose the ages-long militarization of the region that makes women vulnerable to attack.

Responses were not uniform. Some men, and even some women, in the liberation movement under-played the incident, or dismissed it as 'showy'. Some denied its spontaneity, suggesting the women had been 'put up to it'. After the demonstration, trying to drive a wedge between Meitei and Naga women, a unit of the Army went to the hills and forced Naga women to be photographed holding placards distancing themselves from the Meitei women – though other women across the border in Nagaland denounced this trick as a misrepresentation of Naga women's feelings. Nonetheless the incident risked damaging relations between Naga and Meitei militants.

Perhaps even more than the Naga women's associations, the Meira Paibi are politically ambiguous. We saw above how, on the territorial issue, their ethno-national identification sometimes took precedence over their cooperation with Nagas. Bhabananda Takhellambum sees them as a valuable link between the masses and the NGOs in Manipur state, despite sometimes allowing themselves to be manipulated by political forces on both sides (Takhellambum 2003). Binalakshmi Nepram, herself a Meitei woman, told me in interview 'The Meira Paibi are a beautiful powerful movement. But I sometimes despair, because they allow themselves to be misused by both state and non-state actors'.

Also like the Naga women they are ambiguous in a feminist sense. Some women have been disappointed that the Meira Paibis fight social evils, but not the subordination of women, that they push inequalities under the carpet and don't challenge patriarchy (Vijaylakshmi Brara reported in Banerjee 2002: 15). They challenge sexual abuse by the Indian Army and police, but not by the militants. They don't raise the issue of male violence against women in the home. One woman described this (at a seminar in Kolkata) as ignoring the new forms of patriarchy. She asked, 'is patriarchy to be fought with patriarchy or is it not essential to evolve newer paradigms of gender relations that transcend the present unequal ones?' (Aparna Mahanta in Banerjee 2002: 26).

3c: The North-East Network

One women's organisation in the North-East interested me particularly - the North-East Network. It's unique in being regional, not associated with any one state or tribe, and owing allegiance to none of the militant groups. Luckily for me, Roshmi Goswami, a founder member of the Network, and its first coordinator, lives and works in New Delhi, where I was able to interview her.

Roshmi comes from Assam and lived most of her life there. She told me how, as women everywhere in India began to prepare for the 4th UN Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995, women in the North-East mobilised to join the Indian delegation.

So, we went to Beijing. We were 25 women from the region, 200 from India as a whole. In our group we achieved a wide representation of different kinds of people, perspectives and skills. It was an amazing time. Women from the North-East felt really *heard*, not only in Beijing but at the level of the Indian state too.

On returning from Beijing they decided to start the North-East Network. The Board of NEN are all women from the region. At first, it had a very loose structure but later registered as an NGO. Now they have a headquarters in Shillong, two more offices in other states of the region, and an office in Delhi. NEN's coordinator today is Monisha Behel. The main focus of the Network is human rights, to which they bring a gender analysis. They strive to be independent of 'Indian state welfarism' on the one hand, and the agenda of the militants on the other.

Our project was respect for cultural and ethnic identity with respect for women's rights and identity [Roshmi said]. Women are entirely out of decision-making in the region. We tried to unpack what women have contributed, to work on determining their cultural identity their own way.

So the aim was, first, to get women thinking within their own community context about their needs, whether these were economic or political) e.g. for better political representation). Second they aimed to build bridges with other women in the troubled region. Because 'finally they would always raise *peace* as an issue, and say: we must engage'.

In 1997 they held a five-day working conference on women's human rights, facilitated by women with experience of such work in other South Asian countries. They invited women from across the North-East, but also some men attended, as representatives of regional human rights organisations. Although the NGOs tend to be fronts for the militant groups, and 'totally determined by men', NEN wanted to open them to a gender perspective. 'We wanted women's voice to feature more in human rights.' They used the framework of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

After this, NEN continued their consultations among grassroots women, 'collectivizing and homogenizing' women's input from across the region. They documented human rights violations not only by the government of India but also by the militant groups. 'We were women between different sets of players.' They held workshops all over the region, including in Nagaland and Manipur, to which they would bring feminists from other conflict zones.

Bridge-building was sometimes difficult. 'Such fierce ethnic identities don't easily amalgamate', Roshmi said. The Network experienced a serious setback in 2001 when the Naga-Metei conflict (described above) erupted. At that moment 'all gender analysis was subordinated to the political question, and women dived back into the military structures and conventional roles'. Nonetheless the Network has survived and continues its work.

4 FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS FROM 'OUTSIDE'

Being in North India, talking with feminists in New Delhi and Kolkata, often reminded me of Northern Ireland. In the days when the violence between the Ulster Unionists, Irish Republican nationalists and the forces of the British state was at its height, the women's movement in Britain was deeply concerned about the suffering being experienced by women in Northern Ireland, distressed by the repressive and partisan actions apparently being taken 'in our name' by the British state and anxious to find a way to contribute to a just settlement and to peace. But we found it very difficult to make constructive interventions, partly because we failed to identify women's organizations that we could work with. Those that existed were mostly close to groups implicated in armed struggle. Others that used a language of 'peace', were too readily manipulated by authorities with an interest in control.

I was often reminded of this while talking to women in Northern India. For instance I heard one woman say, discussing the problems facing active interventions for peace, 'Peace is a dirty word in Kashmir'. Exactly the same phrase was used to me ten years ago by a Belfast woman about Northern Ireland. In any case, there was no way British women could assume that women in Northern Ireland would welcome their involvement. Irish women had good reason to suspect and resent 'patronage' by women from the metropolitan society, and British women themselves felt immobilized by guilt and self-questioning. Sometimes in these years feminist research substituted for feminist interventions, and humanitarian activity substituted for more 'political' interventions to reduce violence.

In relation to the conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir and North-East India, I discovered a good deal of concern among activist-intellectual feminists in New Delhi and Kolkata about the impact of the violence on women there, and found some struggling with a damaging sense of 'collective guilt' about the repressive actions of the Indian Armed Forces and their abuse of human rights. As 'metropolitan' Indian feminists, what could they do?

4a: Selected interventions

I heard of a number of interventions in Kashmir and the North-East (though more in the former than the latter) by committed feminists involving a connection between the conflictual regions and the 'metropolitan' cities of New Delhi and Kolkata. For example...

(i) *Committed journalism*

One approach is sensitive and well-informed journalism. *Sonia Jabbar*, for instance, is a freelance journalist who lives in Delhi, but has extensive experience in Kashmir. In the mid-nineties, she and photographer Sheba Cchacchi made an installation of photos and texts, based on moving testimonies they had gathered from Kashmiri women. The installation went to the Beijing conference and was later shown in Delhi. In 1997 Sonia, this time with Gouri Chaudhry, explored the possibility of setting up a women's centre and shelter in N.Kashmir. They decided to abandon the project when they realized the lack of local women's autonomous organization on the ground, and the minimal scope for action independent of the Hurriyat.

(ii) *Academic research*

Another approach is to make the conflict in Kashmir the theme of academic research. An example in relation to Kashmir could be *Seema Kazi* (see footnote 6 above) whose current research addresses militarism, civil society and gender in the Kashmir conflict. She's chosen her theme out of deep concern for the people of the region. She travels frequently to Jammu and Kashmir, where she's in touch with a range of Kashmiri women.

Another example, from the North-East, shows the metropolis/periphery link working in the opposite direction. *Binalakshmi Nepram* has completed an MPhil at Jahawarlal Nehru University, Delhi, on small arms and narcotrafficking in the NE region (Nepram 2002). Bina is ethnically Meitei and her home is in Imphal, Manipur. An activist and adviser on small arms control in the international NGO Saferworld and other contexts, she travels a lot among the peoples living on the Myanmar border, and at the same time moves freely between the North-East, other centres in India, and a wider world.

(iii) *Action-research*

Sometimes the research women initiate in the conflict zones could be termed action-research. For instance, I've drawn extensively in writing this Profile on the publications of two such women, Paula Banerjee and Rita Manchanda.

Paula Banerjee, a lecturer in South Asian Studies at Calcutta University and research coordinator at the Manahirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG), has made a sustained intervention in the North-East. She says of the MCRG, 'We do research but then go into intervention mode'. This NGO was founded

in 1996 and is well known for research and interventions on conflict, peacemaking and forced migration, with a particular focus on East and North-East India. The Centre is notable for a consistent stress on gender, for which Paula has been particularly responsible. Another feminist on its advisory board is Asha Hans. The MCRG has organised a series of four 'civil society dialogues' which have successfully brought together individuals from the East and North-East regions with Kolkata-based and other academics working in those regions. Paula herself visits the NE frequently, carrying out research and enabling dialogue between women. Some of her publications are listed in the references.

Rita Manchanda also often works in an action-research mode, being situated less in an academic world than one of human rights and inter-national bridge-building – see reference to the South Asia Forum for Human Rights, see below. She's contributed many studies of women's experiences of and responses to armed conflict in the region, while supporting their activism.

(iv) Projects of reconciliation

Some 'outside' feminists do reconciliation work. For example *Sushoba Bharve* works in Kashmir in association with an Indian NGO, the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation, whose website describes its objective as:

to build reconciliation across every divide in India and South Asia through a culture of dialogue. CDR embarks in areas like Kashmir to bring healing and reconciliation to the victims of violence, to enhance their rehabilitation and heal the communal divides within the Kashmiri society.¹²

Sushoba works quietly to bring together groups of Kashmiri Muslim and Hindu women for discussion of sensitive issues, in an environment that can foster relationship and reconciliation (Bharve 2002 and 2003).

<i>Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP)</i>

An altogether bigger project of this kind was launched in 2000 by the Delhi-based NGO Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), sponsored by the Dalai Lama's Foundation for Universal Responsibility.

The work of WISCOMP is informed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 which calls for the recognition of women's gender-specific experience of conflict and their inclusion in peace initiatives. Its brochure describes it as

¹² www.fnst.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-1027/_nr-8/_p-1/i.html accessed 10 February 2005.

a research and training initiative, which facilitates the leadership of women in the areas of peace, security and international affairs. It provides a unique interface between academia and the NGOs sector, and positions its work at the confluence of Security Studies, Conflict Transformation and Peace Building. The intersection of these with gender concerns provides the focus of its programmes.

In December 2000 WISCOMP organised a roundtable on *Breaking the Silence: Women and Kashmir*. It aimed to enable 'a conversation between women who acknowledge their political and other differences but were at the same time ready to search for common ground' (Basu 2004: 4). Subsequently a group of women from Kashmir said they'd like to carry forward this process of dialogue see how they could work across the political and ethnic divide in J&K 'to understand each other's realities, acknowledge each other's pain, and work together to build constituencies of peace' (Basu 2004: 4).

...and Athwaas

After a further workshop held in Srinagar, the principal city of Kashmir, a group of Muslim (Shia, Sunni and Ahmedia), Hindu and Sikh women from the Valley decided to form a group they called *Athwaas*, which means 'handshake'. Key actors in this were Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath and Dr. Sumona Dasgupta, of WISCOMP, who would facilitate the project for WISCOMP and continue their action research in the area (DasGupta undated). The coordinator of *Athwaas* in J&K would be Ashima Kaul Bhatia, a Kashmiri woman currently living in New Delhi.¹³

The group decided to travel around the Valley to listen to the narratives of women and grapple with the questions they raised. They would try 'to identify communities that required interventions to grow into constituencies of peace. These communities were to be encouraged to emerge as societies that would privilege a gender-sensitive discourse...' (Basu 2004: 7). As successive field trips took place the women were engaging in journeys of two kinds - learning to cross borders in Kashmiri society, but also learning to communicate across the difficult differences within the travelling group itself. Additionally, they were mainly urban women travelling into the new terrain of rural areas.

Athwaas' aim was not a humanitarian one - although locally this was often expected of them. It was rather to build women's self-confidence and agency with regard to breaking the cycle of violence emanating both from the state and insurgent attacks. They used four tools: networking, awareness, reconciliation and advocacy. In relation to the conflict, they gradually evolved an understanding that had not existed at the outset: 'a consensus in *Athwaas*

¹³ It was a real disappointment to me that I was unable to meet Ashima Kaul, without whom, I know full well, any picture of women's activism in Kashmir is incomplete. Several women spoke respectfully about her work with women for peace in Kashmir (she is herself Kashmiri). Aditi Bhaduri, for instance, told me of an initiative in which she is involved with Ashima called YAKJAH. Ashima's idea, YAKJAH aims to build a culture of peace and tolerance by working among Hindu, Muslim and Sikh children in J&K and in migrant camps in Delhi.

on saying no to violence per se, irrespective of the identity of the perpetrator and the victim' (Basu 2004:15). They became gradually more explicit in their aim of reclaiming 'the syncretic culture of Kashmir in which different communities had coexisted' (Basu 2004: 18). After two years in the travelling mode, with intermittent workshops in Srinagar or Delhi to review progress, they decided to set up women's centres in several areas. They called them *samanbals* – which means 'coming together in strength'. Each had a room or rooms to serve as a base for women's activities. To one a computer was provided, to another tailoring equipment.

WISCOMP saw its role not as manager but as facilitator of *Athwaas*, 'governed by the notion that solutions imposed from 'outside' the valley could never yield sustainable peace. The vision, the initiatives, the strategies would have to come from the Athwaas members themselves' (Basu 2004: 5). WISCOMP were however conceptualising and theorising the process, giving currency in a wider sphere to the new knowledge produced in the local field. They saw themselves (I learned during our meeting) as engaged in 'transversalism', not only moving between differently positioned groups in the conflict zone, but between the academic and voluntary sectors.

(v) *Humanitarian interventions*

Some Indian feminists have actually chosen to do humanitarian work in one or other of the conflictual regions because this seemed the only way, in the circumstances, to make a contribution to peace and justice. An example might be *Sahba Husain*, a feminist psychologist, a South Indian whose home is now in New Delhi. Her current work in Kashmir began as part of the Violence Mitigation and Amelioration Project in India, which had been set up by Oxfam in the '90s, to study the ramifications and consequences of India's several armed conflicts. Urvashi Butalia has written about the VMAP's 'women and conflict' subgroup, with which she was involved (Butalia 2004).

<i>Aman</i>

One outcome of the VMAP was the establishment in 2001 of a Delhi-based NGO, *Aman*, which means 'peace'. Aman's brochure describes its aim as being

to provide humanitarian assistance to victims of conflict in Indian society, regardless of caste or creed, and to generate social awareness about the need for such civic interventions. In keeping with these aims, Aman focuses on understanding and reducing violent conflict in India.

Aman has six programmes. They are on: gender, mental health and conflict; non-violent conflict resolution; pedagogy for social peace and civic restraint; human security, citizenship and law; social resources and caste conflict; and culture, symbols and identities.

Sabah is a trustee of Aman, and responsible for the NGO's 'gender, mental health and conflict' theme in Kashmir. Working with the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons and two other local groups, she addresses conflict-

related mental illness, a problem she believes the government of India greatly underestimates. She told me

Death on the scale it's experienced in Kashmir produces catastrophic trauma. Mental ill-health is an epidemic there. Eighty percent of the population is affected. There's only one hospital with mental health resources, and this department had 1,700 registered outpatients in 1989. By 2003 it had 48,000. There are only five psychiatrists in J&K. The official health service just gives 'hard' medication.

Sahba's project goes out to villages, mobilising women around health issues. Women, Sahba says, are the last to access the health system, habitually putting their relatives first. Many are deterred from seeking help by the stigma associated with mental illness. Aman for instance disguise the purpose of the children's psychiatric care centre they set up in Srinagar in 2003 by calling it the Child Guidance Clinic.

While Aman, as a public charitable trust, has a humanitarian focus, its work embodies the left and activist philosophy of those who founded and work in it. Sahba is a long-time member of AIDWA, the All India Democratic Women's Association, close to one of the Communist parties of India, the CPI(M). She speaks a language of class and caste, as well as of gender. I asked her whether she sees her work in Kashmir as political as well as humanitarian. She said

You have to restrain yourself from being political. You have to focus on the presenting issues, like mental ill-health. But, after all, they arise because of the conflict. We talk about 'rights', we produce manuals – that's the political aspect of our work.

They also act politically in the choices they make concerning their positioning in relation to the Government of India. Kashmiris, she says,

have been betrayed by the government. We hold the government responsible. In our work there, we take care to be independent of the government, not appear to be doing good works for which the government gets credit. We don't let the government 'off the hook' of doing what it should.

(vi) Inter-national bridge-building

Some inter-national bridge-building work brings women together women from different conflict zones in the South Asia region. The activity of Rita Manchanda is an example of this. She is a Delhi-based journalist and writer associated with the South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR) based in Katmandu, Nepal, and since 1998 has coordinated its women's studies and peace studies programmes. She's also a local partner in India of Harvard University's programme Women Waging Peace.

Rita edited a volume *Women, War and Peace in South Asia* (Manchanda 2001a), which was based on research sponsored by SAFHR. The year of its publication SAFHR organised a regional workshop titled *Strengthening Women's Role in the Peace Process* (Manchanda et al, 2001). It brought together women from Kashmir, NE India and Sri Lanka with a view to answering the question

Could women from the many conflict zones of the region have the potential to be mobilised as a constituency for peace? Could women peace activists negotiating distinct conflict situations learn from each other on how to strengthen peace activism and how to make a difference in the peace process? (Manchanda et al, 2002: 3).

They brought to the workshop certain assumptions about women in relation to conflict.

Arguably, because women have been socialised differently, they bring different negotiating skills to the peace table. In addition, feminist scholarship claims that women's experiences and ways of knowing enable them to articulate different voices and different values... Related to this is the more radical argument that women, because they have been historically inferiorized and excluded from the public sphere, have insights into inequalities and injustices. That is, women's perspectives come from the margin or 'from below' and therefore may produce better insights into transforming inter-group relations which involve asymmetries of power (Manchanda et al, 2002: 7).

The facilitators encountered serious challenges to their conciliation skills in the course of the workshop, due to 'some [participants] justifying the need to subsume the women's question in the nationalist cause'. This appears to have applied particularly to women coming from Jammu and Kashmir (Manchanda et al 2002: 10).

Another example of bridge building across national borders was a project carried out by *Paula Banerjee* under the sponsorship of WISCOMP (both of whom I've already mentioned above). WISCOMP funded a special project in 2000-01 titled *Women's Network for Peace* (Banerjee 2003). In partnership with the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, they supported Paula in accompanying women peace activists from Nagaland on a visit to Sri Lanka for six days in January 2001. The Naga women travelled to Colombo, Trincomalee and Kantale, holding discussions with both Tamil and Sinhalese women, on opposing sides of the Sri Lankan conflict.

They compared methodologies and strategies in addressing conflict. Although a discourse of 'motherhood' was used in both regions, Naga women shaped their peace movement as one not limited to reconciliation, but with an agenda of justice and human rights. They felt they were taken seriously and had had some success, whereas women's peace initiatives in Sri Lanka had largely failed. Here, the word 'peace' had been 'so misused by politicians that people

no longer had faith in it'. Political parties had appropriated the women's movement.

4b: Problems associated with external interventions

What we're discussing here is 'feminist anti-war action' of a very particular kind. It involves women who are differentially located in relation to power, where women living in a relatively powerful society attempt to work with women in regions where that power is abused. Specifically, it's about women living in metropolitan centres of India attempting to forge co-operation with women living in occupied areas, where India is attempting to defeat insurgencies seeking justice and self-determination. It occurs to me that there may be a lot to learn here for women in other parts of the world, for example Israeli women in relation to Palestinian women; women of the USA in relation to those of Iraq or Afghanistan.

There are inherent difficulties in such externally-generated feminist activism. It's vulnerable to many misunderstandings. I heard a good many worries expressed by women local to the regions, and equivalent self-doubts expressed by the intervening women themselves. They include the following.

- External NGOs get into 'conflict' because there's money in it.
- External voices can't hope to be authentic.
- Local women are sometimes 'used' for the credibility they bestow on external projects.
- Sometimes those coming from outside 'take sides' in the conflict.
- Sometimes their perceptions and interventions 'muddy the waters' for local women.
- Sometimes they misconstrue the conflict, e.g. representing the cause as ethnic hatred rather than state repression.
- Metropolitan feminists condemn the actions of the Indian government when in the conflict zones, but hesitate to publish such views in India.
- Indian academics promote their own careers on the platform of the work they do in conflict zones.

An important issue at stake here is nationalism. 'Many groups, or individuals within them, for example, may themselves sympathise with the state rhetoric of nationalism and anti-nationalism, and therefore it becomes important to ask how this affects any intervention they may make' (Butalia 2004:114). This is something I've found to be a source of disagreement among antiwar activists in other countries in which nationalist aspirations have a different meaning for women positioned within a subordinate group seeking autonomy and those positioned within in a hegemonic group seeking to deny it. At the same time, those positioned within the ruling group are sometimes felt to be blind to the 'hidden' nationalism of the state itself. (See my Profile No.8 on Spain.)

In India this problem is compounded by the fact that the country was founded as a secular state capable of including many different religions and cultures on a basis of equality. A lot of feminists believe strongly in secularism as an

ideal and therefore feel profoundly ambivalent to separatist movements based on religious or ethnic identity. As Seema Kazi told me, 'It's because we believe in the idea of a secular India and won't acknowledge how challenged and bruised that notion is everywhere, and how it's a totally dead letter in Kashmir'...or one might add, in the North-East, or in the Punjab, or Gujerat or other areas that have experienced violent conflict in recent years.

Despite these difficulties and potential misunderstandings, some metropolitan Indian women, as I've illustrated, have persisted. Inspired by principles of justice and nonviolence, they've made extraordinary, generous and sensitive efforts of constructive intervention and tried by their writing to influence Indian opinion in a positive way.

Urvashi Butalia uncovered some of the problems inherent in the 'insider/outsider' dichotomy in an article reviewing the experience of the Oxfam Violence Mitigation and Amelioration Project. Questions facing the VMAP team included:

what kind of interventions can be made by outside groups who are concerned about the spread of violent conflict and its ramifications in the lives of women and children?... how can an 'external' agency, so to speak, contribute towards preventing or mitigating the effects of the processes that lead to conflict, or address the problems of women and children who have lived through situations of conflict? (Butalia 2004:109)

It became clear to the VMAP team, as Sahba Husain's work in Kashmir and other projects developed, that

NGOs/civil society groups/women's groups can only make a limited kind of intervention in situations of conflict. These may have to do with things such as bringing the issue to public attention, showing how women were affected and involved, and the implications of this for the future, working towards strategies for conflict amelioration and mitigation rather than stepping into situations of conflict, and ensuring that wherever peace negotiations took place the question of women and children would be central to the gender (Butalia 2004: 115).

Comparing interventions in Kashmir with the situation in the North-East, Urvashi Butalia found

NGO interventions in the nort-east had been relatively more 'successful', partly because the group that had done considerable work, the North-East Network, was made up mainly of women who could be called 'insiders' even if some of them lived outside the region (Butalia 2004: 113).

She concludes:

this inside-outside dichotomy is an important lesson... For those caught in the heart of violent conflict, an 'outsider' presence can signal many, often contradictory, things. For outsiders it sometimes becomes necessary to tread very carefully to win trust and confidence... (Butalia 2004: 113).

CONTACTS

This profile is based on a two-week visit to New Delhi and Kolkata in December 2005. I had a chance to meet a number of individuals, in and outside organizations. I'd like to thank you all very, very warmly for the friendship, guidance and loads of information you gave me.

In New Delhi, WISCOMP generously hosted a meeting and lunch where I was able to learn about *Athwaas* from Meenakshi Gopinath, Manjri Sewak and others. Sonia Jabbar, Sahba Husain, Uma Chakravarty and Roshmi Goswami generously gave me long interviews. I enjoyed briefer conversations with Urvashi Butalia, Rita Manchanda, Kamla Bhasin, Sheba Cchacchi, Syeda Hameed and Binalakshmi Nepram. I had the real pleasure of walks and talks with Abha Bhaiya, who invited me to stay at her home and also organized several activities for me, including a public lecture and a meeting with women of *Jagori*.

I was fortunate to be invited to Kolkata by Ranabir Samaddar and Paula Banerjee of the Manahirban Calcutta Research Group to give a talk to students on a course on Forced Migration. While there I had the chance to talk with Paula herself, with Aditi Bhaduri, Asha Hans, Rajashri Dasgupta and Krishna Bandyopardhyay. In London I spoke with a Kashmiri journalist who wished not to be named, and in addition I've enjoyed several very informative talks with Seema Kazi.

This profile was returned in draft to my various informants. They gave me suggestions for correcting and improving it. When we had a version with which they felt comfortable, they agreed to my putting it on my website so that it could be available to other interested women.

Here are contact details for the main organizations I mention or visited.

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This document is one of a series of local and regional profiles that will appear on this website in coming months. They are interim products a two-year research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism*, being carried out by the author from her base in the Department of Sociology, City University, London, during 2004/5, with the support of several charitable trusts. The profile is not intended for publication in its present form. I would be grateful if you would not quote it in published work without first seeking my agreement.

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