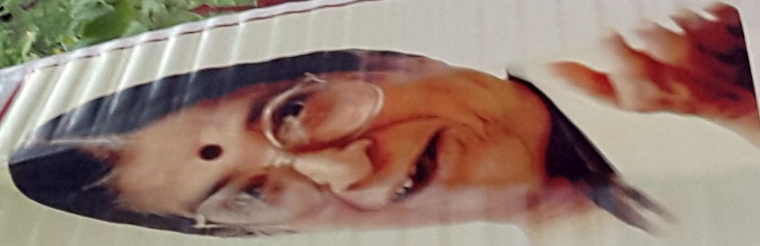


# Choosing Identities : Gender Just and Violence Free Society



"Every female foetus  
has a right to be born.  
Female infanticide  
must be treated  
as crime,"

**MRINAL GORE.**

MRINAL GORE  
INTERACTIVE CENTRE  
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE & PEACE IN SOUTH ASIA  
CHOOSING IDENTITIES,  
GENDER JUST & VIOLENCE FREE SOCIETY  
19-12 November 2016  
SARATHI SACHANNA 6:30PM  
SUDHAKAR GOUDAR 8:00PM  
EVA, GOWDARI  
NORTH EAST VIOLENCE RESEARCH CENTRE

**A Workshop Report**



# **Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre for Social Justice and Peace in South Asia**

In collaboration with

**Shanti Sadhana Ashram  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati Campus  
North East Network (NEN)  
North East Social Research Centre (NESRC)**

Organised a Workshop on

**“Choosing Identities: Gender Just  
and Violence Free Society”**

*Date: 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016*

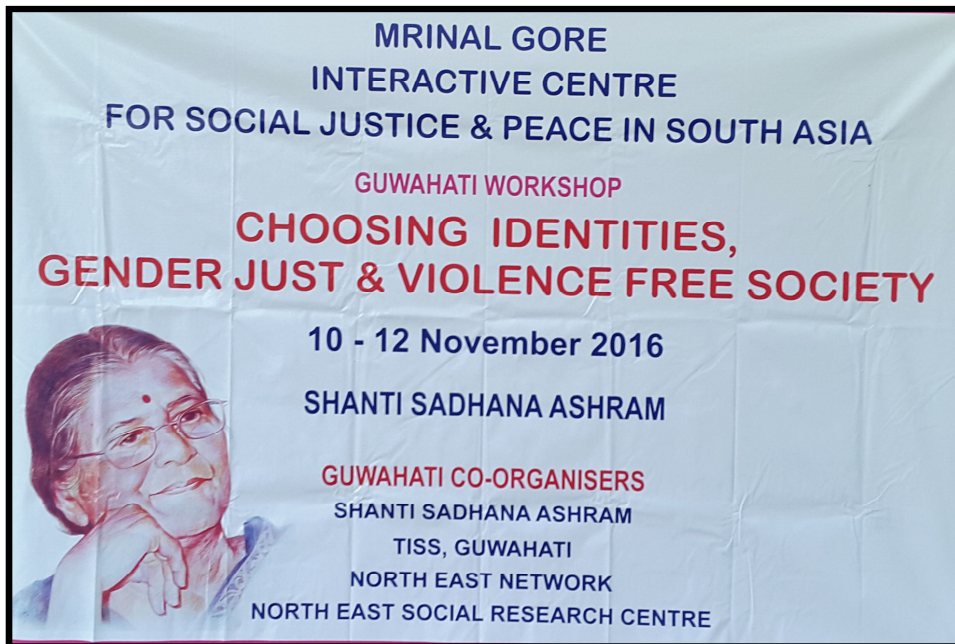
*Venue: Shanti Sadhana Ashram, Guwahati, Assam*

### ***Introduction and Context***

A key feature of the Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre is to build bridges between activists, grassroots communities and researchers to share experiences, perspectives and discuss common concerns under the overarching theme of South Asian Masculinity. Over the last 2 years, starting from the launch conference, we have held a series of workshops in different parts of the country and had discussions on the following issues: violence: a human and political predicament, crimes in the name of honour, patriarchy and masculinity, globalisation and fractured modernity, emerging identities, increasing controls and violence against women. These workshops have engaged people from the academia, grassroots organisations, survivors of violence and activists’.

A two day Workshop on “Choosing Identities: Gender Just and Violence Free Society” was organised by the Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre along with TISS Guwahati, NEN, NESRC and Shanti Sadhana Ashram on the 10th - 11th November 2016.

The workshop brought together more than 150 participants from some of the North East states: Assam, Manipur,



Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Mizoram and Maharashtra. The participants included academia, activists, youth and representatives of NGOs and civil society organisations.

The workshop objectives and outcomes were contextualised from the following scenario: Northeast India has been militarized since the inception of the republic, so it remains the oldest area of exception in India's democracy narrative. We feel that thus it is important for the Centre to connect and make connections between academia and activists, survivors and activists with community leaders from other parts of the country with those of the North East.

According to Census of India 2011, the total population of Northeast India is 4,54,86,784 of which 1,24,15,054 or less than one third (27.3 percent) belongs to scheduled tribe communities. At 68.8 percent, a huge chunk of Northeast population resides in Assam but only a mere 12.4 percent of Assam's population is tribal! While four states - Mizoram (94.4%), Nagaland (86.5%), Meghalaya (86.1%) and Arunachal Pradesh (68.8%) - have a majority tribal population, four others - Assam (12.4%), Tripura (31.8%), Sikkim (33.8%) and Manipur (41.6%) - have a majority non-tribal

population.

Thus it is a common misconception that the entire region is tribal. It fails to take the state of Assam into account which is overwhelmingly



**Participants**

non-tribal and the major population centre of the region thus outweighing the states that surround it demographically. The location is not just one of scenic charm but also strategic, as it shares its boundaries with as many as five countries. The integration of this diversity of the social tapestry of the North East has been challenging and made complex by the hegemonic relation between the State and



the North East. This manifests itself in various forms such as political repression, militarisation, exploitation of natural resources etc.

While our workshops have explored the possibilities of peace, we have inevitably drawn a connection between all these and masculinities as they have been constructed in the cultures of the past and present.

The under-represented, over-stereotyped region usually conjures pictures of conflict and violence in the mainstream media or the society. Within the stereotypes and backwardness of the region exist some remarkable features such as the open presence of women in almost every facet of public life, cutting across their age, class and community. The region can boast of a history of strong women's movements. The *Nupi Lan* (Women's War) followed by the *Meira Paibis* (Torch Bearers) in Manipur, the *Mahila Samitis* of Assam, the *Gandhian Women's Struggle*, Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) or United Organisation of Mizo Women which managed an amendment to the codified Mizo Customary Laws, *Naga Mothers' Association* and the more recent *Bodo Women's Justice Forum*, etc. are examples of activism of women across time and in different parts of the region. The status of women in North East India (NEI) is considered high in terms of the relatively higher mobility and visibility for the women.

True to this, women are not discriminated by issues like *Sati*, caste rigidity or bride burning as seen else where in the country. This is because the relatively egalitarian society allows more scope and space to the women. But still women are placed in disadvantageous positions in several aspects of life, thus breeding discrimination and vulnerability.

While the focus on the above issues is paramount we must not forget that there are deeper structures of power and control within the societies of the North East states as well. In situations of conflict and the state's approach to controlling conflict, women are victimized, certain communities; ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are 'othered', and this results in violence in the name of 'honour', which always has a gender dimension, though its victims are both men and women.

These practices build on deep-rooted structural hierarchies and collude with broader hegemonic forces. The result is that the existing patriarchal order is strengthened and sustained. The rich natural resources of the region have given rise to exploitation of the inhabitants since colonial times. The conflict among tribes is enhanced by the proximity of international borders, so that state violence also becomes endemic to the region. Migration is the response of the people to the destruction of livelihoods and the persistence of conflict, and it gives rise to new deprivations and uncertainties.



While we recognise and extend solidarity to the various local struggles and movements of the people of the North East, it is high time that we also start connecting and networking more actively with the local movements and the issues that they confront on a daily basis.

Patterns of inequalities, discrimination, victimisation draw strength and sustenance from long standing social structures and practices of a region. However, the development policies along with globalisation and (fractured) modernity pursued in recent years have further accentuated the prevailing victimisation, discrimination etc. and the historically determined exclusions have deepened in numerous ways. These inequalities are manifested in inter and intra divisions of caste, community, ethnic groups and ownership and access to resources especially land, housing, food and water, mineral etc.

Feminist scholars have always critiqued development paradigms as being masculinist in their conception as well as in their implementation. But the modernity that comes with globalisation, exposing a society divided into several tribal groups to the forces of world trade and world capital, is necessarily fractured. And yet it



presents opportunities as well as dangers; it brings new aspirations and cultural change. This is true of NEI as it is in many parts of India and the world. But we need to understand better how it is playing out in this region.

The ongoing struggle of people trying to establish their right to autonomy over economic resources, politics and culture, has led to political instability. This is being experienced not only in the North East but other parts of India as well.

In these situations there have been different forms of violence on women ranging from sexual, mental or physical abuse to killings by both State and underground groups, which often go unreported. Also in militarised situations democratic spaces available to all are limited and there are increased forms of restrictions put on people. Women have struggled against these abuses. However, we acknowledge their contribution, which is not seen as significant by State and society. One example is the struggle of Irom Sharmila, who was on a hunger strike for the past 16 years for the repeal of the AFSPA.

In the recent state elections in Assam, the migration issue had featured prominently in polarized discourses, which is a carry forward from the 2014 central elections. Politicians from across the country had joined the fray going to the extent of saying that they will seal off the border and deport “Muslim” migrants. Some had even argued that the flow of Muslim migrants is unsettling a fraught communal balance, sparring new violence in the state’s long lasting conflict. Many have even gone to the extent of conflating Muslims with illegal migrants. For many a Muslim from the North East is a Bangladeshi unless proven otherwise.

There has been a discussion in the last one year on the naturalization of only ‘Hindu’ refugees. This was crucial for Assam particularly in the election period. It was a card which had been played without realising the effects of such an ordinance on a state like Assam which houses millions of refugees from Bangladesh who are both Hindu and Muslim.

The Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre is of the opinion that this issue is one of the most glaring examples of how masculinities play out in the South Asian context and impacts society and bilateral relations. This we feel will need to be addressed by civil society activists. Geopolitically the region is on the periphery of the national culture, although the national movement for independence partially changed this situation. However there is a subtle and not so subtle patronising attitude on the part of Indian society at large within the Indian mainland. The idea is to engage



**Shanti Sadhana Ashram, Guwahati, Assam**

and involve movements from the North East with our remaining workshops in India, our bilateral and multilateral efforts and workshops at the South Asia level. The Centre strives to play a cementing role and to provide a space where people can debate and dialogue on the issue of South Asian Masculinity.

We held the Guwahati Workshop in the above light and proposed the following themes around which we structured the workshop discussions: Women, Peace and Security, Women, Land and Land based resources, Inner Controls and Patriarchy, Migration and Refugees and Interrogating LGBTQI issues.



**DAY 1 - 10<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2016**

**Inaugural Session**

**Keynote Speaker: Pushpa Bhawe,**

**Speakers : Hem Dutta (Hembhai, Varsha Rajan Berry, Wandana Sonalkar, Ilina Sen, Sanjay Barbora**

The workshop started with the welcome note addressed by **Hem Dutta or Hem Bhai**, noted social activist and recipient of the prestigious Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavana Award in the year 2007, who is also the Secretary of the Shanti Sadhana Ashram. He welcomed all participants and enlightened them with the essence of the Ashram based on



**Inaugural Session**

tolerance, love, peace and harmonious integration. A Gandhian by practice, he gently pointed towards the way of life in the Ashram that thrived on a self-sustenance model and the idea of mutual cooperation among all members which also extended to nature around them resulting in very limited uses of technology.

Towards the end Hem Bhai desired that the visitors especially those who had come from other regions, understand the burning issues of Assam and highlight them at a national level. Some problems, especially in the context of identities, sometimes seem to pose a bigger problem than the complexities of gender identities. The most pertinent question was that of “identity crisis” which the citizens of Assam are facing due to rampant illegal migration from Bangladesh. This is converting the Assamese population into a minority slowly which is a cause for great alarm. Hem Bhai wished that this issue, among others, be paid urgent attention to and dealt with in greatest priority.

Another issue which was disturbing was the manipulation of natural resources of this region. Tea, oil, timber and other resources have contributed highly to the Indian revenue but preservation of natural resources is losing ground due to neo-liberal policies decided by the Centre. The same government at the Centre often chooses to be indifferent to the problems of North East and treats the region as “a liability”. The mere 34 kilometers which separates North East from West Bengal and the rest of India should not be reason why North East should be considered distant territory and, thus, qualify to be ignored. The same policy makers who can travel to London or Paris or Brazil for trainings and programmes find it hard to visit the North East by saying that its too far. They must be reminded that North East is just as part of “mainland” India as much as other regions and hence its issues must be dealt with similar urgency and fervour as they do with the rest of India.

In the end, he welcomed every dignitary with a ‘gamcha’ which is a traditionally hand-woven towel or scarf and the cultural symbol of welcome and veneration in Assam.

This was followed by the lighting of the lamp by all dignitaries of the workshop, marking an auspicious opening of the event.

**Varsha Rajan Berry**, Co-ordinator, Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre for Social Justice and Peace in South Asia (MGIC) and an activist-researcher presented the introduction to the Centre and to Mrinal Gore (Mrinaltai as she is fondly known) herself. “Every Female Foetus has a Right to be Born”. Female infanticide should be treated as a Crime” Mrinal Gore, a firebrand socialist and Mumbai’s “Paniwali Bai”, needs no introduction. She said that Mrinal Tai believed in the values of transparency and non-violence and her personality and character had helped shape the work of the Centre. She struggled for social justice and put up strong resistance against communal violence. A befitting tribute to her was to set up a Centre which would continue to take her work forward in the neo-liberal globalised world. The Centre therefore, has created a space for discussion and dialogue on violence especially in the context of South Asia. MGIC with support from TISS successfully launched itself with a Conference on ‘Violence: A Human and Political Predicament’ with a South Asian Perspective in Mumbai in December 2014. Since then the Centre has taken the initiative to organise a series of workshops covering different



regions of India to explore the issues of violence, patriarchy and masculinity, globalisation, fractured modernity to build a South Asian understanding and interconnectedness on the issues between grassroots groups and academics, activists' and theorists across India and South Asia. She asserted that we all need to build our understanding of global geo-political issues particularly in the light of events unfolding in the world and how they can directly or indirectly impact our region and life as well. Just as it is important to link issues of the village, town, district etc. with each other and with South Asia, it is equally important to link them to the global issues. The Centre successfully held the first workshop on the theme of 'Crimes in the Name of Honour' in June 2015 in Pune. The Pune workshop brought together people including survivors from some parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat involved in working on the above theme. The Centre after that has held 2 more workshops in Jaipur and Nagpur. This workshop in Guwahati is the 4th in the series. She welcomed the guests and thanked the local organisers for helping and supporting the Centre in organising this workshop. She said that the Centre would be able to take its work forward only through engaging with movements, organisations, activists', academics who are working on various social and development issues. She mentioned that a South Asian or a national framework for social justice and peace would be incomplete without including the North East India. With that objective this workshop was organized so that a truly socially inclusive project could be made possible.

After the introductory dialogue, the keynote address was given **Pushpa Bhave**, a popular Marathi author and political activist, started her address by welcoming all on behalf of the Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre, Hembhai and his co-workers from the ashram, on behalf of Sanjay Barbora from TISS Guwahati Campus, Melvil Periera of



**Inaugural Session**

North East Social Research Centre and on behalf of Anurita Hazarika of North East Network. She in fact welcomed the entire audience on behalf of all participants from Maharashtra and North East. She while welcoming everyone said that she was aware of the cynical note that people of North East have gently suppressed to let 'us' come to Guwahati for a workshop. She thanked each one from the bottom of her heart. People here do have a feeling "oh! Another group from the mainland".

She assured and pleaded that as group we are new but everyone from the group has been working in many capacities for transparent communication, just and free society and peace. She assured that everyone from the Centre has been working with the people and the Centre does not indulge in seminar tourism. She said, we respect the personality of Mrinaltai and her sincere work with the people. We are all aware that we are geographically distant from each other, but historically and culturally we have a connect of being Indians and South Asians.

Since the inception of our Centre, she stated, with the launch conference on 'Violence: A Human Predicament' in December 2014 our effort has been to build bridges between activists, grassroots communities and want to defy the borders created by misconceptions and sincerely wish to enhance the quality of human life. We are trying to do away with violence in various forms, hegemony of the optical structure, of the mainland perception and that of majoritarianism. The general misconception about North east is that the region is populated by tribal communities. But when we look at the census figures (2011), we understand that the region is mix of tribal and non-tribal communities. So in this 2 day workshop, she said, that we will try to understand the social milieu, wherein two or more than two cultural groups are trying to live together, the groups are choosing identities and sometimes to hold on to identities. The problem of migration due to varied socio-economic push-out factors creates problems of changing map of minority and majority social groups. Within our region multiple religious groups, ethnic identities exist for a long time. Yet the inter-relations do change due to many parameters. She urged that we must give due attention to this phenomena objectively.

She continued by saying that if we look at the temporal span, from colonisation to globalisation, we perceive fractured modernity, which creates cultural complexities. We need to go deeper into the problem. In the contemporary world when the



global narration has taken over, the local problems of land, water and forest have become very acute. The problems have created new question marks to the 'Nation State' concept. The migration problem mentioned earlier is naturally woven into the fabric of this debate.

She said that when we at the Mrinal Gore Centre talk of violence it means lack of food security, lack of secure dwellings, migration forced on common people and family, caste violence in the name of honour.

In the North East the major problem within our democratic narration is we all know - 'Armed Forces Special Power's Act'. She said that "our brothers and sisters from Kashmir are also dealing with this Act. Irom Sharmila led a Gandhian Satyagraha against AFSPA for a long duration. Structural violence under this Act is not only a human rights situation, she said, but a moral problem. So when we discuss this problem in this workshop - the subject is a ground reality as well as abstract value judgment at the same time.

She continued by saying that we are aware that all this discussion cannot happen in two days, yet we are eager to listen to all the presentations. When we use the term 'South Asian' we want to take the masculinity debate out of the western context. It does not mean that we do not accept the knowledge systems created by the veterans of the women's studies. We in South Asia must work on our cultural specificities. In India caste system has to be worked on, because caste and gender is a double binder.

We do want to interpret masculinity at various levels, the play of power, honour and political rhetoric of hate and war. Ultimately she said that we are all looking at a peaceful co-existence. As Gandhiji used to say peace is the way.

**Sanjay Barbora**, Associate Professor at TISS Guwahati, said that dialogue is difficult when the world has turned its back. Authoritarian governments, like Mussolini and Hitler, had given rise to human rights movement and the cause for many revolutionary dialogues. But being a youth today is still tough.

Three particular “M’s” are, therefore important issues that the youth should be thinking of. The three M’s would be - money, migrant and media. These three “M’s” are central to politics in North East.

Starting with money, he said, that the current context of money still reflects the colonial economy. We do not produce what we eat and do not eat what we produce. Next, the idea of migrant is difficult to define. It is important to question what the media says about migrants. Guwahati being a cosmopolitan city is home to many migrants herself, including migrants who form opinions on other migrants. Finally talking of masculinity, he says that it’s not a topic that is much talked about. Gender and sexuality are new if not taboo topics. Newer topics take time to enter our conversations and discourses. The issues which were raging 20-30 years back are still repeatedly debated today and there has been little progress to newer topics other than those timeworn topics. For instance, people could still be talking of the Assam Agitation and the Accord but there has been very less (media) attention on the sexual violence versus the State during the Nellie Massacre. It becomes a challenge then to do research on a topic that has no spotlight or mention.

He concludes that the youth must do away with the silence and reclaim answers which are still in the silence. The youth should be encouraged to ask more questions and be aware to seek knowledge and truth.

**Ilina Sen**, well-known social activist and feminist scholar, was the next speaker. She spoke of how to understand masculinity (or ‘mardangi’ in Hindi and “Purushahankar” in Assamese), one had to first understand the concept and history of genocide. Americans versus the native Red Indians, Nagas versus the Burmese settlers, India versus Pakistan - the history behind these genocides give us an idea of how masculinities are created and reproduced over generations. In a gist, she implied that capitalism and imperialism are closely linked with the ideas of masculinity.

**Prof. Wandana Sonalkar**, Economist and Chairperson of Advanced Centre for Women’s Studies at TISS Mumbai was the last speaker of this session. She pointed out that money is linked to masculinity and power. She refers to Donald Trump’s recent victory at the Presidential elections in United States of America. His victory

reaffirms the fact that in an age where market dictates everything, differences are easily converted to hatred and that this hatred is propagated as good. Hatred is unifying and what makes us a nation. The modern day masculinity is suspicious of differences and is encouraged to wipe it out altogether. Man must be militaristic and aggressive to be truly masculine. Today's masculinity is also afraid of strong women and this is reflected by not just Trump's victory but also how it played out in media and social networks as well. There has to be a deeper reflection on this to ensure peace in the future.

### Session 1

**Topic: Patriarchy and Control in the Contemporary Context**

**Chairperson: Anvar Rajan**

**Speaker: Dr. V. Sawmvelli, Nisha Shiurkar and Dr Akhil Ranjan Dutta**

**Dr. V. Sawmvelli** is an Assistant Professor at TISS Guwahati where she teaches Sociology of Law, Religion and Gender, Legal Pluralism, Cultural Studies and Research

Methodology.

Her areas of interest are with gender and sexual violence issues especially in North-East India. The first speaker of the session, she started the discourse with a classic quotation by



**Our panelist Dr. V. Sawmvelli making an important point**

Simone De Beauvoir, “Women are not born, they are created.”



Our ideas of gender are socially and culturally constructed. Most, if not all, ideas about what should we do or not do as men and women are culturally transmitted through socialization. She recalled how her own mother taught her that girls should not laugh out loudly. Again, in another instance a male friend of hers refused to say that he was in pain once when he fell down and hurt himself. The ideas of what are socially acceptable notions of ideal men and women are taught at since childhood and society makes sure its members follow them.

In the North East, the legal plural system operates. This means that the customary laws of the region are in effect. In the context of Mizoram, by 1926 these laws were codified which was greatly resented by women's association including the Mizo Women's Association. Not only does codification go against the basic idea of having tribal customary laws but since most of these laws are made by men, the codification of the same would mean no scope for gender just judiciary system and tougher to repeal now, post codification.

She spoke on the issue witch hunting which is widely prevalent in Assam. National Crime Record tells that between 2008-2012 around 220 women were killed on being suspected to be witches. These crimes of violence against women must be understood in the context of patriarchy and women who act as 'agents of patriarchy.' With this she concluded her talk and opened the floor for any queries or suggestions.

Her presentation drew comments from Hem Bhai who questioned why does Mizoram who hails very high on literacy and being the only state in India to not use chemical fertilisers - still face such regressive situations.

To this Dr. Sawmveli duly pointed out that apart from strong patriarchal structures, religious institutions like the Church also act in reinforcing patriarchy from time to time. That there is no female pastor in a single church across Mizoram is a silent testimony to this patriarchal hegemony running through the state. In fact, a minister once remarked that even if women are equated with the lowest position

possible ie with shoes - she should understand that shoes are useful in their own right and cannot be totally discarded.

Besides such a mindset, alcoholism, domestic violence and a backward economy could be other factors that create such complex identities of gender in the state.

A participant from the audience had a question as to how these problems can be tackled. He worked in the NGO sector and in his experience domestic abuse, torture, substance abuse and violent behavior and recurrent issue especially in rural areas. To this, Ilina Sen chose to reply wherein she relates her own experience in Jharkhand with women who are factory workers. She shares how women there decided to take matters in their own hands and formed small groups among them to check alcoholism and domestic abuse by devising creative ways to discourage men to be chauvinists or display negative traits of masculinity.

Soon after lunch, the session began again and the next speaker was **Nisha Shiurkar**, activist, Lawyer, stood and acknowledged the welcoming of the guests to the Shanti Sadhana Ashram in Guwahati. She was overwhelmed with the arrangements that were made for all the people who attended the workshop and was happy for the fact that most of the participants in the gathering were youth which is very essential in order to sensitize them with these issues. She began her presentation by



**Our panelists for the session**

praising the land of tea, Bhupen Hazarika and the mighty Brahmaputra which has always attracted her. She also said that Guwahati is a place of worship for women particularly due to the presence of the famous Kamakhya temple. In the context of the topic, she raised several concerns in context to the North-East centering the struggle behind Irom Sharmila (the Iron Lady of Manipur), the Gandhian Movement

in Northeast, struggle of the Adivasis, identity of Nagaland and so on. There is one thing common to all the movements and that is the ideology of patriarchy that guided every struggle in North-East and even in mainland India. She said that in the land of Buddha and Gandhi, violence is paramount and can be seen in every sphere and there is a strong connection between violence and patriarchy. She further went on to reiterate that violence is prevalent everywhere and with Trump winning the American Presidential election we need to understand the kind of mentality which is gaining ground around the world.

She distinguished the meaning behind the term masculine and masculinity in the contemporary context and laid several live examples underlying to it. Peace is strongly connected with silence. If there is peace then silence and harmony will automatically follow. But if there is silence then it does not necessarily mean peace. We need to break the silence in order to bring peace and all-round development in the society. She felt that it is the culture of North-East that is preventing the rise of problems in comparison to that of mainland India. One has to be educated enough to question the existing reality and provide logical connotation to it. She gave an example to the strong initiative towards abolishing the practice of Triple Talaq in Muslim society which has certainly led to importance of identity of women. She even raised concerns to the voice of Donald Trump which states that there will be no right of women to abort child. She highlighted her speech on some of the limitations of patriarchy which may be in a different context; fear among women and at finally concluding with a poem by Sharmila against violence, patriarchy and inequality.

Hembhai, who was one of the organizers and member of Shanti Sadhana Ashram, thanked her for the valuable speech and shared some of his experience in relation to patriarchy and dominance where he added that the issues in North-East are often unheard in terms of publication of news in central newspapers of India.



Dr Akhil Ranjan Dutta, Professor, Political Science Department, Guwahati



**Dr. Akhil Ranjan Dutta addressing the participants**

University spoke about the current state of government, which includes the movements at the grassroots level, the State in the Centre and privatization and globalization at the top. Every citizen aims to be

global in every aspect of their living, the people at the grassroots wish to fulfill their demands from the State, thereby creating a tension and a disturbed state at the Centre. He also explains these processes in terms of micro, meso and macro as regards to their functions. He then gives an example of Cotton College State University as determining the international standard which is a rhetoric one. The fundamental contradiction happens at micro and macro level and is manifested in people's action or movement. Again the temporary settlement of the Armed forces in due course of extension leads to permanence of the temporary thereby resulting in a war economy. There is then scarcity in every aspects of life starting from food to shelter and rise in every possible crime, early marriage, malnutrition, lack of education and health facilities and so on. Women are more vulnerable to the civil camps as these permanent camps do not get diluted till the conflict gets over. He mentions about the 6th schedule of the Indian Constitution which renders autonomy to tribal areas. And there is allocation of a council for every tribal area to take care of their own community. Now that is why there is war among the tribal communities in order to get hold over their autonomy by the government. The struggle among community is nothing but the product of the state. He raised concerns towards many issues concerning women identity, amendment of Citizenship Act, impact of war into universal deprivation and consumer economy, human traf-

ficking and so on. Further he tried to contextualize the concept of patriarchy and violence within communities, state and worldwide that are entrenched within.

## **Session 2**

**Topic: Interrogating LGBTQI Issues**

**Chairperson: Ms Anurita Hazarika**

**Speakers: Minakshi Bujarbaruah and Poonam Kakoty Bora.**

The session followed with a theme concerning “Interrogating LGBTQI Issues” which tried to critically engage the participants with understandings in relation to sexuality and sexual identity in general. A member from the organizing team of NEN, Ms Anurita Hazarika, chaired the session and the speakers were



**Anurita Hazarika, Minakshi Bujarbaruah,  
Poonam Kakoty Bora**

**Minakshi Bujarbaruah and Poonam Kakoty Bora.** It further discussed the concept of sex, gender and sexuality that are essentially linked with the socializations and hetero-normative reinforcements which limits choice of an individual. This issue not only limits to the rights of an individual but also adds to the larger problem of social division like class, caste and other diversities. Sex, which is a biological concept and the term gender, is a constructed one and whose meaning is embedded upon. The session thus tried to flag off pertinent questions on identities of the people, sexual behaviour, challenging normativity and the ongoing struggle in reference to rights and space amidst a context of conflict in northeast India.

At the end, **Mr Anwar Rajan**, concluded and comprehended the entire discussions of the sessions of the Day 1 where he tried to visualize the developments

of the country or the globalization along with the change in social institutions, identity of women, spaces beyond inequality and discrimination. He felt the urgent need of this platform in order to understand and realize the actual problems concerning these issues. Hence he hopes that the connections between the academia and activists will certainly bridge the requirements and necessities in order to bring desired social change in the society.

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## DAY 2: 11<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER.

The workshop started with an introduction by Varsha Rajan Berry. She gave a brief over view of the discussions which took place on the first day of the two day workshop. She said that various forms of violence get perpetrated on women. Witchcraft is one such form being dominant in regions of Gujarat, Rajasthan. This was followed by a group song performed by students of Guwahati Nursing School.



After this the sessions of the workshop were conducted.

There were four sessions on 11th November. The discussions of the sessions are as follows.



### Session 3

**Topic: Women, Land and land Based Resources**

**Chairperson: Wandana Sonalkar**

**Speaker: Surekha Dalvi**

The Chairperson **Wandana Sonalkar** is an economist and a professor from TISS Bombay. **Surekha Dalvi** is an activist and works at the grassroots. Before starting the session Wandana mentioned that due to lack of transportation that arose because of demonetization in the Indian subcontinent many speakers of the panel couldn't make it to the workshop. So, Surekha was the only speaker in the session.

Wandana stated that the issue of land and its ownership rights has been re-conceptualized which resulted into the introduction of new laws. This was done to enable women to possess land. Women are often marginalized and are deprived from the ownership rights of the



**Surekha Dalvi making connections between Maharashtra & Assam**

land. But land is and has always been an integral part of the lives of women. They spend a lot of time working in the fields. But the overarching patriarchal structure often bars them from getting ownership rights over land. The north east region of the country is mostly matrilineal even then the situation of women isn't very affirmative. Land plays a major role in the lives of women. Land and their livelihood are often interconnected. Keeping all these aspects in mind the session tried to understand how women look at this issue of land and their lack of ownership over the same.

Surekha Dalvi stated that each region has its own laws governing them. Assam has different laws from Maharashtra. She then asked the audience that how many women present in the session had land in their name? Very few people stated that they had land in their name. With this she said that the ownership of land can be divided into categories like women, men, village community and the state. This categorization is not free from problems. In the contemporary times, land is only thought of as a resource which should be owned. She tries to redefine land. She states that land is not only the material brown soil one sees but also includes the waterfall, the plants on it, the crops and also the mines underneath. But we sadly only limit ourselves to the question of whom does the land belong to. Often the one who holds the paper becomes the owner of the land. Mostly the machete is held by the men therefore, women even when they work hard in the field do not get the ownership rights of the land. Also, women are considered as "paraya dhan" therefore, when they are married or they do not receive any ownership rights over land and in face of contestation between her brother or male heir she often chooses her relationship ties over ownership rights. In fact the Government policies on land reform did not make any substantial contribution to the lives of the women. This was because the "patta" or the legal document had the men's name on it. So, women did not stand a chance to claim their rights.

Forest and its resources play a major role in the lives of the common people and more so to women. This is because women not only use land for farming but use it for other livelihood purposes like poultry, small farming. These often become trivial for the ones in power. For them the most important resource from forest is the timber which fetches a lot of money while the various livelihood measures of women gets completely unnoticed. Hence, when land is taken away from women they get affected to a greater extent. Also, the laws in paper and the ground realities are very different. Technically both men and women can apply for ownership rights, but it is generally the men who ultimately get those rights sanctioned while women remains deprived.

With the rise of capitalism followed by the development wave natural resources like water and land gets commodified, land by the real estate companies and water by building dams with the help of various corporations. The resources get con-

trolled by the market instead of the individual. This affects women and their lives as they often get the brunt of all such measures.

Later **Wandana Sonalkar** gave her concluding remarks which were followed by a round of recommendations. The foremost recommendation being that there should be ownership rights for both the husband and the wife. The over powering of masculinity needs to be condemned. Women and



their rights over land should not be neglected. Women should break the cultures of silence and raise their voice against such acts. There are certain instances when the people successfully conducted protests and got their demands fulfilled. The battle with Vedanta in Orissa, Dam issues and Narmada Bachao are instances of such positive outcomes. This was followed by a vote of thanks by the panelists.

#### **Session 4**

**Topic: Women, Peace and Security**

**Chairperson: Lata Bhise**

**Speakers: Ilina Sen and Anjulika Samom**

The Chairperson **Lata Bhise** introduced the topic for the discussion. She stated that security and peace are two most important issues of one's lives. These two together play a major role in the lives of women. She said that the issue of security often gets linked to the question of nationalism. Therefore this session would look at the overlap of masculinity and nationalism in the context of the North Eastern states and try to address the question of peace as perceived by women.

The first speaker **Anjulika**, Journalist, asked the audience whether they have ever seen men fight around them and if they have seen them fight who often acts as a mediator during the conflict. The general answer received was that it was the mother or the sister i.e. women who often come forward to resolve the conflict. Therefore, there is a general trend that women are



**Anjulika Samom engaged with the Participants**

looked up as peace makers. They thought so because women are assumed to be much more sensitive and patient. Rehana a student of nursing school said that she thinks women are more capable to resolve conflict than men. Anjulika in the session tried to pose a very interesting question. She asked that do the men of our family lack this quality of being sensitive and patient? Or is it the gender roles that are ascribed to women from childhood that they necessarily become instrumental for peace building. This might be a result of the overarching patriarchal structure which has shaped the lives of women and led to the notion that caregivers can only be peace makers. Why men are not seen as peace makers is something we all should ponder upon. The juxtaposition of women and peace leads to confirming the existent patriarchal structure in society. Also the region of North East has seen the prevalence of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act). With this Act shielding the army, they can kill anyone on mere suspicion. Therefore, in the name of security a lot of violence both indirect and direct has been perpetrated on the women. Also, not only the common people, but the women in the families of the militants are also subject to tremendous torture and sexual assault. Therefore, security, peace and women become an area of contention in conflict zones.



**Ilina Sen**, Activist and Professor at TISS Bombay stated that in the North East one of the major issues is the question of Peace and Security. A lot of unrest is existing in the region. Organizations working in the field are often faced with questions of nationalism. We often use a homogenous identity to extend solidarity between various groups. Apparently it might be ideal for activism and sloganing but one will have to understand the distinctiveness of the groups to solve the problems at hand. Before imposing ones idea of gaining peace one will have to understand whether this is what the people of the region want or not. For example, Kodamkulam Atomic Energy plant of Kanyakumari was supposed address the issues of energy and environment by providing clean energy and claimed to be low in cost. This was met with fierce resistance from the people of the region. The reason being that this plant will add to the pollution and expose the people to nuclear hazards. Hence there rises a clash of interest between the parties. Such clash of interests has been seen in Kashmir, North East which often lead to militarization to ensure security and make peace. But this further adds on to the already disturbed situation. Women get the brunt of it and become victims of violence. Most of the vio-



**Varsha Rajan Berry, Ilina Sen, Lata Bhise, Anjulika Samom**

lence that is perpetrated is not even reported and is only confined to oral narratives. Therefore, only to talk about security and peace is not enough to ensure peace. One needs to question that who is defining this peace for us, or the idea of security for that matter. But having said that, there are various women

who have come forward and raised their voices against such impunity. Meira Paibis, Irom Sharmila, Soni Sori, Dayamani Barla from around the country have been denouncing the repression by various actors, including State. These activists and

organizations like the Naga Mothers Association have tried to build peace in the respective regions where they exist. Women at different places are addressing the violence that is being perpetrated by various actors and are bearing the torch to establish peace in the areas.

Lata Bhise gave her concluding remarks as the Chair. She stated that there is a lack of gender sensitization among the various groups which ensure security. Therefore, there is a dire need to do the same. The country is now facing a crisis which needs to be addressed as soon as possible and for that women will have to do away with this culture of silence that has been imposed on them for long. They have to be vocal about their rights both as a women and as a citizen of the country.

The session concluded with a comment from Anwar Rajan about the utilization of violence by women to combat such situation which also should be condemned. Be it men or women they have to work for peace together and not fight against each other, it is only then can one achieve peace.

## **Session 5**

**Topic: Migration, Ethnic Divide and Refugees**

**Chairperson: Melville Pereira**

**Speakers: Dolly Kikon, Vilas Bhongade, Soibam Haripriya.**

The session was Chaired by **Melville Pereira** who introduced all the keynote speakers.

The first speaker of the session was **Dolly Kikon** is a Lecturer at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne. Dr. Kikon worked as a human rights



lawyer and a community organizer in India. Focusing on land rights among tribal communities in Northeast India, her legal advocacy works extensively dealt with constitutional provisions with regard to land and resource ownership, as well as autonomy arrangements for securing ethnic rights and guarantees.

She started the session about her current work on migration and then proceeded to call out volunteers from the audience to share their experiences of migration to which five participants responded namely Sanglemo, Stephen Murrie, Kombo Arthur from Mahatma Gandhi University, Rihana and Haseena from Dispur Medical College. They each shared their experiences on migration making it a very interactive session. Dolly then spoke about not to get stuck in definitions and that one always has the leaning to be curious about such issues and enquire and be aware of such issues however possible. She then related the events of migration of 2012 and how people of North East were pushed out of major cities like Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai etc. She then talked about the concept of fear psychosis and the issue of racism and how that is ever prevalent in our society and that we need to work towards abolishing it. She also talked about how migrants from Assam end up in cities like Kerala, Delhi, Mumbai only to work as dishwashers or work in the dockyard or the fishing industries, women mainly work in beauty parlours and how they are being exploited and humiliated. She told that we all have a history and how we should learn from it. She then lastly talked about the politics of solidarity and how we are all stuck between the stigma of class, caste etc.

The second speaker of the session was **Mr. Vilas Bhongade** who has been a key figure in the Vidharba region working among dalits

and adivasis on issues of natural resource rights, displacement and livelihood. Beginning his involvement in social movements as a young adult in Nagpur, he has



played an active role in grassroots struggles of unorganized labour - construction workers, incense stick makers, domestic workers and agricultural labour - under the banner of Kashtkari Jan Andolan.

He began his presentation by saying that today every state, capitalists and industries grab and exploit natural resources like land, water, forest, minerals and mountains for their profit. They exploit marginalised communities like the tribal, dalits, forest dwellers, fisherman and farmers and are also forcibly evicted from their habitats. Land which is the only source of income and livelihood is forcibly acquired by the state governments. Majority of the marginalised community is forced to migrate due to rapid urbanisation, mining, hydropower projects, thermal power projects, industries and other infrastructures in the name of development. He quoted that our former Honorable President Shri K R Naraynan on the eve of Republic Day date 25<sup>th</sup> January 2001,said referring to the tribals, Dr. Ambedkar had said: "Civilising the aborigines means adopting them as our own, living in their midst and cultivating fellow feeling, in short loving them". But the developmental path we have adopted is hurting them and threatening their very existence. It is well known how the large river valley projects are uprooting the tribals and causing them untold misery. The mining that is taking place in the forest areas is threatening the livelihood and the survival of many tribes. He suggested that it is through enlightened developmental policies that we can resolve such dilemmas of development. One pre-condition for the success of developmental projects in our extensive tribal areas is that we should take into confidence the tribals and their representatives, explain the benefits of the projects to them, and consult them with regard to the protection of their livelihood and their unique cultures. When they have to be displaced, the resettlement schemes should be discussed with them and implemented with sincerity. This could avoid many critical situations, and we will be able to carry the tribals with us. We have laws that are enlightened and which prohibit the transfer of the tribal lands to non-tribals, private bodies and corporations. These all notes of impact of development were noted by Former Honorable President K R Narayanan, but situation remains the same.



*“Let it not be said of India that this great Republic in a hurry to develop itself is devastating the green mother earth and uprooting our tribal populations. We can show the world that there is room for everybody to live in this country of tolerance and compassion.”*

*He further went on to say that there is no employment, there is growing joblessness and no planning for youth, and he said that the basic problem lies with our education system since we don't have an inclusive policy.*

Most of our remote areas don't have basic educational institutions, therefore our children have to travel and fulfill even their basic education. He said he has witnessed students from the north east facing several problems in DELHI and other parts of country.

He explained that the reason behind forced migration is education and employment; our people have to travel to other villages, District Headquarters, State and even other Countries.

He observed that our societies and families are entangled in the socio, economic, political, educational and cultural issues and problems.

Women face several problems in each sector, they are weak, they do not have land rights. Recently Forest Rights Act gave weightage to the name of women in title of land received. But women are still unable to participate in the decision making process.

He suggested that the Government should come up with tailor made policy and schemes for migrant communities of our country. Our Government should engage with the communities, strengthen local area development, fair participation process, implementation of laws etc. There is a need to have political engagement and friendly relationship with our friends from North Eastern States. We should involve them with our programs and thought process.

The third and the final speaker was **Soibam Haripriya** who did M.A in Social Work (TISS - Mumbai), PhD from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Her area of research/ paper presented and area of interest is as follows: “Durability of Signs and Symbols: Divine King and Sacred Landscape “at the Inter Cultural Dialogue between India and South East Asia, IGNC, Delhi, 17-20 March, 2010 “Recounting and Remembering in a Forgotten Land: Representation of the presence of absence” at IIS 40th World Congress, Delhi, 16-19 February, 2012. She’s currently the Associate Professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati and deals specifically in Peace and Conflict Studies.

She started the session explaining where do we actually come from, our origin and that our ancestors in fact have been migrating throughout the ages. Such stories of our origin, of migration are always found in the respective folk stories of every tribe (in this instance she gives the example of Manipur). She then talks about women migrating from one place to the other and how within the same state, women have a sense of permanence, are taught to bear so much. She then talked about the idea of race and gave a personal account of the history that we all share, of how somehow the idea of pure blood has been a bane to our whole existence and how the lack of acceptance on the basis of the idea of race should be abolished. She further spoke of the idea of home and the sense of belongingness and that where we belong somehow defies who we are. She talks of migration as human stories, the human element of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are ever present and hence it’s important to know where do we actually come from.

The floor then was then open for questions and comments which was lead by Dolly Kikon.

The first comment was by Ilina Sen and she stated that for women wherever they go they try to belong there. Next was a question by a student from Mahatma Gandhi College who questioned on the issue of ‘illegal Bangladeshi immigrants’. Sanjay Borbora was called on to respond to the question presented. He talked about the recent growing contestations about the ‘illegal immigrants’. How the identity of the ‘illegal immigrants’ was created just for the sake of political power play, since

it is being used selectively to target poor Muslim farmers and labourers. He said that the issue can only be solved through dialogue between various parties, including civil society groups in Bangladesh and Assam. He said that dialogue was the only means of resolving this issue.

### **Concluding Session: The Way Forward.**

**Speakers: Pushpa Bhawe, Varsha Rajan Berry, Anwar Rajan**

The speakers in the concluding session talked about the importance of human relationship, of how the barrier that was created by race, class and caste needs to be broken down for the society to come together as one. They also talked about the promoting awareness on these issues and that it is ever important to decode the rhetoric and to address and face the problem of land, of patriarchy and of migration as one.

One very concrete suggestion was that the group together should try and hold workshops

on issues which link different regions of the country. For example, a workshop on AFSPA could be organised with the people of Manipur and Kashmir.



**Pushpa Bhawe, Varsha Rajan Berry, Anwar Rajan**

The **vote of thanks** then was addressed by Hembhai.

# NORTH-EAST INDIA



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