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Women and Insurgency in Assam: Between Resistance and Survival

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Abstract

The long arc of armed insurgency in Assam, stretching from the rise of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1979 through the Bodoland movement to the tripartite peace accord of December 2023, has been narrated overwhelmingly as a story of men with guns and the State that hunted them. Women rarely appear, and when they do, they are flattened into either silent victims or anomalous gun-bearers. This paper attempts a corrective reading. Drawing on a qualitative review of academic scholarship, memoir, fiction, commission reports and press accounts, it argues that women's relationship with insurgency in Assam is best understood as a continuous negotiation between resistance and survival. As combatants and cadres they exercised a constrained agency, recruited and trained yet seldom permitted to lead or to fight; as wives, widows and kin of militants they bore the disproportionate burden of counter-insurgency, from the 'secret killings' of 1998–2001 to sexual violence under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act; and as peace-makers, from the mediation of Indira Goswami to the marches of Bodo women's organisations, they reframed their suffering into political voice. The study finds that insurgency simultaneously opened spaces of agency for women and deepened the patriarchal hierarchies that confined them. It concludes that the post-accord moment demands a gender-sensitive approach to rehabilitation, reintegration and peace-building, in keeping with the wider Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Keywords: Women; insurgency; Assam; ULFA; gender; peace-building; Northeast India

Introduction:

Assam has lived with armed conflict for the better part of four decades. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), founded at the historic Rang Ghar in Sivasagar on 7 April 1979, grew out of the same anxieties that drove the six-year Assam Movement: a fear that the Assamese, as an indigenous people, were being dispossessed of land, language and livelihood by waves of migration, and by a distant central state that took the region's oil and tea while returning little (Baruah, 1999). Where the students of the All-Assam Students' Union pursued an unarmed agitation that ended in the Assam Accord of 1985, a younger and more impatient set chose the gun, declaring war for a sovereign socialist Assam (Mahanta, 2013). The decades that followed brought Operation Bajrang, the Armed Forces

(Special Powers) Act, the long shadow of the 'secret killings', the parallel rise of the Bodoland movement and its armed wings, and finally, on 29 December 2023, a tripartite peace accord between the pro-talks' faction of ULFA, the Government of India and the Government of Assam (The Hindu, 2023).

This history has been told many times. It has rarely been told with women in it. Both the romance of the rebel and the grammar of counter-insurgency are stubbornly masculine: the fighter in the jungle, the soldier at the checkpoint, the negotiator at the table. Women appear, if they appear at all, as the grieving figures behind the men, or as a curiosity when a rifle is found in their hands. Yet women were present at every layer of the conflict. They carried messages and weapons, ran safe houses, trained recruits and occasionally bore arms; they were widowed, displaced, detained and assaulted; and they walked into army camps and ministers' offices to demand that the killing stop. To leave them out is not a small omission of detail. As one scholar of the region observes, to mis-recognise a person is itself a form of violence, and it is a violence that compounds the original wound (Deka, 2020).

The title of this paper offers a frame for reading those presences. Women in Assam's insurgency move constantly between resistance and survival. Resistance names the moments of agency: the choice to join, the labour of mobilisation, the public act of protest, the patient work of peace-making. Survival names the structural fact that, whatever role a woman took, she was rarely the author of the conflict and almost always among its disproportionate casualties. The two are not opposites so much as the two ends of a single taut thread along which women were forced to live. Reading the conflict along that thread restores to view a history that the conventional accounts have quietly edited out.

Objectives:

The study pursues three connected objectives:

- a) to trace the roles women occupied within Assam's principal insurgent movements, particularly ULFA and the Bodo armed groups;
- b) to examine how women experienced the conflict as victims and survivors, including under counter-insurgency; and
- c) to assess women's contributions to peace-making, and to consider what a gender-sensitive peace might require in the aftermath of the 2023 accord.

Research Methodology:

This is a qualitative and interpretive study rather than a survey-based one. It does not generate fresh field data; instead, it reads across an existing body of material in order to reconstruct a picture that the standard narratives leave incomplete. Four kinds of source have been used. The first is academic scholarship on gender and conflict in the region, including detailed interview-based research with former ULFA cadres and with women in the Bodoland districts. The second is testimonial and life-writing, notably the memoir of a former insurgent who later married into the leadership of ULFA, which offers a rare view from inside the organisation. The third is creative literature in Assamese and English, which has often carried truths about the conflict that prose history has been slow to record. The fourth is documentary: the report of the inquiry commission into the secret killings, human-rights documentation, and contemporary press accounts of the peace process and the 2023 settlement.

The method of analysis is thematic. The material has been organised around three recurring figures – the combatant, the victim-survivor, and the peace-maker – not because any woman fits neatly into one of them, but because the three together map the range of positions women occupied and the movement between them. A caveat is necessary. Much of what is known about women in this conflict comes from a small number of dedicated researchers working with a small number of willing respondents, and a great many women have chosen silence, whether from trauma, stigma or prudence. The account that follows is therefore partial by necessity, and it should be read as an interpretation that invites further enquiry rather than a final word.

Analysis and Discussion:

The Woman as Combatant: A Constrained Agency:

ULFA was, on paper, open to women. The decision to admit them was taken partly in emulation of the Naga and Kachin rebel formations with which the outfit had early contact, and partly for tactical reasons, since a woman could move and carry where a man would be searched and stopped (Deka, 2020). Firm numbers do not exist, but the literature suggests that women made up somewhere between a tenth and an eighth of the organisation's strength, and that roughly two hundred female cadres surrendered over the years (Moral, 2013; Deka, 2020). A few rose to visible posts; Pranati Deka, for instance, served as the outfit's cultural secretary. Women trained in camps that ranged across Assam, Nagaland, Myanmar and Bhutan, mobilised villages around questions of exploitation and dignity, and inducted new recruits into the fold.

What drew them in? The motivations recorded by researchers are sobering and various. Poverty pushed some; so, did everyday violence against women in Assamese society, and the killing of civilians and of the families of insurgents by the security forces, which radicalised young women who might otherwise have stayed at home. Above all there was the ideology itself, the promise of redeeming a wronged motherland, which many cadres embraced with genuine conviction and described in the language of revolution rather than of victimhood. Some entered through recruitment drives in their teens; others followed husbands or fiancés into the underground. Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar, herself a former member and later the wife of the ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, has written from the inside about the organisation's claims to internal democracy and the limits of those claims for its women (Deka, 2020).

Yet the agency these women exercised was real and constrained at the same time. Former commanders have remembered the women as more disciplined and committed than many of the men, and the women themselves understood their work as that of combatants fighting to free their homeland. But although they were trained in arms, they were seldom sent into battle and almost never admitted to the inner circle where decisions were made (Deka, 2020). The division of labour underground reproduced the division of labour above ground: women cooked, nursed the injured, kept the safe houses, raised children, and in too many testimonies were expected to provide sexual labour as well. The Bodo armed groups followed a comparable pattern, drawing women into community mobilisation, nursing and logistics, with armed combat very much the exception (Saikia, 2023). The rebel organisation, in short, tended to reproduce the very patriarchy that its rhetoric promised to dismantle. Recent work on a former cadre of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland argues that her path into the movement cannot be read through the cold vocabulary of strategy alone; it

has to be read through the textures of love, desire and belonging that drew her in, and that the organisation then disciplined and contained (Gogoi, 2025). The combatant woman is thus the first site of the resistance–survival tension. She resisted the State; within her own organisation she was made to survive a subordination she knew only too well.

The Woman as Victim and Survivor:

If the combatant is the exceptional figure, the victim-survivor is the common one, and it is here that the burden of the conflict falls most heavily and most unequally. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, in force across much of Assam from 1990, handed the security forces sweeping powers and an effective immunity from prosecution. Women paid a particular price: arbitrary detention, harassment, and sexual violence used as an instrument of war and intimidation (Banerjee, 2008). The record of the wider region carries grim markers of this – the alleged rape of Bodo women at Bhumka in Kokrajhar in 1988, and, in neighbouring Manipur, the killing of Thangjam Manorama in 2004, which provoked the now-famous naked protest of the Meira Paibi before the gates of Kangla (Kolås, 2017).

Counter-insurgency in Assam also took a covert and especially insidious form. Between 1998 and 2001, during the tenure of the Asom Gana Parishad government, the state was convulsed by what came to be called the ‘secret killings. Surrendered ULFA cadres, working under the protection of elements of the state machinery, abducted and murdered the relatives of militants who had failed to bring their kin out of the jungle (Talukdar et al., 2009). The inquiry commission headed by Justice K. N. Saikia later held the state police responsible for a supporting role and described the strategy in stark terms. Entire households were wiped out; the dead were overwhelmingly men, and the survivors overwhelmingly women – wives turned widows in a single night, mothers who buried their sons, daughters left to hold together what remained of shattered homes. The novelist Aruni Kashyap has done as much as any historian to keep this memory alive, returning in his fiction to the village left to its women after the men have been taken away (Kashyap, 2020).

Survival did not end when the violence subsided. The female ex-combatant who laid down her arms discovered that the State’s rehabilitation schemes had been designed, in practice, for men. Surrendered male cadres received loans, the prospect of land, and a measure of restored social standing; their sisters-in-arms were too often left to neglect, social exclusion, and a stigma that, in a society where marriage remains a central marker of a woman’s worth, frequently foreclosed marriage altogether (Deka, 2020). The staged surrender ceremony gave the State a useful photograph; it gave the woman nothing durable. Here survival appears in its barest form: not resistance to the State at all, but the daily effort to remain whole after both the movement and the State have used her and set her aside.

It is worth pausing on the everyday register of this survival, because it is where the line between victim and agent begins to blur. As men hid in the forests or sat in detention, women in Bodo and Assamese villages alike took on the entire weight of the household and the field, kept children fed and farms running, and devised quiet strategies of endurance – what scholars of the region have come to call the everyday forms of resistance of women who could not march but would not break (Saikia, 2023; Swargiary, 2025). The Bengali-speaking Muslim women of the Bodoland districts, caught between communities and suspected by all sides, often pursued education and work and maintained a protective silence as their means of holding their ground (Saikia, 2023). None of this looks like resistance in the heroic sense, and yet, cumulatively, it was the labour that kept communities

alive through the worst of the conflict. To call it mere victimhood is to miss the agency folded inside it.

The Woman as Peace-Maker:

The most visible reframing of survival into resistance is peace-making, and it is here that women in Assam and across the Northeast have left their clearest political mark. The region has a striking tradition of women's peace activism, much of it organised through the moral authority of motherhood, which allowed women to step into a public arena otherwise closed to them. The Naga Mothers' Association in Nagaland and the Meira Paibi in Manipur are the best-known examples, mediating between armed groups and between insurgents and the State, and placing their own bodies between the gun and the community (Banerjee, 2008; Kolås, 2017).

Assam's contribution to this tradition is no less significant. The single most celebrated figure is the writer Indira Goswami, known to readers as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, a Jnanpith laureate who set aside the comfort of literary fame to serve as the chief interlocutor of the People's Consultative Group, the citizens' body formed in 2005 to carry messages between ULFA and New Delhi (Mahanta, 2013). She broke the ice in a stalemate that had defied seasoned politicians; observers recalled that her presence had a sobering effect on hardened men, and that she was the first to make peace seem thinkable. Her fellow emissary Rebati Phukan, also a woman, sat across the table from the government's negotiators. Goswami did not live to see the settlement she helped to imagine – she died in 2011, the year the consultative group was dissolved and ULFA split into its pro-talks and hardline factions – but the long road to the 2023 accord passed through the door she had pushed open.

In the Bodo areas, women turned organisation itself into a tool of peace. Bodies such as the All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation brought rival armed factions into a single room and mediated between them, staged peace marches against insurgency and ethnic violence, and contested elections to claim a formal share of power (Saikia, 2023). What unites the mediator, the marcher and the woman who simply refused to be moved is a single underlying claim: that women had a right to a political voice the conflict had otherwise denied them. The mother who pleads for peace does not contradict the woman who once carried a gun. Both are assertions of agency, made in very different registers, by women who had spent years being acted upon and had resolved to act.

Summary and Conclusion:

Read across its three figures, the history of women in Assam's insurgency resists any single verdict. Insurgency opened doors for women and slammed them shut in the same motion. It let a young woman become a revolutionary, then refused her a place in the room where decisions were taken. It politicised the grieving mother, then expected her to return quietly to her grief. It produced, in the same decades, the trained cadre, the widow of the secret killings, and the Jnanpith laureate turned peace broker – three women who would seem to have nothing in common, yet who were all moving along the same thread between resistance and survival. The central finding of this study is that these are not separate stories but one story: the conflict simultaneously expanded women's agency and entrenched the patriarchal order that limited it, and women navigated that contradiction with a resourcefulness that the masculine narrative of the war has been slow to acknowledge.

This reading carries implications for the present. The 2023 accord with the pro-talks' faction of ULFA, and the gradual winding down of the Bodo conflicts, have opened a window for a peace that is genuinely inclusive rather than merely negotiated between armed men and the State. A gender-sensitive peace would begin by treating female ex-combatants and the widows of the conflict as rightful claimants rather than afterthoughts, designing rehabilitation, livelihood and reintegration measures that reach them on equal terms. It would draw the women's organisations that kept faith through the long years of violence into the formal architecture of reconciliation and reconstruction, in the spirit of the international Women, Peace and Security agenda. And it would remember that the settlement remains incomplete so long as the hardline faction stays outside it, which means that the women of the affected districts may yet be asked to carry the burden of an unfinished peace. To write women back into the history of Assam's insurgency, in other words, is not only an act of scholarly fairness. It is the precondition for building a peace that does not, once again, leave them out.

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