

New Capital, Emerging Conflicts and Social Governance in Northeast India; Nagaland and Manipur

Paula Banerjee and Sucharita Sengupta

Introduction

In a post-colonial democratic structure, social governance emerges crucial as a form of governance in relations to conflict management, especially in a conflict economy. With its origin in western style mass democracy and market system, social governance has evolved into a system that has multiple trajectories¹. The post-colonial states have addressed demands for justice through the axis of development and in a neoliberal world that has meant the growth of market economy, urbanism and capital accumulation in tandem with massive infrastructural changes. That has in turn created occasion for massive transfer of resources necessitating new logistical apparatus. The logistical spaces that were used as conduits were the favoured spaces. This caused massive increase in governmental expenditure and the beneficiaries were a chosen few. In this circuitous mode of development capitalism, induction of new groups became a necessity when older groups were no longer pacified. One can see this phenomena emerging in large sections of the Northeast India. Certain sections of the population became the new beneficiaries with new logistical expansions. This was not without a cost. The new beneficiaries were benefited through new logistical processes of power sharing at the cost of their radicalism in protest movements.

Once conflict starts it often leads to a protracted process. Numerous countries in Asia and Africa have endured decades of armed conflict. In many countries ceasefires and peace accords have resulted in increased violence, as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of these developing countries suffered greatly in the colonial period. The colonial masters often followed a divide-and-rule policy in order to governing voices of dissent. One group of people was treated better than others. The bitter rivalries thus engendered between religious groups, tribes, clans and ethnicities spilled into the post-colonial period. Post-colonial governments often became a player in these conflicts. Traditional structures existing albeit the emergence of a new global economy, free markets, urban centres, new connectivity, trade, resource mobilisation and labour have opened up spaces for new negotiations. The ruling elite in this neo liberal apparatus, having learnt from their colonial masters, persisted in siding with one group against the other. That is where our narrative begins in context of the Northeast India where managing dissent and governing peace are complimentary to each other. The present governance scenario of Northeast bears testimony to this fact. The disorder that has remained through ages and unfolds in new patterns in the region are also normalised. Violent clashes are products of this disorder. Amidst these contesting claims what happens to the questions of justice and rights? What does peace mean in this context? Does it remain as a collateral descant of governance? We want to interrogate these questions. The research therefore will explore in greater detail new fissures in the emerging crony capitalism in the Northeast, contentious claims to resources, new forms of political resistance and governmental policies.

¹ Ranabir Samaddar (ed)), Introduction, *Government of Peace :Social Governance, Security and the Problematic of Peace* , Ashgate: England, 2-3.

Research concerns and Proposed Areas of Study:

The 'Look and Act East' - policy adopted by the Indian government in 1991 had first opened up the northeast to a foray of developmental policies that has seen a boom in the last ten years. A number of bilateral and multilateral projects have been initiated. So while logistically a new space is being built up through expansion of railway, construction of roads, dams and highways and labour, it also presupposes stability and peace. New groups have emerged as stake holders in governmental mechanisms.

Among new groups, it is of special significance how women have become objects of participatory governance or social governance in Northeast India. Women from all the ethnic groups have taken part in the resistance movements and one of the common points of state oppression shared by all the women's groups in the region is the Repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958/72). They claimed it to be merely the most recent state action against women in the region, where women have faced multiple injustices from the colonial period onwards. They also claimed that the brunt of injustices came after the passage of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Northeast India in 1958. Women do not accept their situation of vulnerability passively and have innovatively created alliances at times with the Indian state and at other times with the rebel movements in Northeast India to create a space in which they can be heard, and that can be considered as their own space of empowerment. Over the course of the conflict they have shaped and reshaped their responses to the state and innovated and changed techniques of negotiation. In this way they have had a profound impact on governance and conflict resolution and in the process tries to reshape gender relations in their own societies.

In the context of Nagaland this politics have assumed special significance. Throughout the Naga people's struggle for self-determination and against the security forces of the government of India, the women's relation with the government was characterised by atrocities carried out by the security personnel. The women therefore struggled against these atrocities and violence, and together with their communities, for more autonomy as Nagas. Due to the AFSPA, there were big obstacles for the women to convey their grievances to the government. Once the women started to take an active role in informal and formal peace negotiations, namely to negotiate with both parties and convince them to sit together for peace talks, they had a direct channel for exchange with governmental and security officials.

During the period of peace negotiations between the government of India and diverse Naga groups and resistance movements, the government and the women's groups started to work together. Several aspects made this relationship between the government and the Naga women's groups an established and proven one. Firstly, women's flexibility to work with other ethnic groups and parties, as well as with the government was what made this relationship possible at all. In order to achieve their aims, women also realised that they had to partner with other stakeholders. Since their aims have been rejected repeatedly by the leaders of their communities, they were willing to open up their array of alliances. "The more traditions failed them the more they were willing to invoke modern modes of redress and carry their community with them. This flexibility of the Naga women enabled them to ally with the state when all other forms of redress failed. This alliance for justice proved [to be] extremely effective as it also contributed towards

peace” (Banerjee & Dey 2012, 15). Particularly the younger women with their agenda of women’s (political) rights faced strong opposition from the traditional leadership. Since the government supports women’s representation in politics – the Constitution of India and the Naga Municipal Act mandate reserved seats for women in local governmental bodies –, they saw the government as an ideal partner in this matter (Banerjee & Dey 2012, 26).

Secondly, with the softening of its highly militarised counter-insurgency strategy in the 1990s towards a stronger focus on development as part of the Look East Policy, the government pushed for peace negotiations side by side with women’s groups, and looked for partners to implement its development goals (Banerjee & Dey 2012, 21)

Thirdly, once the peace agreement was signed with the underground movements and an armistice was concluded in 1997, the threat-perception changed for the government. Secession was no longer the main conflict issue. The Nagas now have to deal with other societal contests that became central, such as inter-ethnic disputes, land ownership, disputes with migrants, trafficking of women and AIDS, drug abuse, etc. This change in the nature of conflict gave the government the opportunity to modify its role. It was no longer a party in the new conflict but could act as a mediator for the contesting Naga groups, for example the women and the traditional leaders regarding more political rights for the women. Thus, for the women, the government was no longer a perpetrator or enemy, but became an acceptable partner (Banerjee & Dey 2012, 23).

Fourthly, the development agenda that is part of the Look East Policy, although criticised and contested², brought interesting and indeed positive changes for women. Since the development agenda targets the social, political and economic empowerment of women (specifically the younger women) – e.g. visible in the set-up of the Department of Women’s Development Nagaland³ – it fell on sympathetic ears among the women (Banerjee & Dey 2012, 12). Living in a patriarchal society and being constantly marginalised by social and political inequalities and traditions, the women were pleased to receive support by the government to claim important rights, such as the 33% reservation for women in the local governmental bodies. The ex chief minister of Nagaland, Neiphiu Rio, stated in 2010 that traditionally, women have not had “any role in public governance in Naga society”. However, later he stated that reservations for women cannot be disregarded “as long as the Nagas want to have municipal bodies.”⁴

² See e.g. Das 2010, Kikon 2005.

³ The Department of Women’s Development, Nagaland “has the mandate of uplifting women to function as equal partners and participants in the development process. This new Directorate has initiated and is implementing a number of welfare and development programmes for women” (<http://www.indigenoussherald.com/index.php/region/119-women-development-in-nagaland>), such as a) to improve the socio-economic status of women; b) to safeguard the rights of women; c) to provide support services (Paula Banerjee & Ishita Dey 2012, 13).

⁴ The Statesman, June 24., 2012,
http://www.thestatesman.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=414528&catid=52

These outlined aspects show that the relationship between the women's organisations of Nagaland and the government of India is based on overlapping and coinciding goals, namely to stop violence and to support development. Thus, they have both benefitted from each other's support in order to implement their strategy. The women have been reliant on the government's will to start numerous rounds of peace negotiations with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) and to work on finding a compromised agreement. The government on the other hand has profited from the women's organisations' consolidated support for the peace negotiations. Regarding development, the women have benefitted from the government's support of their struggle for women's rights in which they were continuously impeded by the traditional leaders of Nagaland. The government has also profited from the women's support to implement the development programs under the Look East Policy, and on the other hand, provided women with tailored capacity building and support programs.

The recent removal of the chief minister of Nagaland by the mass presents another dynamic to the political intricacies of Nagaland. Media reports indicate a new beginning of reformation in the security discourse of the state⁵. The social friction over the 33 percent reservation for women in urban local bodies also unravels the modern dilemmas in the questions of justice and rights in the Northeast India. This is indicative of not only Nagaland, but Manipur.

In an interesting analysis, Pradip Phanjoubam discusses how the recent social unrest is nothing but a product of the tradition vs modernity structural adjustments that raises questions as to "what extent customary laws can be pushed at the cost of their anachronism"⁶. The recent clash of the government of Manipur with the United Naga Council (UNC) over creation of new districts, throws open the old questions over resource politics, land ownership and conflicts.

There is another nuance to this problem. Recent instances prove how women through their alliance with the state and in the wake of crony capitalism had to shed much of their own radicalism. In its paradigms of connecting beyond the region, the government interestingly since the past decade has made truce with political assertions of dissenting groups. The Indian government made targeted policies to benefit the women of Northeast. With Erom Sharmilla ending her legendary fast since 2000 against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSA) in Manipur, that made her a national icon, probably indicates state appropriation of voices⁷. Does backlash following the decision mean that we are still unable to accept women as agentive forces and active participants in claim making? Is there a denial of the fact that ways to peace and justice in a conflict torn region is probably achievable only through parliamentary politics? Being an ace political actor, Sharmila took the bait. Women therefore are using the state and its new mode of governance to push for their rights, thereby invoking new contests over governing rather than over sovereignty. Finally, following what Ranabir Samaddar says, for post-colonial

⁵ The Morung Express, February 25, 2017, <http://morungexpress.com/social-security-welfare-parl-affairs/>

⁶ Asian Age, February 6, 2017, <http://www.asianage.com/opinion/columnists/060217/why-nagaland-erupted-tradition-vs-modernity.html>

⁷ DNA, August 26, 2016, <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-sharmila-chanu-beacon-of-hope-or-symbol-of-betrayal-2249078>

researchers, “it will be important to see if the subjects of conflict and governance are passive subjects bowing incessantly to the apparatus of governance, or conduct themselves in a way that ensures their relative freedom from the governing apparatus and the laws of conflict”.⁸ We want to probe these intriguing emerging consternations in the political economy of the Northeast.

Research Questions:

- We will delve into new forms of disruption of new logistical apparatus in the Northeast. Although we will attempt to study the emerging concerns in the entire region, we have in mind mostly the societies in Nagaland and Manipur.
- Contemporary techniques of social governance, forms of resistance and negotiation.
- Alliances and interface of multiple organisations with the State – whether this will lead to empowerment or disempowerment?
- Subjects of conflict governance- women, footloose labour, migrants, role of humanitarian organisations. Policy responses in the background of past conflicts and present political mobilisations.

⁸ Ranabir Samaddar (ed), Introduction, *Government of Peace*, 155.