

Circles of Insecurity

Paula Banerjee

This section intends to study population flows in the East and Northeast of India from the South Asian sub-region of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and parts of Nepal that borders India, and analyse in that perspective how human flows negotiate borders and boundaries, and impact on meta-discourses of security. By reading mega narratives of security against the grain we intend to portray how a reading of issues from below throws up alternative scenarios, and how conflicts, wars, and passions combine within them both traditional and the non-traditional questions, and that even within the traditional issues remain non-traditional concerns, anxieties, and arguments. They remain as *non-traditional* only because they have escaped the eyes of those who govern our lives. The study then will not see traditional and non-traditional issues as binaries. Indeed, one of the aims of the section is to demonstrate with the help of selected case studies, how treating security concerns as traditional or non-traditional depends on viewer's location, and the nature of the concern changes with the change of that location.

My study of the relation between population flows and security will aim to produce a critique not only of state-centric perceptions, but also a critique of the development of a language of care that arises from within the language of violence. It will analyse how concerns for the displaced is born out of conflict and often remains hostage to conflict. I shall take the term "refugees" here as indicative of forced displacement/migration, and of a situation of vulnerability. It will help us into taking into account the widespread phenomenon of external/internal displacement and to show how violence produces internal borders and frontiers and an entire range of security issues faced by the victims – precisely the situation indicated by the notion of vulnerability. The irony is that while to the vulnerable, the condition and the consequence of migration is insecurity, the dominant literature on migration in the region insists that population movement is now only an aberration. Therefore in course of writing on insecurities, I have at times redirected my examination into the existing literature. In this examination and re-examination, my site is the Northeast of India and the India-Bangladesh border.

I

The history of Northeast India from a non-traditional perspective can best be described as a saga of movements of different communities of people. According to a leading historian of the region Northeast India is situated in, “one of the greatest migration routes of mankind,” (Barpujari, 1992, 35) and so it has seen the advent of many different groups of people. One student of geopolitics have summarized these routes as the following:

First, through the north or mountain passes of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, second – through the valley of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra from India and the west, third – by the sea on the Bay of Bengal, passing through Bengal or Burma, fourth – the Assam-Burma routes, one over the Patkai passes in the north-east; leading from the Lidu – Margherita road to China through the Hukawang valley in Burma and the other through Manipur and Cachar in the south-east or south of Assam.(Hazarika, 1996, 41)

The region has even been termed as a museum of races. If one looks at the history of any part of Northeast India it clearly portrays how communities were formed as a result of long-term migrations. It is perhaps best to begin with Assam as in the known history of Northeast India including the colonial period and for sometimes after, Assam constituted the major part of Northeast India. Even today the politics of Assam affects most of Northeast India and perhaps the first agitations against migrations also began in Assam. In the traditional discourse influx of people into Northeast India is viewed as a prime security concern, yet from a non-traditional perspective the interesting point is that even Assam’s own beginnings are traceable to migration of different groups of people from the East and Southeast Asia.

There are a number of myths regarding the origin of the Assamese people. One particularly interesting myth about the people of Pragjyotisha, a name by which Assam was formerly known proceeds thus: A branch of people called Chao-Theivs of China migrated to India at a very early period. They came to be known as the Zuhthis. The word Zuhthis was subsequently transformed into the Sanskrit word "Jyotisha" from where Assam came to be

known as Pragjyotisha. But there is very little evidence to corroborate this myth. What can be corroborated however is that the Ahoms were the offshoot of the Tai race. Some believe that the Tai penetration into the Brahmaputra valley happened as early as in the eighth century (Hazarika, 1996, 59). They argue that the conquest made by the Tai-Ahom was not an invasion but rather a peaceful penetration. But the official history states that the “Ahoms, a Thai-Buddhist tribe from the southeast, arrived in the area in the early 1200's. They deposed the ruler of the time and established a kingdom with its capital in Sibsagar. By 1353, the Ahoms controlled a major part of the area, which they renamed Assam. The Ahoms adopted the language and Hindu religion of the conquered people and ruled Assam for about 500 years.”¹

Historians such as Barpujari agree that the Ahoms started expanding their kingdom in around 1512 AD when they led a successful expedition into Panbari in the north bank of Brahmaputra. In 1523 the Ahom's annexed the Chutia kingdom. In 1536 the Kachari kingdom of Dimapur fell into the hands of the Ahoms and slowly the kingdom emerges as a multi ethnic entity. Meanwhile, in Kamrup the rise of the mongoloid Koch power marked a new epoch in history. But the Ahoms continued their conquests in the Brahmaputra valley. A conflict between the Koch and the Ahoms seemed inevitable. When war took place it led to significant movements of population (Hazarika, 1996, 61). It was through the Koch that the Mughals got their information about this part of the world and hence the Muslim invasion began. After the Koch kingdom the Mughals led repeated expeditions against Assam until Mir Jumla concluded the Treaty of Gilajhari Ghat in 1663. Towards the close of the eighteenth century the frontiers of the expanding Burmese empire reached Assam. The Burmese expanded their authority over Arakan and Manipur by 1813. It was the weakness of the Ahom kings due to numerous revolts of different groups of people such as the Moamaria uprisings that brought the Burmese to the frontiers of Cachar and Sylhet. Successive Burmese invasions by the end of 1821 made them virtually the rulers of this region.

The Arakan refugees finally brought British attention to this region. These Arakan refugees were a point of dispute between the British and the Burmese governments. When the British intervened against the Burmese and annexed the territory in 1826 they ostensibly did it to safeguard the interests of those refugees but undeniably this was also the way they

¹ This is the official version of Assam's history in *Assam-The Ancient Pragjyotishpura*, DestinationNE.com, <http://www.destinationne.com/assam/state-info.html#History> .

strengthened their frontiers. They constituted the region into an administrative division under a Commissioner and started using the name Assam. Further they added to it the southern hill, plateaus and plains, which they subsequently annexed. The whole territory was constituted as a province on February 6, 1874, as the province of Assam under a Chief Commissioner.² By the time the British arrived different branches of the Tibeto-Chinese family of languages including the Tibeto-Burman and the Siamese Chinese and also people belonging to the Aryan groups lived this region (Hazarika, 1996, 42). Therefore, a non-traditional reading of traditional Assamese history portray that even before the arrival of the British not just Assam but most of Northeast India was already a multi-ethnic region.

At the time of the arrival of the British there were not just thousands of independent village communities in India but “six major Hinduised states,” including “the Koch, the Tripuri, the Jaintia, the Kachari, the Ahom and the Meithei”(Chaube, 1999, 36). It was the British, as stated earlier, who brought the Garo Hills, the Naga Hills and the Jaintia Hills within the Assam province. The immediate consequence of the British rule was that some fresh groups of people entered Northeast India and added to the cultural diversity of the region. The other consequence of British rule was the weakening of communal control of land “through the payment of compensation for land acquisition to ‘owners’, chiefs and ‘rajas’”(Chaube, 1999, 44). In subsequent sections of this paper both these developments will be discussed in greater details. It will also reflect on the masculinisation of the region.

The British were in the region for less than a century and so it is said that they failed to develop a native base for the administration. Most of the Commissioners or Deputy Commissioners in this region were British. Some of the other subordinates were from the plains including Bengal. The Bengalis were brought to the region not just by the British but also by the rulers of Tripura who invited Bengali settlers into his territory from the sixteenth century. According to political historians such as S.K. Chaube their lure was money that they paid to the rulers. “The same consideration led the other hill chiefs to settle Nepali cattle breeders in the hills in the early British days, and businessmen from the plains in the comparatively recent period””(Chaube, 1999, 45). However, the movements of such groups of

² Much of this is taken from H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. II*, (Guwahati, Publication Board, Assam, 1992).

people will be discussed later. For now it might be interesting to see how the British administrators viewed people's movements within the region.

There are a number of accounts by British officials that speak of their experiences in the northeast frontiers. One such account is by George Dunbar who was stationed in the present territory of Arunachal Pradesh. His reminiscences dealt with frontier people such as the Abors, the Mishimis, the Hill Miris, the Nishis and some of the Naga tribes. Quite unconsciously Dunbar recorded at least three types of movements of people in this region. They included movements for official purposes including movements by the army, and for non-official purposes such as movements for trade and movements as pilgrimages. When Dunbar went to the Dihang valley for the Abor expeditions in 1911-12 he found the area "rather densely populated with strangers" (Dunbar, 1984, 193). He also found out that there were robust trade relations between these people, the Tibetans and people from the south. In one particularly lucid passage he describes how in some villages, "everything that could not be made locally was Tibetan stuff, brought down by traders." He speaks of regions where, "trade comes almost equally from north and south. Along the foot-hills, of course, the Abors get all they need to buy from shopkeepers in the Plains" (Dunbar, 1984, 212). He speaks of square blue porcelain beads that were used as mediums of exchange. But these beads were not made in the region but "Bori traders brought them down from Tibet" (Dunbar, 1984, 219).

Dunbar speaks of different groups of migrants who had in the recent past migrated to these areas. One of them was the Kebangs, who migrated from Riu and established a powerful village. Another group interestingly enough were the Nepalis, whom he calls the Gorkhas. He speaks of "hundred thousand Gurkha settlers, who mostly became graziers" (Dunbar, 1984, 287). Dunbar is not the only person to speak of Gurkha settlements. There are others as well who speak of their presence in this region from a much earlier time. *The Gazetteer of Naga and Manipur Hills* while discussing the state of immigration into these areas speak of the Nepalese as the main foreign settlers in these regions. It describes the rest of the foreign population as "a few coolies and cartmen from Bengal and the United Provinces, a few artisans from Punjab, and a few traders from Marwar." The Gazetteer also mentions "emigration from the district could not be measured with any degree of accuracy, owing to the changes in boundary that had recently taken place" (Allen, 2002, 35). Even though the Gazetteer mentions that migrations are few and far between but in another instance it speaks of among a total of

eighteen shops in Kohima, thirteen were owned and maintained by Marwari merchants (Allen, 2002, 59). In Imphal town among the existing thirty-six shops Marwaris owned twenty-nine of them (Allen, 2002, 107). As if the presence of Marwaris seemed so commonplace that their influx for trade did not seem exceptional enough for a special mention.

From the commentaries by British administrative officials another trend was apparent. It was to mark the frontier as a space very different from the civilized world. This sense of difference underpinned their attitude towards the frontier people. These people were considered less than human and so they could be treated with contempt. There was no need for a civilized response to them. No wonder then that these memoirs are replete with stories of how the frontier people deserved the violent response that was meted out to them. Allen's Gazette discusses how the British felt that "the Nagas should be taught a lesson," when they refused to submit to the British rule. Allen also discusses how some Naga villages opposed British advance in the early part of 1880s and so the British officials felt that "it was necessary to open fire, and some 50 or 60 of the enemy were killed." It was also remarked that the "punitive expeditions were a regular feature of the administration of the districts, as it was only by this means independent Nagas could be taught that the lives and property of those who had submitted to us must be respected" (Allen, 2002, 23-25). Of course respect for the lives and property of these frontier people were never felt necessary.

Allen's account was not in any way exceptional. Even Dunbar, who wrote much later, felt how it was necessary to have a strong force to protect the frontiers. Dunbar spoke of different violent tribes such as the Daflas. He said that the threat from the Daflas made it imperative for the British to establish outposts in the Aka country (Dunbar, 1984, 285). It was always threat from aggressive tribes that made it imperative for the British to respond with violence and to militarise the region. Dunbar said peace in the borders was threatened by the acquisition of sophisticated weapons by trans-border tribes. And for that purpose it became necessary "to re-arm the local forces, and issue better weapons to villagers in the administered districts than they had previously allowed them for their own protection" (Dunbar, 1984, 304-305). British rule therefore played its part in not just making the North-eastern region multi-ethnic but also created borders and boundaries within frontiers and between different groups of people that they marked as civilized and uncivilized.

In another section of the frontier there were massive flows of migrant people with diverse consequences. Different hill tribes in Tripura came from upper Burma. There is one school of opinion that the people belonging to the hill tribes of Tipperah were a branch of the Shan tribe of Burma (Ganguly, 1983, 2). People from Bengal started moving to Tripura from the sixteenth century. The rulers of Gaur gave the kings of Tripura the title Manikya.³ “Ratna Manikya patronized the settlement of a good number of Brahmins, Vaidyas and Kayasthas from Bengal in Tripura. This was perhaps the first case of immigration of population into Tripura from the west as against all the earlier flows of immigration being from the east and the northeast” (Ganguly, 1983, 3). In the initial period royal patronage encouraged migration from Bengal. The British Government appointed their political agent in Agartala in 1871. Following this the rulers of Tripura were encouraged to appoint administrators from Bengal. Some of the first magistrates were from Bengal. The ruler of Tripura had his own zamindari called Chakla Roshnabad, which was situated in Province of Bengal. The ryots of this zamindari were all Bengalis. In the 1911 census it was estimated that 97,858 people spoke Bengali. They formed over one third of the population of 2,29,613 people.⁴

Migration from Bengal did not mean that other migrations from east and northeast stopped. In fact migrations of groups such as the Reangs, Kukis, Lushais, Mags, Chakmas and Tripuris continued. But these people did not come for administrative jobs. They arrived in search of jhum lands. In some cases community conflicts might have driven them to Tripura (Ganguly, 1983, 4). Another reason for massive migrations into Tripura in the nineteenth century was that until 1880 there was no regular land revenue system in Tripura. In many cases the Maharajas granted land in perpetuity at a fixed rent and where no grants were made the usual custom was to farm out collections. In most cases grantees could get exemptions from paying land revenue by giving free service to the state. After 1880 a number of rules came into force for regulating the land tenure system. Yet fragmentation of holdings, the landlessness of a large part of the rural population and the illegal transfer of lands from tribals to non-tribals continued even after the passage of Tribal Reserve Orders of 1931 and 1943 (Gan-Chaudhuri, 1980, 106-107). Yet, since the migrants themselves constructed the discourse on migration,

³ See for more details, Nalini Ranjan Roy Choudhury, *Tripura The Ages* (Agartala, Bureau of Research and Publications on Tripura, 1977) pp. 5-20.

⁴ Thakur Somendra Chandra Deb Burman, *Census Descriptions of Tripura in 1340* (Agartala, Tripura State Press, 1933) List of Tables No. 5 and 6 (since the introduction has no pagination the page numbers are not given). This is one of the first detailed publication of census in Tripura.

particularly the Bengalis, until recently the hills of Tripura were termed as the benign hills (Ganguly, 1983).

In most other parts of Northeast India the migrant populations were not looked upon as kindly as in Tripura, and perhaps no history of Assam in the post colonial period can be written without dealing with the contentious issue of migration. There is a school of thought that argues that British efforts to recruit labourers for tea companies “took the shape of a well-planned conspiracy” (Bhattacharya, 2001, 33)⁵ The British from 1770 decided to raise land revenue so high that it became impossible for a common cultivator to depend on agriculture alone for their livelihood. But the Assamese cultivators were still not interested to work in British companies as wage earners. The British then had to import tea labourers. First they looked towards China. But with the rising cost of labour they wanted to recruit locally. The problem became all the more acute during the boom in tea markets in 1860s. The Assamese were still apathetic to plantation jobs and so the British turned to Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc. The result of such a policy was that *The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863* was passed. This opened the floodgates for migrants.⁶

Government officials such as Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharya are of the opinion that most of Assam’s woes began with these migrants. There are others who may not hold such extreme views but still blame British policies for much of Assam’s problems today. They feel that although the British were responsible for making Assam a multi-ethnic state but their policies kept the Hill and the Plains people apart. The “Inner Line Regulations were introduced ostensibly ‘to discourage unnecessary interference with and economic exploitation of the tribal people’; in reality [it was used] ‘to exclude all contact, between them and the inhabitants of the plains.’”⁷ Such a policy adversely affected the development of the tribal people. When Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam (1939-42) prepared his note on the *Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam* he stressed the differences between the people of the administrative areas of the Hills and Plains ethnologically, linguistically and

⁵ Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharya, *The Silent Invasion: (Assam Versus Infiltration)*, (Guwahati/Delhi, Spectrum Publications, 2001) p. 33.

⁶ Most of the information in this paragraph is taken from Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharya, *The Silent Invasion: (Assam Versus Infiltration)*, (Guwahati/Delhi, Spectrum Publications, 2001) .

⁷ *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission, 1955*, quoted in H.K. Barpujari, *North-East India: Problems, Policies & Prospects* (Guwahati/Delhi, Spectrum Publications, 1998) p. 5.

culturally. He noted that over the excluded areas the British had at best “the most shadowy control” (Reid, 1942, 295). According to historians such as H.K. Barpujari this may have alienated the hill and the plains people of whom the hill people were largely tribals.

Immigrants from neighbouring districts of Sylhet, Mymensing and Rangpur were populating the plains. The Bengalis were fast replacing the Assamese in the officialdom. Bengali had to be made the language of the court in place of Persian, as there was numerous Bengalis in the administration and when a Persian scribe went on leave it was extremely expensive and difficult to replace them (Barpujari, 1975, 75). The Bengalis also became indispensable because only they could teach in the newly established government schools. They continued to occupy most of the white collared jobs much to the resentment of the Assamese. In other sectors such as trade, both wholesale and retail, the Marwaris enjoyed a monopoly. Beside trade they acted as moneylenders and agents of tea garden managements. According to some social scientists the “immigrants occupied in an organized way waste lands, grazings and forest reserves” (Barpujari, 1998, 37). By 1931 most of the wasteland in the Brahmaputra valley was occupied by the settlers. Many felt that in their hunger for land the immigrants encroached on government land and land belonging to the local people. By 1941 the immigrants “penetrated the then Lakhimpur district. After Saadullah became the Premier of Assam for the second time in August 1942, it is alleged that he attempted a systematic settlement of East Bengal Muslim peasants in Assam” (Saikia et.al., 203, iv).

To the Assamese opinion the situation after 1947 became worse. Between 1958 and 1961 the number of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan rose from 4,87,000 to 6,00,000 (Barpujari, 1998, 39). “The decade also witnessed a large inflow of migrants from other parts of India seeking economic opportunities in trading, construction work, and white collar jobs” (Saikia et.al., 203, vi). It is alleged that during 1971 a large number of East Pakistanis fled to Assam and many of them did not return to their places of origin even after the formation of Bangladesh. Sentiments regarding “foreigners” started hardening after 1972. In 1979 during a bi-election about one-sixth of the voters were declared foreigners by courts. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) declared ‘no revision, no election,’ meaning without a revision of the voter list no election can be held in Assam. They demanded detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners. They had support from organizations such as All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad and (AAGSP) and Asom Sahitya Sabha. Violent clashes occurred all over Assam. The

movement dragged on with the political parties divided in their opinion. For the next few years communal riots recurred in a number of areas and violence spread across communities. Even the moderate Assamese opinion was moved by a “genuine fear that unending immigration across the border will reduce the indigenous people into a minority and the fate of Assam will be the same as that of Sikkim and Tripura” (Barpujari, 1998, 65).

Fear of immigrants did not stop with Assam. It spread to other parts of northeast India as well. Trouble with “foreigners” started in the Mizo Hills much later and according to some social scientist it had a direct association to India China relations. Initially the Mizos were more concerned with their ethnic kin left in Burma. For that purpose “the members of the hill tribes of Burma border lands were allowed to enter India without any passport, ‘provided they did not proceed beyond 25 miles’ from the land border” (Pakem, 1992, 106-107). Hence most of the immigrants came to Mizo hills from Burma. However, even before that the Nepalese had settled in this area. The Nepalese or the Gurkhas, as they were known, came to the region from the beginning of the nineteenth century. But according to official records their settlements began in 1891 “after permanent forts were constructed in Aizawl and Lunglei” (Pradhan, 2004, 58). Gurkha settlers continued to remain in Mizoram until 1980, when their identity question cropped up. Initially the state of Mizoram agreed to confer some citizenship benefits to Gurkhas who had settled before 1950 but that notice was later rescinded. Some social scientists of Mizoram, who might even be sympathetic to the case of the Gurkhas, still consider them as “illegal immigrants” (Sangkima, 2004).

The case of the Chins was even more bizarre. Historically, people inhabiting the Mizo hills were considered part of the Kuki-Chin tribes. Thus the Chin people had close connections with the Mizo people. But in the majoritarian Mizo discourse when in the early 70s the Burmese government started taking actions against the Mizos apparently even the Chin people did not give them refuge and became belligerents. Hence these Mizos living in Myanmar had to move back to Mizoram (Sangkima, 2004, 83). When in 1988 a military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), came to power after brutally crushing the pro-democracy movement the Chins faced enormous problems. The predominantly Buddhist SPDC embarked on a campaign to “Burmanize” the ethnic minorities in the country and a large number of Chins have come to India to escape the religious, cultural and political persecution in their state, where the majority of the population is Christian. When the initial influx of refugees came to

India the government set up camps for them, but the camps were closed in 1995 as ties improved between India and Burma. Since then the Chin people have been scattered all over Mizoram state and in the absence of any humanitarian support have been surviving by doing whatever work they can find. In early 2003 the number of Burmese in Mizoram was estimated to be at least 50,000 (*Refugees International Bulletin*, 23 July 2004). According to human rights activists the way the Chins “were treated by the Mizoram government and the local people discourage them from claiming their refugee status” (Hre Mang, 2000, 63).

Attitude to immigrants in most of Northeast India is negative. Tripura, for certain groups of immigrants was an exception until the 1980s. Since the discourse here is shaped largely by the Bengalese there is some recognition that Bengali migrants have had both positive and negative impact. Not just after 1947 but also in 1971 a large number of Bengalese from East Pakistan came and settled in Tripura. Two factors encouraged the heavy influx of refugees into the state. “First, there was no perceptible local resistance to the immigration of the refugees. Secondly, a sizeable Bengali speaking population already living in the State provided all help and assistance to their incoming brethren” (Bhattacharya, 1988, 16). In the case of Tripura refugees are considered in the Bengali discourse as growth boosters and the main source of labour input. Although it is recognized that they are responsible for the rise in population and tremendous pressure on land, however, they are still considered to have contributed substantially and positively to politics and economy of the region. (Bhattacharya, 1988, 16) But the fact that migration is a problem is recognised by even the majoritarian discourse in the post 1980 period. For example, recently a leading Bengali newspaper from Agartala named *Tripura Darpan* even while criticising tribal sub-nationalism is forced to admit that the Indian government had two options of addressing the socio-economic problems in Tripura – by stopping migration completely through force or by diverting adequate resources for development. But the Government, in their opinion failed to take any such actions leading to a sense of deprivation among the tribal people, who are slowly reduced to one-fourth of the population.⁸

In most of Northeast India today there is tremendous antipathy towards migrants, particularly from Bangladesh and Myanmar. In any given month there are a number of news in

⁸ Saroj Chandra, “Tripura Ugro Jatiyatabader Biruddhe (Tribura Against Radical Nationalism), in *Tripura Daarpan*, p. 42. This is one of the most circulated Bengali periodical in Tripura.

newspapers from Northeast India about the expelling of migrants from one or the other of the Northeastern states. A random survey of some leading newspapers from Northeast India in the month of August in 2003 portray that almost every day there are news that highlights how migration in Northeast is a security hazard. Typically there are news on how Bangladeshi dacoits have penetrated Tripura, “clad in lungi and armed with country made guns raided the houses” (*Tripura Observer*, 21 August 2003). Other news items include information on how efforts are made to evict refugees. One such news item quoted the Home Minister of Mizoram stating that,

We guess there could be at least 30,000 Myanmar nationals illegally staying in Mizoram. Anybody found staying illegally would be deported or their applications for asylum might be taken up. The decision to intensify a drive to detect illegal settlers from neighbouring Myanmar follows an anti-foreigners uprising by local groups in the hill state of Mizoram. (*Shillong Times*, 8 August 2003)

There are other news items showing how migrations have led to the increase of police or security forces in the borders. They report on how:

Mizoram government has decided to deploy more police personnel at the Mizoram-Myanmar border hamlet of Zokhawthar even as mass exodus of the Myanmar national continued and 4110 people including 2074 women crossed the border river Tiau till 3 PM Monday...Police said that one additional section of second battalion of Indian Reserve Police would soon be deployed at border to check illegal infiltration from Myanmar. (*Assam Tribune*, 14 August 2003)

Such discourses clearly show that migration has become a security issue. It also portrays that what is considered threatening is not just the political status of a foreigner but also her/his ethnicity and religion. But perhaps a more important question in the context of this paper is how securitising migration has affected the vulnerable sections of the society including minorities, stateless people and women, and such a discourse is sadly lacking from most of the available written sources. However, a reading of traditional sources point to at least one corrective and that is migration into this region cannot be treated as an aberration. It has taken place over centuries and for most of that time it was accepted as natural. Slightly over last fifty years has it been recognised as a security issue but with little understanding as to what kind of insecurities are created by securitising migration. That such securitisation affects a large number of women is hardly ever recognised in mainstream discourses thereby blurring the gender dimensions of treating migration as an issue of national security. In the subsequent sections we address the question of whose security is affected by securitising migration in northeast India.

Questions of this sort become extremely important because the same newspapers of northeast India that report on illegal immigrants also carry news on how women are affected by such migrations, but these are not lead news. Their leaders, who are largely men, often threaten these women belonging to different indigenous groups so that they do not marry “outsiders”. The Khasi Student Union (KSU) and the Naga Student Federation (NSF) have issued such diktats. The NSF particularly has come down heavily “on illegal immigrants marrying Naga women” (*Assam Tribune*, 23 August 2003). Apart from such developments there are evidences also showing rising violence against women in some parts of northeast India (*Assam Tribune*, 8 August 2003). Further to this there are increasing proofs of trafficking in these border regions including trafficking for sex and labour (*The Telegraph*, August 2003). Attention on illegal immigrants has often taken away attention from the local poor who fall victims to traffickers. In the perspective of the various cross border movements in this region, we have to see what these movements have meant in terms of the security of the vulnerable sections such as refugees, minorities, and women, which as the foregoing accounts indicate, the traditional discourse on migration largely excluded.

II

One of the first known recognition that migration can affect the lives of women came from British administrators. B.C. Allen, while discussing the 1901 Census vis-à-vis the Naga Hills wrote that:

In 1901, there was a preponderance of the male element in the population, there being only 982 females to every 1,000 males. This disproportion between the sexes is, however, entirely due to the foreigners, and amongst those born and censused (sic) in the district the number of women was almost exactly equal to the number of the men. (Allen, 2002, 35-36)

Studies undertaken even in the contemporary period shows that male migration is higher into Northeast India than in other regions. In one such study the authors state that, “as far as the mobility of males is concerned, both Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya have higher share of male migrants than that of males in the country as a whole” (Mitra, 1997, 157). This is because in many parts of Northeast India infrastructure work necessitates the presence of

skilled labour and technical hand and so it attracts largely men. Also the inflow of security personnel in the region increases the share of male migrants. Such a situation affects the sex ratio negatively. It coincides with growing violence against the women in the region. It also reduces the negotiating power of the women in such an uncertain situation. In times of generalised violence marginalisation of women from public spaces continue unabated.

In terms of sex ratio, from the early period Manipur has been an exception. *The Gazetteer* noted that even though there is a “preponderance of the male sex amongst the immigrant population,” but still, “the women in Manipur exceed the men in numbers” (Allen, 2002, 47). *The Gazetteer* also noted that women among these hill tribes enjoyed a special status. Women in Manipur were said to have fullest liberty. “They are not exposed to the risks of infant marriage, or mewd up within the four walls of their houses, and the comparatively healthy life they lead is the cause of their longevity” (Allen, 2002, 47). As a mark of their special status it is stated that during the Raja’s rule, “a criminal sentenced to death was occasionally reprieved if a sufficient number of women appeared to intercede for him” (Allen, 202, 32). While discussing the Naga tribes too *The Gazetteer* made similar observations. It was said that the Nagas pride themselves on the strength and endurance of their women. However, *The Gazetteer* also recorded that the Naga women lived a life of continuous hard work that may have affected their reproductive powers. Therefore, it was recognised that women among many of the hill tribes may have enjoyed a special status, also reflected in the positive attitude towards girl children, but even then they had to work very hard in their daily lives.

Food was a primary concern of these women. For this concern, hill women of Northeast India sometimes came in conflict with the immigrant population. One such case reportedly took place in Manipur in the early part of the previous century. The Marwaris who had migrated to Manipur for trade controlled the main market of Khwairamband Bazar. They also controlled the food prices. Towards the end of the 1920s food prices shot up. For this the exploitative dealings of trading communities were blamed. The people of Manipur established another market to counter such dealings. In 1938 an unprecedented event took place. There was an untimely flood before the harvest of rice and subsequently there was acute food shortage. To make matters worse the traders purchased whatever stock of rice was available for export that led to further hike in prices. In December of that year frustrated with food shortage and price

rice some 50/60 women in Imphal stopped the traders cart taking rice outside the region. Soon word spread and women all over Manipur started stopping carts and bringing these to local villages. A huge gathering of women then went to the State Durbar Office and demanded that the King ban any export of rice. The King was in Bengal and so the women surrounded British officers and some members of the Durbar and did not allow them to leave until the King came to tow with his decision. In the ensuing intervention by an armed British detachment, about 21 of these women were seriously injured. However, the women who had gathered there did not lift the siege. The King soon returned from Bengal and realizing the massive public outburst announced the ban on export of rice.⁹ In this round at least the Nupi women outsmarted the immigrant traders.

In the period after 1947 the Northeast witnessed huge population movements. There are hardly any studies that chronicle systematically changes that took place in women's lives and connect it to the population movements in this period. To analyse the changes that took place in women's lives as a result of these movements one needs to understand what were the general perceptions about women's status in these societies before impacts of such population movements were felt. Although it is extremely problematic to generalise the position of tribal and non-tribal women in Northeast India there are a few realities that affect most of the women from these communities. One such reality is that men outnumber women in these societies. But the interesting thing is that when we compare them to the general population of India tribal women of Northeast India often have a better numerical position. We find differing opinions regarding the relative position of women in Northeast India. Some say that women here enjoy a much higher status in this region while others call them "primitive". Verrier Elwin is said to have commented that tribal women in Northeast India "is in herself exactly the same as any other women".¹⁰ Although there are great disparities among women's status in Northeast India due to their different historical experiences and hence different social construction of their roles recent researches show that since most of these women practiced *jhum* or shifting cultivation they enjoyed a better position in society. A noted woman scholar's of Assam is of the opinion that, "because of the practice of shifting cultivation, women are considered as assets to the

⁹ N. Vijaylakshmi Brara, "The role of Manipuri Women in Conflict," Courtesy *Imphal Free Press*, http://manipuronline.com/Features/April2002/womeninconflict26_2.htm. The version that I have used is taken from Manipur Online website.

¹⁰ Verrier Elwin quoted in Lucy Zehol (ed.), *Women in Naga Society* (New Delhi, Regency Publications, 1998) p. 1.

families and partners of men in *jhum* cultivation” (Debi, 1994, 2). Population movements and pressure on lands have impacted heavily in areas where people practiced *jhum* cultivation.

In many such areas because of increasing density of population and increasing pressure on land there was an effort by the rulers to shift from *jhum* cultivation to plough cultivation. It is difficult to say when *jhum* cultivation was recognised as a problem. Today it is “considered by experts to be ‘primitive, wasteful and uneconomic’ and, ‘besides being a menace to forest wealth, it leads to soil erosion and the consequent decrease in fertility.’ This view seems to have gained currency after the rise of the concept of scientific forestry at the end of the last [nineteenth] century” (Saigal, 1978, 129.). Such a view had profound effect on land system in most of Northeast India but particularly in Tripura. Almost all the known tribes in Tripura practiced *jhum* cultivation including the Reangs, the Lushais, the Darlongs, etc. Even the Rupinis who lived near the foothills of the Baramura range in the Khowai subdivision and often worked as agricultural labourers supplemented their incomes with some *jhuming*. But with the recognition that forests could produce raw materials for industries and thus become more lucrative for the traders and the state there was a concerted effort to stop *jhum* cultivation. In 1930 the Tripura state census shows that the province had 2000 miles of *jhum* land, which was half of all available land in the state and four-fifths of all land that was cultivable. Even in this census it was commented that notwithstanding the pressures from the King the indigenous people of Tripura insist on this wasteful practice but the King is trying his best to encourage these people to take up plough cultivation (Deb Burman, 1933, 98). Such a policy has had enormous impact on the lives of women.

A recent study by Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora analyses how the shift in methods of cultivation has affected women’s lives in large parts of Northeast India. They argue that as long as community owned land and there was a strict division between the domestic and social spheres, women had greater control over resources. But with shift from *jhum* to plough cultivation there is a concomitant change from community to individual ownership of land. In tribes where this process has, “developed further, as among the Dimasa and the Garo, access to land for women is becoming more contested.” (Barbora and Fernandes, 1998, 127)

Perhaps even more striking than the situation of the Dimasa or the Garo women in terms of land is the situation of Reang women in Tripura. Women in Tripura are exceptional examples of how migration affects women in different ways. If one studies the Bengali settlers one sees the vulnerabilities of woman who are part of an immigrant community facing multiple problems including the problems of displacements. The Reangs presents a case from the other side. It is a classic case of land alienation of women belonging to indigenous community that now considers itself under siege. To understand the changing dynamics of the situation of women in Reang society one can look into the evolving marriage practices within the Reang community. The prevalence of bride price in communities is often considered as indicative of higher status of women in these societies. The Reangs of Tripura traditionally paid a bride price. Also it was the custom that the groom was expected to serve his brides family in *jhuming* for two or three years either before or after marriage. According to the census taken by the Tripura state there was a practice whereby the groom had to spend at least two years in his bride's house serving the family. The failure to perform these services led to his losing any claims to the relationship (Deb Burman, 1933, 87). Even in the recent past some social scientists noticed the same practice prevalent among the Reangs. They say "when a young men wished to marry a girl, he had to serve for some years in the prospective bride's house. This practice was known as *Jamai Khata*" (Choudhury, undated, 127). According to other anthropologists the boy serves for a period of three years or so in the father in laws house only after marriage (Kilikdar, 1998, p.100). More recently in the 1980s Malabika Dasgupta, who has worked with the Reangs in Narayanbari village who were ousted in 1976 from their original homeland due to the construction of the dam and reservoir of the Gumti Hydroelectric Power Project, however, found that marriage-by-service had all but disappeared among Reang households of Narayanbari. "Instead, a bride-price in the form of cash has to be paid for acquiring a bride in Narayanbari." (Gupta, 1993, 38) But according to Gan Choudhuri the traditional system of marriage is changing and now the educated men are going in for marriage by consent or even dowry. (Gan-Choudhuri, 1983, p. 48) Thus a short survey of available sources show how the marriage customs within the Reang society has changed over time perhaps as, most of my respondents in Tripura commented, this change is a result of their interaction with the immigrant community.¹¹ Not just the marriage custom but also in certain

¹¹ I accept that such a statement might exaggerate the role of the immigrant community but I thought it worth mentioning particularly because all the respondents from Tripura (about 50 in number) from both indigenous

ways inter-personal relationship between men and women was more equitable among the Reangs than the settler community. A Reang could never leave his wife without her consent. Also bigamy hardly existed in the Reang community. There were almost no child marriages among the Reangs and women were not forced into marriage or a relationship with an older man without their explicit consent (Deb Burman, 1933, 87-88). The Reang women participated in jhum cultivation equally with the men. But in the last fifty years the situation changed. This was another way how changes in the Reang society affected women and such changes can be considered as a model for changes in many other groups in Northeast particularly in terms of their relationship to land.

During the period of jhum cultivation anthropologists agree that women shared in the modes of production. Hence in this agricultural system women had an important role to play. But in the aftermath of India's independence Tripura witnessed, "a massive influx of non-tribals," and so "they [the tribal people] have lost much of their lands" (Fernandes and Barbora, 2002, 30). If one considers the change in the demographic profile of Tripura one can understand the magnitude of the problem. The 1941 census stated that 50.09 percent of the population in Tripura were composed of tribal people. By 1981 this percentage went down to 24.88. Therefore this massive influx of population "began to occupy and encroach upon the hilly lands earlier used for jhumming. As an inevitable result of the downfall of the jhum economy, the tribal women, who were once the backbone of agricultural system, found themselves at the crossroads of the arduous struggle for existence" (Bhaumik, *North-East Sun*, 1-14 August 1997). Land alienation of the tribal people was so alarming a problem that the government in Tripura passed two Land Reform Acts in 1960 and 1974 respectively. These Acts called for a return of the land to its original owners or the tribal people. Predictably these Acts did not succeed because most of the tribes did not recognise individual ownership of land. The tribal people therefore lost much of their cultivable land and were reduced to marginal workers. Among the Reangs in the Narayanbari village Malabika Dasgupta has noted that 22 out of 25 families reported that they worked as daily labourers for the Forest Department (Das Gupta, 1993, p. 38). Hence in the post-*jhumming* stage the tribal families have shifted from being cultivators to agricultural labourers. They faced a decline in traditional economic activity without any expansion in their roles in the modern sector. Thus, the Reang women were left

and Bengali community, that I have spoken to between May 2004 and January 2005 has made similar comments.

with very few options but to come down the hills and become agricultural labourer. Also as a consequence of massive land alienation there is a noticeable exodus of Reang men towards the urban sectors. That has imposed a double burden on women because they have to look after the family now and also have to work as agricultural labourers. According to a noted anthropologist, J. Gan Choudhury, with the erosion of their economic status the Reang women have lost much of their traditional status in their society (Gan-Choudhuri, 1980, 36).

The Reang women are no exceptions. The same phenomenon is noticeable throughout Northeast India among different communities in the post-*jhumming* stages. Even in states like Nagaland women face increased poverty and loss of livelihood because they are being forced to give up *jhum* cultivation. An example from Nagaland shows that between 1981 and 1991 more than 4 per cent of the cultivators lost their land and joined the ranks of non-workers or unemployed.¹² Considering that in Nagaland even in the latest census it is reported that there are 271,608 male and 272,825 female cultivators and so if the percentage of cultivators go down then more women are affected than men. Another interesting feature of Nagaland is that a large per cent of women cultivators losing land and joining the ranks of non-workers is occurring at a time when Nagaland is witnessing the highest regional population growth in all of Northeast India (134.20 per cent from 1971-1991).

Other researches have reflected on the fact that when tribal people lose land then women become more vulnerable even in situations of common resource management. A recent research shows that if on losing land tribes acquire any control on forests then it is men who assume control over such resources and women are pushed further back into the domestic sphere as is the case with *adibasis* in Assam. Here it is noted that it is men who involve themselves in trading firewood for cash whereas women on procuring firewood use it for their family. In this process it might be noted, “while men gain more power, it does not reduce women’s workload. Instead, what was once a part of community work centred social sphere is now transferred to the domestic sphere” (Fernandes and Barbora, 2002, 120). In this connection the situation of Herma tribes in Tripura might be mentioned. The Herma women in the post-*jhumming* phase take up jobs as agricultural labourers in non-tribal areas. In such areas women are preferred as labourers because the common perception is that men do not want to

¹² *Statistical Handbook of Nagaland*, 1997, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Nagaland, Kohima, n. 17.

work. Hence while men sit idle women work both in the farms and at home. According to a noted anthropologist it is clear in the post-*jhumming* period that:

Women in Herma villages have been shouldering a disproportionately heavier burden of meeting the needs of the families, particularly poor ones. They work harder than men and get much less time for relaxation. Yet their dependent status in the society is marked by the fact that by custom, descent and succession it is patrilineal and only the sons, to the exclusion of daughters, inherit paternal property. Even a childless widow does not inherit the property of her husband though she can use it without the right to alienate it. (Ganguly, 1993, 77)

From patrilineal tribes of Northeast India if one looks at matrilineal tribes one sees that women from these tribes too have not escaped the effects of migration. In Northeast India the three matrilineal tribes Khasis, Garos and Jaintias are located in the state of Meghalaya. Although there are local variations generally among these tribes descent is traced from women and they also inherit property. No man could inherit property in the Khasi hills though a man could own self acquired property. But most often on his death it went to his mother and not to his wife and children. Among the Jaintias it is the mother who controls the earning of married sons. There is no caste system among these tribes and problems such as dowry, bride burning, and female foeticide do not exist. Land and forest resources were historically communally owned among these tribes. According to noted social scientists among these three tribes, “women’s independence was secured by her indispensable productive role. Particularly among the matrilineal Khasis and Garos the man was dependent on woman for the necessities of life which he secured in return for his role as protector.” (Mahanta, 2000, 76)

Even the Khasis and the Garos, have witnessed erosion in the power structure particularly regarding women. The Garo society is constituted by a number of clans called *machong*. Each *machong* are composed of extended families on the female line. The inheritance is through the female line. The heiress is called *nokna dongipa mechik* or even *nokrom* or *nokma* (big mother). The spouse of *nokma* is also referred to as *nokrom*. “Marriage also establishes a perpetual relationship between *machong* of spouses” (Roy and Rizvi, 1990, 55). Traditionally *nokma*’s spouses could not dispose of property without the permission of *nokma*’s own *machong* members. But for emergencies a man had to depend on his own *machong*. Although the *nokma* inherits leadership of the clan “each of the grown up sons and daughters gets a small plot of land” (Kar, 1982, 29). So in Garo society women did not inherit

land only symbolically but even got it as their personal property. But still there are many observers who comment that women in Meghalaya enjoy social and economic freedom but politics and administration are seen as man's domain. They argue that traditionally women did not attend the *dorbars* and men headed village administration. Although they accept that "women can act as the moral force behind men and can give views and suggestions to men folk on different issues" (Lyngdoh, 1998, 59). But the "focal point of power," is actually the "male matri-relations of the principal female of the household" (Kar, 1982, 24). Therefore, they argue that women from these tribes are not really the head of their families but it is the eldest brother or the maternal uncle who can be considered as the head of the family (Rajib Chowdhury, *North-East Sun*, August 1997). But in answer to such criticisms there are feminist scholars who argue that it is perhaps incorrect to assume that U Kni or maternal uncle of the Khasis or Nokrom or husband of the heiress of the family, who is the youngest female member of the Garos are the actual household heads. They argue that it is, "the habit of the early ethnographers and the overwhelmingly male anthropologists and other scholars of imposing their own notions of universal male supremacy whenever they encounter any new phenomena" (Mahanta, 2000, 76). In the case of these matrilineal tribes they feel that these men were part of the total structure of authority, which in these cases is collective. Women of these tribes may not have attended assembly organised by the British but these cannot negate their leadership role considering their authority over the economy. There is a traditional Garo proverb where a man laments that though he toils hard for his wife and children his hunger is to be satisfied only by his mother and sister.¹³ Such proverbs portray that traditionally women were in control of at least the household property and hence the economy as among the Garos the basic economic unit is the family. Thus, Khasi and Garo women were certainly not completely in the hands of their men and they enjoyed some real power within the traditional structure.

There have been periodical efforts to change the law of inheritance in these societies. The veteran leader Rev. Nicholas Roy during his time attempted to bring about changes in the Khasi law of inheritance but he faced strong opposition. Recently the Khasi Students groups are also agitating for such changes but this demand is made ostensibly to counter the ill effects of in-migration of "foreigners" and land alienation of tribals in this region. From 1951 onwards

¹³ This is a popular Garo proverb: *mana nona ok, jikna dena kok*.

the population of Meghalaya has grown faster than that of India. But with this growth there was a noticeable drop in the sex ratio. In 1901 the sex ratio was 1,036 in favour of women and it dropped to 954 by 1981.¹⁴ In 2001 it increased to 975.¹⁵ By 1981 the total number of migrants to Meghalaya was 321,660, which was second highest in North East India of whom 57.34 per cent were male migrants. Among the migrant population female migrants due to marriage is found to be low. Yet male migrants who came to the region due to marriage were over one-fifth of the total male migrants. Marriage was the second most popular reason for migration of men to Meghalaya.¹⁶

There was evidently a growing threat perception that Meghalaya was being inundated with migrant people. In 1979 a premier women's organisation was founded called the Ka Synjuk Ki Kynthei Riewlum or the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya, popularly known as TWWADAM. Among the main concerns of this organisation are the protection of tribal lands, foreigner issues, unemployment and other social problems. In the 70s there were two other organisations whose memorandum portrayed how volatile the issue of immigration has become. The Meghalaya Students Union (MSU) began in 1975. Initially this was like any other organisation but it became violent by spearheading the foreigners issue in the late 1970s. The students demanded the detection and deportation of all foreigners and especially those coming from Bangladesh. The Khasi Students Union (KSU) was formed in 1978. One of the main aims of this association is to, "fight against infiltration by people from outside the state and foreigners from other countries" (Malngiang, 2002, 177). The KSU was a pressure group against migrants. From foreigners protests were directed against migrants from other parts of the country. The initial turmoil was against the Bangladeshis but later it was transferred against all people considered alien. In 1987 severe protests were generated against the Nepalis and many of these Nepalis were displaced and ultimately they had to go to Darjeeling.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Sex ratio in Meghalaya, 1901-1981," *Census of India 1981*, Series – 14, Meghalaya, Part II – Special Demographic Profile, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region* (From now on referred to as Basic Statistics NER 2002) (Shillong, GOI North Eastern Council Secretariat, 2002) p. 9.

¹⁶ *Census of India*, Geographic Distribution of Internal Migration in India, 1971-81, New Delhi, 1989.

¹⁷ Discussions with Utpalla Sewa, Lecturer, NEHU, Shillong, March 2002,

Recently the perceived threat of migrants coming into Meghalaya and settling down in the region by marrying Khasi women has led to protest against the matrilineal system. In 1997, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, which has constitutional jurisdiction over Khasi 'customary law', passed the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill. It sought to codify the system of inheritance through the female line but it became highly controversial. The event brought forth a demand for change in the matrilineal system. This demand has fast become strident with the leadership role being played by an all-male organisation, the Syngkhong Rympei Thymai (SRT), lobbying to mobilise public opinion on the issue. "We are just like refugees and the moment we get married we are at the mercy of our in-laws," said Teibor Khongee, SRT executive member. "We are reduced to bulls and baby-sitters with virtually no role in society," he said. Backing the SRT campaign is the KSU. Paul Lyngdoh, the President of KSU commented, "the matriarchal system does not fit into the present generation." He is of the opinion that traditional laws need to be modified so that all family members get equal share of property. The SRT and the KSU are so indignant because there are increasing number of cases of marriages of Khasi women to non-tribals. They say that outsiders are often attracted to Khasi brides because they come with a sizeable chunk of property. "There is frustration among the Khasi youth," said Peter Lyngdoh, a schoolteacher at Shillong, who had to move to his wife's house after his marriage a month ago. "I think this should be changed. We have no land, no business and our generation ends with us."¹⁸ Many Khasi men have become strident critics of the matrilineal system. To rake up popular emotions they connect it to the issue of migrants. Although there are no such demands from either the Garo or the Jaintia people but the Khasi case portray how nativism, or apathy and hatred against the alien can be refocused against other groups such as women.

That radical nationalism and hatred for "foreigners" can lead to marginalisation of women was also revealed during the Anti-Foreigner movement in Assam. The Anti-Foreigner movement was exceptional at least in one way as it brought forth huge support from Assamese women. There were even efforts to give a cohesive shape to women's support to this movement because after the Quit India movement Assamese women took to the streets in such large numbers for the first time. Women responded by forming local and state level women's coordination committees. The Anti-Foreigner movement brought to the forefront a new

¹⁸ Seema Hussain, "Khasi men question their role in matriarchal society," <http://www.khasi.ws/khasimen.htm>. There are a number of websites that contain reports that make similar arguments.

political party called the Asom Gana Parishad. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) rode to political power in 1985 to capture 65 seats in a House of 126. The AGP came to power according to one observer because it expressed the interest of the dominant classes in Assam. “This section of the Assamese middle class projects its own interest as the interest of the entire Assamese masses so as to gain their support for the purpose of acquiring capacity to bargain with the national elite for promoting its own interest” (Baruah, 1998, p. 113). Whether this is true or not is debatable. However, what can be accepted is the author’s assertion that this class believed, “that the influx of innumerable migrants from various parts of the country and even outside pose a threat to maintaining distinct socio-cultural identity,” of the Assamese people (Baruah, 1998, p. 113). Therefore the AGP came to power with a mandate to deal with the situation of the foreigners in Assam and implement the Assam Accord but they could do neither.

Women, who had until then wholeheartedly supported the cause of the Assamese were first let down by AGP when the party did not give ticket to any woman candidate in the Lok Sabha elections of 1985. According to one scholar, “this was a sad lapse on the part of the AGP who despite having whole-hearted support from the women of Assam in their historic movement against foreign nationals failed to share responsibilities equally with women” (Medhi and Datta, 1994, p. 78). After winning the 1985 Assembly elections the AGP made only one woman, from the Bodo community a minister. Only three women won seats in this election, and of them two belonged to the AGP. It has been said that the, “AGP worsened the Congress ... record, by allotting only two tickets out of 126 seats in the assembly to women.... Moreover, both the candidates belonged to strong tribal communities, the Bodos and the Kacharis, who too had to be accommodated.... Thus two birds were killed at one throw” (Mahanta, 1998, p. 178). During AGP’s second term in 1996 there was hardly any change in the situation as there was only one woman who was the state minister for Social Welfare. The AGP therefore, totally ignored the sentiments of Assamese women who participated in the Anti-Foreigner movement as equal partners. Like most other nationalist movement in South Asia the AGP immediately after being victorious pushed back the women from the public domain. This reflects how leaders of Northeast India and of South Asia to garner women’s support use the issue of migration and then marginalize the same women on the basis of whose support they acquire power from the body politic. The battle over migrant population has proved to be extremely problematic for the Assamese women. It not only led to their

marginalisation from the political sphere but also plunged the people of Assam into a civil war where women's social and civil space was progressively eroded. (Banerjee, 2001, pp. 131-176)

In recent years the debate on cross-border migration in Northeast India is not restricted to debates on economic and political vulnerabilities but it rests also on issues of health. Migrating people are considered a health hazard as they are looked upon as carriers of fatal diseases such as HIV and AIDS. The HIV/AIDS situation has assumed alarming proportions in Northeast India and for this female migrants are largely blamed. In a fairly recent report of *North East Reporter* it was stated that:

Assam may soon turn out to be AIDS capital of the Northeast, if immediate steps are not taken to check the growing menace of flesh trade, especially by commercial sex workers who have migrated from Bangladesh.

These immigrant sex workers have posed a serious threat to the health scenario of Assam, causing an alarming rise in the number of HIV positive cases.

A survey conducted by the state AIDS control society indicates that there is an alarming rise in the number of HIV positive cases. Assam has a total of 334 registered patients out of which 90 are full blown AIDS cases.

Official sources said that 70 per cent of the victims had sexual contacts with prostitutes from the migrant population.

Sexual transmission is the main cause in more than three-fourths of the cases. 71.08 per cent of the patients are reported to have contracted HIV through sexual contacts, out of which 70 per cent of the individuals had regular sex with these immigrant prostitutes. (*North East Reporter*, 25 February 2004)

This report addresses the two most important issues of popular threat perceptions and these are; (a) threat posed due to large-scale migration and, (b) threat of uncontrolled sexuality of women. AIDS thus become both, an issue of control of migration/migrants and control of women's sexuality. The report presented above went on to insist that "primarily prostitutes, who belong to the immigrant population, were the main carriers of the virus and persons coming in contact with them risks contracting the dreaded disease" (*North East Reporter*, 25 February 2004).

A few days later there was some more news from Tripura that cases of AIDS is on the rise even there. In these news items it was stated that out of the 79 patients 43 are security force jawans. Therefore, even in this instance it was the migrant jawans on whom then blame was apportioned. The report underlined that "the AIDS graph has shown an upward turn in a

state where there was no report of any such patient some years ago” (*Assam Tribune*, 11 April 2004). Therefore it was obvious that the outsiders were responsible. In another report on the same event what was added is that, “special awareness programme should be undertaken among the women, especially those engaged in sex trade” (*North East Reporter*, 12 April 2004). In one way or the other there is a design to implicate women and make them responsible for the spread of AIDS. Also in most advocacy programmes the target groups were migrant workers who were thought to be clients of these footloose women. In a report from Dimapur it was announced that migrant workers are particularly vulnerable so for any awareness programme to succeed the state health department needed to bring these people on board (*Nagaland Post*, 28 March 2004). But there was another facet to these reports. The world over it is accepted that “women are more vulnerable to the infection biologically, socially and economically.”¹⁹ Yet these newspaper reports say that men are more at risk (*North East Reporter*, 12 April 2004). Therefore, the trope here is that migrant men through their sexual desires bring in life threatening diseases of which these sexually loose women are the carriers. Fear of AIDS multiplies manifold when these migrants are women. There is a growing fear in this region that among women refugees from Burma cases of unreported HIV/AIDS is spreading like an epidemic. And if it is accepted that these women are liberal with their sexual favours (which all alien women are thought to be) then the threat in popular perception multiplies. They are considered threatening for the men who might be lured by these outsiders. Such threat perception assumes serious proportions in a region where women are already vulnerable because of their socio-economic positioning. This makes it easy to target them.

For women, however, this insecurity is not enough. A much worse scenario awaits them everywhere, which we must now note. Here I am alluding to the situation of the trafficked women and children. Though liberal South Asian laws and constitutions guarantee people’s right to be protected from exploitation and thereby prohibits trafficking too but no amount of liberal and humanitarian legislation has been able to stop this form of servitude or semi-servitude of large groups of women. One has to realize that it is not merely a question of more or less governance but a continuance of erosion of women’s physical, economic and social security by the patriarchal mode of national security that holds sway in the areas under discussion. Violence faced by the trafficked women is the worst form of violence faced

¹⁹ “The Gender Issue in HIV/AIDS,” in *Enabling Women to Fight HIV/AIDS*, Report by Action Aid. This is an unpublished report.

perhaps both by women as a social category and by the category of forcefully displaced people. As a group victims of trafficking reflect the growing insecurity of vulnerable groups in the milieu of traditional security as categorized by the term national security.

III

Recent newspaper reports from the borders of India and Bangladesh are rife with news of the growing trafficking of women and children in this region. If one looks at the history of the term “trafficking” it can be traced back to “white slave trade”. Before the great wars it meant the coercion or transportation of Caucasian women to the colonies to service white male officers. At that point the term did not include indentured labourers from the colonies to the plantations where often they were coerced, cheated and abused. From 1904 there were efforts to stop “white slave trade” leading to the *Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Person and the Exploitation of Others* in 1949. By that time trafficking had come to be associated with transportation of women for “immoral purposes” such as prostitution. Social scientists believe that after the wars “women from developing countries and countries which were experiencing civil and political unrest ... were migrating to the developed world in search of a better future” (Pattanaik, 2002, p. 218). Given the gender inequities in these countries women often entered informal sectors such as prostitution, where labour protection laws are minimal. The international community tried to combat these abuses by humanitarian legislation that addressed concerns of women’s vulnerability. The term used to describe the abuse of women in the process of migration was “trafficking”. Efforts to stop trafficking in the 1980s and 90s went hand in hand with efforts to abolish prostitution. Therefore trafficking and prostitution came to be understood as two parts of the same process. In the context of the region under discussion it is likewise understood and the push factors for women’s trafficking even now remain gender inequities in the country of origin, endemic poverty and political persecution.

A few months back in a newspaper report from the northeast India it was stated that, “India was among the seven Asian nations put by US on its ‘watch list’ of countries involved in human trafficking” (*Shillong Times*, 16 June 2004). This is not isolated news but such statements from the West keep recurring. In the same report it was also stated, “not only India

is facing this huge problem but also has become a transit point for prostitution from nearby countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal” (*Shillong Times*, 16 June 2004). India was also marked as the destination for sex tourism from Europe and United States. These reports portray that human trafficking is a thriving proposition and there are a number of routes through which women and children are trafficked into and out of this region. For a while the Assam-Siliguri route was identified as the main trafficking route through which the victims of flesh trade were transported across Northeast India (*Shillong Times*, 5 June 2004). But routes change and when one route is identified traffickers begin using another. Through these routes in the Northeast women from Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh, the Northeast itself and Bengal are seduced, coerced or forced into flesh trade and trafficked. This is both a procurement area and a transit area. Any report on migration in this region would remain incomplete without a stock taking of trafficking that goes on in this region because it leaves enormous consequences not just for the victims but also for the security of the region. Here we are not speaking of state security but security of people who are affected by trafficking.

To find out why this whole region is vulnerable to traffickers one needs to realize that this is a region of endemic poverty, social imbalance and political violence particularly against vulnerable groups of whom women form a large part. Each part of this region is undergoing certain social and political turmoil where more and more women are getting marginalized. In Bangladesh for example effects of globalisation, growth of fundamentalism, modernization policies such as building of dams etc. have all contributed to violence against ethnic and religious minorities, and against women. Of course minority women are in a double bind. They are attacked both as minorities and as women. The fundamentalists who have increased their control in the political arena strive to maintain a predominantly male-dominant status quo. This strategy puts both minorities and women in general in the receiving end. Religion has come to be used by fundamentalist groups as one of the primary means by which male-dominant values and existing gender-oppressive ideology are imposed and perpetuated. According to Meghna Guhathakurta, “it was advantageous therefore for the fundamentalists to target women who step outside the bounds of social norms since they represented a potential threat to the male-dominant status quo” (Guhathakurta and Begum, 2005). To compound all of these developments there is endemic poverty and land alienation of poorer groups of people in *chars* (enclaves). Such developments have led to widespread control and destabilization of

women in the region leading to their displacement. A fall-out of this is an increase of trafficking of women and children across the border.

To these another cause can be added that directly affects the scenario of trafficking of women from Bangladesh. The immediate past and the present government has embarked on a policy of brothel eviction. One of the biggest brothels in Bangladesh is in Tanbazar in Narayanganj. This brothel started during the colonial period. Later, many internally displaced women gathered in the area and were dependent on this brothel for their livelihood. In July 1999 sex-workers from this brothel was evicted by the government and sent to vagabond centers where there are evidences that they were severely mistreated. Other than brothels the government has also embarked on a policy of slum eviction (Guhathakurta and Begum, 2005). In my recent visit to Bangladesh I have had lengthy discussions with women directly affected by these evictions.²⁰ A number of women have tried to resist these developments. But many have not been able to survive such attacks and joined the ranks of the displaced. These women are particularly vulnerable to traffickers. Although any definite data as to how many women are trafficked is almost impossible to gather because of the nature of the problem but the number of brothels in the border areas prove that this is a thriving proposition.

Women from Bangladesh are largely trafficked to India. From India they might then be taken to Pakistan or the Middle East. In a research by *Sanlaap* in two red light areas of West Bengal it was revealed that most of these women migrate from one place to another. Ninety percent of the red light areas that they have identified as places that they have worked in are situated in the states that border Bangladesh. Most of these are either in the Northeast or in West Bengal. In one particular red light area named Changrabandha about Sixty-six percent women said that they have come from Bangladesh. In Dinbazar many of the sex workers have said that their mothers came from Bangladesh. The report clearly states, “The rate of trafficking in Changrabandha is remarkably higher than Dinbazar. The red-light area of Changrabandha is adjacent to Bangladesh border and women are trafficked through this border like any other commodity.”²¹ Most of the women in sex work were illiterates. Many of these women entered prostitution when they were younger than eighteen years of age. Most of these women came

²⁰ Discussions organized by Research Institute of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 25 November 2004.

²¹ *Project: Linkage, A Situational Analysis on Trafficking and Prostitution in Dinbazaar (Jalpaiguri) and Changrabandha (Cooch Behar)*, A Sanlaap Initiative Report, supported by Gana Unnayan Parshad and Human Development Centre (unpublished) p. 18.

from families of either wage earners and cultivators or their mothers were sex workers as well. The mothers who are themselves sex workers find no alternative except letting their daughters take up the same profession because as children's of sex workers they are stigmatised and discriminated. They are deprived of education or even a social environment with any promise or hope. The socio-economic profiles of sex workers of at least Dinbazaar and Changrabandha portray that these women and children did not have too many options to take up other professions.

Even while in the profession their lives are never secure. Basically there are three to four modes of operation. They can work independently, or on contract basis or even under a madam. Women in the third category had to give up all their earnings to the madam, and they were given room, food and some other necessities in lieu of their payments. Even on contract basis they give half of their payments to madams. The best of them earn about Rs. 5000 per month. This takes care of their necessities and their children. Some of them even send money home. Their insecurity is portrayed by the fact that they are trafficked often from one centre to another. These women are at the mercy of both criminal and police. Being near the border often they are forced to give shelter to criminals from either Bangladesh or India. Also the police use them for sex without any payment. They often cater to truckers crossing zero point and to attract them they take to the roads.²²

There are cases where women who are brought from Bangladesh to the metropolitan towns in India face tremendous brutality. One such case is that of Hamida, a young Bangladeshi girl, who was brought to India at the age of ten. She “suffered a series of brutal rapes at the hands of the man who brought her to New Delhi, along with some of his friends who were Delhi policemen... Only one of the accused men has served jail time”(Banerjee, 1999, p. 64). That this is a region of extreme insecurity for men and women crossing the border has been dramatically portrayed by the case of one Jayanti Bala Das of Bangladesh.²³ In January this last year five Bangladeshi nationals, of whom two were minor children crossed the Indo-Bangladesh border and entered India. The Border Security Force (BSF) arrested them from a Baro Bridge across the Ichhamati River. The area in which the incident took place is

²² Ibid, 25.

²³ The case is registered in the Basirhat police station on 13 January 2003, under section 376 (B)/280 of the Indian Penal Code.

under the jurisdiction of the Basirhat police station in the North 24 Parganas. The Bangladeshi nationals including one Jayanti Bala Das were all taken to the Soladana BSF camp at around 5 pm. On the same night (10 January 2003) one BSF personnel allegedly raped Jayanti Bala. Thereafter these “infiltrators” were put in a small boat with holes and efforts were made to push them back. Allegedly when the boatman refused to go he was threatened on the point of gun. The boat capsized in the middle of the river and only Jayanti Bala and her one-year-old son could save themselves. On 13 January the villagers of Bagundi, who had given her shelter, handed her over to the police of Basirhat. She was charged under section 14 of the Foreigners Act. On 21 January a dead body was found in the Brickkiln Canal in South Basirhat. The man was identified as Jayanti’s husband Basudev. When a case was lodged against five BSF personnel the BSF men were unwilling to hand over their personnel to the Basirhat police. Although the BSF disagreed that Jayanti was raped but the officer in-charge of this case stated that initial examinations proved that she was molested (*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 14 January 2003). On 27 January the SDJM of Basirhat issued warrants against five BSF men. In July Jayanti was handed over to the Sromojibi Mahila Samity for safe custody and on 15 September 2003 a writ petition was filed on her behalf. The cases are still pending (*Refugee Watch 19*, 2003, p. 2).

Jayanti’s case reflects the situation of women who are trying to cross the border. Their status of being a foreign born woman increases their vulnerability. No one is willing to shoulder any responsibility for these women. The state that they leave is glad to get rid of them and the state that they enter finds them unwanted. This has been proved last year when in February 213 gypsy snake charmers who have always led a life of seasonal mobility crossing borders at certain times of the year were stopped in zero point in Satgachi in Cooch Behar. They had to remain there for days as both India and Bangladesh was unwilling to take them back until one night they just disappeared. No one knows what happened to them and even less do people care. From the Indian side we were told that they were pushed inside Bangladesh. No one even asked for evidence of what happened because this is a gray area. In such a situation woman can be exploited by anyone and are therefore particularly vulnerable to traffickers.

The border itself is a place of endemic poverty, substantial illiteracy among women and children and enormous violence against women. In a recent survey undertaken in three border

villages namely Shikarpur, Charmeghna and Nasirerpara it was found out that most women in this area are illiterate. In Shikarpur out of 515 women only 190 had some forms of literacy, in Charmeghna out of 590 only 100 women are literate and in Nasirerpara out of 470 women only 85 are literate.²⁴ These women have very few options to improve their situations. Their problems are compounded by increased militarisation and criminalisation of the area. Here every other day women and children are molested or killed. On visiting one such border near Charmeghna two chroniclers poignantly write:

To assert that the control of the border still belongs to them the border security on both ends sporadically do a well-orchestrated show of national safety through aggression. It is then that one witnesses the elaborate, flexing of muscles and the violent exchange of fire and mortar. On such occasions the border sky is lit up by man made conflagrations and the air swells with the sound of brutal human games. At the end of it all, what are lost on both sides are the expendable lives of common people like Baba-Hasim, and Kanakchampa and the eyesight of 6-year-old Sonia, who paid the price for playing, foolishly enough, in her own front yard. (Banerjee and Banerjee, April 2003)

Women living in these borders live a life of extreme hardship. They are the quickest targets for both the security personnel and the criminals. “The robbers demand women during their raids and when they get none they leave threatening dire consequences: ‘you can hide your livestock in the camp. You can hide your money in the bank. But where will you hide your women?’”(Banerjee and Banerjee, April 2003) Any study on traditional security pays no attention to such insecurities, which has become part of their every day lives.

Trafficking of women and children is on the increase in Northeast India. This region is being torn apart by multiple levels of conflict. Our past experiences have shown that in such situations women and children become even more vulnerable. Also attack on women’s land rights and social positions is on the increase in the Northeast as is reflected in the previous section of this paper. Hence trafficking of women and children is also on the increase from this region. In June this year a newspaper reported that “non-governmental agencies fighting against the malaise of trafficking of women and children have expressed grave concern that the

²⁴ Survey undertaken by Subharati Banerjee under my supervision for her unpublished M.Phil thesis *Bharat Bangladesh Simanta Samasya: Charmeghna, Shikarpur o Nasirerparar Porjalochona* (Problems in Bengal Bangladesh Border: A discussion of the three villages of Charmeghna, Shikarpur and Nasirerpara) Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, 2000-2001, p. 73.

evil is growing with increasing numbers women and children from Meghalaya and other northeastern states being lured and deceived into the flesh trade in the metropolitan cities in the country” (*Assam Tribune*, 9 June 2004). The traffickers in this region are said to be working through local networks yet governmental agencies seems not to be much concerned about the situation. In Meghalaya the situation is further complicated because there is a ban on felling of timber. Such moves on part of the Governmental are commendable from an environmentalist’s point of view but for the rural poor this robs them of a chance to earn their livelihood especially because they hardly have any alternative options of earning a living. Therefore they are forced to migrate and many of such women migrating to urban centers because of increasing poverty end up in the brothels (*The Meghalaya Guardian*, 25 May 2004). A number of newspaper reports point out that women from Northeast India are often found in brothels in Mumbai, which is still the capital of flesh trade in India. In Mumbai recently 34 girls from Meghalaya were rescued from these brothels. However, it is extremely difficult to bring these young girls back to the “social mainstream”. That is why once in the profession of sex work, women tend to go back to it. On the same vein an *Assam Tribune* article quoted a survey sponsored by Women and Child Development Department, Government of India, that there are three million women involved in sex trade in India. The survey points out that poverty, illiteracy and societal stigmatization all contribute to women’s marginalisation and the continuance of sex trade. The survey also points to the fact that in Assam “prostitution around trucker’s point, industrial areas, and areas close to concentration of police, paramilitary and army camps,” is on the increase (*Assam Tribune*, 22 June 2004). Therefore, it seems that people who are responsible for enhancing the security of a particular region such as the Northeast India are actually contributing to the growing insecurity of women living in this region.

The situation of women from marginal communities of Burma is probably worse. The case of Burma is much too well known for continuous repetition. But it might be necessary for our understanding of women’s trafficking in this region to go over some of the already charted territories. Political instability in Burma led to the military coup of 1962. Since then a ruthless military junta rules the country. This junta has suppressed any dissent from either the ethnic groups or pro-democracy movements leading to massive desertion and displacements. There are many ethnic minorities that have suffered discrimination under successive Burmese governments, and massive persecution by the present Burmese regime. Following the brutal crack down of 1988 by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), against

democratic movements in Burma refugees came to Mizoram in large numbers. Refugee camps were set up in Champai and Saiha districts of Mizoram to accommodate the Chin refugees by the Mizoram Government. However, these camps were closed down in 1994/95 when the Indo-Myanmar border trade talks began. One of the main reasons for closing down the camps was the request of the Burmese government, which believed that the Chin National Front (CNF) fighting for the independence of Chin State, was operating from these camps. Since then the Chin refugees have been scattered all over Mizoram and forced to find work for their survival. Also according to Chin human rights activists they are victims of the systematic efforts “made by the Burmese military junta to eliminate religion (Christianity), literature, culture, and traditions of the Chin people in order to assimilate them into a homogeneous Burman culture. Efforts were also made to impose the Buddhist religion by restricting the practice of other religion, which in Chin state was mostly Christianity” (Ling and Mang, 2004, p. 19). This has forced resistors to go underground or to flee. In such a situation Chin women have become extremely vulnerable to traffickers in this region. Government of India followed largely a hands-off policy regarding the Chin refugees. It has so far allowed the Mizoram government a free hand to deal with the situation. This has led to large-scale persecution of the Chins even in India.

Chin women come to India both for reasons of political persecution and to earn money. As one Chin woman told *Refugee International*, “It is true that I have come to Mizoram to earn money. The Burmese army forcibly conscripted my son. I have not seen him for more than two years. My husband is sick and he cannot work. I try to earn enough to feed him and my three small children, and for my husband’s medical care, but each month, for many days, I am compelled to do labor for the SPDC. What alternative do I have but to come here, earn money and take it back with me to Burma? If I don’t come to Mizoram, my family in Burma will not survive” (*Refugees International Bulletin*, 2004). In the case of another Chin woman whose father was a Christian pastor the weapon of push back was used without any legal action. She said she was arrested in Burma in 1993 after she spoke against the Government within earshot of an army officer. She said the officer beat and raped her. She fled to India but last year was returned to Burma. The abuse that she faced was not ground enough to give her refugee status in India. She was never tried under the Foreigners Act and was merely pushed back (*South China Morning Post*, 6 February 2001). Although she did not end in a brothel her fate was no better. She ended up in a jail in Guam pregnant and with tuberculosis.

At the best of times, many of the Chin people have been able to live with the Mizo people and get some work to support them. At other times, however they are harassed for being foreigners and even deported to Burma. The Government of Mizoram has often targeted them in its campaigns against foreigners. Most recently in July 2003, tensions between Mizo and Chin communities exploded following the rape of a young Mizo girl. A Burmese man allegedly raped her. A powerful youth group called the Young Mizo Association (YMA) began to go door to door telling the Burmese to leave their homes and warning landlords not to let foreigners stay on their property. A campaign was launched by the YMA, in collaboration with other organizations, to drive all Burmese across the border. These actions were sometimes carried on with the knowledge of state authorities. It is estimated that at least 10,000 Chin were evicted from their homes and the expulsion drive led to the forced return of over 5,000 Chin to Burma even in the face of forced labour and torture. In such an insecure situation young Chin men become wanderers, or take up illegal production of liquors and Chin women fall prey to traffickers. In the name of Mizo security the Chin migrants are pushed into a life of insecurity (Hre Mang, 2000).

The situation of the Rohingya women is even worse. These women are Muslims and are considered “resident foreigners,” even in their homeland. Their subordinate status within their own community discourage them from procuring education or working outside their homes. According to civil liberties activists Rohingya women “live under a relatively conservative interpretation of Islam. Their level of economic and political participation is almost non-existent. Women, even those belonging to the upper class are not aware of any women’s organisations. Multiple marriages are common, especially in the poor strata of the community” (Ghosal, 2000, 13-14). The State authorities and the army habitually sexually abuse them. Sayeeda, an 18-year-old Rohingya girl, who has had some education, was of the opinion that the state machinery used rape as a way to push women out of Myanmar.²⁵ Forced relocation especially without compensation is also used to push women out of Myanmar (Images Asia, 1999). These women are first taken to Bangladesh. But after the UNHCR repatriation programme started in Bangladesh new arrivals were no longer admitted to UNHCR camps. They were often pushed across the borders to India and then to Pakistan (Banerjee, 2003,

²⁵ Interview with the author on 20 September, 1998, in Dhaka

139-163). Women, in this process of displacement are abused sexually and otherwise before, during and after displacement. In any stage of displacement they are soft targets for traffickers. The Government of Pakistan has largely ignored the issue of trafficking of Rohingya women. Besides the risk of being sold Rohingya women become victims of slavery through debt bondage.” Because of their undocumented status, Rohingya women constantly face arrest and imprisonment” (Ghosal, 2000, 15). As I have written elsewhere the Chin and the Rohingya women epitomise the plight of stateless women in South Asia. Unwanted in their homeland the women are victims of gender-based crimes such as rape, which are hardly ever considered as grounds for refuge. In a foreign country without any supporting documents these women are disenfranchised and depoliticised. They are unable to protest against sexual crimes for want of a legal status. The abuse that had pushed them across international border in the first place often seems to follow them in their new settlements (Paula Banerjee, 2003,153-154). Small wonder then that they end up in the hands of the traffickers and in brothels.

As for Nepal, civil liberties activists from the South Asia Partnership have commented in one report that “women, who make up 51 percent of the total population in Nepal, have a secondary status in the patriarchic (sic) Hindu structure. Discriminated by the law and with the lack of awareness of rights and education, the majority of the women are socially oppressed”(South Asia Partnership Nepal, Kathmandu, 2002, p. 21). Throughout their lives, women face reduced opportunities and discrimination. Literacy rates and life expectancy are much lower for women than men. Some say that lack of investment on education and development of women, which is an outcome of patriarchal predominance, is a major cause of vulnerability. The literacy rate for Nepalese women is considerably low. The 1991 Nepalese census shows that only 25.54 per cent women were literate. One of the reasons for such a low rate of female education, says a social scientist is that “the traditional attitude of the family, which requires girls to work rather than attend school. The higher female work burden in rural areas demonstrates that girl children are an active labour force in agriculture” (Sangroula, 2001, p. 5). Many laws are explicitly biased against women, especially those regarding property, citizenship and marriage.²⁶ Women are frequently prosecuted for having abortions, which were illegal until very recently.²⁷ Women often face domestic violence and harassment, with no legal

²⁶ “Discrimination in Nepal” in *Human Rights Feature*, 20 August 2001, <http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc>

²⁷ In 1999 twenty-two women were convicted for abortion, many more were killed when they when to unskilled people for abortion. *Nepal: Human Rights Yearbook 2002* (Kathmandu, INSEC, April 2002) p. 142.

recourse, as paternalism and gender discrimination is deeply entrenched in society. Also the social system teaches women “subordination to males from childhood.”²⁸ Such value systems deny women any options. Hence many rural women fall prey to the traffickers and trafficking of Nepali women has assumed horrifying proportions.

Political instability in Nepal has compounded the problem. The conflict between the Maoists and the State has contributed to increasing instability. In one report from Nepal it is stated that the People’s War in Nepal is resulting in death and displacement of people from conflict areas. The report stated that, “people living in the remote places of Taplejung District are leaving their houses behind and moving to the headquarters, Kathmandu or India” (*Human Rights Situation Report (INSEC)*, 1 August 2002), 23). Such reports also mention that both the Maoists and the state are responsible for the harassment and displacement of people. In an effort to add a gender dimension to the effects of the conflict a women’s rights activist comments that caught between belligerents women in Nepal “suffer sexual violence and psychological and physical trauma. Often, women are witnesses to the killing of their nearest and dearest family members. Women are forced to leave their homes because of the conflict and war” (Poudel, 2001, p. 136). Recent newspaper reports also reveal how women are particularly vulnerable to such harassments. In a news item published in the month of May in 2004 in *The Kathmandu Post* it was stated that one woman of “Tehrathum fled to Kathmandu after Maoists coerced her to join their militia. Her pursuit for secure life in the valley was wrecked after her colleagues sold her to a brothel in Mumbai”(Kathmandu Post, 2004). Although she was rescued with five other Nepali girls no one knows whether she can be rehabilitated in her own society.

When women are trafficked across borders such as from Nepal to India it makes them even more insecure. After crossing a border these women can become stateless if they are without any papers or proof of citizenship. Often they are coerced to cross borders to repay their family loan. It has been stated “about 153,000 Nepali girls were in Indian brothels in 1990 and the number has been steadily increasing at a rate of 5,000 every year”(Banerjee,

²⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

1999, 68). Nepal is considered as the most significant source of girl-child commercial sex workers to India. The average age of Nepali girls entering into Indian brothels ranges from 10 to 14. “Economic stress and historical oppression coupled with immense profits which accrue to the trafficker leads to the rapid flow of girl children from Nepal to India (Banerjee, 1999, 68). In this era of globalisation, tourism has become another occasion for child trafficking from Nepal. Although Nepal has passed the *Human Trafficking (Control) Act of 1986* these Acts are hardly ever implemented. Trafficking of Nepali women to India continue unabated. A very disturbing phenomena within this process is that young Nepali “virgins” are trafficked because people not only prefer their fairer complexion but also there is a ridiculous but common belief among some communities that having intercourse with a young girl can cure many sexually transmitted diseases as well as AIDS. So price for these girl children go up. But the moment they contract the illness they are thrown out of the brothel and come back to their homes where their family is often loathe to take them back (Bhatt, undated, 27). These children are often oblivious of the risk they are in. According to one social worker in J.J. Hospital in Bombay “one 15 bedded women ward was occupied with 13 patients with HIV infection, out of this 11 were Nepali” (Bhatt, undated, 27). What people in sex trade do not realize is that trafficking is not merely violence against women but against humanity. These young girls living in brothels are so powerless that they can hardly insist that their clients use safety measures. Once they contract the disease they inadvertently infect many more and contribute to destabilization and insecurity of the whole region. Once there illness is discovered they are treated like pariahs. They are punished for something over which they had hardly any control and yet the process continues. Trafficking finds little space in traditional security discourse yet it is one mode of migration that actually leads to physical insecurity of a region.

India is emerging as one of the biggest market for sex trade. Often girls coming from Burma, Bangladesh, Nepal and Northeast India travel from brothel to brothel. India’s huge population as well as its geographical location makes it one of the biggest hub for the trade in this region. In East and Northeast there are a number of brothels near routes favoured by truckers. Also markets here cater to the security personnel who have huge presence in this area. Traffickers are fairly safe because if chased by one government they can easily cross the border and take refuge in another state. In the west, i.e, Mumbai brothels cater to clients from the Middle East and beyond. The market for sex trade is so huge in India that girls from former

Yugoslavia are also coming to Indian brothels. Protracted conflict in this sub-region formed by Burma, Bangladesh, Nepal and Northeast India makes women's situation particularly vulnerable. Coupled with traditional gender inequity and faced with nefarious effects of globalisation where women's control over resources is fast receding women in this region faces tremendous problems today and that has made them particularly vulnerable to traffickers. If one ignores this dimension of insecurity in forced migration one does injustice not just to the women but also to the security situation of the region. Because national security after all is for the nation composed of real people.

IV

In this commentary on migration and security I have tried to concentrate on insecurities of marginal people, because unless these insecurities are addressed no amount of border fencing can make the region secure. If there is any truth coming out of these fragmentary explorations it is that the problems of vulnerability are problems of gender as well. In most cases migration is used as a tool to dispossess women of their strength and power. What is noteworthy is that when migrants are blamed for impoverishment of tribal people as in Tripura then ironically it is the tribal women such as the Reang women who emerge as the poorest. When we talk of forced migration it is women and children who are worst off in any given situation. Yet we hardly ever look at refugee groups as predominantly feminine groups when we make policies for protection, care, and relocation. Most often it is women's mobility and independence that is the first casualty in any radical nationalist/sub-nationalist movements that draw their legitimacy from protests against immigration and trace their origins to reactions to migration, as we see in Northeast India. Threat from migrants is juxtaposed with threat posed by women's sexuality. This leads to not just efforts to control migration but also to control women's sexuality. At the end of it all that the political class tries is to militarise the space by first connoting the geopolitical dimensions as the most fundamental to that space, and then to "securitise" it. But in fact most of our traditional efforts to make geopolitical regions more secure are nothing but attempts to privilege a masculine definition of security that result in only feminine insecurities. Yet in addressing questions of security the insecurities of women always remain in the back of beyond. The political class talks about ISI, insurgency, terrorism, and never talks about how trafficking leads to HIV. Little does it realize that the threat posed by AIDS is much more than the one posed by "terrorism". And, herein lies the fallacy in most

policy decisions. When AIDS becomes an epidemic migrant prostitutes are punished without any recognition that they are as much a victim of the system. It is the system that needs to be restructured with gender just vision.

In times of crisis women are controlled/victimized not merely by power structures from outside but also by power structures/systems that inhabit their own communities. Unless there is an effort to change such structures/systems with gender-just policies it will only result in cosmetic changes. As recipients of migrant groups women face destabilization and men in power often make it an occasion to reconfirm their control of resources, as was evident in recent developments in Meghalaya. If one looks at the statistics of main workers and marginal workers in most of these states in Northeast India one finds that women are in minority among the main workers and often in majority among the marginal and non-workers. This portrays how women are constantly being distanced from resources. Often such distancing can lead to displacement.

As migrants, women become even more insecure because they are already destabilized from their moorings and such destabilization is made an occasion for their sexual exploitation. Both migrant men and women are marked as aliens but it is the women whose alien-ness translates into sexual vulnerability. By marking such women as sexually available their sexual exploitation is facilitated. It is an endless cycle, as seen in the developments along the Bengal-Bangladesh border. The exploitation of women by criminals and security personnel makes the border region a much more violent space (Sangroula, 2001). Located as the issue of migration is in such violence, it is the masculine power structures that need to be first addressed to change the prevailing notions of security, so that it can address insecurities of women to make the region more secure.

Insecurities hover in a circle. Within a secure circle, there are insecure spaces; similarly there are insecure zones at the point where circles meet; within grand security little insecurities persist – little not to those who are insecure but to the custodians of grand security. A feminist perspective suggests a critical view of these grand perceptions, a concern for what passes as the small, and a willingness to stand the existing accounts on their heads. That can be done when women's chronicles have been given priority in accounts of security.

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